

In defense of others

Description

Earlier this week, a friend sent me a short email with a newspaper article attached describing a new branch of scientific research that was quite interesting. The article was well written, easily accessible and extremely interesting – a true joy to read. However, there was one large issue – not with the content or photos within the article, but with what my friend wrote in the email.

In the text of the email, which had the article attached, was one sentence: “I think this girl is too pretty to be a scientist.”

Go back and read that sentence again if you don’t mind and let it sink in.

My friend said that the researcher in the photo was “too pretty” to be believed to be a real scientist. What does attractiveness have to do with being a good researcher?

I asked my friend what was meant, and I was told the reasons why. I had a slight hope that the comment was meant as a joke initially, but based on their explanation, it was clear that they genuinely meant it!

So, I wrote an email reply, which I have pasted here, in full.

NOTE: I have elected to keep out the name of my friend, as well as their gender

Hi,

Honestly, I do not even know where to begin with that comment you sent me.

Firstly, I want to thank you for sending me that article, it was really interesting. But my issue is not with that, but the comment you sent along with the article, that the woman in the photo was “too pretty” to be a scientist.

This is a huge issue to me, and has really surprised me that you genuinely think that way. Why would a woman’s physical appearance have anything to do with her intelligence or ability to perform really cool and interesting research?

Are you implying that only “ugly” people can do science? Or that attractive people have better options in life than to explore the mysteries that surround us?

Why does someone’s appearance dictate his or her level of intelligence?

I ask these questions not to attack you, but to illuminate the problems associated with such a bizarre comment. You may have meant the comment innocuously, but even so, even saying such a thing concerns me.

See, this type of discussion is one that has been brought up numerous times, and has been a large talking point in the Science Online conferences that I have attended. Female researchers and scientists (both using their real names and pseudonyms) have shared their stories about comments on their blogs/articles discrediting them because of their gender, their perceived "attractiveness," their relationship status and more " all of which is total B.S.

I have had the distinct pleasure to know and befriend dozens upon dozens of female scientists and/or researchers of every background you can imagine from countless nationalities, demographic backgrounds and expertise. But one thing stays the same " they are all incredible. Every single one deserves countless praise and support for doing what they do and dealing with this type of bias.

I admit that this type of discussion has never cropped up in my comments in my blog or any of the other writings I have done, but I do have some idea how it feels. I think most people have been singled out at one point in their lives by something: a personality quirk, a passion, an outfit, a hairstyle, the people you choose to associate with, and countless others.

Singling someone out for his or her gender, attractiveness, sexual orientation or the like is just silly. If you don't like someone personally, that's one thing. But, to spit venom at them simply because of who they are or whom they choose to be is cowardice in my book.

How would you feel if you had people commenting on your writing saying that you cannot be trusted because of your gender, sprouting insulting words at you, saying that you are crazy, incompetent or worse.

Would you be able to handle it?

Judging someone by his or her perceived attractiveness (which is subjective and varies from person to person anyway) is ridiculous. If you're going to comment on a researcher, comment on their work, methodology and the like, not if you'd like to get them into bed or not.

That kind of attitude is disgusting, inappropriate, old fashioned and sexist. I thought you were better than to fall into such petty traps as those.

Cheers,

David

Originally, I held off on posting this, until I got a response from my friend that convinced me otherwise. This is what my friend wrote:

David,

I am sorry " I did not mean anything by that comment. But I can see how it came off that way, and that was wrong of me.

Did I judge that girl by her appearance? Yes I did, as we all do when we see someone walking down the street. It is wrong, silly and juvenile, but I will not shy away from something we all do.

What I will try to do is think of what others would think of my comments made to myself before making them heard.

It is a small step in trying to change, but I hope that is enough.

I leave this question to you â€“ Is pointing out the problem enough, or should I (and everyone) make people realize the problem and be the better for it?
If my friend does what he/she said, thatâ€™s one small step in the right direction.
But is it enough?

Category

1. emails
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3. Science
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