## PERSPECTIVE

## We are the system.

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"He's making it about himself. No-one wants to hear what he has to say. It's uninformed and unoriginal. And besides, this is appearing in a community journal, it should be about the science not the person."

These, or thoughts like them, race through the minds of those that bring the personal into academic discourse. As a cell biology community, served by a not-for-profit cell biology community journal, what place does discussion of the personal have in our collective thinking? What gets to be discussed, and who decides this? Well, I believe that's up to us as a community, because we are 'the system'.

One often hears and uses the term 'the system' to describe the multifaceted nature of academia. While not dismissing the myriad reasons that we are all a part of academia such as the thrill of the discovery or the joy of getting to be part of the development of the next generation of scientists - the term 'the system' can be a way to describe how academia can simultaneously feel like an entity that variably take too much from us, rewards some but not others, and can occasionally make us feel hostage to a largely unchangeable outcome. However, this conception depersonalises that this system is made up entirely of people, each supportive but biased, clear-minded but contradictory, focused but messy, committed but stressed, and most probably overworked. The system is therefore an emergent property of this complexity. It is a combination of asking people - who are inherently fallible - to make decisions, sometimes about a diversity of people, often without the time or perspective to fully understand the impact of those decisions. Sometimes decisions also need to be made where an outcome that is fair to everyone is not possible. If this system is fallible, and we are the system, is there something that we can do? Personally, I believe so. That something is to help others - especially those that make decisions that can affect us and others - to understand our perspective, in a way that has compassion for them in return. It is likely that there is mutually something we don't understand about that very person's experience. This might be the key to working together to celebrate diversity.

This poses an existential question for our community: does our voice about our personal lives and differing perspectives belong in the cell biology academic discourse? One challenge is that our view of the system is through the lens of an unshakeable historical notion that the scientific endeavour is a meritocracy. That science is objective, and this 'truth' is universal. But, if those making decisions mostly possess a limited number of characteristics, how can we expect a system that is universally objective?

As an LGBT+ community member, I am acutely aware of the need to speak up to help others understand our challenges. I use my own minority characteristic as an example, not as a statement of importance over other characteristics. While, in my experience in the 20 years since I started my PhD, attitudes and acceptance towards LGBT+ colleagues have improved, there remain systemic inequalities for LGBT+ colleagues in our communities. One salient example comes from a survey of twenty-one professional societies in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, with over 26,000 respondents, identifying that LGBT+ professionals fare significantly worse in career opportunities, professional evaluation, social exclusions, and wellbeing from their demographic-, discipline-, and job factor-matched non-LGBT+ colleagues (Cech and Waidzunas, 2021). Moreover, LGBT+ community members more frequently report harassment and social isolation within their departments, ultimately reporting more frequent consideration of leaving the STEM field. Soberingly, this harassment and social isolation is more frequently reported by LGBT+ university faculty in STEM fields, than in non-STEM departments (Bilimoria, 2009; Patridge, 2014).

One suggested explanation for this is the notion that STEM has a history of 'depoliticization' or bracketing of concerns perceived as social or political (such as Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, EDI) as belonging outside of scientific discourse. Although I provide an example above of the LGBT+ community, this principle extends across the diversity spectrum. Discussion of EDI – even publicly identifying oneself or highlighting that problems exist – may be perceived as violating depoliticization and threatening the fabric of the objective and meritocratic idealization of STEM. In simpler terms, 'this space is for the science, that stuff belongs outside of work'. But if the system is people, and we as people can't but help make decisions influenced by our own biases, why is the person and their personal attributes so excluded from much of the discourse?

I am encouraged by cell biology community conferences, and institutional and funder initiatives, that make a point of discussing and considering diversity. Understanding that, as a baseline, we all have inherent unconscious biases is a key step to opening the door to examining how our actions can affect others. The challenge is to break through the bracketing of these efforts as 'the EDI tick-box', i.e. something we can report that we do, but with no actual concrete changes or outcomes being required. I posit, though, that taking the time to simply listen can be an effective step towards understanding each other. I have been an organizer of events that bring together LGBT+ scientists with non-LGBT+ colleagues to discuss what challenges exist in my local community. Having such frank discussions has opened the door to other conversations by demonstrating a collective willingness to raise important topics, such as the intersection of disability and neurodiversity in our workplace. This visibility in discussing EDI as part of my position has led to invitations as speaker at universities for LGBT+ pride-centred events, to discuss the LGBT in STEM experience. These can vary from strong institutional engagement, to somewhat less so experiences where, give or take, only the organising committee is present. Awkward conversations often ensue about how the majority of

faculty are missing. The sense of tokenism in such experiences is palpable, and I suggest that a lack of engagement from institutional leadership may do more damage than good, in fostering a sense of isolation, despite people's best intentions. However, that such initiatives exist and are promoted is a mark of progress and is a clear message that these discussions do belong in our community. There must also be space to try, not get it quite right, and try again without a fear of admonishment or reprisal, so as not to create a deterrent against engaging in such efforts.

