Sexual Stratification: Differences in Power in the Work Setting*

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ABSTRACT

To carry out policy aimed at achieving sexual equality in labor market positions, we need a clear understanding of what constitutes comparable positions in the work setting. In this paper we expand on what is normally examined when determining whether persons or groups have similar positions in the workplace. We argue that power in the work setting is an essential aspect of stratification and is helpful in the study of sexual inequality in labor market positions. Our empirical analysis offers confirmation for these arguments.

A full understanding of the amount of labor market discrimination on the basis of sex and the processes by which it is generated is an essential ingredient of an effective policy which aims to achieve parity between men and women in the labor market. To this end, social scientists have invested much of their energies and resources to discover the extent and nature of sexual inequalities in labor market positions. Yet sociological research investigating sex differences in work positions and in occupational status attainment, has left ambiguous the need or mechanism for remedying sexual discrimination in the work setting. We argue that one problem with such research is what constitutes comparable positions in the labor market. One purpose of this paper is to expand on what one considers when determining whether individuals or groups of individuals have comparable positions in the workplace. To do this, it is necessary to consider dimensions other than occupational status which differentiate positions. One

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such dimension is power in the work setting. By considering power in the work setting, we begin to clarify whether men and women have parity in labor market positions and in allocation into them.

In this paper we briefly review the results from research on sex differences in occupational status attainment. Then, we argue that one must consider other theoretically relevant attributes such as power in the work setting. After a brief discussion of the relevance of power for stratification research, we argue, when theorizing about the sexual distribution of power in the work place, that the sexual division of labor in the family has wide-ranging implications for the sexual division of labor in the market place. In short, we hypothesize that women's subordinate position in the home is translated to subordinate positions in the work force. Following this discussion, we empirically test these assertions and assess their importance in understanding sexual inequality in labor market positions.

**Antecedent Research**

Some students of stratification have argued that socioeconomic status (SES) (and, therefore, its measure—Duncan's socioeconomic index) is the sole best indicator of the hierarchic ranking of occupational position (Featherman and Hauser, a; Featherman et al., b). For example: "... What justifies the use of socioeconomic metrics to scale occupations? There is mounting evidence in the U.S. and elsewhere that the hierarchical structure underlying occupational roles is largely socioeconomic" (Featherman et al., b, 330-31). Further, the authors argue that "... the fundamental core of occupational inequality in the U.S. and other capitalist, industrialized societies is socioeconomic status" (357). If this is the case, then one would expect such measures to tap the differentiation of positions in the work force. In particular, one would have thought that studies comparing the status attainment of men and women would have revealed that women had restricted ranges of opportunities. Our notions are based on (1) the fact that the literature on occupational segregation by sex suggests that women are highly concentrated in a very small number of positions (Gross; Oppenheimer), and (2) the common observation that women are discriminated against in access to labor market positions.

However, the research comparing the occupational status attainments of men and women produced some unexpected results (Featherman and Hauser, b; McClendon; Treiman and Terrell). First, the occupational status distributions of men and women had similar mean levels and standard deviations. This implies that men and women have comparable levels and ranges of opportunities in labor market positions. Furthermore, regressions of occupational status on education and several aspects of family background have indicated that the occupational attainment process is
essentially identical for men and women, suggesting that there is no discrimination in the attainment of occupational status. Although a more recent study (Sewell et al.) has found some differences in the levels and process of occupational status attainment by sex, the basic results remain. Because these results seem to be in conflict with what is known about the kinds of positions men and women hold in the labor market, we question the adequacy of measures of SES in tapping important aspects of sexual differentiation in labor market positions.

In order to determine whether the sexes (or individuals or groups of individuals) have comparable positions in the labor market, it seems necessary to consider power in the work setting. By such power we mean control over resources, people, and things. Power is an important dimension stratifying positions in the work setting (Bendix; Braverman; Chandler).

People with differing amounts of power on the job not only hold very different positions in the work setting, but also behave differently in situations outside work. A person with more power in the work setting has a higher rank, more status, added perquisites, higher earnings, and different ways of attaining income than a person with less power (Kluegel; Spaeth; Wright and Perrone). Power in the work setting has implications for behavior outside the firm: class consciousness, values, voting behavior, social participation (Dahrendorf; Kluegel). Because power in the work setting is an important dimension of stratification and has important implications for all aspects of social behavior, an understanding of the extent and nature of sexual differentiation along this dimension should help clarify the anomalous findings about sexual equality in labor market positions.

