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# The Declining Significance of Gender?

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# Chapter 1

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## The Declining Significance of Gender?

Francine D. Blau, Mary C. Brinton, and David B. Grusky

In the typical life history of a social revolution, the initial revolutionary ardor proves to be sustainable for only so long, and gradually sentiment grows that the revolution has stalled or run its course. We appear to be entering just such a period of pessimism about the future of the ongoing "gender revolution." After a half-century of dramatic reductions in the gender pay gap and other forms of gender inequality, we now find ourselves poised at a crossroads in which two very plausible futures appear before us, an "optimistic scenario" which assumes that the remaining (and very substantial) gender inequalities will continue to erode, and a "pessimistic scenario" which treats the gender revolution as stalling and regards contemporary institutional arrangements as an equilibrium.

The optimistic vision rests on the straightforward premise that the forces making for change over the last half-century remain in play and will bring about further substantial reductions in gender inequality. The scholars who advance this vision emphasize that egalitarian values continue to spread unabated and to produce a growing commitment among parents to provide their daughters with the same opportunities as their sons. These egalitarian values also undergird a shared political commitment to such powerful legal interventions as antidiscrimination legislation and may lead ultimately to more ambitious and far-reaching forms of legal intervention (for example, paid parental leave legislation, expanded provision of government-provided child care). At the same time, gender equality is further advanced by the continuing diffusion of women-friendly organizational reforms, most notably on-site child care, guaranteed family leaves, and rigorously enforced bureaucratic rules that provide formal guarantees of equal treatment. Finally, because women are disproportionately located in economic sectors that are growing (especially the white-collar and service sectors) and men are disproportionately located in economic sectors that are shrinking (especially blue-collar and manufacturing sectors), there is continuing downward pressure on the gender pay gap. The foregoing forces for change are all ongoing and, one might argue, can be anticipated to carry the gender revolution forward.

## The Declining Significance of Gender?

The pessimistic vision rests on an equally diverse array of counter-arguments that have appeared with increasing frequency in popular magazines (Louise Story, "Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood," *New York Times*, September 20, 2005; Lisa Belkin, "The Opt-Out Revolution," *New York Times*, October 26, 2003), popular books (Barash 2004; Faludi 1991), and scholarly outlets (chapters 8 and 9, this volume). This work often emphasizes that the gender revolution has been a profoundly asymmetric one, a revolution in which females have increasingly assumed male-typed jobs, but males have not to the same extent moved into female-typed jobs. If, as proponents of this view argue, most of the gains that asymmetric change can generate have now been reaped, any further gains will have to rest on the unlikely prospect that the revolution develops a more symmetric cast to it (see chapter 8, this volume). For other commentators, it is equally troubling that there has been no great rush among men to take on child care and other domestic duties, an outcome that is entirely in keeping with the asymmetric dynamic observed elsewhere. It is argued that the persistence of this deeply gender-based division of labor in the family reduces the incentives for women to further invest in their human capital or to acquire work experience, thus dampening the rate of change in gender inequality. The final set of pessimistic arguments, again closely related to the foregoing ones, emphasizes that a rather constricted form of egalitarianism has been diffusing, one that rests on a formal commitment to "equal opportunity" without any corresponding commitment to ensuring that women and men will be similarly oriented toward taking up such opportunities. By this line of argument, a narrow commitment to purely formal guarantees of equal opportunity leaves much room for "essentialist" ideologies to flourish, ideologies that regard women and men as fundamentally different, having very distinctive skills and abilities, and therefore unlikely to avail themselves of the formally equal opportunities in the same ways (see Charles and Grusky 2004).

It is possible, then, to put forward two quite contradictory predictions about the future of gender inequality, both of which have at least a surface plausibility. How well do these scenarios stand up under closer scrutiny? How does the pattern of change over the last half-century accord with each of these visions? What are the proximate mechanisms at work that might move us toward the optimistic or pessimistic visions? How, if at all, might ongoing and new political interventions make the optimistic or pessimistic visions more or less plausible? Are there other, more complicated visions of the future that might be realized? To address these issues, we have assembled eminent scholars in the field of gender inequality, scholars who span many approaches and disciplines. Although impassioned arguments in defense of the optimistic or pessimistic visions have frequently been advanced, to date we have not seen a serious and sustained attempt to consider dispassionately the forces that might lead to either of these outcomes or to some yet more complicated outcome. We present such an attempt in the pages that follow.

The precursor to this volume was a series of colloquia at Cornell University, sponsored by the Center for the Study of Inequality, on recent declines in the gender pay gap and in gender differences in other labor-market outcomes. The partic-

ipating scholars were asked whether such declines, which are among the most spectacular forms of social change in the twentieth century, can be expected to continue apace as we move into the twenty-first century. The chapters in part II, "Making Sense of Change and Stability in Gender Inequality," focus on understanding change and stability in gender inequality in the past, while also giving some attention to prospects for the future. The chapters in part III, "Possible Futures of Gender Inequality," consider and build on analyses of what has happened in the past, but to a great extent focus on the implications of this past for the future.

We shall here explore the central themes that play out in these chapters by providing an organizing frame through which they may be usefully viewed. We focus our comments on the United States because understanding this case is very challenging in itself and is a useful preparation for the more daunting task of making sense of the future of gender inequality throughout the world.

As noted, the principal motivation for the colloquia and volume was the considerable dissensus among scholars over the future of gender inequality, a dissensus that is all the more striking because the empirical record of change over the last half-century is, for the most part, well established and is not a matter of much debate. Why is there nonetheless so much disagreement about the future? We think that it arises for three reasons:

1. Some forms of gender inequality, such as the pay gap and the level of female labor-force participation, have changed more rapidly than others, such as women's representation in top managerial positions and the division of labor in the family. This makes it possible for scholars to develop projections that implicitly feature extrapolations of different time series and stylized facts.
2. The evidence that scholars feature and the projections they develop are themselves undoubtedly affected by differences in their political orientations, in their personal experiences with gender inequality and discrimination, and in their disciplinary worldviews.
3. The causal forces underlying change and stability in the data remain unclear, making it possible for different scholars to weave stories that feature different causal forces and, as a result, different outcomes.

We shall elaborate briefly on each of these three sources of dissensus. On the matter of the empirical record, it bears emphasizing that some stylized facts suggest an impressive decline in gender inequality in the United States, whereas others suggest that gender inequality will not wither away completely, at least not in the near term. The various facts are well known (see, for example, Blau 1998; Blau, Ferber, and Winkler 2002; Charles and Grusky 2004) and need not be covered in great detail here. The evidence that leads commentators to emphasize changes in gender inequality includes the dramatic growth in female labor-force participation, especially that of married women, from the middle to the late twentieth century; the reduction and even reversal in gender differentials in educational attainment; a notable decline in occupational sex segregation, beginning in the 1960s

### The Declining Significance of Gender?

and proceeding more rapidly over the 1970s and 1980s; a marked decline in the gender wage gap beginning in the late 1970s; and a small but notable reallocation of housework between husbands and wives, a change that was especially prominent in the 1980s.

However, commentators can also readily draw on less favorable evidence, including a rate of change in the sharing of household tasks within the family that lags behind the dramatic rise in female labor-force participation and that is slower than many social scientists would regard as necessary for further progress in reducing market inequalities; the slowing rate of decline in the gender wage gap and in occupational sex segregation and the slowing rate of increase in female labor-force participation; the continued underrepresentation of women in the upper echelons of corporate America, government, and academia; the persistence of discriminatory practices in hiring and other aspects of employment (though there are indications that such discrimination has been reduced); and the seeming intractability of the essentialist presumption that skills, proclivities, and tastes tend to be gender-specific, an especially insidious source of inequality that appears, like employment discrimination, to have been reduced but not eliminated.

The simple point that we wish to make is that the empirical record encompasses time series that are changing at varying rates and cadences, making the future difficult to predict. Will the forces underlying past change continue to operate unabated until full equality is achieved? Or does the slowdown in the rate of change in a number of important time series suggest that we have reached a plateau and that further change in gender relations will now occur comparatively slowly?

