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*Dissatisfied by existing theoretical explanations of gender inequality in the labor market, Fiorentine and Brines argue for incorporating gender-based symbolic-normative structures as consequential for gender stratification. Fiorentine incorporates norm-based gender differences in occupational choice as determinants of gender stratification but largely fails in his effort to incorporate the concepts of agency and equity as the means by which inequality persists. Brines challenges the logic of a gender-neutral exchange in the division of household labor and succeeds in distilling evidence of how beliefs about gender are the currency of symbolic exchange between domestic partners. Although differentially successful in their efforts, both works recognize the importance of seeking gender-based cultural explanations of gender stratification.*

## **Explaining Gender Stratification and Inequality in the Workplace and the Household**

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Gender stratification is one of the most persistent and intractable features of contemporary social organization in both the public arena of the labor market and the private arena of the household. Over the past three decades, social research has focused on documenting its presence and endurance in the U.S. occupational structure and in the organization of labor within the household. In the public sphere, for example, Reskin and Roos's (1990) analysis of occupational sex segregation finds that it endures despite radical transformations in the industrial and occupational structure of the post-World War II era, changes in the composition of the labor force during the same period, the onset of the feminist movement, and antidiscrimination regulations of the 1960s and 1970s. In the domestic sphere, the time-consuming tasks comprising household labor continue to be disproportionately performed by women, despite the fact that women, on average, now spend less time on housework than 10 years ago, that husbands contribute proportionately more time to

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household labor (in part an artifact of wives' declining contribution), that women's economic activity has increased, and that gender beliefs of both sexes have become less sex-typed (e.g., Hochschild 1989; Robinson 1988). The consequence of gender segregation at home and at work is persistent gender inequality, including a continuing wage gap between employed male and female workers, gender-differentiated opportunities for employment and advancement within occupations, and a doubling of the labor women provide others when they add work outside the home.

The search for theoretical explanations for gender inequality has also preoccupied the research agenda of social scientists over the past three decades. Those explanations have met with varying empirical precision, comprehensiveness, and success. According to Fiorentine's article, viable structural explanations include the prejudices that employers impose on women in hiring them, which result in crowding in occupations of middle status and authority; the consequences of mistrust of women as outsiders in organizational settings riddled with uncertainty; the statistical discrimination that employers impose on women as a group in anticipation of gender differences in productivity and turnover; and the enactment of capitalist-based patriarchal controls over women, which perpetuates their exclusion from privileged economic positions in society. More often than not, according to Fiorentine, explanations pertaining to gender stratification in the labor market seek insights into structural *causes* of inequality but typically document only gender differences in socioeconomic *outcomes*. Dissatisfied with available structural theories, Fiorentine looks elsewhere, primarily to those he labels "cultural theories of gender stratification" that emphasize normative role expectations of women and men.

Explanations for gender-based differentiation in household labor also have had limited success. Those explanations, according to Brines, include the neoclassical economic theory of human capital investment and household time allocation, the "bargaining" or resource perspective on family power, and the economic dependency model. Those explanations are "structurally located" in the sense that each seeks understanding of the ways in which an individual's economic value in the labor market (such as one's market wage) or quasi-economic value (such as market-derived self-interest or relative economic dependency) enters into husbands' and wives' negotiations about division of labor in the household. Brines is as dissatisfied with the empirical power of the models she evaluates to account for the persistence of the division of household labor as is Fiorentine with his, leading Brines to explore the symbolic importance of enacted displays of gender in the division of household labor.

Both Brines and Fiorentine conclude that gender-based symbolic-normative structures have consequences for gender stratification. For Fiorentine, that approach means incorporating normative role expectations of women and men as manifested in gendered cultural mandates that shape the degree of human agency one is able to execute in the occupational structure. Use of cultural approaches (the human capital model, the normative barriers approach, and the normative alternatives approach) enables understanding of the impact of norm-based gender differences in occupational choice as determinants of gender stratification in the occupational structure. According to Fiorentine, this shift in emphasis engages the concepts of agency and equity.

