Ground Rules and Tools for Productive Discussions

This group is intended to be a forum for discussion of ideas and for learning about differing viewpoints, not for debate. As scientists, we are used to trying to convince everyone that we are right. In discussions around diversity and equity, it’s important to understand that everyone sees and experiences the world differently – what is “right” in your experience may not be so in someone else’s. Everyone is asked to consider different perspectives, for the purpose of sensitivity, learning, and growth. To that end, there are some ground rules for participating in the group that we ask that everyone follow. There are also some useful tools and links below, for more information and to help get people in the right frame of mind for these discussions.

Ground Rules:

1. Acknowledge that sexism and racism exist.
2. Acknowledge that we are all systematically taught misinformation about our own group and about members of other groups. This is true for everyone, regardless of our group(s).
3. Agree not to blame ourselves or others for the misinformation we have learned, but to accept responsibility for not repeating misinformation after we have learned otherwise.
4. Agree to respect others. This includes honoring others' experiences by being sensitive to them.
5. Agree to raise your hand when you want to speak unless otherwise specified.
6. Keep in mind that no one should be required or expected to speak for their whole race or gender... They couldn't if they wanted to!
7. Take responsibility for and accept the consequences of your words.
8. Be willing to keep an open mind: it is likely that some of your beliefs will be challenged in this group.
9. Take risks. Comfort is over-rated - dare to engage yourself.
10. Agree to participate in the creation of a “safe” atmosphere for open discussion.
11. Equality pertains to all people with NO exceptions.
12. Agree to keep specifics of what is discussed in the group confidential. What is said here, stays here; what is learned here, leaves here.

13. Share the air: if you have a tendency to dominate discussions, take a step back, and let others participate. If you haven’t said much, you’re invited to participate more.

14. <this space left for people to add more>

Note that in #10, we put the word “safe” in quotes. This is because people with some identities or personal experiences rarely feel safe in any room, and it’s important to acknowledge that.

**Useful tools for discussions:**

**Oops, ouch.** Part of having these conversations is messing up (and oh, how I’ve messed up). If you say something that is hurtful or problematic and you realize it, you can say "oops" to acknowledge it and then try again. Alternatively, if someone else said something harmful or problematic then you can say "ouch" which lets everyone know that there’s something that needs to be discussed further. The specific words “oops” and “ouch” aren’t necessarily used all that often, but the idea gives people a way to bring these things up. See more below on “How to effectively call someone out/in” and “How to apologise properly.”

**Everybody’s right, but only partially.** The goal is not to agree, but to gain deeper understanding. Remember that your experiences of how the world works and how society treats you are not the same as anyone else’s.

**Use "both/and" rather than "either/or" thinking.** Someone else may be making a good point that you may miss if you’re concentrating on disagreeing with part of it. Agree with the parts you agree with, and disagree with the parts you don’t.

**Intent ≠ impact.** When you say something harmful, it still hurts whether or not you meant it to. As an analogy - if you tread on someone’s foot and they tell you it hurt, you apologize and step off. You don’t spend time explaining that you didn’t mean to step on them, and so therefore they shouldn’t be hurt.

**Be aware of intersectionality.** People have intersecting identities and the experiences of white, straight, able-bodied women are not necessarily the same as the experiences of women of colour, lesbians/bisexual women, and women with disabilities. Despite this, when people talk about “women,” they almost always mean straight, white, able-bodied women.
Disagree with content, not tone. Some of the topics we will be talking about are emotional issues for people who live these experiences every day. While some people in the room are able to talk about these things in a detached way, others are not, and should not be expected to. White people, in particular, have been taught that anger, and making a point loudly, are unacceptable ways to communicate, and often say things like “no-one will listen to you if you’re shouting at them” or “I’m not going to talk to you while you’re addressing me like that,” or “I know you’re angry, but...” We need to understand that people who have been marginalized do not have the luxury of emotionally distancing themselves from conversations about their rights and experiences. It’s not an academic discussion for them. Disagreement with their points is fine, but be sure to disagree with the content of what people are saying, not the way in which they’re saying it.

How to effectively call someone out/in. Part of talking about equity and diversity topics is messing up (guaranteed). When someone does, we need to have a way to talk to them about it effectively. Often we talk about “calling out” someone who has said something offensive, or had an “oops” moment. I prefer to talk about “calling in,” which assumes that everyone wants to do the right thing, just needs a bit of help getting there. A colleague once referred to it as “no white person left behind,” which really made me laugh because it was so apt. Always remember that calling someone in is a brave thing to do. No-one wants to do it because it’s risky – people often don’t react well to being called in (see below, under “how to apologise”), and so it puts the person doing it at risk of personal attack. A blog post at http://womeninastronomy.blogspot.com/2015/04/i-was-wrong-and-i-am-sorry.html is a great primer for the whole situation. We can also mitigate some of the bad feelings by ensuring that we call in people’s words, rather than their intent. See this video for an example of what I mean by that:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0Ti-gkJlXc

How to apologise properly. Getting called out/in sucks. Really, really sucks. It’s embarrassing, it’s excruciating, you feel attacked, like you’re about 2 inches tall, and it’s a miserable experience. The first reaction anyone has is to defend themselves. Don’t do this. Remember that being called in is a gift from a very brave person, who was willing to put their own safety and comfort on the line to help you become better educated. The following 2 posts are superb explanations of how you can react in a good way to being called in.

http://womeninastronomy.blogspot.com/2015/04/i-was-wrong-and-i-am-sorry.html
http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/11/how-to-apologize/