This ambiguity in the data makes it possible for scholars to interpret the evidence in ways consistent with their favored causal models, political orientations, and various other predispositions. We are not arguing that individuals engage in conscious distortions or selection in their interpretation of the evidence. Rather, the lens through which inequalities are described and interpreted is inevitably refracted by values, orientations, and predispositions of which we are sometimes only faintly aware. This makes even straightforward description—let alone analysis—difficult to achieve. For example, most scholars are committed to equalizing opportunities for women and men (though there are obvious disagreements as to how this objective might be achieved), a commitment that can color how evidence is presented or discussed. In some cases, this shared commitment to equalization motivates scholars to downplay evidence of decline in gender inequality, presumably out of concern that undue emphasis on the progress achieved so far will make it appear that the remaining level of inequality is acceptable or unproblematic. Because of this concern, a conventional rhetorical strategy is to emphasize that much inequality remains and to assure the reader that the goal of perfect equality has by no means been achieved. That is, rather than focusing on how much progress has been made over the last half-century or longer, most scholars emphasize how far contemporary societies truly are from reaching the condition of gender equality.

Finally, because none of the disciplines is operating with a wholly consensual causal model of inequality, scholars often focus on different sources of change and consequently arrive at different conclusions about the likely trajectory of change.

If, instead, they could agree on a single causal model, it would reduce debate to disagreement about the trajectory of the independent variables that are presumed to drive change. In the absence of a consensual model, the debate is complicated by differences of opinion as to which variables are most relevant as sources of change—an additional source of uncertainty in forecasting change. We aim to develop a more comprehensive narrative that recognizes the manifold causal forces underlying change and stasis and that clarifies why more specialized narratives can lead to such diverse assessments.

The search for an improved narrative underlies many of the book's chapters. We seek here to clarify the discussion in these chapters and in the field at large by introducing a distinction between the proximate and distal causal mechanisms that affect gender inequality. It is hoped that this distinction will motivate readers to think expansively about the different types of processes that affect gender inequality in economic life and about the often complex relationships among these processes. Throughout this introduction we apply this distinction for the purpose of explaining trends in the wage gap and in occupational sex segregation, as these two outcomes are fundamental to gender inequality and illustrate the many processes at work that either sustain or weaken gender inequality.

## **DISTINGUISHING PROXIMATE AND DISTAL MECHANISMS**

The conceptual distinction that we seek to make is between proximate mechanisms of change, such as declining employer discrimination, and more distal "macro-level forces," such as economic competition or bureaucratization, that affect gender inequality via the proximate mechanisms. In past analyses, the tendency has been to focus on proximate mechanisms alone and to either ignore distal ones altogether or to mix them indiscriminately with proximate ones. This conventional approach can lead to incomplete analyses that beg the more fundamental question of why the proximate mechanisms are themselves undergoing change. It is not entirely satisfying, for example, to explain declines in gender inequality by simply noting that employer discrimination now occurs less frequently or that the gender gap in occupational aspirations is declining. To be sure, it is crucial to understand the proximate mechanisms at work, and indeed much fundamental research in the field is oriented toward precisely that task. However, once the proximate mechanisms have been established, one should then ask why discrimination is abating, why women are increasingly aspiring to hold formerly male-typed occupations, and why the household division of labor has changed more slowly than other forms of gender inequality. These types of questions require us to consider the macro-level forces that affect gender inequality via proximate mechanisms.

In table 1.1 we list the five proximate forces and the four distal, or macro-level, forces that the contributors to this volume identify either explicitly or implicitly. We organize our discussion by considering each of the macro-level forces—eco-

## The Declining Significance of Gender?

TABLE 1.1 / Macro-Level Forces and Proximate Mechanisms Generating Gender Inequality

Proximate Mechanisms	Macro-Level Forces			
	Economic	Organizational	Political	Cultural
A. Discrimination				
1. Tastes	X	X	X	X
2. Statistical	X	X	X	X
3. Institutional	X	X	X	X
B. Internalization				
1. Preferences				X
2. Self-evaluation				X
C. Labor-force commitment				
1. Domestic division of labor	X	X	X	X
2. Workplace adaptations	X		X	X
D. Cultural Devaluation				
1. Pollution		X	X	X
2. Cultural devaluation		X	X	X
E. Feedback effects				
1. Expectations of discrimination	X	X	X	X
2. Expected sanctions				X

Source: Authors' compilation.

conomic, organizational, political, cultural—in turn and the proximate mechanisms through which they exert their effects. We shall show how some of the proximate mechanisms are linked to all or nearly all of the forces at the macro-level, whereas others are more narrowly linked to a small number of macro-level forces. In each of the following sections, we first describe a particular narrative in positive and sympathetic terms and then we discuss the countervailing or inertial forces that may prevent the stylized account from playing out as straightforwardly as its adherents presume. In this way we seek to provide a comprehensive discussion of the forces making for change as well as stability.

### THE ECONOMIC NARRATIVE

We begin with the well-known narrative of market competition (see Becker 1957/1971; Arrow 1973; chapters 2 and 7, this volume). In this narrative, it is assumed that labor-market practices that disadvantage women are often (but not always) inefficient, implying that a competitive market will select for firms that eschew women-disadvantaging practices. We review the three classes of proximate mechanisms through which market forces may reduce gender inequality: discrim-

ination, labor-force commitment, and feedback effects. We then turn to the countervailing forces and conditions that may undermine the putatively equalizing effects of the market.

### The Positive Case

In his original formulation of the "taste for discrimination" model (see table 1.1, line A1, "Tastes"), Gary S. Becker (1957/1971) argued that employer discrimination would be eroded by competitive market forces because it requires employers to pay a premium to hire members of the preferred class of labor, whether these be males, whites, or individuals identified by other ascriptive characteristics that employers consider desirable.<sup>1</sup> This taste is "discriminatory" because it rests on exogenous preferences for a certain category of labor that cannot be understood as arising from some larger concern for maximizing profitability, market share, or another standard economic outcome. That is, when managers make hiring decisions in accord with discriminatory tastes, their firms will not be competitive with nondiscriminating firms because they must pay extra to secure labor from the preferred class, without any compensating increase in productivity. In standard renditions of this account, it is presumed that such discriminating firms will gradually be selected out by the market, although it is of course also possible that some discriminating firms will change their hiring practices to remain competitive. For example, managers with tastes for discrimination may shed these tastes, may no longer feel free to act upon them, or may be replaced by individuals without such tastes.

We further interpret this model as suggesting that competitive forces should operate against institutionalized organizational practices that involve discrimination and thus hinder firms from minimizing their labor costs or using labor efficiently. These types of discriminatory practices, which we term "institutional discrimination" (line A3, "Institutional"), may be deeply embedded in organizational routines and hence can be perpetuated quite independently of individual tastes for discrimination. To the extent that these routines are inefficient,<sup>2</sup> market competition should again root them out, either by selecting against the offending firms or obliging them to reform their ways by eliminating the routines themselves. If, for example, the institutionalized assignment of women to a dead-end "mommy track" compromises a firm's efficiency, the economic narrative tells us that it will ultimately be selected out by market forces. To be sure, firms are complicated bundles of many discriminatory and nondiscriminatory practices, implying that the market effect on any particular practice may be indirect and potentially slow to register. This complication may be one reason why discrimination has tended to persist over time in the face of competitive forces.

The situation with respect to statistical discrimination (line A2) is more complex. Where there is considerable uncertainty and poor information about worker performance, firms may be tempted to treat sex or other ascriptive characteristics as a low-cost source of information about an individual worker's productivity. The re-

### The Declining Significance of Gender?

sulting statistical discrimination entails making hiring, promotion, and pay decisions on the basis of group performance, such as the average productivity of all women at a given job, rather than individual performance (see Aigner and Cain 1977).<sup>3</sup> If employers are correct in their assessments of average group differences in productivity, we cannot count on competitive forces to eliminate statistical discrimination. That is, competitive forces will eliminate statistical discrimination when it is based on *erroneous* inferences about group differences or when other screening devices are more cost-effective, but not when it is based on correct and cost-effective judgments.<sup>4</sup>

The "taste for discrimination" model and at least one form of the statistical discrimination model (erroneous beliefs) may be couched, then, as a narrative about how discriminatory firms, managers, and practices gradually disappear under the force of market competition. It may be argued this narrative not only has market forces rooting out inefficient firms, managers, and practices, but also has such forces positively selecting for new practices that make firms more efficient in an ever-changing environment. In the contemporary context, one of the main environmental changes to which firms must respond is the dramatic increase in the size of the female labor force, and various inequality-reducing workplace adaptations (line C2) to this environmental change might well prove to be efficient and hence be positively selected by market forces. For example, policies that facilitate the integration of work and family responsibilities, such as maternity and parental leave, employer-provided child care, or child-care subsidies, have become increasingly prevalent in recent years. Although such policies can be government-mandated and hence proliferate for reasons other than their efficiency, some employers have voluntarily offered such policies to attract employees who may regard them as desirable nonwage benefits and may be willing to forgo some wages in exchange, and also to retain employees in whom they have made substantial investments.

