

Four Gloomy Futures for Sex Segregation*

David B. Grusky

Asaf Levanon

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For those of us trained in the structural-functionalism of the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Parsons 1970), it is perhaps especially difficult to shake the simple view that ascription is destined to wither away, if only gradually and fitfully. The well-known presumption of the structural-functional tradition is that racial, gender, and class discrimination will be gradually undermined by the inefficiency of discrimination (e.g., Becker [1971] 1957), the diffusion of bureaucratic personnel policies (e.g., Dobbin, Sutton, Meyer and Scott 1993), or the spread of egalitarian sensibilities and the consequent delegitimation of discriminatory tastes (e.g., Jackson 1998). The purpose of this essay is to suggest that such arguments, however normatively attractive they may be, overlook many complexities in the mechanisms by which gender inequality is generated and maintained. Although obviously one cannot rule out the possibility that the future of gender inequality will unfold over the very long run in accord with a structural-functional formulation, there are several other futures that also seem plausible, at least in the more meaningful short run. The future of gender-based ascription is in this regard a very open one, perhaps moreso than is the case with other types of ascription, such as those based on race or social origins.

Why even attempt such a speculative essay? After a half-century of dramatic reductions in the gender pay gap and other forms of gender inequality, recent evidence reveals that change is stalling on some fronts and slowing on others (see Blau, Brinton, and Grusky 2006), and important decisions must therefore be made as to whether new and more aggressive policy initiatives should be undertaken. It may be useful in making those decisions to chart the various pathways and endpoints that appear to lie before us and to ask whether certain initiatives might make some endpoints more likely than others. We will proceed, then, by attempting to identify the most plausible endpoints, obviously leaving unaddressed the question of how one might come to prefer some endpoints over others.

In taking on this task, special attention is properly paid to the future of occupational sex segregation, given that the gender pay gap and other gender differentials in life chances are largely a function of such segregation (e.g., Petersen and Morgan, Ch. 88). The occupational structure is in this sense the backbone of the gender stratification system and hence a natural starting point for any discussion of its future.

The Two Dimensions of Segregation

The task of making sense of the future of sex segregation is best addressed by laying out the competing logics that underlie late-industrial segregation regimes. As Charles and Grusky (2004) have argued, two distinct cultural principles are interwoven to generate the contemporary pattern of sex segregation, the first being the essentialist presumption that women and men have fundamentally different tastes and proclivities and are accordingly best-suited for different types of occupations, and the second being the vertical presumption that men are more status worthy than women and accordingly well-suited for prestigious positions that require the most substantial human capital investments. These two cultural tenets are undergirded by a wide array of proximate processes on both the supply and demand sides. For example, the essentialist presumption that men are especially well-suited for jobs entailing strength is not just internalized by employees and revealed in their preferences for particular jobs, but is

also internalized by employers and revealed in their tastes for discrimination at the point of hiring, firing, and promotion. Similarly, the vertical presumption that men are status-worthy is not just expressed in their supply-side decisions to invest heavily in human capital, but is also expressed in the demand-side decisions of employers to privilege men in the competition for high-status occupations (see Charles and Grusky 2004, pp. 15-23, for further discussion of the mechanisms underlying these cultural principles).

In contemporary segregation regimes, a core essentialist claim is that women excel in service, nurturance, and interpersonal interaction while men excel in interaction with things (rather than people) and in strenuous, physical, or demanding labor. This cultural tenet is expressed in the worldwide tendency for women to disproportionately fill nonmanual occupations and men to disproportionately fill manual ones. That is, because nonmanual occupations are associated with skills in which women are presumed to excel (e.g., interaction with people), and because manual occupations are associated with skills in which men are presumed to excel (e.g., strength, interaction with things), the forces of demand (e.g., discrimination) and supply (e.g., aspirations) will generate much segregation across the manual-nonmanual divide.

The distinctive feature of this particular form of essentialism is that it allocates women into occupations that are relatively high in pay and status (i.e., nonmanual occupations) and are therefore preferred relative to the manual alternative. We may accordingly refer to this form of essentialism as female-advantaging. Although Charles and Grusky (2004) focused almost exclusively on the female-advantaging variant of essentialism, it is well to bear in mind that many forms of essentialism are in fact male-advantaging. Most obviously, the presumption that men are more suited to analytical or mathematical tasks has precisely this male-advantaging effect, as the occupations that rely on analytical or mathematical skills (e.g., technical and professional occupations) are typically higher in status and pay than those that do not rely on such skills.

The contemporary segregation regime is therefore generated by three processes: (1) the “vertical” cultural presumption that men are well-suited for the substantial human capital investments that underwrite entry into high-wage, high-prestige, and otherwise desirable occupations; (2) the “female-advantaging” essentialist presumption that men are well-suited for (relatively less desirable) manual occupations requiring strength, robustness, and interaction with things, and (3) the “male-advantaging” essentialist presumption that men are well-suited for (relatively desirable) occupations requiring analytical and mathematical skills. If one then analyses a $J \times 2$ cross-classification of occupation by gender, this interpretation may be formalized as follows:

$$m_j = \alpha + \beta X_j + \gamma Y_j + \delta Z_j \quad (1)$$

where m_j refers to the logged ratio of men to women in the j^{th} occupation, X_j refers to the vertical location of the j^{th} occupation (as indexed by wages, prestige, or some other measure of desirability), Y_j refers to the quantitative score of the j^{th} occupation on a female-advantaging trait (e.g., requirements for strength), Z_j refers to the quantitative score of the j^{th} occupation on a male-advantaging trait (e.g., requirements for analytical or mathematical skills), α pertains to the baseline level of female labor force participation (when X_j , Y_j , and Z_j all equal zero), and β , γ , and δ pertain to the effects of the three types of occupational traits on levels of segregation.

