



Occupational segregation and psychological gender differences: How empathizing and systemizing help explain the distribution of men and women into (some) occupations [☆]



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ABSTRACT

The proportion of men and women workers varies among occupation types. There are several factors that may contribute to occupational segregation by gender. Using a large U.S. sample ($n = 2149$), we examine the extent to which occupational segregation can be attributed to gender differences in empathizing and systemizing: Psychological dimensions which theorists argue represent meaningful differences between men and women. Of the eight occupational categories for which employee gender and occupation type were associated at the $p < .01$ level, four of these – Construction, Professional/Scientific/Technical fields, Management, and Education – were partially mediated by systemizing and/or empathizing scores, which typically accounted for 10–20% of the observed gender differences. For other areas, like Health, gender differences were not mediated by either measure.

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1. Introduction

Some occupation types in the U.S. have a higher proportion of men and some have a higher proportion of women, a phenomenon which has been labeled “occupational gender segregation” (e.g., Alonso-Villar, Del Rio, & Gradin, 2012; Mintz & Krymkowski, 2011). For example, data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) showed that approximately 9% of workers in construction were women, but that approximately 78% of workers in health services were women. This disparity, in which women are overrepresented in teaching and service jobs while men are overrepresented in technical and laborer jobs, has existed for over 60 years (e.g., Lippa, Preston, & Penner, 2014). Though occupational segregation by gender declined between 1970 and 2009, the decline appears to be occurring at an increasingly diminished pace (Blau, Brummund, & Yung-Hsu Liu, 2012), even though women’s overall labor force participation and educational attainment over this time period has increased (e.g., DiPrete & Buchmann, 2006; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009, 2011). Indeed, as of 2001,

31% of men or women (or a combination of thereof) would have to change occupations for there to be total gender equality in occupational distributions (Gabriel & Schmitz, 2007).

For decades, economists, sociologists, psychologists, policy makers, businesses, and feminist scholars have sought to track and understand why U.S. occupations are segregated by gender (e.g., Albelda, 1986; Blau & Jusenius, 1976; Gross, 1968; Jacobs, 1989), due to the implications of occupational segregation for the gender-wage gap, gender equality in opportunities for work, and attracting and developing talent in the workplace (e.g., Blau & Kahn, 2006; Cohen, Huffman, & Knauer, 2009; Maume, 1999). Specifically, researchers have argued that occupational gender segregation is the leading explanation for gender earnings inequality today (Gauchat, Kelly, & Wallace, 2012), because women are concentrated in jobs that are less prestigious and less well-paying. Occupational gender segregation is also economically inefficient, as it may discourage talented individuals from entering gender-atypical occupations where they would perform well (Hegewisch, Liepmann, Hayes, & Hartmann, 2010). Indeed, young people’s career preferences and perceptions of career opportunities and success are strongly affected by the extent to which their own gender is represented in that career (e.g., Miller & Budd, 1999; Reskin & Hartmann, 1986; Tinklin, Croxford, Ducklin, & Frame, 2005), and by the apparent success of people of their gender in that career (e.g., Correll, 2004; Lockwood, 2006), making occupational gender segregation self-perpetuating.

[☆] The research was conducted at FIU. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of ACT, Inc.

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The reasons proposed for occupational gender segregation include that women and men may selectively choose their occupations, they may be directed toward different occupations, they may be hired for different occupations, and they may leave particular occupations at differing rates. Supply-side and demand-side theories focus on different reasons for workplace segregation. Supply-side theories focus on the role that workers' values, skills, choices, and interests play in segregation, while demand-side theories focus on the influence of social and structural forces, like job, workplace, and cultural features and practices (Okamoto & England, 1999). Research suggests it is likely that both internal and external forces operate simultaneously to affect work segregation (e.g., McDowell, Cunningham, & Singer, 2009), with differing contributions depending on the context and phenomena under investigation (e.g., Wood & Eagly, 2002).

1.1. Supply and demand

In terms of demand-side explanations, gender stereotypes can prevent women from being hired and promoted into particular occupational roles (e.g., Biblarz, Bengtson, & Bucur, 1996; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). Women may also deliberately choose or retain jobs that permit them more flexibility (e.g., Carlson et al., 2011; Gabriel & Schmitz, 2007; Goldberg Dey & Hill, 2007), perhaps on account of gender role socialization that accords them a greater burden of child care and domestic work (e.g., Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Friedman & Marshall, 2004; Saxbe, Repetti, & Graesch, 2011). Research has also found that gender stereotypes about occupations predict the actual distribution of men and women into occupations, suggesting that occupational stereotypes may create gender segregation and vice versa (Cejka & Eagly, 1999).

