

# Triple Jeopardy: Race, Gender and Class Politics of Women in Technology

Lynette Kvasny  
Assistant Professor

School of Information Sciences and Technology  
Pennsylvania State University  
002N Thomas Building  
University Park, PA 16802  
USA

Phone: (814) 865-6458

Fax: (814) 865-6426

E-mail: [lkvasny@ist.psu.edu](mailto:lkvasny@ist.psu.edu)

## Abstract

In this paper, I consider how class, race, and gender influence perspectives regarding information technology (IT). I do so by considering how participants in a community technology center located in an inner city neighborhood conceptualize IT, and how their standpoints shape their beliefs in the opportunities and rewards that are enabled by IT. Using the metaphor of ascension, their narratives constructed IT as a mechanism for liberating entire classes of women economically and socially. These findings suggest that the perspectives regarding IT held by the women participating in this study contradict the findings presented in prior IT and gender studies that generally take as their focus highly educated, middle-class women working in the IT profession and women studying at universities in disciplines that prepare them for entry into the IT profession. These divergent findings suggest a need for additional research that specifically addresses the joint effects of race, class and gender in contexts beyond the IT workplace environment, and with a broader diversity of women.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Organizational studies are criticized for being biased in their representation of workforce diversity. For instance, Nkomo [20] argues that much of the organizational research on workforce diversity examines and presents a managerial view of information technology (IT). Most studies analyze the impacts of gender and race composition on organizational outcomes such as job performance, job satisfaction, job segregation, job turnover, wages, and benefits [19, 22, 23, 24]. The implications drawn from these studies provide recommendations to managers

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for addressing recruitment and retention issues as they pertain to women and minorities. Even when the rank and file workers are studied, it is usually the researcher's view of functionalist organization science and its managerial bias that informs her interpretation of workers' experiences.

In addition to managerial biases, organizational studies on workforce diversity primarily focus on gender issues. As Cheng [4] notes, "Although women-in-management research has become mainstream, other diversity issues are almost entirely ignored, particularly racism, patriarchy, class, heterosexism, sexuality, sexual identity, religion, postcolonial issues, physical ability and so on." Within the women-in-management literature there is an underlying assumption of "womanhood" or a shared female experience. This universalizing tendency is political in its reductionism for it typically emphasizes a single characteristic of gender while ignoring the interaction effects of race, class, national origin, and sexual preference on the self-identity of women. Consequently, the organizational interventions that are informed by women-in-management studies may fail to adequately deal with the diverse and fragmented nature of women's experiences and needs [11].

A similar form of reductionism occurs with respect to race. Researchers adopt the conventional practice of merging Asians, blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics into single categories such as "nonwhite" or "other". This too is a political act in that it ignores and trivializes the uniqueness of men and women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Race is not a biological characteristic; it is the result of the historical construction of racial categories, the shifting meaning of race, and the crucial role of politics and ideology in shaping conceptions of race [21]. Reducing the diverse voices of people of color omits from discussion the voices of nonwhite people as subjects who engage with IT for a whole range of reasons, and who face unique challenges in the areas of recruitment, retention and promotion within business organizations.

A third bias in organizational studies on workforce diversity is the absence of research that examines class issues. For hooks [16] class is much more than Marx's definition of the relationship to the modes of production. Class involves your behavior, your basic assumptions about life. Your experience validates these

assumptions. Cheng [2] contends that social class is a taboo topic in organizational studies because “business school professors not only have a vested interest in reproducing existing class relations; they sell the American dream of using one’s education to overcome humble class origins”.

Beginning with the assumption that class, race and gender are salient features of self-identity, it follows that these factors play an integral role in shaping our understanding of IT, and the benefits that we can expect to derive from our engagement with IT. This paper explores the intersection of these three constructs. The paper begins by presenting the central tenets of feminist standpoint theory, the theoretical lens that informs this research. The following section summarizes the research methodology. Next, the research findings are presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of this research for women-in-management research.