In any credible model, the full complement of segregative forces could not likely be represented without several vertical dimensions (e.g., wages, prestige), several female-advantaging essentialist traits (e.g., strength, robustness), and several male-advantaging essentialist traits (e.g., mathematical skills, analytic skills). The simplified model of equation (1) is in this sense purely didactic. We resort here to a stylized model because we wish to represent late-industrial segregation in its generic form rather than that prevailing in any particular country or time period (see Levanon and Grusky 2007 for a related model applied to the United States).

The operation of this model can be illustrated with hypothetical data for each of the three occupational dimensions (i.e., X_j , Y_j , Z_j). The data graphed in Figure 1 may be understood as stylized representations of occupational variability in (a) socioeconomic status, (b) requirements for mathematical or analytical skills (i.e., a male-advantaging essentialist trait), and (c) requirements for strength or robustness (i.e., a female-advantaging essentialist trait).¹ The stacked bars of Figure 1 thus represent how the socioeconomic and essentialist traits characterizing each occupation combine to

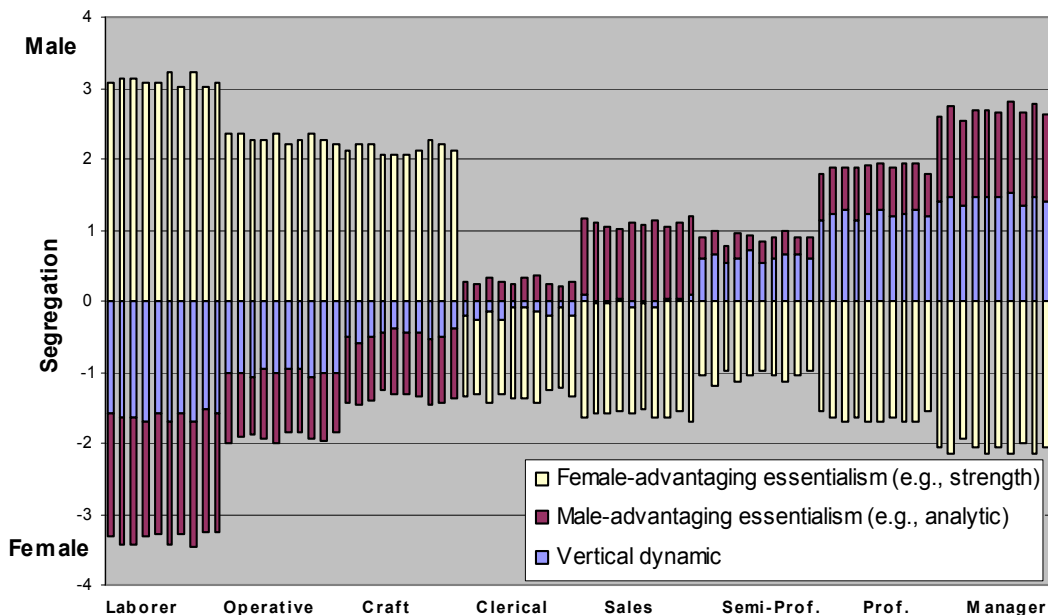


Figure 1. Components of segregation

produce an observed level of segregation. Because prior research reveals that female-advantaging essentialism is an especially important determinant of segregation (e.g., Levanon and Grusky 2007), Figure 1 rests on the assumption that γ , the coefficient for female-advantaging essentialism, is twice as large as β and δ (and hence the stacked bars represent the quantities X_j , $2Y_j$, and Z_j). This assumption expresses the well-known importance of the manual-nonmanual divide in contemporar segregation regimes (e.g., Charles and Grusky 2004).

¹ These three variables have each been standardized to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.