On the other hand, supply-side theorists have proposed that the sexes have some fundamental and reliable psychological differences that may lead them to different careers, including differing personality, interest, and ability profiles (e.g., Browne, 2006). In terms of personality, Del Giudice, Booth, and Irwing (2012) recently challenged the idea that gender differences in personality are small, finding large differences in U.S. men's and women's personalities. And work by Woods and Hampson (2010) found that children's levels of Openness/Intellect predicted whether or not they entered gender-stereotypic occupations as adults (though males and females with similar levels of this trait ultimately entered different occupations).

In terms of interests, women and men across cultures have been found to express stable and markedly different vocational preferences, with women often preferring to work with people and men often preferring to work with things (e.g., gadgets and mechanisms) (e.g., Harmon & Borgen, 1995; Prediger, 1982; Lippa, 1998; Su, Rounds, & Armstrong, 2009). Gender differences in vocational interests have been found to account for an economically and statistically large fraction of the occupational gender gap in information technology (Rosenbloom, Ash, Dupont, & Coder, 2008). It has also been suggested that occupational gender segregation may result from men's relatively homogenous work preferences, goals, and values, and women's more heterogenous work preferences, goals, and values (e.g., Hakim, 2000, 2005, 2006; Morgan, Isaac, & Sansone, 2001). These differential preferences and goals, however, may derive in part from the family structure and gender roles, again illustrating the reciprocal relationship between supply and demand-side factors.

Finally, in terms of abilities, much research finds that males and females are highly similar in cognitive ability and performance (Hyde, 2005; Spelke, 2005). The differences that do exist are typically small and not always in line with gender stereotypes (e.g., Lindberg, Hyde, Petersen, & Linn, 2010; Voyer & Voyer, 2014).

There are exceptions, however, such as gender differences in mental rotation performance (Voyer, Voyer, & Bryden, 1995). Some research also shows that women's abilities are more symmetrical than men's, with math and verbal ability levels tending to coincide (for a review, see Valla & Ceci, 2014), which may provide them a greater array of career choices and contribute to gender work segregation. Specifically, one longitudinal study found that women were more likely than men to have high verbal as well as high math skills, and individuals with this ability profile were less likely to pursue STEM careers than those with high math but moderate verbal skills (Wang, Eccles, & Kenny, 2013).

While it may appear that there is an abundance of literature on internal factors that help to account for gender work segregation, most work has focused on social and structural forces that affect men's and women's work choices and success (for reviews see Eagly & Carli, 2007; Rudman & Glick, 2008). Supply-side explanations for gender segregation have not received as much attention. In fact, the paucity of supply-side explanations for gender work segregation are highlighted in a recent article in one of the premier journals in psychological science which petitioned researchers to take gender differences in interest and ability profiles more seriously in the effort to understand women's underrepresentation in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) (Valla & Ceci, 2014). Others have recently argued that, despite their value in predicting work performance and persistence, interest profiles are generally ignored in the employee selection literature and deserve more attention (Nye, Su, Rounds, & Drasgow, 2012).

The relative dearth of supply-side investigations may be partly due to the belief that purely structural explanations lend themselves more easily to solutions than explanations that invoke intrapersonal variables. However, individual difference variables, even those that appear or originate in biological systems (e.g., Maguire, Woollett, & Spiers, 2006), have bidirectional relationships with structural, social, and contextual variables. Therefore, understanding both pieces of the puzzle (and how they interrelate) is critical to developing lasting solutions that promote gender equality in work opportunities and outcomes.

In the current paper, we aim to answer the call to further examine supply-side explanations for work segregation by testing the extent to which the cognitive styles of empathizing and systemizing (Baron-Cohen, 2003) account for occupational gender segregation in the U.S. In doing so, we hope to add to a more complete understanding of the many forces that produce and sustain gender segregation and inequality in the workplace.

1.2. Empathizing and systemizing

Empathizing–Systemizing (E–S) theory proposes that individuals are predisposed toward some combination of the cognitive styles of empathizing and systemizing (Baron-Cohen, 2003), constructs that are independent from general intelligence (Wakabayashi et al., 2006). The tendency toward empathizing has been described as “spontaneously and naturally tuning into the other person's thoughts and feelings” (Baron-Cohen, 2003, p. 21), while the tendency toward systemizing is “the drive to understand a system and to build one” (Baron-Cohen, 2003, p. 61). Thus, empathizing is a drive to identify another person's mental state (i.e., emotions and thoughts) and to respond appropriately to it. It encourages identification with others and allows for substantive communication and for the prediction of others' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Systemizing, on the other hand, is a drive to construct and understand rule-based systems such as numerical, abstract, mechanical, motor, or social systems that transform inputs into outputs. Identifying the rules governing these types of systems also allows for prediction and control of these systems (for review see Baron-Cohen, 2009). Those with an exceptionally strong drive toward systemizing tend

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