

# Science and the Politics of Race and Gender

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I recently witnessed a disturbing event. During a paper session at a scientific meeting, a researcher was shouted down by three members of the audience who felt that her research was “racist.” The first person interrupted the speaker’s presentation before she had a chance to even present her findings (and then left shortly afterwards). The second two dismissed the speaker as “not understanding” and being “the wrong color to be doing this research” (as was the person who made this remark). It did not matter that the presenter’s research highlighted tremendous strengths in both black and white families who were living in dire circumstances (in fact, the black families were actually faring better than were the white families). This jury of three had reached its verdict.

Other colleagues of mine have received similar treatment around gender issues. One male and female team of researchers have been publicly booed at meetings and even threatened by audience members who felt their research was “sexist.” The objectors did not have anything to say about the *methods* of study, but they were most unhappy with the research *results!* Still two other colleagues have literally had co-workers shout in their face when they strayed too far from the “orthodox” position on race, class or gender.

I believe that science cannot flourish in such a hostile and explosive environment. People who have received such treatment report that it is painful, and even traumatic. Only the most hardy will persist in a line of research that has caused them so much grief. What this means is that a small of number of people--most of them non-scientists--are influencing *what* scientists, and their junior colleagues, choose to study. I once overheard a senior researcher telling a junior colleague not to pursue a particular line of study because it went against the prevailing orthodoxy (she took his advice). What a waste! The rights of individual scientists suffer, as does the entire field. For many questions, we need research data from populations other than white males. Yet many researchers will not touch studies that involve race or gender issues with the proverbial ten-foot pole.

In some ways, we are at an impasse. Many of the prevailing models and paradigms *do* need to change. Yet these topics have become so politicized that many have chosen to switch topics rather than fight. So how can we affect a change in scientific paradigms? Is it necessary to be so nasty to our colleagues in order to affect change?

If we look at that the history of science, we see that most of the major changes have occurred when someone proposed a different model. This new model affected what Kuhns described as a “paradigmatic shift.” Unfortunately, we have become so mired in

critiquing existing research, that we have been slow to develop new models. Instead of spending time and energy debating whether a particular study or line of research is racist or sexist or classist or whatever, let's develop better models that more accurately capture the experiences of the populations of interest, and encourage our colleagues to do the same. Many conference organizers, journals and foundations are literally begging for material that is culturally sensitive. The time is ripe for the presentation of these alternate views. Some will balk at these suggestions, insisting that they will not affect change quickly enough. While I grant that the pace of change can seem painfully slow, we must also consider whether the more confrontational approach has accomplished anything besides putting everyone on the defensive and driving many from the field.

As a final note, I urge that we reinstate courtesy and respect into our scientific discourse. This does not mean that we do not disagree or challenge. In fact, we need to do this. Disagreements, however, can be handled constructively. This business of shouting in people's faces, name-calling and booing simply must stop. Most of us would not tolerate this kind of treatment from a spouse or friend. Should we tolerate it from a colleague?