The provision of such benefits probably will increase in the future as women continue to be integrated into the workforce at all levels. Moreover, employers have an additional incentive to provide such benefits because, insofar as household responsibilities in the family are increasingly shared, family-friendly policies are attractive to men as well as women.<sup>5</sup> Widespread adoption of family-friendly policies should in turn promote a more equal division of labor in the household, since such policies make it possible for women to compete more successfully in the labor market and thus increase their incentive to invest in human capital with a market payoff instead of specializing in domestic labor. It is of course difficult to predict the extent to which such a "benign circle" will develop.<sup>6</sup>

The latter point leads us directly to a discussion of "feedback effects" (see especially chapter 2, this volume). As indicated in line E1, the foregoing economic forces should have indirect positive effects on women's human capital and other job-related investments, since they encourage firms to become family-friendly and thereby increase the anticipated payoff to women for making such investments. Because human-capital theory posits that individuals make investments in light of their anticipated future gain, their perception of the extent of employer discrimi-

nation and family-friendliness may affect these investment decisions. If women have historically made lower investments in their human capital than men partly because employer discrimination and other women-disadvantaging practices have caused them to anticipate a lower payoff to their investments, the erosion of discriminatory tastes and practices in the labor market should reduce this expectation of a payoff differential and lead to more-similar investment decisions by men and women (line E1, "Expectations of discrimination"). This decline in the payoff differential likewise should act to undermine an important rationale for the intrafamilial division of labor in which men are regarded as principally responsible for market labor and women are regarded as principally responsible for domestic labor. If the economic rationale for this division of labor begins to disappear, one might anticipate that the cultural support for such an arrangement, including norms about female domesticity, may likewise begin to falter.

This discussion implies that the economic narrative is perhaps more far-reaching than has usually been appreciated. Although the "tastes for discrimination" argument is well known, economic forces may also operate to root out other institutionalized forms of discrimination, decrease some forms of statistical discrimination, positively select for women-friendly workplace adaptations, motivate women to increase their investment in human capital as the anticipated payoff to such investment rises, and help to promote a more equal division of labor in the family. These effects all depend on the presumptions that women-advantaging reform is efficient and profit-maximizing and, moreover, that the forces of competition are sufficiently strong so as to lead to these results. We now address these presumptions more directly.

## Limitations

As has long been recognized, the claim that competitive forces will erode gender discrimination, particularly discrimination based on employers' tastes, is arguably at odds with empirical evidence that such discrimination has persisted for some time and shows no sign of having been eliminated. Some commentators have argued that, because gender inequality has persisted, the economic narrative cannot provide a very compelling account of the evolution of inequality. We note, however, that the intractability of gender inequality is a double-edged sword that has led other social scientists to doubt that labor-market discrimination is responsible in whole or in part for gender inequality in economic outcomes. The very persistence of gender inequality is regarded by such commentators as presumptive evidence that it is efficient and that pure discrimination cannot account for it. We shall suggest below that this defense of the economic narrative fails to recognize that there are cogent economic reasons for expecting that the forces of competition may not eliminate all forms of gender discrimination.

The economic narrative can be undermined by at least two general types of problems: first, the competitive market will not eliminate forms of gender inequality that are consistent with or even increase firm efficiency; and second, the

## The Declining Significance of Gender?

competitive forces that play out in real economies are imperfectly developed and cannot always be counted upon to completely eliminate even those forms of gender inequality that *reduce* firm efficiency. We consider each type of problem in turn.

The first class of problems arises from the unfortunate possibility that, much as gender inequality is morally troubling to most of us, some of its manifestations may actually solve organizational problems. The classic illustration of this dilemma is statistical discrimination. The strategy of making predictions about future productivity on the basis of group averages may be efficient if there is not much individual-level variability around such averages, and if more reliable forms of information gathering, such as forms that capture this residual individual-level variability, are unduly expensive. If these two tests are met and statistical discrimination is accordingly an efficient adaptation to the high costs of gathering information, competitive forces may not penalize firms that deploy it (see, for example, Aigner and Cain 1977; Blau, Ferber, and Winkler 2002). Likewise, many inequality-enhancing adaptations, such as "mommy tracks," could be interpreted as forms of statistical discrimination in which firms presume, with a tolerable amount of error, that women have more substantial domestic duties and therefore are efficiently assigned to less-demanding positions. (This reference to mommy tracks is purely illustrative and is not intended to suggest that they are indeed efficient adaptations.)

In the foregoing discussion of statistical discrimination, we have referred to the compatibility of the competitive market with gender inequality. As Aigner and Cain (1977) have pointed out, whenever women are less productive in a particular job and employers accurately perceive this productivity differential and set wages accordingly, women's wages will be reduced, but as a group women will be paid their expected productivity. This does not constitute labor market discrimination as economists define it because, at the group level, gender differences in pay are accounted for by gender differences in productivity. It does mean, however, that a woman who performs above her group mean will nonetheless be treated as a member of her (gender) group and hence not be paid according to her individual productivity. From a normative perspective, the practice of basing employment decisions on characteristics like sex—a characteristic that the individual cannot change—is a form of discrimination because it does not accord with the standard of paying *individuals* based on their *individual* productivity. Indeed, the practice of judging an individual on the basis of group characteristics rather than on his or her own merits seems the very essence of stereotyping or discrimination, and such behavior is certainly not legal under antidiscrimination laws and regulations.

It must further be recognized that "enlightened" employers who ignore the sexist tastes of their clients or customers may be penalized for imposing their views on a recalcitrant public. For instance, discrimination may not be incompatible with economic efficiency if customers or clients strongly prefer not to deal with women and threaten to take their business elsewhere if the firm places women in positions where the public expects to find men, such as airplane pilots, and heart-transplant surgeons. These potential sources of discrimination were elucidated by Becker in his initial formulation (Becker 1957/1971; also Arrow 1973 and Sunstein 1991).

Further, Francine D. Blau (1977) has pointed out that some forms of occupational sex segregation within the firm can be efficient if they reduce the amount of worker heterogeneity within an occupation and thereby allow firms to treat occupational incumbents in an undifferentiated and hence cheaper way.<sup>7</sup>

The second class of problems to which we alluded above is arguably more troubling, as it involves a fundamental failure of modern economies to deliver efficiency. This class of problems arises when departures from competition in product or labor markets weaken or eliminate the discrimination-eroding effect of competitive forces. For example, Becker (1957/1971) has pointed out that discrimination may be more likely to persist in monopolistic industries, such as some utilities, where employers are to some extent shielded from the forces of competition in the market for their product. As another example, Dan Black (1995) has developed a model in which workers face substantial search costs in locating new jobs, which can have an inequality-preserving effect because search costs give employers more market power over wage determination than they would have in a competitive labor market. To the extent that labor-market discrimination raises the search costs of female or minority employees above those of their male and white counterparts, these groups can safely be underpaid by an amount that is just less than what would induce them to search further. Finally, we note that the market cannot in all cases be expected to work expeditiously in selecting out inefficient organizational practices, given that firms are complicated and ever-changing bundles of practices, some of which may be optimizing and others not. In this context, the market verdict on any particular practice may be slow in coming—indeed, by the time a verdict is reached, the environmental conditions under which it holds may well have changed. Thus, there is nothing in the economic model that specifies a time frame within which inefficient practices will be selected out. If particular inefficient practices are so widely diffused as to be universal, one might well be faced with a long wait before a particular firm breaks with convention and subjects such a practice to a test.

In our view, these examples make it clear that the persistence of some gender inequality can be plausibly understood within the context of the economic narrative. There is no need to question the narrative in its entirety merely because gender inequality persists. Although these illustrations suggest that some forms of discrimination and gender inequality may solve organizational problems, it bears emphasizing that this need not imply that these female-disadvantaging practices will necessarily persist into the twenty-first century and beyond. However, it may be necessary to rely upon processes invoked in other, noneconomic narratives to understand why they might not persist.

