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## Creating Inclusive Spaces for Women of Color in the Workplace and in Society – Part One (<https://thebridge.agu.org/2020/06/19/creating-inclusive-spaces-for-women-of-color-in-the-workplace-and-in-society-part-one/>)

Posted by [Caitlin Bergstrom](https://thebridge.agu.org/author/cbergstrom/) (<https://thebridge.agu.org/author/cbergstrom/>).

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***by Paula R. Buchanan and Maria E. Mejia***

*This is part one in a series around diversity in the Earth and space sciences. We encourage everyone to read parts one and two (<https://thebridge.agu.org/2020/06/19/creating-inclusive-spaces-for-women-of-color-in-the-workplace-and-in-society-part-two/>), of this piece on creating inclusive spaces for women of color. “We demand better for our community and for the future of our society and the planet. Together, we can build a thriving, sustainable and equitable future for all.” Read AGU’s [From the Prow](https://fromtheprow.agu.org/agu-demands-diversity-equity-and-inclusion/) (<https://fromtheprow.agu.org/agu-demands-diversity-equity-and-inclusion/>) statement [here](#).*

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Even though we were raised in two different areas of the U.S., we both learned how to interpret coded messages about our perceived “otherness” from the world around us. I am, of course, referring to micro-aggressions (<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/02/microaggression>)—subtle everyday acts or statements that discriminate against members of a marginalized group. Unfortunately, STEM fields are not as diverse as they should be, and often do not reflect the diverse demographics of our country. As women of color working in STEM fields, we have become adept at performing the mental calculus of whether to call someone out for whatever racist or prejudiced remark escapes from their lips. This decision usually depends on how much professional or academic sway the aggressor has over our future career goals. For example, if the offender is someone we encounter daily and holds a position of influence, we are less likely to confront their microaggression as an act of self-preservation. Unfortunately, retaliation is alive and well as a part of the systemic racism that pervades our country and the world.

As women of color in STEM, we are no strangers to navigating spaces predominated by white men. We have lifetimes of experience in overcoming other people’s perceptions of our capabilities and qualifications. That said, we are not people who are easily intimidated by other people’s insecurities and fears about who we are, and what we represent in a society that is based on a foundation of systemic racism and discrimination. Here are just two of the many indignities that we have faced because we are women of color.

*When You Are Confronted with a Hostile Person in Your Audience, from Paula Buchanan*

(Read Maria’s story in Part two of our piece) (<https://thebridge.agu.org/2020/06/19/creating-inclusive-spaces-for-women-of-color-in-the-workplace-and-in-society-part-two/>)

One of the reasons that I was chosen by AGU to be a Voices for Science Advocate is that I was one of the few applicants at that time that had expertise in the fields of disaster science and emergency management. As one AGU staffer told me, my knowledge of water stewardship helped to fill a void of knowledge in their ongoing mission to convey the value of earth and space science to policy decision-makers and public audiences. As a disaster science researcher, one of my areas of interest is on how socio-technical systems, or the interaction between people and the technology that they use, impact how emergency managers communicate risk messages to the populations that they serve.

Because emergency management is predominantly composed of older, white males, I knew that I would experience discrimination as I advanced in the field. In the Fall of 2019, I was invited to a national emergency management conference to moderate a three-person panel on how emerging technologies can be used in practice. As the panel’s moderator, I was the professional “cat herder” who asked panelists questions and kept the discussion moving. As the conference session started, I laid out basic ground rules for the audience of 100+ people: our discussion would include a question and answer session guided by me as the moderator and there would be at least a 15-minute Q&A session at the end for audience questions. This was the typical session presentation session format for the conference.

The presentation moved along smoothly as I made sure that each panelist had a voice to answer respective questions. But then, one audience member decided to violate our conference session ground rules. A middle-aged, white male audience member decided that *he* should take over our conference session. As I asked the third round of questions to the panel, the white guy yelled out loud (and did not even bother to raise his hand), interrupted our civil conversation, and tried to answer the question.

