

The Effect of Occupational Sex Composition on the Gender Gap in Workplace Authority

Vered Kraus and Yuval P. Yonay

Department of Sociology, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

This article compares women and men's attainment of workplace authority in female-dominated, mixed, and male-dominated occupations. It is based on a representative mobility study of Jewish women in the Israeli labor force conducted in 1991–1992. Two sets of hypotheses are offered based on two competing theories. The first theory predicts that in female occupations women have more influence and mutual support than in male occupations, and, hence, they will have more access to authority. The opposing perspective argues that in male-dominated occupations the competition between women and men is weaker, and therefore men have a smaller incentive to discriminate against women. Our findings support the second argument. The gender gap in authority is larger in female-dominated occupations, and women have the highest chances to have authority when they work in male occupations; men have similar chances, no matter in which type of occupation they are employed. © 2000 Academic Press

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This article examines women's access to positions of authority within three groups of occupations: occupations in which women comprise the vast majority of employees (female-dominated), those in which they constitute a small minority (male-dominated), and those in which sex composition is relatively even (mixed). While it has been demonstrated that women in the labor market achieve less authority than men with similar educational achievements and work experience (see literature review below), the more refined parameters of this gender discrimination have not been investigated. In this study, we explore how the concentration of women in an occupation affects the gender gap in workplace authority.

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Address correspondence and reprint requests to Yuval Yonay, Department of Sociology, University of Haifa, Mount Carmel, Haifa, 31905 Israel. Fax: (972-4) 824-0819. E-mail: rssso231@soc.haifa.ac.il.

The theoretical and empirical literature offers contradictory expectations concerning the impact of occupational sex composition on workplace authority. According to one line of reasoning (Kanter, 1977 is probably the best example), as more women enter an organization, they become less conspicuous and hence under less pressure, they support each other, they have more power relative to women in organizations with fewer female employees, and in consequence, they are treated more equitably by managers. A contradictory claim maintains that when more women enter an occupation, men face more competition and feel more threatened. This view follows the same logic as Blalock's theory on minority competition (1967): faced with larger numbers of women co-workers, men tend to increase their discriminatory behavior, which in turn decreases women's chance of advancing to higher positions. Sometimes unconsciously, men working in female-dominated occupations perceive their jobs to be unmanly; such loss of status, together with sexist ideology, drives men to "compensate" by aggressively pursuing the most advantageous positions in their occupation. Since the women who compete with them have been socialized to be less assertive, such behavior from their male colleagues leaves them at a disadvantage. In order to determine which approach better fits the reality, we compared the rates of women and men who hold authority in the Jewish labor force in Israel, using data from a representative mobility survey conducted in 1991–1992. We calculated raw differences between women and men regarding three dimensions of authority and then controlled for variations in background and human-capital variables to find the net differences. Our findings support the second approach: women have a higher likelihood of holding authority in male-dominated occupations where there is no significant gap in authority between women and men.

The Gender Gap in Workplace Authority

Control over subordinates and organizational resources is an essential component of the work experience and a major determinant of workers' prospects (Halaby, 1979; Reskin and Ross, 1992; Adler, 1994; Reskin and Padavic, 1994; Wright et al., 1995). As Peter Blau explains, "positions of authority over many employees in work organization are the source of most authority in contemporary societies." "Top positions in organizations with large financial resources," he adds, are also "the basis of much control over economic resources" (Blau, 1977, p. 230). Women's access to these top positions, however, is very limited despite their many achievements. Although women comprise between a third to a half of the labor force in industrial societies, they remain conspicuously underrepresented in managerial jobs and lack access to key positions (Kanter, 1977; Wolf and Fligstein, 1979a; Jaffee, 1989; Reskin and Ross, 1992; Jacobs, 1992; Savage and Witz, 1992; Hakim, 1996).

As in the analysis of the gender gap in income, human capital differences explain many of the reasons for this authority gap. Clearly, if women have less

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