Brines advocates attending to the gender displays that are embedded in partners' negotiations about housework and their symbolic importance in expression of their "essential natures as men and women." Brines is most concerned with rectifying the assumptions of a gender-neutral exchange in negotiation of housework between husbands and wives. The sex differences she finds in the support/dependency ratio of the economic dependency model are powerfully telling because that ratio is more consequential for wives than for husbands. What is even more telling is how that ratio interacts with so-called "deviant" household arrangements in which the husband is more dependent on the wife than the (traditional) reverse. Under those conditions, the "doing" of household labor becomes heightened symbolically as a crucial determinant of gender-role accountability within the relationship between husbands and wives. As Brines notes, the dynamic between husbands and wives as a gender issue is fundamentally linked to economic power, but it is in no way reducible to it.

Fiorentine's examination of theories of gender stratification fails to adequately develop the concepts of agency and equity. He defines agency as "the degree of individual control of occupational destiny," that is, as it relates to the activity of (female) occupational choice. Fiorentine overlooks agency as it relates to the purposive actions and interests of other groups such as employers, male employees, and unions or those with interests in preserving (or changing) the status quo. In fact, issues of agency and structural barriers are not as easily disentangled as Fiorentine suggests.

Two points are relevant here. First, structural barriers can be created and sustained by the agency and interests of various individuals and groups. For example, Reskin and Roos (1990) find that employers construct preference rankings for potential employees on the basis of gender, thereby preserving openings for males and sustaining sex segregation. A rapidly growing line of research on sex-segregated job structures (e.g., Bielby and Baron 1986), their

consequences for attainment (e.g., DiPrete and Soule 1988), and their resistance to change (e.g., Acker 1989; Reskin and Roos 1990) suggests a stratification system fundamentally organized around ascription based on gender. Thus Fiorentine entirely misconstrues an entire line of research by asserting that the structural causes of sex segregation have been analyzed. His claim that structural research confuses process with outcome might be applicable to much of the work on the 1970s, but it ignores a large body of research on the causes and consequences of gender hierarchies within work settings, occupations, and the professions published over the past 10 years (see also Baron, Mittman, and Newman 1991; Bielby and Baron 1986; Bridges and Nelson 1989; Konrad and Pfeffer 1991; Milkman 1987).

Second, Fiorentine's faith in the power of cultural norms to constrain choices and undermine women's persistence seems to contradict his interest in the concept of agency. In fact, individuals are quite malleable in their willingness to transcend normative proscriptions once structural barriers are removed. For example, according to Jacobs's (1989) longitudinal assessment of career aspirations and outcomes, women who initially aspire to work in female-dominated occupations are nearly as likely to be employed in male-dominated fields at some time in their careers as are those who initially aspired to work in sex-atypical occupations. Jacobs's analyses of trends within and across birth cohorts indicates that the occupational choices of women of all ages are quite responsive to new opportunities in male-dominated fields. Findings such as these suggest that agency, cultural expectations, and structural barriers are mutually interrelated.

There are also serious limitations to Fiorentine's use of the concept of equity, which he often defines with respect to perceptions of fairness in the distribution of rewards. Fiorentine limits his use of the concept to the moral judgments one would make from alternative theoretical perspectives and largely overlooks the process by which individuals come to perceive outcomes as equitable or inequitable. There is a large body of social psychological research on equity processes that documents gender differences in how men and women invoke equity considerations. That research finds that women have lower internal standards of personal entitlement and, in the absence of salient, external comparison standards, make fairness judgments based on application of same-sex norms about appropriate outcomes (Crosby 1982; Major, McFarland, and Gagnon 1984). Moreover, some research suggests that job segregation by gender sustains sex-specific norms of entitlement, thereby legitimizing gender stratification (Bielby and Bielby 1988).

Finally, Fiorentine's overview of cognitive theories ignores research on how cultural stereotypes influence *employers'* perception of and behavior

toward female employees. This research demonstrates how employer biases interact with personnel practices in ways that sustain statistical discrimination and the devaluation of women's work (e.g., Etaugh, Houtler, and Ptansnik 1988; Heilman 1984; Snyder 1981).