Unfortunately, I had experienced this type of micro-aggression before from white people, both male and female. By interrupting me, the old, white rude-dude questioned my authority as an expert in a field that is dominated by white people. Furthermore, not only did the white person interrupt me, he did so in a public forum, in front of 100+ of our colleagues.

I was livid. I was mad. And I had been publicly insulted.

But, as a Black woman, I knew I could not berate him in public for his rudeness. I would then be labeled as an “angry, Black woman,” a horrid caricature of what white America perceives me to be.

Unfortunately, in the back of my mind, I had expected something like this to happen. Would this man have treated me in such a rude manner if my appearance fit his biased opinion of what a panel moderator should look like? A young, Black woman in charge of a panel that is discussing emerging technology at a conference dominated by older, white men? Shouldn't that moderator be a white person?

This incident was a micro-aggression, and one that was inflicted on me in a very public space.

I stopped talking, looked directly at the rude, old white guy and using the most condescending, passive-aggressive, slow-talking voice that I could muster, I told the rude-dude that as I had previously announced, there would be time for audience questions at the end of the session. I paused for silence and emphasis, and then said, “Now, I'll return to my discussion with the panel.”

A few more minutes went by, and then the rude white dude did it again! He decided that *he* was the moderator and asked a question for the panel. Dear lord, I thought. Is this guy racist, does he not have any “[home training](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=home%20training)” (https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=home%20training),” or what? Again, I put the rude-dude in check, and finished the rest of the session.

After the session was over, a white, female colleague of mine who was in the audience came up to me and said, “Wow, that guy was rude! I have never seen any audience member be that obnoxious, and I've attended this conference for years. I'm sorry that happened. He probably did that because you're black. Shame on him. Anyway, your session rocked! Good job!”

Well, that is what often happens when a black woman is an expert in two different areas, STEM and emergency management, that are both dominated by white males, and takes the lead on a discussion about the topic. At least 100+ witnesses to what happened.

As I wrote this blog, I was not sure how to end it, because it really does not have an ending because incidents like these—both smaller and bigger—have happened to me for decades. Unfortunately, these racial- and gender-based slights have also happened to my friend Maria. (https://thebridge.agu.org/2020/06/19/creating-inclusive-spaces-for-women-of-color-in-the-workplace-and-in-society-part-two/)

Reader, Maria and I ask that you take the following lessons from our experiences:

**1) Assume that people who are different from you have earned their way in life to be where they are in**

... assuming that people who are different from you have earned their way in life to be where they are in their careers. Before you question their expertise, ask yourself what is driving your concern. Your unconscious bias may be affecting your thoughts. Does the person before you diverge from your expectations? Are you surprised by their appearance, vocabulary or professional demeanor? Are you surprised that “someone like them” could “go to school like that”? Does their ambition make you uncomfortable?

2) **Be an ally for people of color by not being in their way at all.** White privilege refers to societal privilege that benefits white people over nonwhite people in some societies. Understanding white privilege is critical to creating a more equitable society. Educate yourself on how to become anti-racist. Do not ask your black and brown colleagues how to do this work for you. And if you are white, use your white privilege for good. If you see a colleague struggling, lift them up and give them the space to communicate freely. If you witness racism, whether it is overt or in the form of a microaggression, call it out. Please do not sit back and watch it happen. Silence is complicity.

3) **Use your privilege to help people of color, especially women of color, achieve an equitable place in our society.** If you are a “woke” white person who benefits from so-called white supremacy and white privilege, use it to elevate people of color. For example, when I applied to be a Voices for Science (VfS) advocate, I visited the VfS homepage and instantly noticed that most previous fellows were white. I included this fact in my VfS essay application, noting the importance of having a diverse set of science communicators that reflect the diversity of the populations that we serve. By stating this in my essay, I implicitly told VfS that they needed to do more, and that they must be more diverse. Fortunately, VfS leadership was “woke” enough to acknowledge this shortcoming. They read my factual statement about their program’s lack of diversity at that time as something that would not cause tears of denial and weakness. Instead VfS said, “I hear you. I see you. And we value talented and diverse people like you.”

