

How Community Agreements Can Improve Climate in Physics

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ABSTRACT

Codes of Conducts have become ubiquitous in laboratories and physics departments across the country. However, these codes are often devoid of practical consequences for violating them, and therefore are mostly performative in nature. A considerable effort has been devoted by various groups in developing instead what are called “Community guidelines”. In addition to providing ethical core principles, these specify accountability. This white paper reviews examples of community guidelines in Physics and argues that all Physics collaborations, however large or small, should have a Community agreement in place.

1. INTRODUCTION

Both Diversity and Inclusion find root in the ampler ethical concept of Equity [1], which is the fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people, based on their actual talents and skills. The happiest and most productive societies are those based on equity and social justice. Improving equity involves increasing justice and fairness within the procedures and processes of institutions or systems, as well as in their distribution of resources [2]. This is of paramount importance as in the current environment, even the brightest minds cannot do much Physics without appropriate resources.

Scientific organizations' and publications' Codes of Conduct generally include scientists' duty to behave ethically, respectfully, and inclusively toward one another and to reveal potential conflicts of interest. Together with Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) committees, Statements of Values and Codes of Conduct have become ubiquitous in the past few years, in laboratories and physics departments alike across the country. This is due to the regrettable fact that equity in science is still a mirage, as shown by survey after survey [3]-[6]. The sharp contrast between the often-toxic environments found in scientific labs and academia and the healthier ones in industries that are more customer oriented, for instance, has made human climate in science a serious concern for all, and especially for the funding agencies.

In 2002, psychologists identified personality traits, including narcissism, that undermine the work and well-being of others in a lasting and often irreversible way. Another, more recent, main finding that has garnered global interest is that executive leaders tend to be higher than average in narcissism — a personality trait characterized by an inflated sense of self-importance, a strong desire for power, and a propensity for manipulative behavior. Several social studies have shown that narcissism affects more than 18 percent of individuals in positions of high responsibility, CEOs for example, as compared to the 5 percent average in the general population [7, 8]. Narcissists often pursue and are selected for leadership

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positions. At the same time, they act in their own best interest, putting the needs and interests of the organization and others at risk. Research has shown that self-centeredness also hinders the flow of communication throughout the organization and impoverishes the climate. Unfortunately, statistics and studies speak clearly on how prevalent these negative traits are in Physics.

This often-toxic climate is deleterious in general for the scientific productivity in the country, and is remarkably antithetic to a modern society, where younger generations care much more about emotional intelligence and empathy than for cold-hearted behavioral approaches. Bearing witness to the keen sense of urgency in the community for a more just and livable workplace has become of critical importance to sustain the scientific knowledge and effort for future generations.

2. THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

As much as the original establishment of Codes of Conduct (CoC) may have been well-intended, they have produced a number of unforeseen negative consequences. CoC apply within the Universities/Physics organizations own judicial systems using different standards than state or federal judicial systems such as Title IX. In most cases CoC are written in such a way that the process of dealing with violations/imposing sanctions is either not defined or weak. This is bound to lead to arbitrariness, and to generate mistrust in the process. To effect positive change, an EDI institutional initiative has to have clear and well-defined goals, as well as an enforcement policy with clear-cut consequences equal for all. All too often, one sees performative activism, i.e. “the act of advocating for a cause or issue to gain attention, support, or profit rather than caring about making a difference in the cause” [9, 10].

Another unintended consequence of Coc is their weaponization against women and other marginalized people.

The conception of ethical concepts and procedures requires understanding the mechanisms by which discrimination occurs. The most prevalent forms of discriminations include sexual harassment and retaliation. As well-known, the much needed effort in closing the “gender gap” in science, engineering, and medicine is jeopardized by the persistence of the former [4]. And since 2008, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has reported that the latter is the most common discrimination finding in federal sector cases [11]. The most potent predictor of discrimination is organizational climate—the degree to which those in the organization perceive that misconduct of any form is or is not tolerated. This means that institutions can take concrete steps to reduce discrimination of any sort by making systemwide changes that demonstrate how seriously they take this issue and that reflect that they are listening to those who courageously speak up. This is in contrast with the policies and procedures that only protect the liability of the institution but are not effective in preventing misconduct. Hierarchical power structures with strong dependencies on those at higher levels are more likely to foster and sustain sexual harassment and other forms of discrimination. This is exacerbated when power is highly concentrated in a single person.

