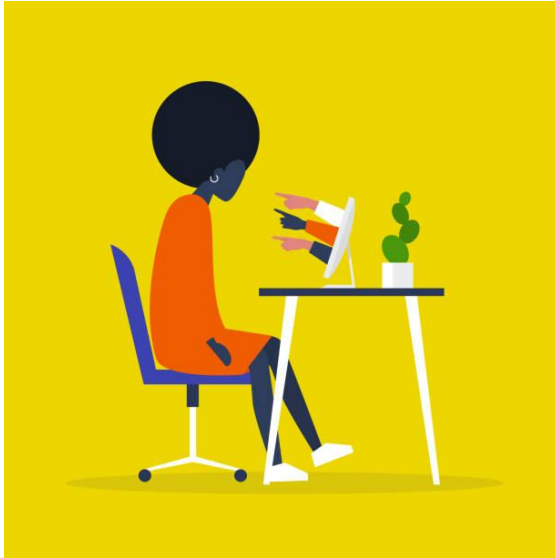# Gender-Fluid Geek Girls: Negotiating Inequality Regimes in the Tech Industry

Authors: Lauren Alfrey, France WindDance Twine (2016)

Presented by: Vandana Keshavamurthy

A scenario ...

- this is the experience that women who work in the technology industry go through on a daily basis

- race, sexuality, and class on top of gender, can make these experiences look vastly different (worse)

How do technically-skilled women negotiate the male-dominated environments of technology firms?

Gender-Fluid Geek Girls: Negotiating Inequality Regimes in the Tech Industry

Authors: Lauren Alfrey, France WindDance Twine
(2016)

Presented by: Vandana Keshavamurthy

Abstract, Motivations, Goals

Empirical research has demonstrated that the climate of STEM occupations do not welcome women. Women are forced to:

- Downplaying their femininity

- Neutralizing their gender differences

- "Leaky pipeline"

Issues with these studies:

- Limited studies on black, Latina, Native American women

- Look at STEM as a whole

- Lack intersectional analysis on how race, gender, and sexuality operate together

Literature Background

Paper Title: Gender fluid geek girls: Negotiating inequality regimes in the tech industry

gender

- 1970s - Rosabeth Moss Kanter
- Impacts all sects of organizations

Inequality regimes

- 1990 - Joan Acker
- *def*: interlocking practices and processes that reproduce structural inequalities in the workplace

"geek"

- Geek culture symbolizes a type of normative masculinity

gender fluid

- 2006 Kristen Schilt study - following their transition, respondents were seen as "one of the guys" at work

How do technically-skilled women negotiate the male-dominated environments of technology firms?

Underlying arguments

How do race, sexuality, and gender interact to structure the experiences of women employed on male teams?

How do the race and sexual orientation co determine whether a woman is allowed to be treated and accepted as one of the guys?

"geek" culture in tech demonstrates an association of masculinity to technical competence

About the study

- **a qualitative study**

    → of women who are technical workers on male teams

    →with participants come from diverse gender identities, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and sexual orientations

Population Targeted

San Francisco

Aged: 25 – 44

18 women

Asian, black, white, Latina

College degrees but not all CS backgrounds

Lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual

$75,000 and $250,000, worked for large firms and startups

Research Design & Reasoning

Wide population demographic

+ Small, but covers difficult to access workers
+ Technology firms have been reluctant to release industry-wide or firmwide data

Semi structured interview

+ Asking about their workplace culture
+ Interactions with direct co workers
+ And their fit with the team

Data Collection

+ Coded transcripts to identity themes

Major Findings

- Microaggressions: subtle, stunning, and often non-verbal exchanges that put down a person of a minority status

- Can escalate into hostility or even abuse

Anastasia
Age: 29 years old
White, heterosexual
Education: Carnegie Mellon
**Work:** switched to CS, all male team
Experience: No eye contact, people confirm what she is saying by asking male colleagues, makes her feel alienated

