

Comment

Identity crisis

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Regular readers of this column (both of you know who you are) will have noticed that my feelings about the holiday season are a bit ambivalent, to say the least. Of course, on the one hand there is the abundance of delicious food, the constant good cheer, the visits from friends and relatives. Then on the other hand there's the good stuff. But one of my major problems with the holidays is that with holidays come holiday parties. And with holiday parties comes the problem of sustaining a conversation with people one doesn't know. Now, I consider myself a pretty good conversationalist, but I have never found a satisfactory solution to the situation that inevitably develops a few minutes into any such encounter, when the other person says, "So what is it that you do?" I have only to reply, "Me? I'm a structural biologist," when the eyes of my companion begin to glaze over, and he or she excuses themselves as rapidly - and unconvincingly - as possible. "A structural biologist. That's very interesting. But you must excuse me - I suddenly realize I have to have a tooth pulled."

I've tried to modify what I call myself in order to seem more hip, but it only postpones the inevitable:

Interesting Person at Party: "So, what do you do?"

Scientist at Party: "Me? I do, um, genomics."

IPAP (wishing they could escape but trying to be polite): "What's genomics?"

SAP (with typical scientist's enthusiasm): "Well, all organisms have their genetic material arranged in one or more chromosomes, and if you consider for example the Archaea -"

IPAP (abandoning politeness for survival): "Excuse me - I just remembered I have to wash my car."

I don't want to give the impression that I think this happens because most of the rest of the world are anti-intellectual, science-phobic boobs. If only they were. If that were the case, then I could absolve myself, and my profession, from blame. But I'm afraid that isn't the case. I don't think most people are afraid of science at all. What they're afraid of is scientists. Or, to be more precise, scientists at parties talking about their work. I don't think the average layperson flees from us as though we

were carrying the Ebola virus because they think they couldn't understand what we would say. I think it's because they know, probably from bitter personal experience, that most scientists love to talk about what they do. Interminably. It's not incomprehensibility they're fleeing; it's boredom. This also explains why so many scientists end up marrying other scientists. It's not that our social circles are restricted to people we work with; it's that no one else will listen to us.

Years of attempting to chat up various interesting, attractive people at holiday parties have made me feel a bit like George Costanza, the short, overweight, balding, perpetually unemployed man on the classic television comedy *Seinfeld* who still lives with his parents. These qualities make him about as appealing to the opposite sex as - well, as a short, overweight, balding, perpetually unemployed man who still lives with his parents. Desperately trying to appear more desirable, on meeting beautiful women George frequently pretends to have an interesting, exciting job (in one case, he claimed to be a marine biologist). His favorite assumed identity, however, is that of an architect. I must confess I find this idea tempting. Everybody thinks architects are interesting. (Well, everybody except Prince Charles and Tom Wolfe, and who cares what they think.) People could listen for hours to architects. Beautiful women and interesting men flock around architects like graduate students around pizza. But with my luck, I can just imagine what would happen:

IPAP: "Wow! That is so great! I love architecture. What are some of your buildings?"

SAP: "Have you heard of the new Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao?"

IPAP: "Of course. I love that building! But I thought Frank Gehry did that. You mean that was you?"

SAP: "Uh, no."

My guess is things would just deteriorate further from there.

A big part of the problem is that few of us call ourselves scientists, or even biologists. Biologist wasn't good enough; it had to be Molecular Biologist. Now it's Cell Biologist, or

Genome Biologist. What makes us feel we have to give ourselves identities that are more overblown than if we were simply to call ourselves biologists? Why do we have to say that we do proteomics, or systems neuroscience, or structural genomics? One of the great things about biology is that biologists can usually understand at least some aspect of what any other biologist does - something that's not true in chemistry, for example, where as far as most organic chemists are concerned the average physical chemist might as well be speaking Swahili, and *vice versa*. Many of us got into biology in the first place because of a love for living things, so why do we think it sounds more learned, or more glamorous, to say that we do cellular immunology or biophysical chemistry? OK, it may sound more learned, but if the reaction I get at parties is any indication, it certainly doesn't sound more glamorous.

With this in mind, last year I tried not to get bogged down in details. It didn't work very well:

IPAP: "So what do you do?"

SAP: "Me? I'm a biologist."

IPAP: "Wow, it must be great to be able to be outdoors all the time observing wildlife."

SAP: "Um, well, I'm sure it is, but you see, I don't actually do that. I use synchrotron radiation to -"

IPAP: "Excuse me, but I just realized I'm supposed to clean out my gutters."

This experience convinced me that what we scientists need is a new name for ourselves. Something that would give us the proper air of glamour, intrigue, and fascination. Something that wouldn't leave us standing in the middle of the room with a drink in our hands wondering why everyone was acting as though we had just grown a pair of horns and a pointy tail. Fortunately I didn't have to look very hard to find it. The Italians, who possess a legendary capacity to see conspiracies behind every event, have coined a wonderful term: dietrology. It means the study of that which is hidden. Dietrology. Isn't that what we all, as scientists, do? The word sounds mysterious, and maybe even slightly dangerous. Indiana Jones could have been a dietrologist (come to think of it, he was). It's perfect. So at another party last holiday season I tried it out:

IPAP: "What do you do?"

SAP: "I'm a dietrologist."

IPAP: "Really? Cool. I was born on 5th March. That makes me a Pisces, right? So -"

Finally, I decided the whole business was stupid. A grown man shouldn't be inventing sexy-sounding names to cover up what he does. I have nothing to hide. I am a member of an honorable, well-respected profession. That's why this year, when some interesting, attractive person at a holiday party asks me what it is that I do, I'm going to hold my head up, look them straight in the eye, and say proudly, "Me? I'm an architect."