he most striking feature of Figure 1 is that

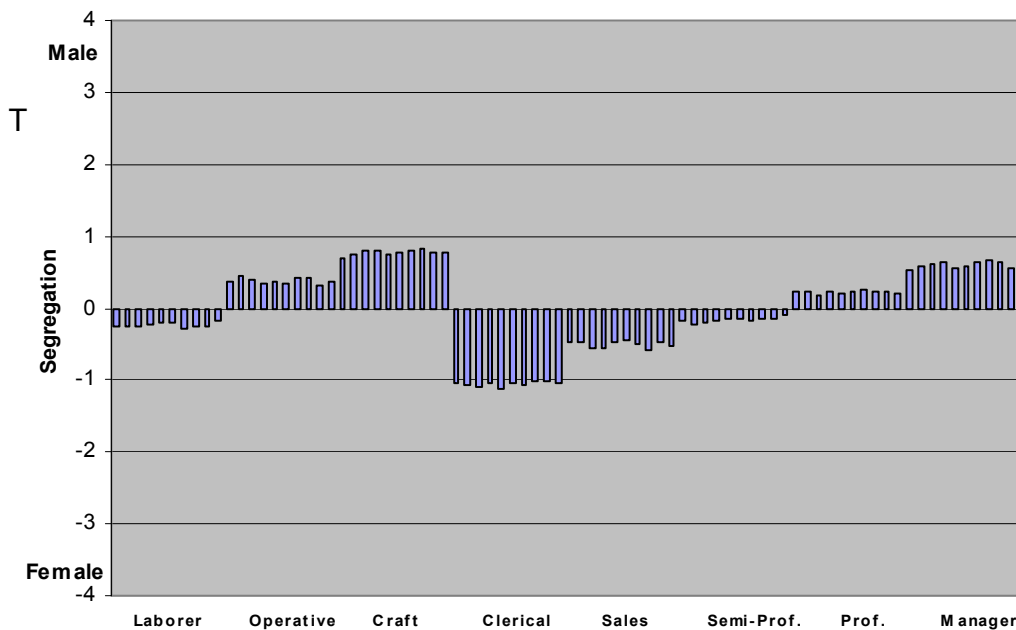


Figure 2. Overall segregation pattern

many occupations contain within them starkly opposing forces for male and female representation. The laboring occupations, for example, are “feminized” by virtue of their low socioeconomic status (i.e., the vertical dynamic) and analytic requirements (i.e., the male-advantaging essentialist dynamic), but are simultaneously “masculinized” by virtue of their substantial strength requirements (i.e., the female-advantaging essentialist dynamic). The combined effect of these opposing forces, as represented by adding X_j , $2Y_j$, and Z_j together, is a slight net female over-representation (see Figure 2). At the other end of the class distribution, we find that semi-professional occupations are feminized by virtue of low strength requirements but masculinized by virtue of relatively high status and analytic requirements. Again, these countervailing forces combine to generate a net female over-representation (see Figure 2), although such an outcome is in this case achieved with a very different mixture of occupational traits. The overall pattern yielded in Figure 2, although entirely stylized, is nonetheless consistent with the representation of late-industrial segregation that Charles and Grusky (2004) have elsewhere described.

This simple analytic setup, which is hopefully an uncontroversial account of the hybrid structure of late-industrial segregation, can serve as a tool for uncovering the implications of possible changes in the mechanisms underlying segregation. It is useful in particular to consider how changes in the relative prominence of essentialist and vertical principles may play out (see Table 1). Although the contemporary “dual inequality” regime rests on both principles, the question at hand is whether there are forces at work that will change the prevailing mixture of essentialist and vertical principles. The following sections take on this question by considering whether any of the regimes distinguished in Table 1 might emerge over the next half-century or so.

Table 1. A Typology of Segregation Regimes

Essentialist Principle		
Vertical Principle	High	Low
High	Type I: Dual inequality	Type II: Queuing
Low	Type III: Essentialist	Type IV: Dual equality

Essentialism and the Rise of a Type III Regime

In predicting the future, a conventional approach is simply to extrapolate recent developments, an approach that in this case suggests a continued weakening of the vertical principle. The main cultural force behind such weakening, the diffusion of egalitarian commitments, can of course be dated to the Enlightenment but has arguably intensified over the last half-century. As egalitarianism spreads, women and men are increasingly viewed as having the same rights and responsibilities, and rules, laws, and regulations aimed at reducing gender inequality in families and the workplace are increasingly adopted. This diffusion of liberal egalitarianism acts to erode vertical segregation through changes in the supply and demand for labor. On the supply side, the rise of liberal egalitarianism means that women will come to be more fully committed to the formal labor force and, by virtue of this commitment, decide to make human capital investments that qualify them for occupations that are similar in pay and prestige to “men’s occupations.” At the same time, demand-side discrimination against women should also weaken, not merely because employers will gradually shed their tastes for vertical discrimination against women but also because, in a society where egalitarianism has spread and become institutionalized, there are substantial legal, financial, and public-relations penalties imposed on discriminatory firms. These developments should in turn precipitate “feedback effects” (Blau, Ferber, and Winkler 2002) whereby new cohorts of women come to appreciate that vertical discrimination has receded and that substantial human capital investments are now more likely to yield a payoff. It is precisely such multiplier effects that can convert small shocks to the system into large changes in gender inequality.

Will this ongoing diffusion of liberal egalitarianism also precipitate a decline in essentialism? There is good reason to doubt that it will. As Charles and Grusky (2004) argue, essentialism can readily adapt to liberal egalitarianism, transmuting itself into a conservative “different but equal” understanding of the aptitudes and abilities of women and men (also, Charles and Grusky 2006). Within the essentialist worldview, women and men are understood as having very different tastes, aptitudes, and aspirations, an understanding that can be reconciled with liberal egalitarianism insofar as the (relatively few) men and women with gender-atypical aspirations can compete fairly in a gender-neutral contest. For a liberal egalitarian, one must defend the right of women to freely and fairly compete for any occupation to which they aspire, but there is no corollary obligation to examine how those aspirations were formed or why they may putatively differ from those of men. This mix of liberal egalitarianism and essentialism therefore leads to a Type III essentialist regime rather than any simple withering away of “ascription” (Parsons 1970).