Furthermore, it is important to consider power explicitly in the work setting since two pieces of research suggest that occupational status is a poor proxy for it. Occupational status (or prestige) measures the goodness of the occupation as evaluated by groups of raters (Duncan; Featherman et al., b; Siegel). The work of Goldthorpe and Hope suggests that three criteria are used by raters in evaluating the goodness of an occupation: income, education, and prestige of the job. Aspects of power in the work setting are not explicitly considered when raters evaluate the goodness of occupations. Wright and Perrone show that authority position on the job, which they interpret as class in a Marxist sense, has an effect on income that is independent of the effect of occupational status. Thus, if one wants to consider power in the work setting, one must do so explicitly rather than using an occupational status scale as a proxy for it.

Although there are a number of aspects of power in the work setting, in this paper we are concerned with only one of these aspects: authority. We define authority as control over the work process of others. While other aspects of power in the work setting such as autonomy (control over one’s own work process) could be relevant to such a discussion, authority is
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Clearly the most salient of all aspects and the most important for locating individuals in the hierarchy of work.

Despite sex similarities in the occupational status attainment process, there are many theoretical reasons why one would expect women not to be in positions of authority in the work setting. Theorizing about the sexual differentiation of authority in the workplace requires us to consider how sex roles in the family are translated to sex roles on the job. In this society, persistent sex-role socialization has led to a well-defined division of labor within the family. This has had implications for the division of labor in the work setting (Bernard; Boulding; Hartmann). It affected what kinds of positions employers thought were appropriate for women as well as what kinds of positions women were interested in obtaining. Employers' views on women's adequacy to perform in supervisory positions are shaped by employers' attitudes on what women's roles should be as well as the actual labor force behavior of women. Employers believe women should not be in positions of authority in the firm because of their (1) intermittent employment, (2) lack of sufficient tenure and commitment to the firm, and (3) restrictions on geographic mobility as well as on travel for work (Blau and Jusenius; Oppenheimer). Further, employers often feel women are too emotional and therefore are unfit to be in supervisory positions (Bowman et al.; Kantor). There is also a strong belief among employers and workers that women should not supervise male or mixed-sex work groups (Bowman et al.; Caplow; Kantor; National Manpower Council; Oppenheimer; Whyte). Other reasons for not expecting women to occupy positions of authority are their own view of their competence for such positions and their lack of desire to be in supervisory roles. Some women, not having been socialized into leadership roles (Maccoby and Jacklin), might view themselves less capable of assuming such positions. It is also possible that some women are reluctant to assume positions which require long-term commitment to a particular firm due to anticipated interruptions in employment. Thus, we hypothesize that women are less likely to be in supervisory positions because of attitudes and behaviors of employers and workers as well as the preferences and employment experience of some women.

There is some empirical support for our argument that women are less likely to be in supervisory positions. First, women are much less likely to be in the Census major group "managers and administrators except farm" than men. In 1973, 4.9 percent of all women workers and 13.6 percent of all male workers were in this major group (U.S. Department of Labor, 89). Second, according to Grimm and Stern, although women are highly represented in certain semi-professional occupations (nurse, social worker, school teacher, librarian), men are overrepresented in the higher level positions within these semi-professions. This implies that even in the sectors of the labor force where women predominate, men tend to be
in supervisory roles. In general, women tend to be excluded from occupations which by definition involve supervising others and they tend not to assume supervisory positions in work settings in which they dominate, let alone in mixed work groups. This empirical evidence does not tell us whether women are less likely to be in supervisory positions net of their occupational status and other characteristics. We hypothesize that net of these other factors, women are less likely to control the work processes of others.

In our discussion thus far, we have suggested that parity in labor market positions should imply that individuals have similar roles not only in type of work or occupational status, but also in authority on the job. We are not arguing that authority in the workplace is the sole best indicator of comparable positions on the job. Rather, it can be used in conjunction with other indicators to determine whether people have comparable positions. In particular, authority in the work setting should be useful in the study of sexual stratification as we have argued that men and women differ in extent of authority despite similar occupational statuses.

