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Sex Segregation

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Synonyms

Gender segregation

Definition

Unequal distributions, or separation of people according to their biological sex.

Introduction

Sex segregation, or gender segregation, is an enduring phenomenon that is typically defined as an imbalanced distribution of men and women within a given locational dimension such as occupation, professional specialization, industry membership, or education (Charles 2015). While absolute separation between the sexes is much less common in the Western world today than it was in the past, relative sex segregation is still a prevalent phenomenon in the workplace. The present entry focuses on *occupational sex segregation*, which is the separation of men and women into different jobs or different roles within organizations (Harcey and Prokos 2017).

Types of Segregation

There are two fundamental types of sex segregation – *horizontal sex segregation* and *vertical sex segregation*. Horizontal sex segregation refers to men and women's unequal dispersion across different occupations, for example, teachers, doctors, lawyers, cashiers, nurses, and construction workers, or across different occupational specifications, such as pediatric surgeon versus heart surgeon or science teacher versus arts teacher. Horizontal segregation shows at least three distinctive features, which are (1) the magnitude of gender distributions across disciplines, (2) the crowding of women into a narrower range of professions than men, and (3) the likelihood of men and women sharing an occupation. In contrast, vertical sex segregation refers to men and women's unequal dispersion within an organizational hierarchy such as first-level manager versus executive manager, school teacher versus headmaster, or assistant professor versus full professor (see Charles 2015).

In general, sex segregation has substantially dropped since the early 1970s but reached a relative plateau in the 1990s. Vertical sex segregation is a nearly universal phenomenon that occurs within almost every profession and culture (Gutek 2001). Even today, women's presence within different hierarchical levels in the workplace still takes a pyramid-like shape representing an increasing gender imbalance at higher stages of the career ladder. However, through a variety of governmental, organizational, and societal

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initiatives focused on improving gender equality in the workplace, vertical segregation has decreased moderately in industrialized countries, and invisible leadership barriers for women (i.e., glass ceiling) have become more permeable (Bosak and Kinahan 2014; Charles 2015). In contrast, horizontal segregation has not changed considerably over the past decades. Instead, occupations continue to be prone to gender labeling or gender typing. More specifically, gender typing implies that roles and responsibilities are assigned based on a traditional division of labor, wherefore men and women occupy positions with traditionally gendered job descriptions (Costen 2012). Thus, certain occupations like truck drivers or construction workers are still categorized as "men jobs," whereas other professions such as nurses or primary school teachers are perceived to be "women jobs" (see Charles 2015).

Causes and Consequences of Sex Segregation

Research presents several explanations for occupational sex segregation (e.g., Harcey and Prokos 2017), among which the three most common explanations for occupational sex segregation are (1) evolutionary, (2) economic, and (3) sociological. The *evolutionary perspective* explains sex segregation with innate biological differences between men and women that arose from human evolutionary history (Browne 2006). According to Buss (1995), these biological differences emerged because in human evolution men and women have faced "recurrently different adaptive problems" (p. 19). More specifically, for large parts of human history, men faced the adaptive problem of hunting, whereas women faced adaptive problems of gathering and caring for offspring. The evolutionary perspective thus argues that men and women are fundamentally different and therefore equipped to fit occupations, which are congruent with their biological characteristics.

In contrast, the *economic or human capital view* of sex segregation argues that differences in men and women's hierarchy and role in an organization are attributable to differences in their human capital, that is, their specific KSAOs (knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics; Costen 2012). Because women are often more invested in domestic work, childcare, and eldercare than men, it is claimed that they develop less human capital. According to the rational choice concept, households are likely to focus on the career development of the party with more human capital as primary breadwinner (Blackburn et al. 2002).

Stemming from sociology and social psychology, *social role theory* emphasizes men and women's adaptation to a traditional division of labor in which men typically served as the provider and women as the caretaker (Eagly 1997) rather than biological or evolutionary positions. Specifically, social role theory views traditional gender roles as "socially constructed sets of ideas that are firmly grounded in the requirements of a society's productive activity" (Eagly 1997, p. 1381). As an explanation for occupational sex segregation, social role theory suggests that the traditional distribution into different social roles resulted in the generation of gender stereotypes. For example, women are perceived to be more communal (e.g., caring, helpful), while men are believed to be more agentic (e.g., assertive, dominant); thus, gender role stereotypes reinforce traditional sex segregation, in which women typically occupy roles that are characterized by nurturing acts, care, and helping, whereas men usually occupy positions that are characterized by assertiveness and dominance (Eagly and Wood 2016).

Other explanations for sex segregation focus on factors pertaining to employer behavior and the broader societal context. For example, the increased availability of part-time work is viewed as facilitating increased segregation, with child-rearing women leaving their occupational path for part-time hours and lower-skilled, feminized work (Blackwell 2001). Other work emphasizes the influence of governmental policies such as maternity leave, anti-discrimination, and protective legislation on occupational segregation (Chang 2004).

