



“Summary of article by Ronnie J. Steinberg: Social Construction of Skill: Gender, Power, and Comparable Worth” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 5: The Political Economy of Inequality. Island Press: Washington DC, 2000. pp. 274-277

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Pay equity is an important part of the movement for gender equality in the workplace. Early demands for equal pay for equal work proved insufficient to deal with the reality that men and women rarely perform exactly the same job. Achieving pay equity on the basis of comparable worth is a popular alternative; however comparable worth presents its own set of problems because it requires a precise, ordered and easily understood measure of skills that often occur in fluid, complex combinations. The article summarized here argues that existing instruments for evaluating skills are themselves biased toward male-dominated occupations and reflect gendered power relationships in the labor market. Rather than objectively based criteria, skill definitions are social constructions developed under particular historical conditions. The movement for compensation based on comparable worth both brought these biases to light and developed strategies to overcome them when conducting job evaluations.

SKILLS IN CONTEXT

Discussions of skill among sociologists and political economists take two basic paths, either situating skill within the historical trajectory of industrial capitalism or within a framework of “stratification and the distribution of job rewards.” [451] The first path focuses on the effect of mechanization and automation on skills, particularly artisan’s skills. Some analysts, epitomized by Harry Braverman in his 1974 book *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, make the further claim that technological change enhances control of the employer over the employee. Others view the progress of industry as a neutral process accompanied by compatible changes in the skill content of jobs. The second path views skill as a “major variable in explaining labor market outcomes.” [451] Functionalism related skill differences to unequal economic rewards based on differences in the functional values of jobs within firms, while human capital theory focused on skill as one of the determinants of differential rewards to individuals.

Most studies of wage determination accept simple indicators of skill with the implication that these are objective measures capable of distinguishing between occupations with accuracy and reliability. However, some feminist analysts have begun to question whether generally accepted conceptualizations of skill are truly unbiased. This is particularly important because a great part of the gap in wages between men and women has been attributed to human capital differences or lower skill levels for jobs traditionally held by women. The women’s movement in the 1960s targeted economic equality as one of its major goals and quickly confronted the fact that the demand for “equal pay for equal work” was ineffective in a labor market heavily segregated by

gender. Women and men rarely performed the same work; however the level and complexity of skills required for different jobs was often comparable. This insight gave rise to the movement for compensation based on comparable worth.

Comparable worth proponents hold that the “femaleness” of a job lowers the wage rate of the job net of other characteristics. Characteristics of jobs are measured by employees using job evaluation systems. Evaluation procedures vary in their degree of rigor, with the most sophisticated systems that assign points to such factors as education, responsibility, effort, working conditions, and skill; make an overall assessment of complexity; and attach wage rates. However, advocates and researchers found that existing evaluation systems were often based on assumptions derived from male-dominated manufacturing, craft, administrative and managerial occupations. In some women’s occupations, job descriptions were lacking in sufficient detail to capture all compensable qualities.

EXPOSING BIAS

Investigation of the assumptions underlying definitions of skill and the construction of systems of compensation revealed pervasive sex bias in the design and application of job evaluation systems. Such systems tend to undervalue the work women do in the marketplace either by ignoring the skills required for women’s jobs or underrating them. The skill content in the work that women do is often not recognized. Even when detailed descriptive information from the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) was used to control for skill differences, some studies found that “the percentage of females in an occupation accounts for a significant portion of wage differentials by gender.” [453] In some cases the DOT itself evidenced biased ratings. For example a 1974 review of the DOT “found that dog pound attendant, parking lot attendant, and zookeeper were rated as more complex than nursery school teacher and child care worker.” [456]

Underlying ideology - During the 19th century few women worked outside the home after marriage. Men were expected to be the breadwinners and jobs were developed with this principle in mind. When women did work, their opportunities were limited, and their wages were premised on the idea that men in their families furnished their main support. Over time this assumption became institutionalized both in the job structure and in the evaluation systems set up as metrics for determining compensation. The National Research Council found an extremely high level of correlation among evaluation systems, so that flaws are widespread.

Invisibility - Certain characteristics are well defined in the context of male jobs, yet may remain unrecognized - and therefore uncompensated - when associated with female jobs. Firefighters are clearly understood to be dealing with emergencies. Flight attendants also must deal with emergencies (in fact the job came about as a result of Federal Aviation Administration regulations), but this aspect of the job is not recognized for compensation purposes. In each of the major evaluation areas - skill, effort, responsibility, working conditions - characteristics that come with women’s jobs are often overlooked or vaguely described in contrast to very detailed descriptions of men’s jobs. A few examples of often overlooked characteristics from each area are: communication and coordination, lifting people or performing multiple tasks, caring for patients or representing an organization to the public, exposure to disease or to difficult clients or patients.

Undervaluation of complexity - In some cases a job characteristic is noted but rated as less complex when attached to a woman's job. Communication is ranked hierarchically so that communication with "higher-status persons is defined as inherently more complex" [463] than communication with the general public. Men are more likely to interact with higher levels of an organization while women are in direct contact with clients or patients. Fiscal responsibility is generally rated higher than the responsibility of caring for the lives of patients. Clerical workers' knowledge of grammar and composition are not rated as highly as the technical skills of entry-level craft workers. In some cases an evaluation system developed in one context is a poor fit with another situation, for example a system set up for a bureaucratic organization will not adequately address the teamwork needed among professional and technical personnel in a hospital.

Factor weighting - Evaluation systems generally assign weights to various job characteristics. One frequently used scheme, the Hay Guide-Chart system assigns managerial know-how five times and technical know-how seven times the weight of human relations know-how. Yet human relations includes supervision of other employees so that managers get points under both managerial and human relations subcategories, while a nurse supervisor receives points only under human relations. "[T]he New York State Comparable pay Study concluded that working with difficult clients and dying patients, repetitious work, and undesirable working conditions received negative weights, net of other job characteristics." [466] Presence of these characteristics actually reduced compensation.

Inconsistency - Job evaluations are often conducted by employee committees trained to use a particular evaluation system. In one case reviewed by outside experts, the point scores of the Hay system, a well known evaluation model, were applied in such a way that women's jobs received low end scores and men's jobs received high end scores. The evaluators themselves were unaware of this pattern. In another case employees brought substantial knowledge of the jobs to bear on the evaluation, supplementing formal job descriptions with information about the actual duties of the job. An observer noted that when women reported that a job in question was more complex than the specification, their comments were rejected by men on the committee, while men's reports were accepted by women evaluators.

THE POLITICS OF SKILL RECONSTRUCTION

The movement for comparable worth has taken place largely in the public sector and by 1989 all but four states had enacted some kind of pay equity measure. Yet resistance and political maneuvering caused delays or compromised results. During the first phase, in the early 1970s, most efforts used existing job evaluations systems. By the second phase in the early 1980s, the gender biases of these systems were becoming known and advocates of comparable worth began to struggle over the evaluation process itself as well as the outcome. Personnel administrators used various strategies to retain control over the evaluation process, however, even within existing systems of evaluation women made gains as pay equity became an acceptable goal. During the third phase advocates of comparable worth have become more adept at gaining control of the entire job evaluation process, choosing consultants and technical advisors and forming their own review teams to monitor the evaluation process.