In order to assess the usefulness of our theoretical scheme, it is instructive to assess our arguments empirically. The analysis in this paper has two goals. First, we want to examine whether men and women have differing amounts of authority despite similar levels of occupational status. If such differences exist as hypothesized, there is support for our argument that one must use multiple indicators in order to assess whether individuals have equality in labor market positions. Second, we want to begin to understand the basic allocative mechanisms through which men and women achieve differing amounts of power in the work setting.

In the empirical analysis, we ascertain whether men and women have differing amounts of authority holding constant certain other relevant variables. The variables are included and held constant for two reasons. First, occupational status is included so that we can control for what some students of stratification have called comparable positions in the occupational structure. By holding constant occupational status (level), we are able to ascertain whether men and women whose jobs have similar occupational statuses (or similar goodness of occupations) have differing amounts of authority. By controlling for occupational status (level), we are not holding constant all characteristics of occupations (i.e., Census major group, white collar/blue collar) but merely the rated goodness of occupations.

Second, the other variables are included so that we can identify some of the main mechanisms by which men and women get sorted into different authority positions. The two variables are education and self-employment. Education is the major mechanism by which positions in the work setting are obtained. Self-employment should increase an individual's likelihood of supervising others. These two variables are not meant to
exhaust all possible mechanisms which might allocate men and women to positions of authority in the work setting.

Data, Methods, and Variables

The data are from the Wisconsin Study of Social and Psychological Factors in Socioeconomic Achievement, which is a longitudinal study of a random sample of 10,317 persons who were seniors in Wisconsin high schools in 1957 (Sewell and Hauser). A follow-up study of the members of the sample was conducted during 1975, obtaining completed interviews of 9,138 respondents (or 88.5 percent of the original sample). The data for these analyses are drawn from the 1975 reinterviews. Using this data set means that no one with fewer than 12 years of education is included in the sample. The results cannot be generalized to non-high school graduates. Furthermore, we are investigating the distribution of authority at mid-life (around age 37) and our results do not address the issue of the distribution of authority in the work setting for the total working population or for one cohort earlier or later in its life course. One could argue that by observing individuals at such an early point in the life cycle, there is not enough variation in the dependent variable, as individuals might be more likely to have authority in the work setting as they grow older. This is not a problem as evidenced by the marginal distribution of authority which is presented in the next few pages. In any case our work is the first study to investigate sex differences in authority in the work setting at any point in the life cycle.

The sample included 7,563 individuals (4,264 men and 3,299 women) (1) who had a current job or had worked in the last five years, (2) whose current or last job was not unpaid work at a family business or farm, and (3) on whom there were data on all relevant variables for the analysis. The largest sample attrition was due to the fact that 1,329 females did not have a current or last job. (See Fligstein and Wolf for a discussion of some of the potential effects of looking at a restricted population—employed women.) This data set was chosen because it had information for men and women on authority in the work setting and a sufficiently large number of cases for complex analyses.

The method used is log-linear analysis with a dependent variable (Bishop et al.; Goodman, a, b, c). The reason for choosing this analytical strategy is that our dependent variable, authority, is polychotomous and an ordinal scale, and lacks qualities of interval measures.

Log-linear models can imply a cross-classification of data into a multidimensional contingency table where all variables are in categorical form. The variables have been coded in the following way. Education has four categories defined by number of years of completed schooling: (1) 12 years, (3) 13–15 years, (3) 16 years, (4) 17 + years. Occupational status is
coded into the following eight categories using Duncan SEI scores (Duncan; Featherman et al., a): (1) 0–19, (2) 20–29, (3) 30–39, (4) 40–49, (5) 50–59, (6) 60–69, (7) 70–79, (8) 80–96. The first and last two deciles were combined as there were small numbers of individuals at the extremes of the distribution. Class of worker is dichotomized into employed by private business or government and self-employed.

The operationalization of the concept of authority was based on yes–no answers to the following questions:

1. I have authority to hire or fire others.
2. I can influence or set the rate of pay received by others.
3. I supervise the work of others. That is, what they produce or how much.

The categories were defined according to the number of “yes” answers to these three questions. The first category (the highest amount of authority) included individuals who answered “yes” to all three (1,560 respondents); the second category included those who answered “yes” to any two (1,234 respondents); the third included those who answered “yes” to any one of the questions (1,524 respondents); and the final category included those who answered “no” to all of the questions (3,245 respondents). We argue that this categorization represents a rough ordinal scale of authority on the job. Those in high authority positions can hire, fire, set pay, and supervise others. Those in lesser positions will not have these responsibilities. These questions do form a Guttman scale.