While sex segregation always entails an unequal distribution of men and women, it does not automatically imply discrimination (Browne 2016). It is however strongly linked to gender inequality

(Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015), with typical jobs and occupations performed by women rather than men being valued and paid less. For example, research using US census data from 1950 to 2000 found substantial support for the view that increased feminization of occupations diminishes their relative pay, which is indicative of the devaluation of jobs with large shares of females (Levanon et al. 2009). The mere existence of sex segregation and thus people's observation of women and men in different roles further limit (a) women's and men's autonomy and individual choices and (b) collective flourishing. For example, Bosak and Sczesny (2008) found that, despite comparable qualifications and skills, female business students felt less suitable for an entry-level leadership position than their male counterparts because they believed to possess less of the masculine attributes typically ascribed to leaders. These internalized gender beliefs limit women's choices and career behaviors and contribute to the underrepresentation of women in traditionally male-dominated roles such as leadership. The same applies to men with ambitions to pursue female sex-typed roles albeit the proportion of women wishing to pursue nontraditional occupations is more pronounced than that of men, with occupational segregation thus disadvantaging women more than men. Sex segregation in the workplace might also constrain organizational performance and collective flourishing. Research has found that a positive association between gender diversity and firm performance is only achieved in the presence of a critical mass of women rather than "token women" on corporate boards (Joecks et al. 2013). Further, Bettio and Verashchagina (2009) state that, at a macroeconomic level, "segregation may be exacerbating skill shortages insofar as it impedes the efficient reallocation of male and female workers and distorts the allocation of future flows of workers" (p. 46). Finally, occupational sex segregation both builds on and, in turn, fosters cultural beliefs about women and men, with these stereotypes shaping gender-differentiated aspirations and choices – reinforcing the prevailing pattern of occupational segregation by sex (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015).

Sex Segregation and Social Change

Some scholars adopting functionalist and neo-institutionalist views of gender inequality believe that sex segregation will gradually erode due to economic (e.g., gender inequality is argued to be inefficient and not compatible with liberal capitalism) and cultural (e.g., nation-states show increased commitment to gender equality and nondiscrimination) factors (see Charles 2015). Other scholars emphasize the persistence of cultural beliefs or stereotypes about men and women, which justify, rather than undermine, the existing sex segregation in employment and hierarchy in organizations (Bosak and Eagly 2014). According to social role theory, people's beliefs about women and men follow from their observed role behaviors. The slow but gradual change in women's social position and roles in society thus might foster a change of gender stereotypes over time. For example, Bosak and Sczesny (2011) found that those participants, who believed that more women would move into leadership roles over time, also expected the perceived incongruity between women and leaders to erode in the future. In general, vertical and horizontal forms of sex segregation are strengthened by descriptive and prescriptive gender norms about what women and men are like and should be like, which contribute to gender bias and discrimination in the workplace, and men's and women's own gender identity, which has implications for their job search behavior and career decisions (Bosak and Eagly 2014; Bosak and Kinahan 2014). Another factor limiting change pertaining to sex segregation is women's compared to men's continued greater involvement in domestic work and child-rearing, which – paired with a lack of family-friendly practices in organizations and/or high childcare costs – makes women often leave their careers or perform non-elite, less skilled work (Blackwell 2001).

Interventions directed to reducing sex segregation have therefore focused on educating individuals about stereotypes and biases through diversity training and unconscious bias training with somewhat positive effects. Other interventions aim to change the gender composition of

study programs, occupations, and leadership positions through organizational policies, government mandates, and initiatives including affirmative action, gender pay reporting, the introduction of gender quotas, and the formal institution of family-friendly work-life policies (see Eagly and Heilman 2016). While these direct interventions at organizational level can yield positive effects, research (e.g., Heilman and Haynes 2006) has also shown that they can foster (i) resistance in organizations who might seek to opt out of the mandate; (ii) negative reactions among non-beneficiaries who feel unfairly treated, and (iii) stigmatizing effects toward beneficiaries (e.g., the professional success of some women may be unfairly perceived by some to be the result of affirmative action rather than performance). Finally, interventions might also entail increasing women's human capital via education and training in nontraditional occupations and leadership capital via opportunities to gain leadership experience.

Conclusion

Sex segregation refers to an imbalanced distribution of men and women within a given locational dimension such as occupation, professional specialization, industry membership, or education. Vertical occupational segregation, i.e., over (under) representation of women and men into elite versus non-elite roles, can be distinguished from horizontal segregation, i.e., over (under) representation of women and men across professions. Both horizontal and vertical sex segregation are strongly associated with gender inequality and contribute to the prevailing gender pay gap through (a) a general devaluation of work that is performed by women and (b) women's higher prevalence in non-elite jobs. The prevailing sex segregation can be explained by evolutionary, economic, and sociological theories. It has implications and potential costs at individual and macroeconomic levels. Many organizations and policymakers, therefore, aim to reduce occupational sex segregation via various, sometimes controversial, interventions.

Cross-References

- ▶ Adaptation
- ▶ Biases
- ▶ Individual Discrimination
- ▶ Social Roles

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