Organizational structures also impact retaliation [11]. Rigid bureaucratic structures promote retaliatory behavior among managers. Organizations that do not foster a procedurally just climate also encourage retaliation. Organizations that foster a climate of aggression and bullying are more likely have managers who abuse power and retaliate when claims are made. Other organizational factors that influence retaliation are: a lack of administrative policies discouraging retaliation; an authoritarian management culture; overly hierarchical organizations, where rank or organizational level is prized; high levels of task-related conflicts; reward systems and structures that promote competition; and the ability to isolate the

accuser. At the psychological level, researchers have found that those with a sense of entitlement and authoritarian personalities, people who place a high value on status in group settings, will experience offenses much more emotionally than others and take them much more personally. As such, these individuals are more likely to ruminate over the offense, ultimately seeking retaliation [11].

The recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences and the EEOC include to: 1. Create diverse, inclusive, and respectful environments; 2. Address the most common form of sexual harassment: gender harassment; 3. Move beyond legal compliance to address culture and climate; 4. Improve transparency and accountability; 5. Diffuse the hierarchical and dependent relationship between employees and managers; 6. Provide support for the victim; 7. Strive for strong and diverse leadership; 8. Make the entire community responsible for reducing and preventing harassment and discrimination.

3. SCAFFOLDING ELEMENTS FOR COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

As an example of key elements to include in a Community agreement, we take the Core Principles and Community Guidelines created by an Ethics Task Force of the APS Division of Particles and Fields (DPF) [12]. This public document lists the core principles and community guidelines for DPF membership activities, and particularly for the Snowmass process itself. We note that [12] was inspired by the Princeton Physics department code of conduct and the github community guidelines, among others.

3.1. Core Principles

Practices of a community should be based on its stated underlying values, or core principles. As detailed in [12], “The core principles form the most important responsibilities of our community members. In addition to: 1. Respect and support each other; and 2. Commit to constructive dialog and take initiative, from [12], the following additional key concepts apply:

- A mission statement that identifies the community goals.
- A multi-way test, such as that used in effective Service organizations to check one’s actions: 1. Is it the truth? 2.

Is it fair to all concerned? 3. Will it build goodwill and better relationships? 4. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

3.2. Community Guidelines

The community guidelines extend the core principles by setting expectations for participation in in-person events and virtual communication. Participation in these events and forums implies an agreement to follow these guidelines as well as the APS CoC [12].

3.3. Accountability and Enforcement

What is often missing in performative EDI initiatives is a clear list of increasing consequences for violating core principles and community guidelines. Without accountability for everyone’s actions and transparent polices to initiate professional aftermath, attention to gender and racial equity is disingenuous and no positive change can happen.

- A most common problem at meetings are session chairs unequipped to react to behavior violations by attendees. The problem is so extensive that the 2022 APS Council Speaker Robin Sellinger has been focusing on adequate training for chairs at conferences and workshops. Certainly, increasing awareness and knowledge of the core principles by session chairs and group conveners would nip a large number of verbal infractions at the nub.

- The next point of contact for violations should be a devoted and trained CoC group of at least two people to whom reports can be made. Ideally the organization would also have an Ethics committee with mechanisms for some investigation.
- Responses to infractions should be tiered so that it is possible to respond to minor infractions and issue warnings.
- When possible, responses to complaints should not be exclusively punitive, but should also have a restorative goal.
- When the offense is egregious or repeated, the outcome should be to inform their institution. A clear threshold in the severity of the violations should be assigned for removal from the community.
- Similarly, lack of bystander intervention, with repeated failure to do so or failure to do so in extreme cases, should lead to sanctions for those in leadership positions.
- An appeal process should be accessible for both the initiator and the complainant.

3.4. Transparency

Since can only be sustained in the lack of transparency, it is of paramount importance that the CoC group track all reported violations and keep records of the offenders. An anonymized list should also be made publicly available, as done in [12].

4. CONCLUSIONS

A considerable effort has been devoted by various groups in developing Community guidelines. When accompanied by accountability and enforcement processes, they develop into Community agreements. Their beneficial impact for the current community and their positive investment for Physics future generations make these a must going forward. All Physics collaborations, however large or small, should have a Community agreement in place.

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