Compared to Fiorentine, Brines has a much narrower empirical focus: the division of household labor. Theoretically, however, she treats cultural determinants in a way that is more subtle and complex. In her view, gender "norms" are not simply abstract forces constraining choices about work and family roles. Instead, beliefs about gender are the currency of a symbolic exchange within social relationships. Moreover, bargaining within those relationships is simultaneously about economic interdependence and cultural meaning. Brines does not, however, replace rational action as the means through which this exchange occurs. Although she incorporates the notion of gender display to account for inconsistencies with the gender-neutral rational choice model, the interaction between husbands and wives remains an exchange that is fundamentally a prospectively rational negotiation (Bielby and Bielby 1992). That is, outcomes are based on expected costs and benefits (both material and symbolic) of current and future activities.

Two points are relevant here. First, Brines's strict adherence to rational thought and action precludes attention to "noncognitive" responses to situations wherein "scripted" sequences of gendered activities are triggered by cues in the environment, not by rational or irrational decisions of individuals (Abelson 1976; Laws and Schwartz 1977; Pfeffer 1982; Schank and Abelson 1977). Noncognitive responses emphasize the degree to which objective orientation and intention are habitual, rulelike, or taken for granted. Thus certain household (and workplace—see DiMaggio and Powell 1991) activities and the negotiations around them could be viewed as habitual rather than intentional and rational. In a noncognitively based negotiation, those activities are neither recognized as binding nor evaluated with respect to the net benefit to be derived from them. Instead, an emotional or affective basis for the persistence of a particular division of labor is taken for granted (Collins 1981). To the extent that noncognitive scripted sequences are invoked, the gendered actions they guide remain institutionalized.

Second, Brines's challenge to the credibility of approaches predicated on a gender-neutral logic of exchange is based on one counterintuitive finding: that economically dependent husbands contribute less to household labor than do husbands who earn substantially more than their wives. Her result should be replicated before being as compelling evidence refuting the gender neutrality of rational choice models. There is, however, evidence accumulating from other work that lends support to her conclusion. For example, work that I have done in collaboration with William Bielby (Bielby and Bielby

1992) suggests that gender ideology is a strong, semiautonomous factor shaping husbands' and wives' decisions about relocating for a better job. Specifically, that research tests the neoclassical model of family migration decisions among dual-earner couples (Mincer 1978). The neoclassical model is gender neutral: Both husbands and wives should be unwilling to relocate if doing so disrupts a spouse's career and fails to improve the economic well-being of the family. Accordingly, the model predicts that all else constant, one's willingness to move for a better job will be negatively related to the spouse's current income. In fact, contrary to the predictions of the neoclassical model, willingness to relocate for a better job was highly contingent on both gender and gender-roles beliefs. Women behaved as predicted by the model: The higher their husbands' earnings, the less willing they were to relocate for a better job for themselves. In contrast, traditional males—those who believed in the primacy of a husband's role as provider and who disapproved of the working mother—were not influenced at all by their wives' earnings. Instead, they give primacy to their own careers or overall family well-being. However, not all men placed their own career interests ahead of those of other family members. Men who rejected traditional gender-role ideology were deterred from relocating if their spouses were in well-paid jobs, although even these men were less sensitive to disruption of their spouses' careers than were working wives under comparable circumstances. Our findings suggest that the extent to which household division of labor is negotiated around symbols of masculinity and femininity is contingent on the degree to which spouses hold themselves accountable to cultural definitions of gender.

In conclusion, both Brines and Fiorentine introduce loosely conceptualized notions of culture to the study of gender stratification and inequality. Brines uses the concept to account for anomalies found in rational choice explanations, and Fiorentine explores culturally located normative constraints on women's occupational choices. What is particularly promising about the notions of culture offered in each of these works is that they incorporate gender as an organizing dimension of the inequality observed in the household and in the workplace. That is, both authors recognize the importance of seeking gender-based cultural explanations of gender stratification. The two works discussed here differ in the promise they offer for accomplishing that agenda. Invoking agency and equity appears to have considerable potential, but we have yet to see how those concepts operate as gendered processes within Fiorentine's scheme. Brines goes further in identifying gender as an organizing principle, but so far she has simply appended her conceptualization to a rational choice model of the division of labor. A

more elaborate specification of her model of gender as symbolic exchange has the potential for altering how we think about gender stratification.

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