Clearly, this construct is measured by subjective responses to a series of questions. Therefore, there is an element of perceived authority in this measure. Yet we are fairly confident of the objectivity of the authority measure because it is constructed from questions that ask about one’s control over certain specific processes in the work setting (i.e., hire, fire, pay). Despite this caveat, this data set is the only one, to our knowledge, which includes questions that can be used to measure authority for both sexes.

Analyses

Before presenting and testing our specific hypotheses, it is instructive to inspect the distribution of authority, found in Table 1. From this table it is obvious that females are less likely to be in positions of authority than are men. Although this relationship was predicted, the table does not tell us whether there are sex differences in authority holding constant what others have considered comparable positions in the work setting. To test this assertion, we present the following hypothesis.
H1. Females will have less authority in the workplace than males when the effects of education and status level of job are held constant.

This hypothesis follows directly from the foregoing discussion and requires no further elaboration here. Status level is held constant in order to control for what some students of stratification have called similar positions. We control for education since it is one mechanism by which individuals could be allocated to positions of authority and our interest here is to examine sex differences in authority net of such variables. Furthermore, we control for the relationships between all of the independent variables (Bishop et al; Goodman, b).

Table 1. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTIONS OF AUTHORITY BY SEX (Ns IN PARENTHESES)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authority (1 is highest)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>30.5 (1,300)</td>
<td>7.9 (260)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>19.8 (844)</td>
<td>11.8 (390)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>19.1 (813)</td>
<td>21.6 (711)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>30.7 (1,307)</td>
<td>58.7 (1,938)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 presents the results of a log-linear analysis of the determinants of authority in the work setting. The test of Hypothesis 1 can be found in Part A. From line A8, we see that sex has a main effect on authority net of status level and education, thus confirming Hypothesis 1. In fact, the effect of sex is the largest net effect on authority analyzed in Part A of the table (see lines A8 through A10). The tau parameters for the main effect of sex on authority in Part A of Table 3 indicate that, holding constant education and status level, women are in jobs which have much less authority than men. These results indicate that women are more likely than men to be in subordinate positions even when they have the same levels of education and status. They also suggest that looking at other dimensions which differentiate jobs (besides status) gives us a clearer picture of the stratification of the sexes in the workplace.

H2: (A) The effect of sex on authority in the workplace differs by educational level.
(B) The effect of sex on authority in the workplace differs by status level.

Hypotheses 2A and 2B differ from Hypothesis 1 in that not only do we expect sex to affect authority, but we expect this effect to vary at different levels of status of job held and education. In particular, we expect sexual inequality in authority to be most pronounced at higher levels of status and education. At lower levels of status and/or education, it is possible that
neither men nor women have much authority over the work process of others. At upper levels of education and occupational status, men would be more likely to be in positions of authority than women, since women tend to be concentrated in the semi-professions where they have little authority.

Lines 11 and 12 of Part A of Table 2 indicate that the effect of sex on authority does not differ at different levels of status or education. Hypotheses 2A and 2B are not confirmed. Although we had argued that sexual inequality in authority would be more pronounced at higher levels of education and status, this is not the case. The exclusion of women from supervisory positions is pervasive, regardless of their education or status level. Some readers might be interested in ascertaining in which jobs the sex differences in authority are the largest. However, the size of this
Table 3. TAU PARAMETERS DESCRIBING THE MAIN EFFECTS OF SEX ON AUTHORITY UNDER DIFFERENT MODELS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authority (1 is highest, 4 is lowest)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PART A: Tau parameters describing the main effect of sex on authority under the saturated model (1234) where 1 is sex, 2 is occupational status level, 3 is education, and 4 is authority.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.603</td>
<td>1.130</td>
<td>.947</td>
<td>.583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.624</td>
<td>.885</td>
<td>1.056</td>
<td>1.715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART B: Tau parameters describing the main effect of sex on authority (14) under the saturated model (12345) where 1 is sex, 2 is occupational status level, 3 is education, 4 is authority, and 5 is class of worker.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.238</td>
<td>1.098</td>
<td>1.023</td>
<td>.398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.447</td>
<td>.911</td>
<td>.977</td>
<td>2.513</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

sample (or any other that we know of that contains data on authority) prohibits such a detailed analysis.