The persistence of essentialism can be understood as playing out on both the supply and demand sides. On the supply side, liberal egalitarians will view aspirations as well beyond their purview, and the persistence of gender differences in such aspirations won’t, as a result, be scrutinized or challenged to the extent that they would under more radical egalitarian commitments. On the demand side, the liberal egalitarian commitment delegitimizes all forms of pure discrimination, but it does not as directly challenge statistical discrimination that rests on essentialist presumptions about gender differences in aptitudes. In a world in which women have disproportionately invested in nurturance and service, essentialist stories about intrinsic gender differences in aptitudes have ample room to flourish, and employers may therefore reason that gender

provides a good signal of capabilities in nurturing and service. It follows that liberal variants of egalitarianism serve principally to undermine the assumption of male primacy rather than gender essentialism; and, consequently, essentialist forms of segregation may prove to be quite resistant to the spread of liberal egalitarianism. With the rise of liberal egalitarianism, women will develop an ever-strengthening commitment to the paid labor market, but they will do so in ways that are consistent with their essentialist preferences, with the essentialist sanctions imposed by others, and with the essentialist prejudices of employers.

If liberal egalitarianism leaves essentialism largely untouched, are there any other forces that might call essentialism into question? Although one obviously cannot rule out the possibility of an anti-essentialist revolution, there is good reason to believe that, at least in the short term, essentialism will live on and remain a main interpretive lens through which gender inequality is understood. The essentialist worldview remains, after all, deeply embedded in families (with their gender-specific socialization practices), work organizations (with their discriminatory hiring practices), and all manner of other institutional contexts. By way of (trivial) example, consider the continuing practice among American fast-food restaurants of providing gender-specific toys to children, a practice of interest only because it is widely diffused and evidently unobjectionable to all but a small minority of gender progressives. If these same restaurants distributed toys on the basis of racial or class standing, the practice would be deemed absurd at best and racist or classist at worst. This example suggests that, at least in the United States, it is less legitimate to interpret racial or class-based inequalities in essentialist terms than to interpret gender segregation and inequality in these terms. In this sense, there is a deep structure to essentialist segregation that seemingly makes it an organic feature of modern economies, even as pressures for equalization may mount in other domains of the stratification system (see Charles and Grusky 2004 for details).

If indeed a Type III regime is in ascendancy, one might reasonably ask how sex segregation will be patterned under such a regime. This question can be explored by recalculating the predicted segregation values after reducing the parameter for vertical segregation (i.e., β). In Figure 3, this coefficient has been (arbitrarily) halved, while the two essentialist parameters remain unchanged. Although the vertical principle is clearly visible in both the manual and nonmanual sectors of Figure 3, it is so weakened that the most desirable nonmanual occupations have become disproportionately female and the least desirable manual occupations have become disproportionately male. Under this formulation, the parameter for female-advantaging essentialism remains unchanged, but even so the manual-nonmanual divide is cast into sharper relief because it is no longer camouflaged by other, competing principles of segregation. The segregation under the resulting Type III regime therefore takes on an increasingly sectoral character.

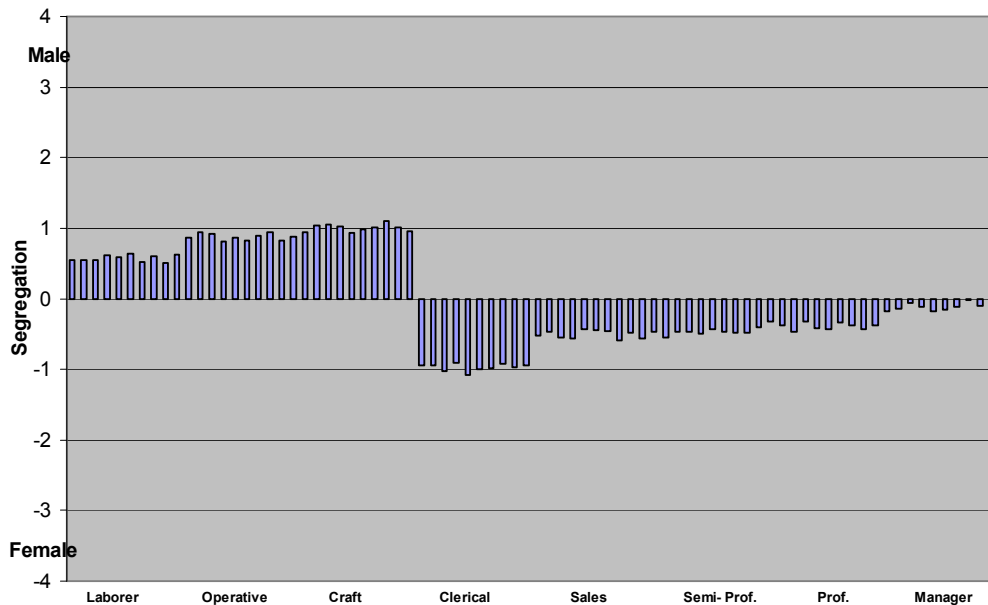


Figure 3. Type III Regime (Weakened vertical segregation)

The Opt-Out Revolution and the Persistence of Type I Segregation

The foregoing story stresses that liberal egalitarianism, for all its success in weakening vertical segregation, is not exactly tailor-made for the task of taking on essentialist segregation. Although the persistence of such segregation is inconsistent with structural-functional stories that have all forms of gender inequality declining of a piece, the story is nonetheless one of gradual desegregation that continues to play out until vertical segregation is completely eliminated. Is there an alternative story on offer that questions whether even vertical segregation will wither away? Is it plausible that our current Type I regime will persist over the long run rather than gradually transform into a Type III regime?