## 2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Gender and IT studies generally incorporate either the deterministic or socio-cultural perspective. From the deterministic perspective, IT is understood as a neutral tool that can be mastered simply by obtaining basic skills. Women are perceived as being somehow deficient, so there is a need for women to ‘catch up’ with men. These deficiencies are assumed to be overcome by offering women the same opportunities as men to acquire some recommended set of technology and managerial skills [7, 26, 27, 28]. Consequently, interventions are designed to promote ‘compensatory strategies’ such as increasing the pipeline of women entering IT careers, making it easier for women to choose IT careers, and promoting a more feminine image of computing [11]. This same approach informs many of the digital divide interventions that provide basic IT skills and public access to seniors, low-income residents, and other non-traditional users who lack access to computers in their homes, schools and places of employment [18]. Responsibility is placed in the hands of women and minorities to conform to the IT cultural norms and values that perpetuate the advantages and privileges that have been traditionally enjoyed by white males [25].

While deterministic interventions attempt to shape individuals, socio-cultural models are aimed at exploring, understanding and challenging the ways that technology and institutions are currently constituted. Employing the socio-cultural approaches, researchers question the neutrality of technology, and seek to understand why and how women and minorities are excluded from IT education and occupations [25]. Limited technical acumen is not seen as an essential characteristic of women. Rather, this research challenges the ways that gender and technology are constituted by resisting compensatory strategies precisely because these changes reinforce women’s non-technical identity [10].

Feminist standpoint theory is a socio-cultural approach to understand the diverse experiences and standpoints of under-represented groups as they strive to cope within the digital society. Feminist standpoint theory is rooted in the power/knowledge framework that focuses on collective group experiences and histories. These theorists argue that shared histories are based on common experiences in subordinate locations in relation to power hierarchies, and these common experiences lend a particular kind of sense making to social

groups [9, 13]. Moreover, the activities of those at the top of the stratified hierarchy both organize and set limits on what persons in lower positions can understand about themselves and the world around them. Feminist standpoint theorists advocate for using the everyday lives of women as a basis for criticizing dominant knowledge claims and as a foundation for constructing oppositional knowledge [8, 13].

Race, class, gender, ethnicity, age and sexuality are not individual markers, but rather elements of social structure that foster inequality resulting in groups [3, 14]. It is the multiplicity of these factors that creates both the generation of groups and the accompanying standpoints. However, proximity on a single variable such as gender does not serve as a surrogate for solidarity because individuals have differences on other variables. For instance, an Asian female janitor that dusts the computer and an Asian female professor that produces journal articles on the same computer would have different lived experiences, and thus different standpoints about that same IT artifact. While each person’s standpoints can achieve only a partial and situated view of reality, the knowledge of the oppressed are privileged because they are believed to be in a relatively better position to envision more objective, just and liberating social practices [8, 15].

The use of feminist standpoint perspectives in organizational studies can help to increase knowledge by identifying missing constructs, developing new relationships among concepts, and building more comprehensive theory [1]. To broaden our understanding of diversity and information technology, this study examines the lived experiences of working-class, African American women and the ways in which their modes of existence informs their standpoint on IT.

## 3. RESEARCH APPROACH

Feminist standpoint theory is used as a lens to inform the data collection and analysis. The informants were comprised of African American women participating in a computer technology center in an urban inner city. Data were collected over a 14-week period using participant observation, unstructured interviews and document analysis. Qualitative research is inherently multi-method, which reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question [5]. In two-hour intervals, I observed participants in a structured classroom environment and an unstructured activities computer lab. Participant observation was used to gain an understanding of the curriculum, and to learn how the participants used IT. The researcher observed a group of 15 participants and a facilitator through the initial orientation session, the 7-week basic computer course and the 7-week computer applications course. The findings presented in this paper focus exclusively on the female participants.

Unstructured interviews were conducted with participants to explore their life histories, and their perspectives of IT and the digital divide. These unstructured interviews were generally informal conversations that took place in the break room, classrooms and labs. Over 50 informal interviews were conducted, each lasting an average of 20-30 minutes. The interviews were intentionally limited to short time frames because they were not recorded. The researcher did, however, have repeated access to the same informants, and used follow-up interviews to clarify and confirm her understanding. Key phrases

were jotted down during each interview to facilitate recall of the content of the discussion, as well as insights and reflections such as the emotional tone and difficulties that were experienced. These discussions assumed a conversational tone. However, interview guides were developed to inform the conversations. Each guide consisted of the list of questions and topics to be covered, but these questions were not asked in any particular order. The discussions were organized around themes such as images of IT, barriers to learning about IT, and the value of the IT training and access.