## THE ORGANIZATIONAL NARRATIVE

A second narrative of interest emphasizes the diffusion of modern personnel policies in the form of universalistic hiring practices and bureaucratized pay scales and promotion procedures (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983;

## The Declining Significance of Gender?

Dobbin et al. 1993; Jackson 1998; Reskin and McBrier 2000; Charles and Grusky 2004). The essence of bureaucratic personnel practices is a formal commitment to treating all workers equally, and to meritocratic hiring and promotion on the basis of credentials. In its ideal-typical form, bureaucracy is not about substantive rationality involving the maximization of productivity or output but about a formal commitment to a bundle of organizational practices, such as universalistic hiring and a reliance on credentials, that are regarded as normatively desirable and are typically presumed, rightly or wrongly, to be efficient. We will proceed again by first outlining this narrative in its positive form and then discussing why it may not play out as straightforwardly as some scholars have assumed.

## The Positive Case

From the start, we note that the economic and organizational narratives have identical implications insofar as bureaucratic organizational forms are indeed as efficient as many managers, employers, and organizational scholars presume. In this context, the economic narrative implies that such forms will diffuse by virtue of their intrinsic efficiency, and the organizational and economic narratives therefore overlap. But the two narratives diverge to the extent that bureaucratic forms may not embody strictly efficient practices and the diffusion of bureaucratic forms is accordingly attributable to cultural stories about their efficiency rather than their actual efficiency. The widely held belief that bureaucratic practices are modern and efficient will itself serve to further diffuse such practices, either because managers have been socialized into this modern belief in colleges or business schools and will seek to implement it in their own organizations, or because managers pragmatically realize that, in an environment that regards bureaucratic practices as modern and efficient, there are real costs involved in setting up organizations along some different, nonbureaucratic model (Meyer 2001). In this sense, firms that eschew bureaucratic forms will not only forgo the productivity gains that bureaucratic hiring may generate but will also incur various social and even legal penalties.

If neo-institutionalist and economic neoclassical accounts are fused in this way, it becomes apparent that the costs of exercising discriminatory tastes may vary depending on the particular legal, institutional, and cultural environment in which employers operate.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is plausible that the diffusion of beliefs about legitimate organizational forms independently contributes to the costs of discriminating, beyond the efficiency costs discussed above in connection with economic forces. In an environment that has delegitimated discriminatory practices, a firm that nonetheless persists in discriminating faces real social costs, not just the legal costs that arise in such environments but also the public relations costs of becoming branded as an unfriendly employer for women. The long persistence of many discriminatory practices throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggests that employers may need to incur additional social costs of this sort be-

fore fundamentally rethinking their hiring and promotion practices. This inference is consistent with the evidence that the enactment of federal antidiscrimination legislation and regulations in the United States in the mid-1960s contributed to the subsequent reduction in the gender pay gap, although these laws and regulations appear to have had a less dramatic effect on the gender pay gap than on the black-white pay gap.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, a decline in pure discrimination (lines A1 and A3) may be driven in part by institutional forces as well as economic competition. Does the same argument apply to statistical discrimination (line A2)? We think it does. This is because statistical discrimination is inconsistent with a formal bureaucratic logic that treats all individuals equally and without concern for such ascriptive group memberships as race, ethnicity, and gender. In their purest form, bureaucratic personnel practices delegitimize gender-based hiring, firing, and promotion even when it would be efficient to treat gender as a signal in these decisions (see chapter 7, this volume). As we have argued, competitive forces will only undermine those instances of statistical discrimination that are based on *erroneous*, and thus inefficient, inferences about group differences in productivity, whereas the diffusion of bureaucratic practices should erode all forms of discrimination, even those that are efficient. There is little scope within the context of ideal-typical bureaucratic systems to discriminate against women merely because it is believed that they tend on average to perform more poorly at the job in question or are more likely to quit than are men. When institutionalized in ideal-typical form, bureaucratic practices thus undermine both the "strong form" of statistical discrimination in which, on average, there are objective gender-based differences in productivity, and the "weak form," in which beliefs about objective differences are incorrect but nonetheless persist because stereotyping blinds employers to disconfirming evidence or because feedback effects influence women's incentives to invest (see Blau, Ferber and Winkler 2002; Lundberg and Startz 1983).<sup>10</sup>

Although negative prohibitions on ascription are fundamental to bureaucratic systems, these systems additionally involve a positive commitment to hiring and promoting on the basis of formally meritocratic criteria. In practice, this means that positions are typically awarded on the basis of credentials, especially those secured in schools or through vocational training. Does the diffusion of such meritocratic practices work to reduce gender inequality? Again, we think it does. The rise of credential-based hiring allows high-achieving women to substantiate their claims to high status, claims that might otherwise be challenged and undermined by men or women who hold negative stereotypes about women. For example, a woman credentialed at Harvard Law School has considerable legitimacy, which makes it more difficult for men at her law firm to challenge her abilities and reduces their interest in trying to do so. In chapter 3, "The Rising (and Then Declining) Significance of Gender," Claudia Goldin proposes a "pollution theory" of discrimination in which men in high-status segregated occupations are concerned that the prestige of their occupations would be "polluted" by the entry of women, who are presumed to be less qualified.<sup>11</sup> Just as residents of high-status, all-white neighborhoods are often concerned that property values will fall when African

## The Declining Significance of Gender?

Americans move in, male incumbents of traditionally male high-status occupations may be concerned about the effects of gender integration on the prestige of their "occupational neighborhood." This so-called polluting effect may be at least partially countered if formal credentials serve to certify that newly entering women are as qualified as their male counterparts (see chapter 3, this volume). If bureaucratization does in fact increase credential-based hiring and promotion, one can conclude that it could undermine the perceived polluting effect of women and allow integration to occur more readily.

Finally, we note that the organizational narrative, like the economic narrative, can be embellished with feedback effects. Indeed, whenever there is an equalization in the payoff to male and female human capital, the incentive for women to invest in such capital increases. This dynamic plays out regardless of whether the macro-level source of changing payoffs is economic competition or the diffusion of bureaucratic personnel systems. Two types of feedback effects should emerge: the reduction in discrimination that bureaucratization engenders should trigger an increase in human-capital investments by women and an associated decline in occupational sex segregation and in the pay gap (see table 1.1, line E1); and the bureaucracy-induced equalization in the human-capital payoffs for women and men diminishes the rationale for a domestic division of labor (line C1). The organizational narrative is therefore a powerful story that is consistent with many of the same proximate processes that have conventionally been associated with the economic narrative.

## Limitations

The organizational narrative arguably has an internal logic as compelling as that of the economic narrative. Just as the economic narrative marches ineluctably forward once one conditions on a competitive market, so too the organizational narrative plays out quite straightforwardly insofar as organizational change takes the simple form of bureaucratization. The main critiques, therefore, of the organizational narrative involve questioning whether bureaucratization of this simple type is indeed in ascendancy. In reviewing these critiques, we may distinguish in particular between impediments to equalization that emerge within bureaucratized workplaces and those that emerge within newer or smaller organizational settings that have not been bureaucratized.

Within bureaucratized workplaces, there is ongoing debate as to what constitutes modern and legitimate organizational forms, and the particular vision of "bureaucracy" featured in the conventional organizational narrative is surely not the only possible vision. There is in fact a tension between bureaucratic visions in which all forms of gender inequality are regarded as illegitimate and those in which gender inequality is deemed acceptable insofar as it is efficient. Although the organizational narrative outlined above presumes that the first vision is dominant (implying, for example, that statistical discrimination based on correct perceptions of gender differences will come to be delegitimated), it is hardly obvious

that this vision of equity will triumph over those that instead permit gender inequality whenever it is—or is perceived to be—efficient.

This contest between competing visions is revealed when one considers the gender inequality that internal labor markets (ILMs) typically produce. In an ideal-typical ILM, the main prerequisite for promotion is accumulating relevant firm-specific human capital (for example, performing feeder jobs), and men will typically accumulate such capital more quickly than women because they are freed from pregnancy, childrearing, and other domestic work that have historically tended to lead to women's intermittent labor supply. The question here is whether the resulting gender inequality will be delegitimated, even though it is presumably efficient. In the standard organizational narrative, a radically egalitarian vision is assumed to be diffusing in ways that delegitimize such inequality and motivate efforts to overcome it. But there is also much cultural support for an alternative bureaucratic vision that enshrines efficiency and treats all inequality emanating from an efficiency imperative as wholly unproblematic. This efficiency rationale is therefore an inertial force that reduces support for certain types of equality-enhancing organizational reform.