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## Creating Inclusive Spaces for Women of Color in the Workplace and in Society – Part Two (<https://thebridge.agu.org/2020/06/19/creating-inclusive-spaces-for-women-of-color-in-the-workplace-and-in-society-part-two/>)

Posted by [Caitlin Bergstrom](https://thebridge.agu.org/author/cbergstrom/) (<https://thebridge.agu.org/author/cbergstrom/>).

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*Escape from an R1 Institution, from Maria E. Mejia*

(Read Paula’s story in part one of this piece) (<https://thebridge.agu.org/2020/06/19/creating-inclusive-spaces-for-women-of-color-in-the-workplace-and-in-society-part-one/>)

In a previous leadership role at an R1 institution, the Dean of the school entrusted my team and me with migrating the institution to a new electronic exam system. This high-stakes transition was the first of its kind at the university. Many interested parties closely watched the initiative to see how to replicate this technology solution within their school. As an educational technologist, I was excited about this challenge and committed to making this experience as smooth as possible for students and faculty.

To navigate this change, I recruited a diverse group of stakeholders, including faculty, student leaders, and administrative groups like IT and Academic Affairs, to promote this initiative. After all, they—along with incoming students—would be the ultimate users of this product. After months of careful planning, we conducted a pilot study. The lessons learned from the pilot allowed us to expand the project and move into phase two, which involved transitioning first-year classes for the upcoming fall semester.

When the time came to unveil the project details at a faculty retreat, my team and I were ready to answer any questions. A few minutes into my presentation, a Caucasian female faculty member began to pepper me with questions. I listened and promptly addressed her concerns. She kept interrupting me, and after the first few questions, her tone began to change. Her inquiries took on the shape of accusations asking, “What gives someone like me the right to tell her how to do her job?” Would she have interjected (repeatedly) if I were a cisgender white male?

In a room of highly respected scientists, faculty, senior administration, not one person stopped her. She proceeded to belittle my academic accomplishments and professional expertise. She questioned my intelligence. She challenged my authority and threatened me—saying that I would be responsible if this initiative hurt student performance and the institution’s sterling academic reputation. When I regained control of the presentation, she

said that my tone was “abrasive,” “defensive,” and “insubordinate,” even though I never raised my voice. I continued with the demonstration, and she exited the room—only to reenter moments later and continue her tirade.

Never in my life had I been professionally humiliated. And, I have never been angrier and more disappointed in my peers who did not intervene. Keep in mind that this was a room full of senior academic and administrative leaders—full professors, chairs, and deans—with the political clout to do something. Instead, they sat back utterly astonished as this one-way tantrum unfolded.

When the presentation was over, these leaders quickly approached me and apologized for their colleague’s behavior. They complimented me for keeping my cool under duress and, in the same breath, offered excuses for her behavior—dismissing her outburst as “impassioned” and “spirited.” They said she felt threatened “by my outspoken, confident nature” and “wasn’t used to people like me.” They encouraged me to “forget about the whole episode.” I returned to my office, feeling eviscerated.

In the following days, other faculty stopped by my office and shared their own experiences of their encounters with my aggressor—people of color, men and women alike. I realized that no complaint or whistleblowing would change the toxic culture at that institution. After the project launched (successfully I might add), I took my talents elsewhere—to a competing institution.

Reader, Maria and I ask that you take the following lessons from our experiences:

- 1) **Assume that people who are different from you have earned their way in life to be where they are in their careers.** Before you question their expertise, ask yourself what is driving your concern. Your unconscious bias may be affecting your thoughts. Does the person before you diverge from your expectations? Are you surprised by their appearance, vocabulary or professional demeanor? Are you surprised that “someone like them” could “go to school like that”? Does their ambition make you uncomfortable?
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