These interviews were supplemented with analysis of documents that were produced by the women as part of their coursework. These included letters to the Mayor, essays on their experiences at the community technology centers, and newsletters and flyers for community organizations in which they participated.

## 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings derived from this research suggest that working-class, African American women voiced their self-defined standpoints in ways that tapped into their everyday consciousness. There were three movements in this process of coming to voice: experiencing concrete encounters with oppression, developing a self-defined standpoint concerning these experiences, and displaying acts of resistance. Each of these movements will be discussed in further detail.

### 4.1 Experiencing oppression

The impoverished nature of the informants' existence is visible in the language that was used by managers at the community technology initiative to describe the "target community". For instance, the Strategic Plan document stated that the community technology initiative would focus on those "neighborhoods where over half of the households fall below the poverty line and the literacy rate is low...[T]hese are low-income residents who have been left out of the digital revolution."

According to the 1990 census, 49,000 people live in the target community, and 90% of these residents are African American. Single females with children under the age of 18 head 25% of 18,500 households. And 76% of the households are below the poverty line. Only half of all adults over the age of 18 have earned a high school diploma. The more fundamental meaning of these statistics is the loss of educational and job opportunities, and the further marginalization of women and their families already living on the brink.

Empowerment was second theme that emerged from the manager's discourse. As the executive director states, "The true value of what we are doing is not the technology, but the empowerment that comes from it. We are enabling residents to discover a world of information and knowledge that they would not have access to were it not for our ...centers."

The discourse of empowerment and opportunities for increased workforce participation resonated with the women's deep and justifiable frustrations with the failure of public schools to educate their children, and the lack of jobs within the inner city that provide livable wages for parents. They believed in the possibility of upward mobility and collective progress. They knew that blacks have suffered in the US for centuries, but they also let themselves believe IT presented a real opportunity for

change. In this shared worldview, IT is highly prized as a mechanism for social and economic advancement. A common refrain was that computer skills would help women to obtain higher paying clerical jobs. It seemed that something was finally being done to bridge the digital divide.

### 4.2 Developing standpoints

Once the participants learned the basics of operating a computer, they began to reflect critically upon their learning experience and how they would apply their newly acquired skills. Ascension is perhaps the representation of IT that is most often expressed by the women. Ascension evokes metaphors of movement, travel, and rising. Many women such as Keisha used language that stressed change and greater participation in "the twenty-first century".

**Keisha:** *To be able to access information rapidly is important. Knowing how to surf the Internet makes the information as close as your keyboard. We are learning to also use computer applications, Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel and Access just to name a few have brought us into the twenty-first century.*

Narratives of ascent are not about gradual movement; they are about rapid progression from poverty. The question is not how to get skills, but what to do with these skills.

**Rashida:** *I have certainly had a successful computer orientation and beginning. It is truly an exciting journey. My goal is to continue my training with the ultimate goal focusing on certification status. Then, it is look out world as I am on my way!*

Rashida sees this initial IT training as providing the basis for additional coursework that will ultimately lead to computer certification and a higher paying job. Similarly, Gail employs the metaphor of the "road of information freedom" in her narrative of ascent.

**Gail:** *[W]e are taking computer classes that have connected us with the great information divide. We are no longer left behind...We are still traveling on the road of information freedom and enjoying every minute of it. There is so much to be learned, and the information is available because we made the first step, receiving information and taking the steps to change our future in the usage of the computer in our everyday life. We now realize that the Internet is the mode of travel for today as well as tomorrow.*

As Gail reflected upon her training at the technology center, she stated, "This is the first time in my life that I feel educated." The Internet is a "mode of travel" which can be used to "change our future". IT skills are seen as tools for liberation.

### 4.3 Resisting Oppression

Narratives of ascent also express a yearning for escape from alienation and loss. Themes from the exodus story were adopted to signify a large migration from a hostile environment. Derived from the biblical story of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, the exodus story personifies the victimization and struggle experienced by oppressed groups. The exodus

metaphor enables oppressed groups to see themselves as chosen people who will ultimately be freed from oppression. So while there is alienation and loss, there is always the sense of hope and a promised land awaiting them in the future.

Participants like Rashida view parents as “the lost generation” that has historically lacked access to computer and technology training. For her, IT skills enable her to become more confident and capable in her parenting skills. She is hopeful that IT skills will enable her to connect with her children, and become a more knowledgeable parent.