H3: Even when controlling for the effect of class of worker on authority, men have more authority than women, holding constant the effects of other variables.

Hypothesis 3 is an attempt to clarify further the mechanism by which women obtain less authority. That women have less authority in the workplace could be due merely to the fact that men are more likely to be self-employed and those who are self-employed are more likely to have control over the work of others.

The bottom half of Table 2 presents a log-linear analysis of the determinants of authority where the independent variables are sex, education, occupational status level, and class of worker. Thus we are able to test Hypothesis 3 empirically. The sex effect is still very large (line B7) although the class of worker effect is the largest main effect in this table (line B10). Inspection of the parameters (in Part B of Table 3) for the main effect of sex on authority indicates this effect is slightly more pronounced when controlling for the effect of class of worker on authority. Thus, the results showing that women are excluded from supervisory positions cannot be explained by the fact that women are less likely to be self-employed and those who are self-employed are more likely to be in positions of authority. In fact, net of the effect of class of worker, women are even less likely to be in supervisory positions than men (as indicated by the parameters).
Our analyses have shown that there is marked sexual inequality in power in the workplace.

Conclusions

In order to develop an effective policy to produce parity in the labor market positions held by men and women, it is necessary to have a full understanding of sexual inequality in these positions and how it is generated. Unfortunately, the extant sociological literature is ambiguous as to the nature of sexual stratification in the workplace. In an attempt to clarify this matter and to obtain the information which is a necessary precursor for an effective policy, this paper has explored the yield of other dimensions of jobs besides occupational status in the study of stratification. Otis Dudley Duncan, the originator of the SEI scale, said:

There can be no such thing as a single index of socioeconomic status suitable for all purposes of social research in a modern, complex society. Even in small and static communities of the United States, it is a patent oversimplification of the facts to suppose that the whole population may be placed unambiguously in intervals of a single scale of "class" or "status." Given the actual complexity and multidimensionality of the stratification structure, any particular variable or index can at best reflect a selected aspect of the structure that may be strategic from a certain point of view (139).

We argue that dimensions of jobs relating to power in the work setting are necessary for identifying one's position in the stratification system. Indeed, authority on the job is an indicator not only of position in the work setting, but also of one's social standing and power in the community at large.

We have illustrated the usefulness of this concept by showing how it helps clarify past research on the stratification of the sexes. Despite the commonsense notion that women are discriminated against both in the types of jobs they hold and the wages they receive for their work, past research has revealed that men and working women have similar mean levels of occupational status and achieve these statuses through similar processes. What do our analyses tell us about the differential positions of men and women in the work setting that is not known from past research on sex differences in occupational status attainment? In terms of authority in the work setting, women have considerably less control over the work of others than men, even when they have similar levels of education and occupational status. In fact, we find that the exclusion of women from supervisory positions is pervasive regardless of their education or status level. We find that these differences are not due to the fact that women are less likely to be self-employed, but that the effect of sex on authority is more pronounced when controlling for class of worker. For any given level of status and education, there is sexual inequality in authority in the work setting.
We have demonstrated empirically that women are less likely to be in supervisory positions than men. Clearly, it has not been a major concern of this paper to determine all of the allocative mechanisms by which men and women are sorted into positions of authority in the work setting but rather to illustrate how a consideration of other attributes of jobs can lead to a clearer understanding of the stratification of the sexes. This piece of work is merely a first step. To understand the exact nature of sex differences in authority, future research should explore the mechanisms by which women are restricted from positions of authority, that is, the relative contributions of employers' behaviors and attitudes, other workers' attitudes, women's employment histories (tenure and length of work experience), and women's aspirations (see Wolf and Fligstein for this next step). Another line of research could examine whether women have less authority than men because of their concentration in female occupations. Our research points to the need to include other attributes of jobs in studies of social stratification so that we can better understand the difference in the positions men and women hold in the work setting. Only with this understanding can we develop an effective social policy which has as its goal the achievement of equal positions in the workplace for men and women.

Notes
1. Those who worked without pay were excluded since we could not ascertain whether they should be considered self-employed. There were 165 respondents excluded for this reason.
2. In a log-linear analysis of the determinants of class of worker (whether an individual is self-employed or not) sex has a statistically significant ($X^2 = 31.7$ with 1 degree of freedom) main effect on class of worker, holding constant education and status level. The parameters indicate that men are more likely to be self-employed than women.

References


