CHAPTER 12

SUBTLE FORMS OF GENDER-BASED DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT IN SCIENCE

Subtle gender-based differential treatment, from backlashing to tokenism, with some attention to body language, condescension, devaluation, exclusion, hostility, invisibility, role stereotyping, and sexual innuendo.

We doubt that any sensible person would deny that women have been subjected to overt discrimination throughout the history of science. Until recently, the scientific community was populated at professional levels almost exclusively by men. Women were traditionally in the background, in supporting nonprofessional roles. Substantial signs of change have been seen in recent decades; overt discriminatory practices that largely excluded women from the professional ranks have diminished or in some instances disappeared. As we’ve noted, governmental and institutional actions, combined

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with the momentum of the most recent feminist movement, which began in the late 1960s, have contributed to the change.

But, a point often overlooked and usually denied is that whereas overt discrimination has declined, a large residue of subtle discrimination—individual and institutional—still persists. These less tangible attitudes and practices reflect an imperfect adaptation of the scientific community to the concept of gender equality. They also present challenges more difficult to confront and eradicate by legal and other means because they are ephemeral and defy the usual confrontational approaches.

We will try, in this chapter, to categorize some of these persistent subtle forms of discrimination against women scientists, as described during our interviews and discussions, and as reported in earlier studies, notably those of Eileen Shapiro.\(^1\) Even though some may seem minor, and in a few instances may seem tinged with just a soupçon of paranoia, they do form part of the totality of existence for at least a segment of the women in science. The categories described by Shapiro as “nonactionable discrimination” encompass most of the broad range of activities that constitute subtle discrimination. We have adopted them, and added a few of our own, to prepare the following list:

- exclusion
- condescension
- role stereotyping
- tokenism
- hostility
- sexual innuendo
- invisibility