**Sherry:** *We are the lost generation. The divide is with adults, not with the kids. They are learning computers in the daycare centers.*

The exodus metaphor and its biblical imagery are imprinted on the psyche of African Americans. It evokes a class politics in which exodus is less a place of bondage or a promised land, but more a series of sojourns. It is an itinerary with movement from Africa via the Middle Passage, from slavery via the Underground Railroad, from the South via the Great Migration, and now from the inner cities via the virtual world of Cyberspace.

Although these women face tremendous barriers, they continue to strive, and do not yield to despair. Metaphorically the notion of an information superhighway is seen as a road that moves, as a mechanism that enables black people to flee from the oppressive and menacing conditions of the inner city and to keep despair at bay.

**Cynthia:** *Even though I have myriad things to learn, and am still in the beginning stages of my computer/technology education, I know that it can be done and I am excited about the future possibilities in this field. The instructor...is also adept at demonstrating the relationship between the level of technological competence, and success in the workforce.*

Another characteristic of the ascent metaphor is the movement from ignorance to enlightenment. It is a movement of entire groups, not individuals.

**Shawna:** *I will learn a lot of computer applications when I finish this class. I will be able to get a better job and better opportunities. I will conquer the digital divide. We all need to learn these computer applications. We will need this information to be successful in the business world. Afro-Americans have basically been left behind in this arena. We must make progress....I am attempting to empower myself with the use of the technology available today and proficient use of the computer. I would like to share this information within the community because it is so very important in our society.*

These women viewed IT access and skills as part of a strategy for escaping poverty, enhancing their parenting skills, and broadening their social participation in the digital society. They were pulled by the hope and lure of employment. The mere idea “that there is something out there for us” in cyberspace moved the women, sending them to on a journey on the “information highway”. An

outgrowth of this movement was a renewal of the hope, community solidarity and self-determination.

## 5. IMPLICATIONS

The major implication of this study is that the notion of all women being marginalized by IT is not a universally shared reality or truth. Sojourner Truth exposed the socially constructed nature of “women” as she juxtaposed her experiences as an African American former slave with the qualities ascribed to women. “Her rhetorical question “and ain’t I a woman?” highlights the culturally constructed notion of womanhood, and the contradictions inherent in the blanket use of the term women. The notion of women needs to be understood as part of a broader discourse in which the lived experiences of middle class, predominantly white women are imposed onto females of all races and classes. One must separate the biological from the ideological notion of womanhood [12].

This research also demonstrates that failure to understand the implications of class and race on the gender-technology relationship may help to explain the continued underrepresentation of women in IT occupations. As the working-class, African American women in this study demonstrate, the legacy of race and class play important roles in shaping standpoints on IT. The sole emphasis on gender masks the extent to which middle class, college educated women dominate the discourse and promote their class interests. In doing so, it builds solidarity among women but at the same time, it ignores the differences between their social status and the status of masses of women.

Exploring the intersection of gender, class and race identities helps us to understand contradictory discourses, and how women position themselves differently within the IT discourse, depending on the power and resources that they have on hand. Diverse standpoints give rise to different spaces within which women are exposed to different understandings of technology, gender and the relation between the two. The essentialist belief that women possess a non-technical identity is a social construction that does not speak to the experiences of all women. Thus, it is important that our research address a variety of women, and their accompanying standpoints and experiences.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Exploring the differences and commonalities that exist among women is crucial for increasing the participation of women in the IT workplace and society in general. These findings suggest that low-income African American women generally constructed IT as highly empowering from an economic and social standpoint. Technology was seen as a mechanism for uplifting the entire community. Feminist standpoint theory is important in this regard because it forces the researcher to look for both commonality and differences across groups of women. Foucault [6] warns that dominant groups use individualization as a tool to foster utopian visions. Yet focusing on the individual leaves the masses in isolation and profoundly powerless relative to dominant institutions. Resistance to institutions and values dissipates through individualization.

Therefore, future research should focus on finding solidarity among women along the diverse axes of sexuality, social class,

nationality, religion, geographic region and job classification. Suppressing the knowledge and experiences of nonwhite, middle class women is critical in structuring patterned relations of race gender, and class inequality that pervade the social structure [17]. Armed with the knowledge and experience of diverse women, we can then begin to explain how power relations oppress women, envision more democratic and just institutional practices, and challenge the discourses and structures that limit women's engagement with IT.

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