

ABSTRACT

Cultures and norms in climate justice groups can differ from those in the science community. Since scientist activist numbers are relatively small, collaborating with non-scientist activists is necessary. ç and the ideal of an objectively knowable truth differ significantly from common climate justice norms of “security culture”, consensus-based governance principles, and equity practices such as “step up, step back”. Scientist activists sometimes find themselves working with actors who may misrepresent scientific information or even reject it. How can scientists successfully navigate the “culture shock” they experience in climate justice activism?

SCRIPT

I’m chained to a bank door. Other scientist types wearing labcoats are too. We’re baking in the heat, listening to other activists speak on a bullhorn. I suddenly realize that the person speaking now is (gently) criticizing us! It’s a shock, because we’re about to get cut out of our chains by with boltcutters and arrested.

Why criticize us? We’re scientists about to be jailed for acting to protect the climate! I listen more.

Turns out the criticism wasn’t about us personally. It was about the labcoats we were wearing, the identity we were asserting – scientists – and the whole colonial, patriarchal, imperial, exploitative multicentury-old engine behind those things.

A lot of harm has been done to people like the speaker by people who wore lab coats or other uniforms like the ones we were wearing. Scientists have often served the interests of those who have harmed and exploited people like this speaker. It’s understandable that we might be regarded skeptically.

Then there are the negative stereotypes of scientists. You just have to turn on your TV to see that. Activists are sometimes affected by those stereotypes and may think of scientists as alien.

This brings me to the first of 4 things I’d like to share about scientists navigating the culture of climate justice activism:

Share #1: As a scientist activist, sometimes you’re on the “outside”. That’s OK, you can be an effective activist and ally even if you’re not accepted by everyone all the time.

Usually scientist activists ARE warmly welcomed, accepted and appreciated! But at times you may find that your direction differs from your allies. For example, it’s common for scientist activists to want to “just” concentrate on climate or biodiversity. Your allies may be more focused on justice, like anti-war struggles or the effects of climate on women and girls.

This OK, because the #climateemergency is enormous and civilization-wide and will require a lot of pushing on a lot of fronts. Many different strategies, tactics, movements, targets have to be grappled with all at once.

Share #2: When your car is stuck in a ditch, you need a lot of people pushing on it more than you need to agree on the exact direction. Once the car is moving, you can debate about exactly where to turn the steering wheel.

But! Sometimes you are warmly welcomed as scientist activist, but you might not be so comfortable about it! A couple of years ago, our local scientist pod was asked by allies to dig into the science around a brownfield remediation project, and to help argue that it wasn’t done

right and was still dangerous. Turns out, one member of our group had experience with the project. We looked into it. We decided that the available science didn't support the claims of our allies.

What to do? In the culture of science, you'd present the evidence you'd turned up and your findings - even if it contradicted the views of peers. Well, *especially* if it contradicted the views of your peers. That's how science works - it's great when your findings contradict established understandings. You can make a name for yourself in science this way.

But is it even your place to assert your scientific authority in a situation in which allies are waging a struggle for justice - or perhaps for their lives?

I don't have the answers. But what we decided in this case is that we would offer our analysis & evidence, explain that we thought they were incorrect, and to let them know that we could not back their position but would not publicly oppose it.

Share #3: As a scientist activist, sometimes you're invited "in" by non-scientist activists, but you may have to navigate in a way that preserves your integrity as a scientist and your relationships with activists. You may have to wrestle with squaring the ethics you've adopted as a scientist with the ethics of working with justice movements.

Often the culture of science is hierarchical. Deference to expertise, seniority. Labs and universities and government agencies have well-defined org charts. There are bosses and PIs and tenured profs and agency chiefs.

But many climate justice and similar groups use decentralized and consensus-based governance and decision making processes, following frameworks you may not have heard of like "sociocracy" or "holacracy". This can be slow, frustrating, and time consuming. But it's important to include all voices in activist decision-making, especially if there are personal risks involved. To create movements at scale, composed of volunteers, you need decentralized systems in which everyone is heard, and there is resiliency and dynamism.

Share #4:

Be open to de-centralized and consensus-based decision-making. Often no one is "in charge", though leadership is still a thing.

Final Share:

The cultures of activists will feel strange at times to scientists and academics and researchers. But taking action with them can provide those who study our climate and ecological emergencies a sense of agency and hope. You have to learn new ways of interacting, organizing, participating, expressing. But as scientists we are good at learning how to learn, so this is something we all can do. Being a climate justice activists can be joyful and mind-expanding and profoundly meaningful. I hope you find your way in.

* * *

Share #4a

Scientists historically have been centered and encouraged to speak out or lead. Monitor how often you find yourself speaking up in activist circles. Consider "*stepping back*" so those who usually aren't encouraged to speak up can step forward. OTOH, if you a quiet participant, take a chance and "*step up*" with your ideas and concerns with groups