If it is important to have academic leadership engaged in equality and diversity efforts, how do so-called minority considerations make it into the purview of others, when time is always a limiting factor? And how do we as the decision-making system try to gauge where our blind spots are? I do not have all of the answers nor even most of them. I can only attest to important facets of my own experience. One approach, that is simultaneously simple and infinitely difficult: approach colleagues with different characteristics to ask them what their experience is like, show them you are interested, and make space in discussions usually reserved for 'the science' to talk about some of these difficult topics. For instance, Leslie Voshall (Rockefeller University) provides a convenient survey template to ask, in our own laboratories, how happy lab members are, as a mechanism to bring discussions into the open of topics we may not often approach

(https://www.rockefeller.edu/research/uploads/www.rockefeller.edu/sites/8/2018/04/A nonymousLabSurvey\_Vosshall.pdf). My own terribly informal and unscientific query of how often EDI issues are discussed in lab meetings on Twitter reveals ~75% of respondents (n=92) do this rarely or never

(https://twitter.com/DavidBryantLab/status/1672194455422509057). Even with good intentions, discussions within teams can be particularly difficult when there is a power imbalance, i.e. the person you are speaking with about what might need changing may have some power over your person or career. In a career structure based on peer-review between colleagues and with laboratories built on a trainee-mentor relationship dynamic, this is hard to escape. Moreover, anonymous surveys can still have identifying features: although science is meant to be universal, it largely requires a single language proficiency, English. Responses can be identifying of non-English-as-a-first-language speakers. Similarly, the smaller the team, the easier it is to inadvertently identify people based on personal history or writing style. What is needed, in all instances, is therefore an understanding that difficult conversations are accompanied by a guarantee of thoughtful consideration without adverse response. This has to come from those in power and must be stated emphatically before discussions begin. This is why such conversations are easy and infinitely difficult at the same time.

In my own career, I have experienced moments where such conversations were not easy, open, and clear, emphasising that the reality of life is that we often can't state mutually agreed 'rules of engagement'. When being diagnosed with a disability while on the job market, I was told "Don't tell anyone. It will lower your chances of getting a job." When starting my faculty position, it was suggested "Don't hire women of a certain age. Having your new starts go on maternity leave will be a challenge for a young lab." When taking up the role of chair of equality and diversity in my institution, "Don't waste your time on this, focus on putting your science first." When proposing support events to focus on the challenges women face in transition to independent group leader positions, "If you're going to have women in science events, we need men in science events too." When creating information packages about how and why people use personal pronouns in digital signatures, "Not broken: doesn't need fixed. I don't even consider the gender of my colleagues." These are select examples of a much longer list that I am sure many of us share. I raise these not to complain, but rather to emphasise a point: these interactions are difficult to disentangle with their problematic nature because they often coincided with a genuine desire to help. And these suggestions may be based in the lived experience of others but perhaps delivered in a way that was not comfortable - or acceptable - to me. What is critical is to take the time to *mutually* hear the experience of the 'other', to understand our respective opinions rather than an immediate vilification. In doing so, we create the space for truly opening up to diversity. In the beginning of my faculty position, I did not feel I had the ability to speak up and share my side of the story, or why I felt such positions were difficult to agree with, due to a power imbalance and not having the right toolkit for how to approach such conversations. As my career advanced, and I actively sought training in how to engage in an inclusive way, I felt more comfortable in speaking up. I want to acknowledge that this aligned with personal growth, but also coming to be in a position of power as a group leader position with tenure. And this is why I write this perspective piece – to say that we, as the system, need to be willing to have these difficult conversations, in a respectful and inclusive way, in the academic space.

I want to take a moment to also state the importance of compassion for, or consciousness of, what we do not know. If you are in a position of power where you feel you can respectfully speak up, it's wonderful to hear your voice where you can, to help us understand each other. There is power in using this voice to state you would like to actively listen to what you don't understand, rather than only give your opinion. Your clear demonstration of creating space for others may mean the world of difference to someone not able to do so. But if someone does not participate in these initiatives, there can be myriad, powerful reasons for why they may not. It is not, and should not, be a judgement on participation in 'the system'. We cannot know everything about each other's lives. My hope is that we can create the space to have conversations that might one day make this easier for others to join, and leading with compassion for others that we may not agree with is a good starting point.

I feel grateful that our community journal, Journal of Cell Science, considers discussion of the person behind the science, not just their scientific contribution, as a welcome addition to the publication. Indeed, highlights of early career researcher journeys has been a regular feature since 2015 in the Cell Scientist to Watch series. As part of my own experience, discussion of some of the challenges of being LGBT in leadership in cell biology was also welcomed (Bristow et al., 2022), as part of an on-going diversity series. Despite what I write here, I am sure that there are many things that I don't understand. I am not and do not claim to be an expert in diversity. Even in writing this piece, which has a whole-hearted intent of being non-controversial, supportive, and encouraging, I considered being anonymous due to potential backlash against my career. Nonetheless, this is an opportunity – which could perhaps be called a privilege - wherein I hope to use my voice when and where I can. I hope that it resonates in a way that is helpful to our community discourse.

If there is a topic that you feel could or should resonate with our cell biology community, please get in touch with Journal of Cell Science. We would love to hear from you to help us disseminate more voices of the community, where we can. Why? Because we are the system.

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