Queer Science: LGBT Scientists Discuss Coming Out at Work

by Vivian Underhill (/web/20220414050832/https://www.bitchmedia.org/profile/vivian-underhill)
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Photo: Dr. Josephine Baker, an accomplished early 20th century scientist who lived with female partners all her life.

Coming out in any workplace can be a daunting task. With all the recent discussion around the lack of women in science (https://web.archive.org/web/20220414050832/http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/06/magazine/why-are-there-still-so-few-women-in-

science.html?_r=0), I got interested in investigating the experiences of queer women in science. So in the spirit of National Coming Out Day (https://web.archive.org/web/20220414050832/http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/national-coming-out-day) this month, I interviewed ten queer professionals and students working across science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields about how they decided to come out or stay in the closet at work.

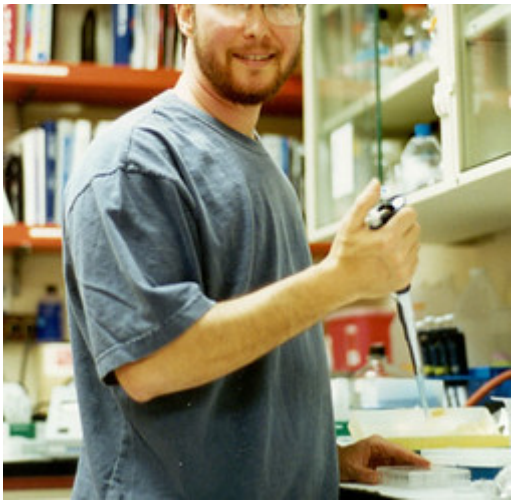
Compared to the cultural dialogue we have around gender bias and racism in the sciences, there is little discussion in media of issues of queer-related bias. Many scientists keep their queer identity invisible, which leaves young queer and questioning people with few queer role models in scientific fields. By failing to discuss the unique barriers to queer people in the scientists, we allow the image of smart, successful scientists to become disconnected from our socially constructed projections of homosexuality.

Historically, the choice to come out or stay in the closet was much easier—women working in science two decades ago say coming out was not even an option.

“In the early 90s at Princeton, there were only a handful of students who were out as LGB people,” says Dr. Donna Riley, who helped found the first engineering program at a U.S. women’s college (the Picker Engineering Program at Smith (https://web.archive.org/web/20220414050832/http://www.smith.edu/swg/faculty_riley.php)) and is openly bisexual. “We were mostly just met with silence. We knew to compartmentalize, and we knew when and where it was safe to be out—and that was definitely not in the engineering building.”

This tactic of keeping personal life separate from school and work life is common, says Dr. Erin Cech (https://web.archive.org/web/20220414050832/https://sites.google.com/site/erinacech/%5D), co-author of a groundbreaking 2011 study (https://web.archive.org/web/20220414050832/http://crgp.ucsd.edu/documents/CechWaidzunas2011--NavigatingHeteronormativityofEngineering.pdf) (PDF) on the experiences of LGB undergrad students in engineering school. “For them, there are always questions of personal life vs. school life, and they have to manage how to keep them separate,” says Cech, whose study found that queer women often feel isolated and unable to speak up for themselves for fear of being pushed aside or losing credibility. Instead, many queer women spend large amounts of emotional energy staying in the closet, overachieving to “make up” for their queerness, or compartmentalizing and downplaying queer cultural signifiers.

Dr. Ben Barres (https://web.archive.org/web/20220414050832/http://med.stanford.edu/



profiles/Ben_Barres/%5D) (at right) is a transgender professor of neurobiology at Stanford, and uses his first-hand experience of gender bias to inform activist public speaking and writing (https://web.archive.org/web/20220414050832/http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/07/060714174545.htm). About living in the closet before his transition, he says, "I really felt by that point that life had been so hard on me…I didn't sleep lots of nights, I was suicidal, life was so uncomfortable. Don't get me wrong, I've really enjoyed my life," he continues. "But the personal part was just so uncomfortable that sometimes you think, 'I've had enough.' It's that distressing."