The main foundation for such a prediction is to be found in currently fashionable stories about an ongoing “opt-out revolution” (e.g., Belkin 2003; Story 2005). Under these formulations, women with high investments in human capital and seemingly attractive career options are presumed to be increasingly opting out of high-stress careers in favor of recommitting to their children, spouses, and domestic responsibilities more generally. The presumed precipitants of such opting-out are either (a) a disenchantment with the shallow and superficial rewards that careers can offer and a rediscovery of the more fundamental rewards of childrearing, or (b) a recognition that, because gender discrimination and institutionalized barrier to career advancement persist in the workplace (e.g., a glass ceiling), career investments won’t necessarily have the payoff that had been initially anticipated. The result in either case is that women will come to make less substantial investments in human capital and that the historic erosion in vertical segregation will slow down or even reverse itself.

In judging the plausibility of the opt-out story, one of course has to first appreciate that the data on which it is based are exceedingly thin, surely too thin to provide any

foundation for convincing extrapolation. The original opt-out essays were based on convenience samples of women in elite universities (Belkin 2003; Story 2005), and subsequent and more rigorous research reveals only a slight decline in female labor force participation in the post-2000 period, a decline that pertains equally to mothers and non-mothers alike (e.g., Boushey Ch. 79, 2005; also see Weeden 2004). Furthermore, even if the dynamics described by opt-out scholars are indeed at work, they may not imply anything more than a minor and temporary slowdown in the rate of decline in vertical segregation. It is relevant in this regard that the opt-out narrative doesn't typically rest on any claim to the effect that demand-side discrimination is in fact intensifying. Rather, the narrative simply presumes that women overestimated the likely payoff to their human capital investments, an overestimate predicated on the assumption that discrimination and other barriers to workplace advancement would erode more quickly than in fact they did. Ironically, the forces for retrenchment under this story are set in motion not because of any real deterioration in the opportunities for women, but only because opportunities prove not to be as substantial as had been anticipated. The more important point, however, is that these forces for retrenchment merely imply a temporary readjustment in human capital investments, a readjustment that brings them into alignment with real payoffs rather than the earlier highly optimistic estimates of the rate of decline in discrimination. This one-time readjustment implies a corresponding one-time deterioration in human capital investments and occupational outcomes but not a more fundamental change in the trendline thereafter.

The proponents of the opt-out story seem not to have appreciated that their story, even if true, thus implies a seemingly minor one-time readjustment rather than a long-term threat to the gender revolution. Is there any way to embellish the story in ways that render it more threatening? Indeed there is: It need merely be argued that the opt-out phenomenon, no matter how limited it may be, becomes prominent and celebrated enough to precipitate an ongoing and more fundamental change in how the aptitudes of women are understood. That is, insofar as employers and others come to believe that women are increasingly bowing out of high-status occupations, such observations could conceivably reinforce the older cultural principle that men are especially well-suited to high-status pursuits. This recommitment to the old principle of male primacy will in turn fuel (1) an increase in statistical discrimination by employers, and (2) a consequent reluctance on the part of women to make human capital investments that don't in the end pay off. It follows that feedback effects are the consummate double-edged sword. Indeed, just as they can magnify and reinforce initial declines in segregation and convert small developments into a revolution, so too they can magnify and reinforce initially small counter-developments and transform them into a full-blown counter-revolution. The most perverse version of this embellished opt-out story has employers reassessing the aptitudes of women not because of any objective increase in opting-out behavior but because of celebrated (yet incorrect) claims of an objective increase. However unfounded those claims may be, the consequent take-off in statistical discrimination would alter the payout to human capital, and women would be obliged to take this changing payout into account when making their investment decisions. This especially perverse version of the opt-out story falls foursquare into the category of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Decline of Essentialism and the Move Toward Type IV Equality

To this point, our discussion has focused on whether vertical segregation will continue to wither away, and our argument that essentialist segregation is, by contrast, relatively resistant to change has not been exposed to much critical scrutiny. Is there any reason to believe that essentialist segregation might possibly wither away and move us toward Type IV segregation? Will a deeper form of egalitarianism ultimately emerge and delegitimize (1) the tendency of women and men to view their aptitudes in essentialist terms and develop aspirations in accord with these self-understandings, and (2) the tendency of employers to make hiring, promotion, and firing decisions in ways that are likewise affected by their essentialist presuppositions?

In addressing these questions, it has to be appreciated that liberal egalitarianism, for all its popularity, is hardly the only cultural commitment in play. Although liberal egalitarianism is easily reconciled with essentialism, it is of course possible that a new form of more radical anti-essentialist egalitarianism will come to supplant liberal egalitarianism. This type of revolution is precisely the mission of a small vanguard population of gender liberals and feminists. Within this subpopulation, much emphasis is placed on socializing children in gender-neutral ways, with daughters in particular being encouraged to become mathematicians, engineers, scientists, and other similarly gender-atypical occupations. For such radical egalitarians, it is not enough to simply encourage girls to invest heavily in human capital, but additionally there is some sentiment for encouraging them to overcome essentialist presuppositions by making human capital investments that are gender-atypical in content. This sentiment may be understood, then, as delegitimizing not just vertical segregation but essentialist segregation as well.

