

By Edward J. Smith

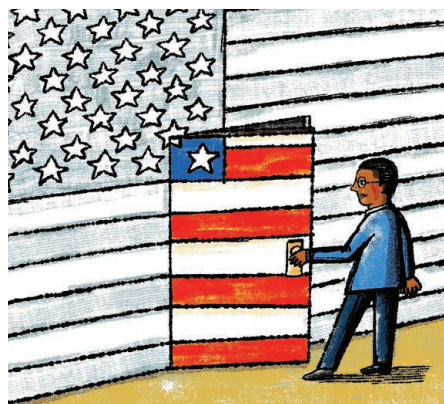
Doing science while black

When I was 11 years old, my older brother left our village in Sierra Leone to study physics in the West. After completing his degree, he returned home to contribute to development. I followed his lead, though I studied genetics—and I never returned to live in Africa. Instead, I established a career in research and research education in the United States. Being an academic scientist in this country with my skin color and accent has not been easy, but I hope that my resilience amid significant challenges offers a path for younger minority scientists.

I experienced my first brush with bias in the virology lab where I started my Ph.D. Every time I left the photography room, the principal investigator (PI) was there to check on my results. He didn't do this for other students; it was clear that he didn't trust me to do the procedure correctly. At lab meetings, the PI called on every other group member for a progress report. But in my case, he asked the senior Ph.D. student I was working with to speak for me. I felt frustrated and humiliated, but I wouldn't let these experiences derail my plans for a research career. I left that lab after 4 months and completed my doctoral studies in a less flashy lab, in animal sciences, with an extremely supportive adviser.

The first place in the United States that really felt like home was Tuskegee University, a historically black institution in Alabama where I had my first faculty position. (I didn't consider returning home because Sierra Leone was in the middle of a brutal civil war at the time.) It was easy to be productive in a place where no one questioned my right to be in the lab or my ability to mentor students.

But my experiences with the larger scientific community still made me feel like I didn't belong. A few years after becoming a professor, for example, I went to a social event at a society meeting with an international, multi-racial group of colleagues. I was the only black researcher among them. When we walked into the room, the crowd fell completely silent, apparently uncomfortable with my presence. I considered myself a scientist with great potential, but that experience made me feel that, to others, my skin color was more important than the quality of my work. The next year, as I was starting a sabbatical in a lab at another institution, I asked one of the researchers in the group whether the PI was in. "Are you delivering a package?" he asked. "I can pass it on to him." These



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me from the realities of being a black scientist in a white world, where I rely on one-liners such as “doing science while black” or “leading while black” to communicate the complexities of my circumstances.

Despite the hostility, both blatant and subtle, that I have experienced in the corridors of science, and still encounter, I'm glad that I stayed here. I believe that the career I have carved out for myself will help pave the way for future generations of underrepresented minority (URM) scientists to thrive, and for all members of the scientific community to be more culturally sensitive than those who came before them. I have spent much of my professional life focused on training URM scientists, and I am as proud of these researchers as anything else in my life. As all of us strive to increase the critical mass of URM scientists, encounters with black scientists will become more commonplace until, hopefully, none of us is ever mistaken for a delivery person. ■

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