

What Really Keeps Women Out of Tech

By EILEEN POLLACK OCT. 10, 2015

An op-ed in the New York Times:

TECHNOLOGY companies know they have a gender and diversity problem in their work force, and they are finally taking steps to try to fix it. But where are those new employees going to come from if women and minority students aren't opting to study computer science or engineering?

As a woman who earned a bachelor of science degree in physics in the 1970s but left the field because I felt I didn't belong, I have long been interested, and focus here, on women in science and math. I was fascinated, but not surprised, to learn that many young women today avoid studying computer science because they, too, fear they won't fit in

Over and over, Dr. Cheryan and her colleagues have found that female students are more interested in enrolling in a computer class if they are shown a classroom (whether virtual or real) decorated not with "Star Wars" posters, science-fiction books, computer parts and tech magazines, but with a more neutral décor — art and nature posters, coffee makers, plants and general-interest magazines

In another experiment, Dr. Cheryan and her colleagues arranged for female undergraduates to talk to an actor pretending to be a computer science major. If the actor wore a T-shirt that said "I CODE THEREFORE I AM" and claimed to enjoy video games, the students expressed less interest in studying computer science than if the actor wore a solid shirt and claimed to enjoy hanging out with friends — even if the T-shirt-clad actor was another woman.

Such superficial stereotypes might seem laughably outdated. And yet, studies show that the public's image of a scientist hasn't changed since the 1950s. And such stereotypes do have a basis in reality. Who could fail to notice that only one of the eight people awarded Nobel Prizes in science or medicine last week was a woman?

The percentage of women studying computer science actually has fallen since the 1980s. Dr. Cheryan theorizes that this decline might be partly attributable to the rise of pop-culture portrayals of scientists as white or Asian male geeks in movies and TV shows like "Revenge of the Nerds" and "The Big Bang Theory."