Meanwhile, some forms of inefficiency that clearly disadvantage women may nonetheless persist because they are subtle, difficult to detect, and hence unlikely to be exposed to challenge. The formally gender-neutral regulations, procedures, and institutions within bureaucratized settings may offer ample room for informal decision making that remains gender-biased (Baron 1984). For example, bureaucratic rules about open job posting and hiring can create the appearance of gender-neutral competition, but the actual hiring and promotion decisions that are made within this context may not be truly gender-neutral. We do not mean to suggest that managers and other decision makers merely "go through the motions" of open competition, but in the end cynically make decisions that are consistent with their overt tastes for discrimination. Rather, the typical mechanism is likely less Machiavellian than this, with managers discriminating in subtle and unconscious ways that proceed from deeply internalized essentialist presumptions about the types of jobs for which men and women are best qualified. Because subtle and unconscious forms of discrimination are difficult to detect and prove, further progress in combatting these residual forms of discrimination may occur less rapidly than in the past, when efforts could be focused on more obvious and overt forms.

These subtle processes also appear in more dynamic organizational settings in which bureaucratic forms have yet to emerge or are undergoing change. As Cecilia Ridgeway (chapter 9, this volume) points out, modern bureaucratization remains limited in its reach, given that contemporary economies are highly dynamic and that new organizations and occupations are constantly being formed. The dynamism of modern economies may in some cases generate increasing elaboration, specialization, and differentiation within the division of labor, leading to the creation of new jobs that are subdivisions of older ones. How are these subdivisions implemented? Although this topic remains underresearched (for one of the few studies, see Reskin and Roos 1990), we suspect that at least on occasion the new

### The Declining Significance of Gender?

subdivisions are defined upon partly essentialist lines, with the "essentially female" aspects of the old job amalgamated into one subclass of occupations and the "essentially male" aspects of the old job amalgamated into another subclass of occupations. For example, the occupation of lawyer was once quite undifferentiated, but it has gradually subdivided into a host of specializations. As women streamed into this occupation, they appear to have moved disproportionately into various "essentially female" specializations, such as family law.<sup>12</sup> In this particular case, the occupation differentiated in advance of the encroachment of women, although it is possible that some types of differentiation among lawyers emerged in part as a response to the influx of women.

If segregative processes of this sort are more generally at work, they would be operating on the margins of a larger pattern of quite significant occupational integration over the last half-century (Blau, Simpson, and Anderson 1998; Charles and Grusky 2004). We believe that such integrative trends will continue as a result of the various proximate processes outlined in table 1.1 and discussed here. In noting that countervailing forces are also at work, we are pointing out that the proximate processes itemized in table 1.1 do not operate altogether unopposed, that the occupational gender segregation that remains may be actively generated by essentialist and other processes, and that one cannot treat it as a simple residue of old institutional practices that will quietly fade away.

## THE POLITICAL NARRATIVE

In turning to the political narrative, we shift the focus to collective action that is explicitly oriented toward changing the laws, institutions, and norms that govern labor-market practices. We again lead off by outlining how gender inequality may be reduced through political action and then follow up with a discussion of the complexities and limitations of the political narrative.

### The Positive Case

While economic and organizational narratives treat change in gender inequality as an unintended by-product of macro-level forces, political narratives concern instrumental action that is explicitly oriented toward effecting a decline in gender inequality. In theory, such political action could engage any of the proximate mechanisms listed in table 1.1, but historically the main emphasis has been on legislation aimed at reducing the three types of discrimination listed in lines A1 to A3. The United States implemented its antidiscrimination legislation before most other advanced industrial countries (Blau and Kahn 2003) and may therefore be viewed as the home ground of the political narrative. The centerpiece of this legislative approach has of course been title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As noted previously, the evidence strongly suggests that the federal government's antidiscrimination effort has played a role in reducing gender inequality in the labor market.

The federal government's effort has been driven primarily by an emphasis on equal opportunity rather than the equalization of outcomes. The main possible exception to this generalization is affirmative action, which has been defined as "proactive steps . . . to erase differences between women and men, minorities and nonminorities, etc." in the labor market (Holzer and Neumark 2000, 484). The affirmative-action approach may be contrasted with laws and regulations that solely require employers not to discriminate against these groups. However, affirmative action is legally required under quite limited circumstances, generally as a result of the implementation of an executive order impacting government contractors and very occasionally as part of a court order in cases where employers have lost or settled discrimination suits. Although some commentators argue that affirmative action leads to inefficient and nonmeritocratic hiring and promotion decisions, in fact the available evidence strongly suggests that such claims are off the mark and that so-called "reverse discrimination" is not widespread in the labor market (Holzer and Neumark 2000).

If anti-discrimination legislation constitutes a major political success of the late twentieth century, comparable-worth initiatives have fared considerably less well. These initiatives are directed at equalizing pay for predominantly male and predominantly female occupations that are deemed to have comparable skill requirements. The pay differences that motivate comparable-worth initiatives potentially arise from a number of sources:

1. Employers may exclude women from higher-paying male jobs and relegate them to female occupations that are relatively poorly paid because of the resulting "overcrowding" and wage competition (Bergmann 1974).
2. A preference among women for "female" occupations and among men for "male" occupations has the effect of crowding women into relatively few occupations and thereby lowering their wages.
3. Employers may undervalue and underpay female-dominated occupations because they internalize the societal assumption that any task assigned to women cannot be very important or useful (table 1.1, line D2; see England 1992).
4. Higher pay in predominantly male jobs may also reflect compensation for higher skills, longer or more complicated training, or less favorable working conditions.

The last mentioned cause of pay differentials is deemed legitimate by most advocates of comparable worth and is not the target of equalization efforts. The objective of comparable-worth reform is instead to equalize pay in male-dominated and female-dominated occupations that are *equivalent* in skill demands, training requirements, and working conditions. Despite the best efforts of comparable-worth advocates to control for such variables, it is always possible that the metric through which "comparability" is ascertained is flawed and that pay differences that are judged to be problematic under this metric are in fact attributable to dif-

## The Declining Significance of Gender?

ferences in skill, training, or working conditions (Polachek 1981; Macpherson and Hirsch 1995).

Whatever the sources of the pay gap, the objective of comparable-worth remediation is to achieve pay parity without the necessity of eliminating occupational segregation. This form of remediation has been proposed as a legal interpretation of title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but such an interpretation has not been ratified by the Supreme Court, which has not issued a definitive ruling on the matter. Nor is there much evidence that comparable worth has been widely adopted in the private sector, although some state and local governments have implemented or begun to implement some version of it.<sup>13</sup> In addition, some unions, particularly those in the public sector, have pressed for pay equity as a collective-bargaining demand.

There has also been some political work oriented toward establishing family-friendly programs as a type of "workplace adaptation" (line C2). As suggested previously, such family-friendly policies may spread not only because of the economic payoff associated with them but also because political pressure on behalf of these policies is brought to bear on firms, either through explicit laws mandating these policies or in the form of more diffuse public opinion. In the end, this political effect may be partly mediated through economic incentives, as firms presumably factor in the cost of violating the law or inflaming public opinion in deciding how and in what ways to modify their personnel practices. It is useful to distinguish between cost calculations that reflect the political climate firms face and thus are part of the political narrative and those that reflect more narrowly drawn concerns about attracting and motivating the best workers, implicating the economic narrative.

Although the United States has been an innovator in antidiscrimination legislation, it has lagged behind its counterparts abroad in implementing other types of organizational reform. By international standards, the United States has a relatively weak entitlement to parental leave: a federally mandated twelve-week unpaid leave, introduced in 1993. In contrast, other OECD (Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development) countries implemented mandated leave earlier and most have a much longer period of leave, usually paid (Ruhm 1998). Similarly, the United States tends to have a smaller share of young children in publicly funded child care than many other OECD countries, although it does provide relatively generous tax relief for child-care expenses (Gornick, Meyers, and Ross 1997).

