

MAR15-2014-020556

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the MAR15 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

“We’re all unisex anyway”: The persistent discourse of gender neutrality in physics

ALLISON GONSALVES, McGill University

Doctoral physics students have stories about the kinds of actions, behaviours and ways of doing physics that enable them to be recognized as physicists. This presentation will illuminate some of these stories through a lens that scrutinizes how discourses about gender can shape both the stories that students tell and the behaviours they practice to achieve recognition in their field. Through observations, photo-elicitation, and life history interviews, eleven men and women shared stories about their experiences with physics, and the contexts that have enabled or constrained their participation in doctoral physics. The results of this study revealed that recognition was often achieved through the reproduction or reworking of persistent discourses of gender norms. This presentation will explore the particularly persistent discourse of *gender neutrality* in physics. I will explore how this discourse is constructed, how it can be contested, and how it may be constraining for both men and women students. The construction of physics as gender neutral can pose conflicts of identity for students who feel the need to refigure their gender performances in ways that permit recognition as “physics people.” This presentation will look at two case studies that demonstrate the conflict students experience between expressions of femininity and doing physics against the backdrop of gender neutrality. I will discuss the problematic of gender neutrality, and I will also discuss some of the creative solutions doctoral students adopt to navigate discourses of gender in this neutral terrain.