The key question at hand is whether the hopes and aspirations of these vanguard parents can be realized in the near term. It is no easy task to convert such abstract political commitments into truly gender-free socialization given that children are exposed daily to more conventional gender messages from peers, teachers, films, video games, popular music, and television. Moreover, even though such radical egalitarians are no doubt intellectually committed to anti-essentialism, most of them were themselves raised under the influence of deeply essentialist precepts; and their commitment to anti-essentialism is therefore best viewed as an ideological veneer that is layered on top of subtle, subconscious, and perhaps more profound essentialist presuppositions (e.g., Reskin, Ch. 82). This essentialist foundation will surely color their interactions with everyone, including their own children, and make it difficult to succeed in delivering truly gender-free socialization. The more fundamental point is of course that relatively few parents even have an anti-essentialist veneer of this sort. For children of these less “enlightened” parents, essentialist socialization within the home will simply mirror essentialist socialization outside it, and little in the way of meaningful change can be anticipated.

This is not to deny that incipient anti-essentialist forces are clearly at work and that gradual and possibly fitful movement toward a more radical form of egalitarianism can be anticipated. However, because our commitment to anti-essentialism is far less profound at this point than our commitment to liberal egalitarianism, it seems likely that more headway will be made in reducing segregation of the vertical variety than segregation of the essentialist variety. The resulting “different but equal” solution bears, perhaps ironically, some resemblance to the vision of gender equality that comparable

worth activists have long pursued. The Type III regime is nonetheless achieved through different means than “comparable worth” adjustments; that is, the movement to Type III segregation occurs as women enter high-prestige occupations that have an essentialist “female profile” (e.g., pediatrician, sociologist, personnel manager), whereas the comparable worth vision was to be secured without any occupational mobility at all, just an upward adjustment of rewards to characteristically female occupations. The end result in either case is a new form of “different but equal” segregation.

The Decline of Female-Advantaging Essentialism

If a wholesale decline in essentialism is not in our immediate future, is there any reason to anticipate a decline in at least some forms of essentialism? There have clearly been non-trivial shifts over the last half-century in the types of traits that have been regarded as essentially male or essentially female. The question that then emerges is whether we should anticipate further changes over the next half-century in the content of our essentialist beliefs and in the structure of essentialist segregation.

In posing this question, it bears recalling that men were linked to manual labor in an especially prominent way during a period of history, that of early industrialism, in which manual labor was a central factor of production (see Kessler-Harris 1982; Milkman 1987). By contrast, manual labor is now becoming a less fundamental part of production, particularly in late-industrial economies that are experiencing deindustrialization through labor-reducing technological change and the globalization of production. It is not entirely plausible that men will stand idly by as “men’s work” of the conventional manual sort becomes peripheralized. Over the next half-century, the transition to a post-manual system may begin to reduce male commitment to those pieces of the essentialist package, especially an emphasis on male physicality, that assign men to increasingly devalued pursuits. It must in this context be appreciated that essentialism rests in part on self-assessments of competence and accordingly requires some complicity among those making those judgements. Will men remain complicit even when doing so profoundly disadvantages them?

If men are able to gradually disown such female-advantaging essentialism, they would succeed in harnessing essentialism to work almost entirely on their behalf. Although progressives and other “gender egalitarians” might assume that *any* breakdown in essentialist beliefs should be applauded, a decreasing emphasis on male physicality has ambiguous implications for women’s status because it involves undermining one of those relatively rare manifestations of essentialism that benefits women rather than men. If the male physicality assumption breaks down, this female-advantaging effect is lost; and the remaining forms of essentialist segregation disadvantage women (in terms of pay and prestige) quite systematically. For example, the essentialist presumption that men have superior mathematical or analytical skills generates a disproportionately large number of male accountants, scientists, programmers, and engineers, all occupations that are relatively well-paid and high in prestige.

The implications of such a breakdown in female-advantaging essentialism are depicted in Figure 4. When the parameter for female-advantaging segregation is trimmed in half (i.e., reduced to .5), the resulting segregation profile (see Figure 4) takes on a quite dramatic vertical form in which men dominate the good jobs and women are relegated to the bad ones. Although the profile appears to take on a purely vertical form,

in fact both essentialist and vertical processes underlie it, a complication that is largely concealed because the female-advantaging form of essentialism has been suppressed. The remaining male-advantaging variant of essentialism combines with the vertical dynamic to produce a segregation regime that would have to be understood as a real setback for women. The simple moral here is that, much as we think of essentialism as regressive, in fact its female-advantaging variant plays a role in making segregation as palatable as it now is. If the female-advantaging variant begins to wither away, and there is good reason to believe that it might, the segregation regime may begin to assume a more hostile form for women. This threat to the gender revolution may well be more serious than the celebrated opt-out revolution: It is hardly implausible, after all, to suppose that men will successfully shake off old disadvantaging definitions of masculinity and adopt new definitions that bring more power, prestige, and rewards.