Like the economic and organizational narratives, the political narrative encompasses a number of unintended feedback effects, but in this case such effects may play out in inequality-enhancing ways. Three classes of unintended effects are of special interest here. First, Eva M. Meyersson Milgrom and Trond Petersen (chapter 6, this volume) point out that family-friendly programs not only ease the work-family conflict for currently employed workers but also may motivate new workers with substantial child-care responsibilities to enter the formal labor force. As family-friendly programs diffuse, the female labor force may therefore become

less stringently culled, with women's labor-market outcomes suffering on average as a result. Second, if firms implement "comparable-worth" adjustments to their pay scales, occupational segregation could intensify as improved pay encourages women to remain in female-typed occupations. In theory, men should also be attracted to the increasing pay of female-typed occupations, yet the evidence suggests that they are more resistant to entering such occupations than women are to entering male-typed occupations (see chapter 8, this volume). Third, if government-mandated policies such as parental leave raise the costs of labor beyond any increase in benefits to the firm, employers could seek to avoid these costs by discriminating against women at the point of hiring.<sup>14</sup>

In all three cases, the core problem is that policy interventions can have inconsistent effects on the various outcomes of interest, increasing inequality on some outcomes, such as choice of occupation, while diminishing inequality on others, such as pay. This means that it is impossible to make good policy recommendations without first settling on some master metric that establishes how much of a loss on one dimension should be exchanged for a gain on another (see Bourguignon 2006). Moreover, a further challenge arises because policy decisions are often gradational rather than binary in character, meaning that potentially consequential judgments about the size or extent of the program must be made. For example, mandating long parental leave that is generously remunerated by the employer could end up being a significant deterrent to hiring women into highly responsible positions, whereas the hiring deterrent under more modest mandates might be offset by the benefits of promoting women's attachment to the firm and the enhanced investment in firm-specific skills that may result.

In reality, it is unlikely that the success of political reform depends entirely on its costs and benefits. Instead, the outcome of reform efforts probably depends at least in part on the actions of powerful actors, such as politicians and capitalists, who presumably attend to their own interests as well as to those of the larger collectivity. According to Jackson (chapter 7, this volume), inequality-reducing political reform has been successful because males as a group are no longer deeply committed to their privileged status and have not exerted themselves in its defense. We will argue below that the success of such reform is also due to cultural changes that affect the tastes and interests of women as well as men.

## Limitations

The reach of political reform in the United States has been limited by its liberal egalitarian premises. As noted, political activism in the United States has focused on equalizing opportunities (access) rather than outcomes (wages), meaning that little reform effort has been targeted toward either equalizing the aspirations of men and women or equalizing their pay. The main objective of reform has been to reduce discrimination in employment, an objective that is consistent with liberal egalitarianism. If government intervention continues to be oriented toward reduc-

## The Declining Significance of Gender?

ing discrimination, the pace of future declines in inequality may gradually slow as the residual of discrimination-induced inequality grows ever smaller and more difficult to address due to the increasingly subtle and even unconscious form contemporary discrimination is likely to take. It follows that upward trends in gender equality may stall because reform remains oriented toward sources of gender inequality that are becoming less important and increasingly hard to identify.

How might this pessimistic view be countered? First, it is possible that reform efforts focused on employment discrimination will have a "jump-starting" effect, triggering changes in human-capital investments and the domestic division of labor. The "benign circle" that we outlined earlier implies that reductions in discrimination will encourage further shifts in the amount and type of women's human-capital investments and promote continued reallocation of household responsibilities between partners. It follows that a relatively small intervention at any point in the circle could precipitate self-generating change.

Second, political reform may develop in new, more ambitious ways that create momentum for change. Although liberal egalitarianism undergirds most contemporary reform efforts, it is not outside the realm of possibility that other logics may ultimately come to the fore and provide an expanded foundation for reform. The ongoing public interest in the gender pay gap is suggestive in this regard because it does not seem to stand or fall on any complicated analysis of whether the gap is attributable to employment discrimination or other conventional targets of liberal egalitarian reform. Rather, at least some of the interest in the pay gap appears to signal a more generic concern with inequalities in *outcome*, no matter how such inequalities have been generated. This generic interest in the pay gap motivates the research of Heidi Hartmann, Stephen J. Rose, and Vicky Lovell (see chapter 5, this volume).

In the past, such interest in unequal outcomes has been the impetus for comparable-worth initiatives intended to eliminate, by legal or organizational fiat, inequalities of pay prevailing between comparable male-typed and female-typed occupations. As stated, the comparable-worth effort did not meet with much legal support in the past, nor are there any obvious signs of revived support for it. If there is growing public attention to unequal outcomes in the future, we suspect that it will instead lead to increased political support for workplace adaptations that go beyond conventional antidiscrimination guarantees.

## THE CULTURAL NARRATIVE(S)

The cultural narrative rests on the argument that egalitarian beliefs are grounded in Western ideals of justice and equality that continue to be endogenously worked out through a cultural logic that to some extent operates independently of the economic efficiency of such ideals. These ideals may lead to increasing "tastes" for equality and for egalitarian practices, tastes that might at the limit be honored in the labor market even with some loss in profits or efficiency.

## The Positive Case

The cultural narrative thus makes tastes endogenous to fundamental cultural forces. Although none of our contributors outlines a cultural narrative in such stark terms, Robert Max Jackson's line of argument (chapter 7) hinges on changes in cultural expectations of this general sort. Similarly, Solomon W. Polachek (chapter 4) suggests that "societal discrimination" may ultimately weaken, not because of the economic costs of discrimination but because of egalitarian cultural change that erodes the conventional domestic division of labor.

The cultural narrative can be straightforwardly distinguished from the economic narrative because tastes are not presumed to change merely because of the cost of exercising discriminatory tastes. Likewise, the cultural narrative is distinct from the organizational narrative by virtue of focusing on the spread of tastes for equality and equality-enhancing practices, not the spread of organizational forms such as bureaucratization that are deemed efficient, normatively desirable, or both. In the last analysis, the diffusion of organizational forms and practices may be understood in cultural terms, yet the "culture" that is diffusing is principally a story about the efficiency or normative desirability of bureaucracy. The cultural narrative, by contrast, pertains to the diffusion of tastes for equality rather than the diffusion of beliefs about the efficiency of bureaucracy.

The cultural and political narratives are closely related because political commitments to equal opportunity, affirmative action, and comparable worth may be partly motivated by tastes for equality. The political narrative may ultimately be driven by these more fundamental cultural forces. At the same time, the cultural commitment to equality is not expressed exclusively in political terms but in addition is expressed in the attitudes and behaviors of family members as well as of workers and employers in the labor market. We focus here on these extra-political effects of cultural change.

The cultural narrative is revealed in the diffusion of egalitarian beliefs across a wide range of work and family attitudes. There are four classes of attitudes that may be particularly susceptible to such egalitarianism:

1. *Increasing tastes for equality.* Employers may gradually shed their preferences for certain categories of labor and instead develop tastes for equality in hiring and promotion.
2. *Declining beliefs in pollution.* Male workers may become less likely to believe that an occupation is devalued or polluted when women enter it.<sup>15</sup>
3. *Declining beliefs in female domesticity.* Men and women may become less likely to support a division of labor in which women are responsible for domestic duties and men work in the external labor market.
4. *Decline in occupational essentialism.* Men and women may be viewed as less likely to have fundamentally different talents and abilities.

### The Declining Significance of Gender?

Whereas the economic, organizational, and political narratives are largely driven by demand-side mechanisms, the distinctive feature of cultural egalitarianism is that it partly operates on the supply side as well. In particular, weakening beliefs in "female domesticity" should orient women increasingly to the external labor market and motivate them to invest in *more* human capital, while the decline in "essentialist beliefs" should motivate them to invest increasingly in the *same types* of human capital as men.

We will discuss each of these four classes of effects. The first two demand-side effects need not be covered in great detail, as the mechanisms are straightforward and have already been discussed. We led off this section by noting that various forms of labor-market discrimination against women should become less prominent (see lines A1 to A3) as tastes for equality diffuse and employers become increasingly wed to egalitarianism, shed their preferences for certain classes of labor, and come to question institutionalized practices that privilege men in hiring and promotion. Likewise, when employers and managers become more egalitarian, they may wish to actualize this commitment through various workplace adaptations such as maternity leave, family leave, and child-care subsidies (line C2). The presumed polluting effect of women (discussed in chapter 3) should also be undermined by the diffusion of egalitarian views. When women are increasingly regarded as the status equals of men, their entry into an occupation no longer pollutes it and should therefore be met with less opposition on the part of male incumbents (line D1).