Takeaway: educational creds and technical skills did not protect them from hostilities in the workplace, were repeatedly asked to defend their work

Major Findings

Theme: Femininity can be a liability

- by changing her style and supported by her whiteness, she was able to assimilate herself into her mostly white coworker environment and be 'one of the guys'
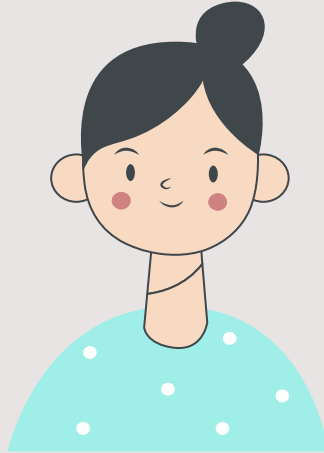
**Tasha**
Age: 28 years old
White, bisexual
Work: startup
Experience: When she wore a dress to conferences and introduced herself as a women engineer, people would be surprised

Takeaway: Tasha's race allowed her to assimilate herself into the inequality regime in which competence was associated with being white and male.

Major Findings

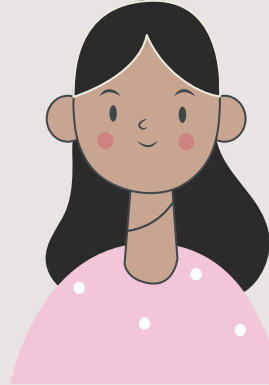Theme: Gender fluidity can help, but not for everyone
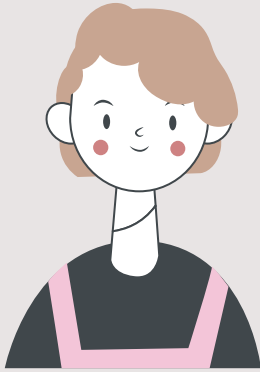
Samantha

White, nonbinary trans
Work: SWE
Experience: "I think it would be difficult for a woman to be very feminine because engineering is such a non feminine space"

Jasmine

Black, pansexual
Work: intern
Experience: told she was underperforming, ousted out the company despite her coworkers exhibiting worse behavior

Takeaway: Unlike black women, white and Asian workers who identified as gender fluid in the sample avoided routine microaggressions reported by conventionally feminine women.

Summarized Findings

RQ: analysis of how race and sexuality structure a cisgender woman's experience in an occupation symbolically defined as masculine.

Outcomes:

- women who belong to the racially dominant groups in the tech industry and who present as gender-fluid and identify as LGBTQ, are able to manage their status on male-dominated teams.
- Black women who identify as LGBTQ did not report the same inclusion and acceptance from their gender fluidity.

Strengths + Weakness of the Study

Strengths

- Study maintains a focus on technology

- Women in the study cover many types of demographics

- Analyzed findings well, were able to draw patterns in broader themes

Weaknesses

- Small sample size - few points of evidence

- Qualitative case study - difficult to generalize the data

- Authors do not cover the details and nuances of the study

Discussion Points

1 How do inequality regimes impact not only the recipients of the inequalities being enacted but also the perpetrators of those actions?

2 Does the solution to solving the gender inequality in the workplace lie in better demographic hiring practices or having current male counterparts go through DEI trainings?

3 Since the study was conducted in SF, some factors like class may not be relevant. So if a similar study was conducted in a different location (ex: Fairfax, another country), would there be similar or different results?

Personal Thoughts, Reflection, & Conclusion

- Paper takes a great step forward into providing insights into how gender, sexuality, race all fit together in the workplace

    - However, this study has several shortcomings in its methods, raises doubts of the validity of its results

        → need more quantitative studies

    - Have great technological advances, but inequalities still persist - personally resonates with me

    - Even though it's the 21st century, experiences mirror women in corporate offices 30 years ago

Thank you!

Questions?