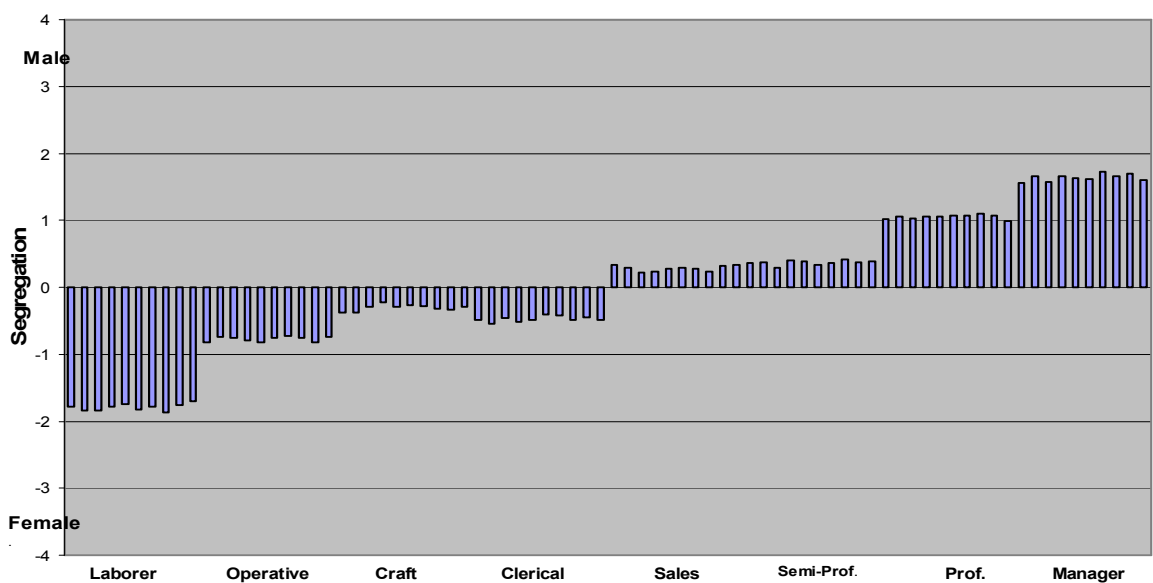


Figure 4: Weakened female-advantaging segregation

The Rise of Male-Advantaging Micro-Essentialism

The final possibility worth considering is that male-advantaging essentialism will not just persist over the next half-century but in fact strengthen. This forecast is most plausibly developed in the context of the argument, already outlined above, that vertical segregation will gradually weaken as liberal egalitarianism spreads. As may be recalled, our core claim is that vertical segregation is partly undermined by liberal egalitarianism, whereas essentialist segregation can coexist quite organically with liberal egalitarianism. Although this line of argument implies that essentialism will persist, it does not provide any reason to believe that it will increase.

Is there room for a more aggressive argument about how essentialist segregation will come to increase? The main rationale for such an argument is that the spectacular flow of women into professional, managerial, and other relatively desirable sectors of the occupational structure might itself precipitate a reactive resegregation within those sectors. As the two genders come together in the workplace, deeply entrenched

essentialist precepts may inform decisions about how tasks should then be divided among them, with the result being a strengthened “micro-essentialism” informed by presumed gender differences in skills, aptitudes, and tastes. There is much anecdotal and qualitative evidence supporting just such an account: (1) the rising number of female physicians appears to have generated new female-dominated ghettos in nurturant work (e.g., pediatrics); (2) the recent (minor) influx of U.S. women into road-construction occupations has been coupled with personnel practices that shunt new entrants into positions that are physically undemanding or people-oriented (e.g., “flagman”); and (3) the rising number of female lawyers has been accommodated by allocating them into family practice and other essentially female specialties. In each of these cases, initial headway has been made in reducing vertical segregation, only to find that the newly integrated occupations seemingly re-segregate along essentialist lines at a lower sub-occupational level.