The supply-side aspects of the cultural account are more complicated and are best understood by reviewing the conventional wisdom on how cultural beliefs about gender differences have historically served to maintain gender inequality (see especially Marini and Brinton 1984). It has long been argued that stereotypes about natural male and female characteristics are disseminated and perpetuated through popular culture and the media, through social interaction in which significant others—parents, peers, and teachers—implicitly or explicitly support such stereotypes, and through cognitive processes in which individuals pursue and remember evidence that is consistent with their preexisting stereotypes and ignore, discount, or forget evidence that undermines them (Fiske 1998; Reskin 2000). As children grow up, they internalize the sex-typed expectations of others and convert these expectations into durable sex-typed aspirations and preferences, some of which operate at the subconscious level. For example, when girls internalize essentialist stereotypes that associate males with mathematical ability, they become less likely to prefer and aspire to work that utilizes such skills, to embark on the requisite training for such work, or to persist in such work in the face of difficulties. This line of argument presumes that gender-specific preferences become internalized in childhood, affect subsequent investment decisions and aspirations, and form a stable component of the adult personality (Parsons and Bales 1955; Chodorow 1978; Bourdieu 2001).

How does the diffusion of cultural egalitarianism break down such supply-side mechanisms? As cultural egalitarianism spreads, women and men are increasingly assumed to have the same rights, responsibilities, and abilities, thereby

weakening conventional stereotypes about male-female difference. This new worldview affects individual cognition and ultimately is embodied in individual action. As a result, judgments about the proper balance between market labor and domestic labor become more similar across genders (line C1), and the types of occupations to which men and women aspire likewise become more similar (line B1).

The diffusion of egalitarianism may also affect how workers come to understand their skills and abilities (line B2). As Shelley J. Correll (2001) elegantly demonstrates, women tend to regard themselves as less competent than men at male-typed tasks, even when, objectively measured, they are just as competent (see also chapter 9, this volume). This implies that women will eschew male-typed work not only because they find it less desirable or appropriate but also because they believe that they are less competent at it. Even in the absence of sex-specific preferences, internalized beliefs about gender differences in ability can result in biased self-evaluations of performance, thereby contributing to segregation. The diffusion of egalitarian views implies that such gender-biased judgments about competence should gradually break down.<sup>16</sup>

The usual feedback effects should also be relevant here. Whether change is generated by the economic costs of discrimination (the economic narrative), the diffusion of bureaucratic organization (the organizational narrative), or the diffusion of egalitarian beliefs (the cultural narrative), women should come to anticipate less discrimination in the workplace. As women anticipate that the workplace will better reward their human capital, they are motivated to invest in more of it (line E1), thus diminishing the rationale for the traditional division of labor in the family (line C1).

Although this "discrimination-reduction" feedback effect pertains to all narratives, we have noted in table 1.1 that the cultural narrative generates an additional form of feedback distinctive to that narrative (line E2). When egalitarian views are embraced by parents, coworkers, and friends as well as by managers, this has far-reaching effects on the wider "cultural climate" within which women and men make decisions about the amount and type of human capital to acquire. This is important because workers who transgress norms about gender-appropriate labor have historically been subjected to informal sanctions (Goffman 1977; West and Zimmerman 1987; Fenstermaker and West 2002). For example, parents may disapprove of their son's wishes to become a nurse, or construction workers may harass a female entrant. These sanctions come to be anticipated and thus shape individual aspirations, preferences, and human-capital investments (see Kanter 1977). The historic staying power and perniciousness of gender essentialism can be attributed in part to such sanctions; indeed, even individuals who disavow conventional gender norms may find themselves taking them into account, given that they perceive that others still embrace them and may impose sanctions against "gender egalitarians" (see Fenstermaker and West 2002, 29-30). Insofar as cultural egalitarianism begins to take hold, such sanctions should occur less frequently, and individuals should be able to make decisions about their lives without taking sanctions as much into account.

## The Declining Significance of Gender?

The diffusion of egalitarianism may therefore have far-reaching effects that operate via all of the proximate mechanisms outlined in table 1.1. In evaluating this narrative, a crucial question is whether it comes packaged with a diffusion mechanism that is as plausible as those underlying other narratives, especially the economic one. The latter narrative rests on two assumptions: that at least some gender-egalitarian practices, such as a reduction in pure discrimination, are efficient, and that a competitive market will gradually select for such efficient practices. We have noted that one can reasonably question either of these assumptions, but the mechanism is at least well specified.

Does the cultural narrative have such an elegant mechanism of diffusion? This question becomes especially important if predictions about the future are sought. There is much evidence that overtly racist or sexist ideologies have been discredited over the last half-century, but this trend cannot be convincingly projected into the future without some mechanism suggesting a self-perpetuating dynamic. The conventional view in this regard is that a series of crucial historical events—the Enlightenment, the defeat of Nazism, the civil rights movement—have served to define equality as one of our core cultural commitments. Absent some revolutionary event that changes this cultural trajectory, the course of human history becomes the “working out” of this commitment, a task that involves shedding subsidiary values, such as the “freedom” to discriminate, that sometimes come into conflict with our deeper commitment to egalitarianism. This deepening of our core commitment to equality takes the form not merely of increasing the number of groups to which guarantees of equality are extended (gays, people with disabilities, AIDS patients) but also of devising reforms that better realize these guarantees. The core mechanism that drives cultural diffusion may therefore be understood as the gradual “reconciling” of competing values to a new value—equality—that has been elevated by one or more historical events to a position of prominence.

## Limitations

Within the cultural domain, the diffusion of egalitarianism is an extremely important development, one that will likely continue apace unless some unforeseen catastrophic event induces us to rethink our core cultural commitments. Although the future of egalitarianism appears bright, it is well to consider the limits of the particular version of egalitarianism that has taken hold and that continues to diffuse. Among the many competing egalitarian visions, it is clear that “liberal egalitarian” strands remain dominant, implying that our collective commitment to gender equality mainly takes the form of developing procedural guarantees of equal opportunity. This commitment to liberal egalitarianism is quite compatible with the essentialist presumption that men and women have fundamentally different tastes, skills, and abilities (see Charles and Grusky 2004).<sup>17</sup> That is, liberal egalitarianism represents women and men as autonomous agents entitled to equal opportunities and treatment, not as socially or culturally constructed agents. The cen-

trality of autonomy within this vision allows for the persistence of fundamentally gendered outlooks and identities. For a liberal egalitarian, it is enough to defend the right of women to fairly compete for any occupation to which they aspire, without questioning how those aspirations were formed or why they may differ from the aspirations of men. It follows that liberal egalitarians may embrace an "equal but (potentially) different" conceptualization of gender and social justice.

If this version of egalitarianism continues to diffuse, the push toward complete equality may be slowed. This suppressive effect occurs through proximate mechanisms on both the supply and demand sides. On the supply side, we cannot expect liberal egalitarians to attend much to individual aspirations (line B1) and self-assessments (line B2), meaning that the persistence of gender differences in these outlooks and identities will not 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 (lines A1, A3) but it does not as directly challenge statistical discrimination that rests on essentialist presumptions (line A2). In a world in which women have disproportionately "invested" in nurturance and service, essentialist presumptions about gender differences in capabilities have ample room to flourish and statistical discrimination may well continue.

The key question is whether competing strands of egalitarianism that do take issue with such essentialist presumptions will gradually call into question the processes by which women and men come to develop different tastes. Within some circles, parents clearly feel obliged to convey to their female children that they have every right, perhaps even an obligation, to pursue conventionally male-typed professions, such as scientist or mathematician.<sup>18</sup> Although less likely, it is also possible that grassroots reform efforts designed to counter the presumptions of essentialist ideologies will gain support. There is indeed some evidence of such efforts:

1. It is increasingly common for primary schools to adopt curricula that call essentialist assumptions into question. We are referring, for example, to primers that feature girls in conventionally male-typed roles.
2. Federal programs have been developed to encourage women to enter engineering, mathematics, and other stereotypically male pursuits. These programs include the NASA Federal Women's Program and the National Science Foundation Program for Gender Equity in Science, Mathematics, Engineering, and Technology.
3. The mass media depict an increasingly complicated world in which women are sometimes assigned roles that break the rules of essentialism (police detectives, surgeons, warriors), though of course they also continue to be conventionally cast as secretaries, nurses, and teachers.

These developments suggest that a new anti-essentialist logic may ultimately emerge to challenge or at least supplement liberal egalitarianism. For this reason,

## The Declining Significance of Gender?

and no doubt many others, the gender gap in aspirations is clearly narrowing (see, for instance, Jacobs 2003). Despite these hints of change, it is still striking that essentialist ideologies appear to have a continuing appeal for many people, which may hamper further change in occupational segregation and in the gender pay gap. As we see it, gender inequality is not simply another form of ascription destined to wither away as cultural egalitarianism spreads (see Parsons 1970), but instead is a very special form distinguished by the durability of its essentialist legitimation.