Many queer women echoed the same sentiment, telling me things like, "I feel SO alone," and "sometimes it feels like I'm the only one." A doctoral student who recently received her Ph.D. in anthropology wrote, "I nearly failed grad school because [the] emotional angst was too much."

Even hostile silence is a marked improvement from how queer women in science were treated in earlier decades. Rochelle Diamond (https://web.archive.org/web/20220414050832/http://www.its.caltech.edu/~diamond/), now a research biologist at CalTech, recalls being slowly pushed out of a lab after a coworker found out she was a lesbian. Diamond is now president of the National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals (https://web.archive.org/web/20220414050832/http://www.noglstp.org/) and works to ensure that younger queer scientists will never have to experience the same discrimination she did.

Today, in considering coming out, queer women scientists navigate a much more nuanced landscape. Overt instances of bias are less common than they once were and some institutions have official non-discrimination policies. But many hard-science settings are still dominated by a heteronormative culture that forms strong but subtle prejudices. Coming out can still feel like a can of worms best kept closed. A woman currently finishing her master's degree in geology told me, "It's mostly male students right now. They're very young and very boorishly loud, and I am very, *very* disinterested in having a Coming Out Moment."

Once a queer woman has decided to come out, though, the hard part is not necessarily over. The sciences often have an overarching tendency toward avoiding social-justice issues that makes coming out feel awkward or inappropriate. As Dr. Riley says, "We think we eliminate bias by keeping our 'personal lives' out of the lab,

classroom, or office. But actually this is how we allow implicit bias to seep in and saturate everything we do, because that which is male, straight, white, able-bodied, monied, is *not* left behind in the practice of science and engineering—it is just so normative that lots of us don't notice."

Individual experiences these days differ significantly depending on the microclimates of work and research environments. Two scientists at the University of Minnesota, Jeremy Yoder and Allison Mattheis, just finished a nationwide survey of queer scientists (https://web.archive.org/web/20220414050832/http://www.queerstem.org/), and found that the factors that seem to predict how out people are in professional contexts aren't the size of their workplace, what part of the country they live in, or whether they work at a private or public institution. Instead, what makes the big difference is whether queer scientists rate their workplace as "safe and welcoming" and "whether their employer provides benefits and support for queer folks."

Photo: Researchers Yoder and Mattheis doing some last-minute recruiting for their survey at the Twin Cities Pride Festival earlier this year.

In some research programs, queer women relate feeling very accepted. One undergraduate student who completed a summer internship in an environmental laboratory said, "It would probably be a bigger deal if I drove a truck with a V8 engine (oh the gas!) or stopped using my reusable coffee mug than if I wandered into a post-work shindig with a girl in tow." Comments like this are heartening, but we still have a long ways to go.

Partly, individual institutions have a responsibility to create a safe and welcoming

space for queer people to come out. But also, this is where the power of coming out comes in.

"I choose again and again to come out and be out," Dr. Riley says. "This is risky, and it comes at a cost, but I believe the costs of being closeted are much greater, both personally and politically."

Not everyone is able to come out at their workplace—but those who can and do help shift the image of who a scientist can be. Particularly within an institution that prides itself on being objective and meritocratic, the relative invisibility of queer people in the sciences implies, across popular science culture, that queerness and science don't mix – but coming out and acting with confidence in scientific fields turns that implication upside-down. Coming out is an opportunity to normalize the combination of queerness and science, and sets a powerful precedent for other scientists of all sexualities.

Vivian Underhill (vivianunderhill.wordpress.com) is a hydrologist, writer, poet and an activist based out of Denver, Colorado, and writes a series about queer women in science for Autostraddle (https://web.archive.org/web/20220414050832/http://www.autostraddle.com/queer-scientists-the-legend-of-the-unicorn-187054/).

For more great discussion of feminism in STEM fields, check out our podcast episode Wired (https://web.archive.org/web/20220414050832/http://bit.ly/15kKBJJ).

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