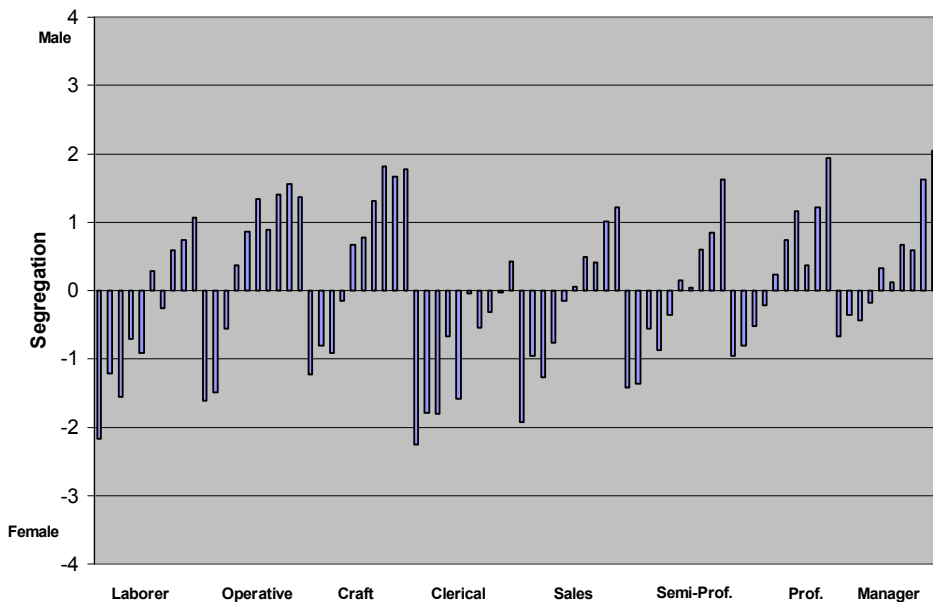


Figure 5: Strengthened male-advantaging micro-essentialism

This re-segregative process, if allowed to play out, might lead to a regime of the sort represented in Figure 5. In generating this figure, the values in Figure 3 were simply augmented with a “noise parameter” that creates ghettos of extreme segregation within each major class (e.g., craft, professional), a noise parameter that rests on the further assumption that male ghettos tend to be relatively high in status and female ghettos tend to be relatively low in status. This constraint represents the very plausible claim that within-class essentialism will be male-advantaging. The second main assumption underlying Figure 5 is that classes comprise detailed occupations that are very heterogeneous in their segregative practices; that is, whereas Figure 3 allowed for only

trivial amounts of within-class segregation, Figure 5 ratchets up the amount of such segregation and gives it a distinctly vertical cast.²

The end result is again a highly segregated regime that is nonetheless nominally consistent with liberal egalitarianism. Although radical egalitarians may complain, for example, about the disproportionate number of female pediatricians and their relatively low pay, their concerns will never gain traction because of the compelling essentialist story that legitimates such segregation as well as the inequality in remuneration that so often goes with it. Namely, liberal egalitarians will understand essentialist segregation as arising, in part, from the exogenous tastes of women, implying that the wage penalty they suffer is compensated by the extra utility they derive from realizing their tastes for nurturant work. These liberal egalitarian defenders will also continue to be attracted to the logic of matching women to occupations that appear to exploit their talents. By liberal egalitarian logic, the right of women to exploit their competencies and realize their aspirations should be vigorously defended, whereas the social processes that shape and form these aspirations and competencies are regarded as sacrosanct and well beyond the proper purview of policy.

Conclusions

The standard evolutionary accounts of our time treat gender inequality as a vestige of an earlier economic system (e.g., Parsons 1970), as an economic irrationality that the discipline of the market will gradually eliminate (e.g., Becker 1971 [1957]), or as an inevitable casualty of our growing commitment to liberal egalitarianism (e.g., Jackson 1998). These accounts continue to be rehearsed by some (e.g., Jackson 1998) and challenged by others (e.g., Blau, Brinton, and Grusky 2006). The main question posed here is whether a new set of narratives might be developed by treating essentialism and liberal egalitarianism as two coexisting logics in deep tension.

In building any narrative, it is conventional to privilege certain tendencies and downplay others, thus making the preferred pathway seem especially plausible. The tack instead taken here is to identify a constellation of trajectories and thereby expose straightforwardly the inevitable ambiguities and complexities in attempting to make claims about the future. Although several “long-shot trajectories” are considered (e.g., an opt-out revolution), the most plausible narratives feature the role of essentialism in generating sex segregation and gender inequality.

The narratives featured here also take into account the powerful effects of liberal egalitarian ideology in shaping tastes and beliefs (e.g., the decline of discriminatory tastes), motivating and legitimating political reform (e.g., antidiscrimination legislation), and underwriting various types of organizational reform (e.g., the rise of bureaucracy). There is no denying the dynamic role of liberal egalitarianism in legitimating far-reaching change. It is nonetheless important to recognize that liberal egalitarianism, for all its seductive appeal, is not the only dynamic at work. Rather, because it coexists with an essentialist logic that is no less deeply institutionalized, it is unlikely that sex segregation regimes will develop as simply as standard evolutionary accounts have it.

² We suspect that micro-essentialism of this sort is most likely to emerge within occupations (e.g., lawyer, doctor) rather than within the big social classes of Figure 5 (e.g., laborer, operative, craft). This complication has been suppressed in Figure 5 for the purpose of simplicity.

The resulting narratives laid out here will hopefully play the role of cautionary tales. If standard evolutionary accounts lull us into a sense of security about the fundamentally benign forces at work, essentialist-laced narratives make it clear that any number of wrong-turns (by the logic of radical egalitarianism) may instead play out. These “wrong-turns” are at least plausible. It is hardly alarmist, for example, to suggest that men will gradually shed those parts of the essentialist package, like the male physicality assumption, that serve to allocate them into ever more peripheralized pursuits. If essentialism indeed evolves in such terms, women will become less protected from male competition for nonmanual occupations; and one of the few essentialist advantages that women now have will be lost. It is equally plausible that the historic feminization of the professional and managerial sectors will trigger new resegregation of the “micro-essentialist” variety. As women stream into these sectors, compensatory forms of resegregation may surface at the detailed occupational level, forms that will likely bear the imprint of male-advantaging essentialism.

The plausibility of these and other essentialist-laced scenarios make it altogether clear that a liberal egalitarian logic is not the only logic in play. When liberal egalitarianism is fused with essentialism, a “different but equal” conception of gender and social justice is generated, and even extreme forms of segregation can be taken as consistent with this conception.

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