## CONCLUSION

We have sought to show that most analyses of gender inequality place emphasis on proximate mechanisms of change and stability and pay relatively little attention to the macro-level forces that generate change in the proximate mechanisms themselves. When macro-level forces are recognized or invoked, the tendency is to work within the context of a single narrative, thus privileging a limited set of proximate mechanisms. We have expanded the analysis of gender inequality by distinguishing among a number of narratives of change and showing how they rely upon different constellations of proximate mechanisms.

This approach generates a richer picture of the underlying sources of past change and the prospects for future progress. In particular, it suggests that the future of gender inequality rests on a struggle between egalitarian and essentialist forces that is not quite as one-sided as theorists focusing on a narrower set of mechanisms have sometimes claimed. To be sure, powerful macro-level forces have fueled a spectacular revolution over the last half-century, and these forces continue to work to undermine gender inequality. The importance of these forces cannot be overstated, yet further declines in gender inequality may be more difficult to secure and may play out more slowly. Almost by definition, the easier gains have now been achieved and the securing of additional gains may require more fundamental changes in essentialist practices and ideologies. Rather than viewing gender inequality as an ascriptive residual that withers away under egalitarian pressures, it is best regarded as an organic feature of modern economies that is in some respects ideologically consistent with egalitarianism, at least as the latter is understood and practiced today.

At minimum, we are suggesting that simple extrapolations of past trends should be avoided, since it is at least possible that the mechanisms underlying those trends will have a diminished role in the future. This perspective does not imply that future change is necessarily stalemated. If the pessimistic view is that easy reductions in equality have already been "creamed off," the optimistic view envisions self-reinforcing "feedback effects" in which early positive interventions gain momentum over time. In this benign circle, reduced discrimination is one of the main triggers that brings about initial labor-market gains for women, gains that then encourage further shifts in the amount and type of women's human-capital investments as well as continued reallocation of household responsibilities be-

tween partners. At the same time, cultural shifts promoting gender equality and an expansion of women's roles may impact the supply side, contributing to increases in women's human-capital acquisition and a reduction in gender specialization within the family. These changes would encourage further reductions in barriers to women in the labor market by eroding the rationale behind statistical discrimination. Are these types of triggers powerful enough to overcome the essentialist values that support the domestic division of labor and gender-specific human-capital investments? This question, which reemerges throughout the book, obviously remains an open one.

The future of gender inequality is further complicated because it is deeply affected by a variety of indirect forces that we have not emphasized. We have mainly focused on social change that operates relatively directly on gender inequality. Often, factors impacting women's outcomes may be indirect in the sense that change occurs as an unintended, latent consequence of changes in seemingly unrelated social domains (see chapters 2 and 7, this volume). For example, economic forces may disproportionately expand occupational sectors in which women happen to be concentrated, such as the service sector. This sectoral shift can generate an increased demand for female labor and corresponding changes in rates of female labor-force participation and pay (see especially Oppenheimer 1970/1976; Goldin 1990; chapter 2 in this volume). As another example, Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Kahn show in chapter 2 that the returns to labor-force experience increased over the 1980s, disadvantaging women because they have less experience on average than men. In each of the foregoing cases, the causal forces—labor demand shifts, changing returns to experience—are nominally gender-indifferent, yet they nonetheless have unintended effects on the rates of female labor-force participation and the pay gap between men and women.

The chapters in this book present a set of nuanced arguments addressing the issues we have reviewed in this introduction. The lines of evidence and debate presented in these pages are intended to stimulate readers to think more deeply and in new ways about the extent to which gender will or will not remain a major fault line of inequality in the decades to come. It is our hope that the book will contribute to informed and far-ranging discussions about how gender inequality is generated, sustained, and ultimately altered.

## NOTES

1. See also Kenneth Arrow (1973). Although Becker's work dealt with race discrimination, the preceding discussion reflects what is usually viewed as a reasonable extension of his analysis to other groups, such as women, who might also encounter discrimination.
2. We can characterize an organizational practice as "efficient" when it maximizes profits, market share, or some other standard economic outcome.
3. The statistical discrimination model may be elaborated to allow for the possibility that productivity is less reliably predicted for women than for men. In the interest of simplicity, we do not consider that alternative here, though we note that Dennis J. Aigner

## The Declining Significance of Gender?

and Glen G. Cain (1977) do not regard it as a likely source of large and persistent discriminatory wage differentials.

4. In the presence of feedback effects, initial differences based on erroneous perceptions may become self-fulfilling and be perpetuated (Arrow 1973; Lundberg and Startz 1983). When women realize that employers would under-reward their human capital, their incentive to invest in it is diminished, even if that under-reward is based on erroneous perceptions. It follows that competitive forces may not eliminate even that form of statistical discrimination based on (initially) erroneous perceptions.
5. The term "family-friendly" should probably be understood as a code for "women-friendly" (see Glass 2004).
6. It is important to note that not all efficient workplace adaptations necessarily promote gender equality in the workplace or the family. For example, if it proves efficient to institute dead-end "mommy tracks," market forces will operate to produce greater inequality between men and women within the firms instituting such tracking practices.
7. Prior to the 1950s, "marriage bars" frequently excluded married women from employment in clerical and teaching positions, a practice that Goldin (1990) argues could be compatible with profit maximization to the extent that marriage reduced female productivity, and employers found it costly to alter employment practices and wages of individual workers on a discretionary basis.
8. This "embedding" of discrimination in a social context plays out in various ways. For example, Blau and Kahn (2000) present evidence that, in many European countries where unions and the government play a large role in wage setting, the gender pay gap may be reduced by the resulting overall wage compression.
9. For a summary of the evidence on gender, see Francine D. Blau, Marianne A. Ferber, and Anne E. Winkler (2002, 242-46). John J. Donohue and James J. Heckman (1991) make an especially powerful case for the dramatic impact of these laws and regulations on black-white differentials.
10. The rise of internal labor markets (ILMs) can of course have countervailing effects that deeply disadvantage women. We discuss these effects in the next section.
11. For a fuller elaboration of the model, see Goldin (2002).
12. There are two competing hypotheses about how segregation comes to be expressed at detailed occupational levels. Although we are arguing here that women tend to be drawn into "essentially female" specializations, the obvious competing argument is that they are sent into specializations that are less desirable in terms of income and other rewards, and then these specializations become typed as "essentially female" after the fact. We are not aware of research that convincingly adjudicates between these two interpretations.
13. It has been reported that eight states have fully implemented a pay-equity plan and all but five states have initiated some degree of pay-equity activity such as salary increases for female-dominated or minority-dominated job categories. For example, see Susan E. Gardner and Christopher Daniel (1998), as cited in Michael Baker and Nicole M. Fortin (2000).
14. Christopher J. Ruhm and Jacqueline L. Teague (1997) note, however, that mandated programs may be efficient if information about benefit usage is intrinsically asymmetric.

ric. For example, firms that voluntarily provide a benefit such as parental leave will disproportionately attract workers who have a high probability of utilizing it, increasing costs to these firms. Because of this adverse selection problem, such policies may be underprovided when offered voluntarily, making government-mandated interventions attractive.

15. George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton (2000) present a model in which occupations are associated with societal notions of male and female, leading men to resist the entry of women into their area of work because of the loss in male identity or sense of self that this would entail. A growing cultural commitment to gender equality is also likely to weaken this motivation for the exclusion of women.
16. The experimental evidence of "stereotype threat" also suggests that negative perceptions of the abilities of women and minorities can adversely affect their performance (see, for example, Steven J. Spencer, Claude M. Steele, and Diane M. Quinn 1999). We obviously would not claim that gender-biased assessments of self-competence are so powerful as to *preclude* women from working in male-typed pursuits. Clearly, many women do work in male-typed occupations, although presumably fewer do so than would be the case if the processes identified by Correll (2001) and Spencer, Steele, and Quinn (1999) were not at work.
17. The standard version of such essentialism regards women as especially skilled in nurturing and interpersonal tasks and men as especially skilled in physical, analytical, and technical tasks.
18. It is rather less common, we suspect, for parents to instruct their male children that female-typed occupations are worth pursuing (see chapter 9, this volume, on the "asymmetry" of change).

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