Reflections on "Expanding Potential Women in STEM" workshop

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I was drawn to the "Expanding Potential: A workshop navigating the hurdles faced by women in STEM Fields" because of microaggressions I have experienced in various biology labs. Derald Wing Sue and colleagues define microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color."[1] I experience microaggressions when my male colleagues interrupt and/or speak over me, make sexual innuendoes while I verbally share protocols, and condone sexual harassment. I thought by attending I would learn about polices and resources in place to alleviate some of the isolation I feel when I stand up and call out microaggressions in my workplace.

I became disappointed and disengaged after the primarily white, heterosexual women speakers assumed that their lived experiences of sexism by colleagues in STEM are universal. I could appreciate that the majority of speakers connected gender-base discrimination into larger campus, state, and federal polices and resources. However, by framing the discussion as a binary experience of "women or racial/ethnic minorities," it erases those of us whose identities rest at the intersection of race and gender. This would have been a good segue into the theory of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw.[2] Her work examines how identity categories such as gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, and others are interconnected and interact on multiple levels, contributing to systematic injustice and social inequity.[3] Intersectionality can be a useful approach to understand specific forms of discrimination faced by women, especially women of color, in STEM. For future events, I would find it more useful to have women of color at different career stages, economic backgrounds, and career fields to enrich the discussion of different approaches to the academy and STEM.

I think the speaker's anecdotes were helpful in opening up discussions about privilege and ongoing microaggressions faced by underrepresented communities in STEM by colleagues, faculty, and staff. However, I think it is not enough to recognize and dissociate "us" from "others" who make disparaging remarks to and about underrepresented communities. I felt the advice and strategies placed too much emphasis on us, the audience of women STEM graduate students, to be and do *more.* Be *more* professional. Do a *more* memorable "elevator pitch" and center your [insert STEM field here] work when a senior faculty member assumes your race/ethnicity is not awarded STEM degrees. Grow *thicker skin*.

This advice is probably useful to people at all stages in life, not just women and/or underrepresented communities. But it felt like individuals were being evaluated on how they are

[1] Sue, D.W., *et al*. (2007) Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life in Implications for Clinical Practice. American Psychological Association.
[2] Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*.
[3] Crenshaw, K. (1993). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*.

able to turn these micro- and macroaggressions into "teachable moments." These strategies place an enormous burden on individuals to create solutions for themselves, navigate when to "grow thicker skin" and "when to speak up." None of which translates into policies that would hold the people in positions of power – the ones likely to hold and state discriminating views – accountable to "be and do better." It also, in the long term, does not address the severe imbalance of power between faculty and students. I found myself wanting a more detailed way to navigate when people (especially those in positions of power) are the source of sexist and racist microaggressions.

I also found the framing of family planning to be heteronormative and failed to include challenges faced by non-traditional families. The discussions centered how and when *straight* women plan for families, with or without male partners, to (un)intentionally erase and reduce men and women to their reproductive capabilities in heterosexual relationships, whether through marriage or partnership. Again, current approaches and assumptions around family planning illustrate and highlight structures in place, from individual faculty members up to broader campus policies that unnecessarily penalize women who can and are assumed to be the primary caretakers of the family. In navigating with my queer community here at Cal and through my work as a queer activist, these assumptions of heterosexuality offer a limited set of strategies against a larger backdrop of policy changes and committees charged with being open, inclusive, and broadening the dialogue beyond straight women.

Here at Cal, I can highlight specific experiences of homophobia in STEM that are intimately connected with also being a cisgender,[4] Asian-American woman. One very common experience, both in personal and professional settings among male STEM classmates/colleagues, is the tendency to "bond" with me by objectifying other women colleagues. If these men reduce my sexuality to "one of them", then their insecure and inappropriate sexual commentary in professional settings contributes to an overall hostile work environment. Not only does it undermine the actual scientific achievements of their women colleagues, but it also perpetuates a harmful stereotype that women's success is measured by hewing to conventional beauty standards. When this dynamic takes place with a peer, I can stop it through non-verbal cues (frowning, walking away) and/or explicitly stating that I am uncomfortable and don't understand their comments. Other strategies have included asking colleagues to not use specific slurs around me and appeal to them to apologize for slip-ups and move on. Again, I have to rely on myself to create these individual remedies. I would rather utilize resource centers on campus to provide mandatory training for faculty, staff, and students on homophobic, sexist, racist and other behaviors that is not acceptable.

In moving forward, I think that soliciting calls from STEM workers who identify among multiple marginalized communities will allow for better dialogue about the ongoing policies that address multiple forms of discrimination and create more inclusive environments.

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[4] Cisgender individuals are those whose identities match the gender they were assigned at birth.