
Gender and Workplace Dispute Resolution: A Conceptual and Theoretical Model

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This essay introduces a conceptual and theoretical model for understanding how dispute resolution in the workplace contributes to gender differences in employment. We conceptualize workplace disputes as having three components: origins, processes, and outcomes. We synthesize theory and existing empirical findings in several disciplines to examine how these three components are patterned by gender roles, sex segregation in jobs, and institutionalized work structures. The essay illuminates workplace dispute resolution generally, demonstrates linkages to other aspects of gender inequality in employment, and provides a model for further research and policymaking.

This essay proposes that gender differences in workplace dispute resolution are features of the social organization of work within firms that may contribute to other well-documented employment differentials between women and men. Although workplace conflict and related dispute resolution issues have been discussed in literature in law, organizations, management, sociology and industrial relations, gender differences in workplace dispute resolution and their consequences for other aspects of employment inequality remain unexamined. Drawing on a multidisciplinary set of theory and empirical findings, we theorize that gender differences exist in the origins, processes, and outcomes of workplace disputes; that these are related to gender roles, the sex composition of jobs, and institutionalized work structures (i.e., unions, firms, industries, and occupations); and that this nonpecuniary dimension of the workplace contributes to other observed patterns of gender inequality in employment.¹

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¹ A note on terminology: We use "gender" when referring to the social construction of women's and men's roles and "sex" in reference to aggregates of women and men (e.g., the sex composition of occupations). In addition, we use "dispute" and "problem" to describe workplace conflict of varying degrees. We think of disputes as being identified and articulated by employees and thus more likely to be subject to formal and informal dispute resolution procedures. We think of problems as being lower-order and less-often-articulated conflict. We use "conflict" as encompassing the range of problems and dis-

We begin by reviewing the literature on gender differences in employment and conclude that little is known about intra-organizational processes that may contribute to unequal employment outcomes (such as earnings). Next, we review the literature on workplace dispute resolution and find that the little attention paid to gender differences is focused on a narrow slice of dispute activities (mainly arbitration). While the reviewed literatures do not address specifically the issues of gender differences in workplace disputing or their consequences for employment inequality, from them we distill a new model to help explain these previously unexamined intra-organizational processes. We then present the new model, which integrates a tripartite conceptual framework of the origins, processes, and outcomes of workplace disputes, with three theoretical approaches. In the main body of the article, we systematically raise hypotheses suggested by the model and assess the extent to which empirical research supports these hypotheses. In the conclusions, we summarize the results of our investigation and discuss their implications. The appendix provides a case study illustration of the model.

I. Literature Review

A. Gender Differences in Employment

Gender differences in employment, particularly the wage gap, are well documented (Blau & Beller 1988; Goldin 1990; Stromberg & Harkess 1988; Treiman & Hartmann 1981). Explanations of these differences come from three basic theoretical streams: Gender role theory offers explanations that focus on individual-level characteristics, such as human capital (education, on-the-job training, work experience), socialization and aspirations, and household division of labor. Sex stratification theory focuses mainly on job-level experiences and characteristics, such as occupational segregation, discrimination, and union membership (Reskin 1984; Schultz & Petterson 1992). Macro-level theories of work structures find the sources of gender inequality in employment in institutionalized labor markets, industrial sectors, and intra-organizational environments (Blau & Ferber 1986; Brown & Pechman 1987; England & Farkas 1986).

Increasingly, research attention has turned to the social organization of work within firms and internal labor markets, with findings that gender differences in certain precursors of earnings (e.g., promotions and occupations) are much greater within firms than those observed in sample survey and census studies, whose data are across firms and occupations (Hartmann 1987;

putes. This is consistent with the model of dispute “naming, blaming, and claiming” developed by Felsteiner et al. (1981).

Bielby & Baron 1984). Roos & Reskin (1984) and Reskin & Roos (1990) show pervasive institutional barriers to women's on-the-job training, promotion and transfer opportunities, retention, and access to better-paying sex-atypical occupations (via information, recruitment, entry restrictions, and job assignments).

How these gender differences are actually accomplished within firms, however, remains largely a "black box." Little is known about the intra-organizational processes that create, maintain, or nullify gender inequality in the workplace. One intra-organizational process that can affect such gender inequality remains unexamined, namely, workplace dispute resolution. We propose that gender differences in workplace disputes, and how these disputes are resolved, contribute to gender differences in earnings and factors associated with earnings, such as promotions, turnover, and job satisfaction.

B. Workplace Dispute Resolution

Workplace dispute resolution refers to the formal and informal rules individuals and groups use to resolve problems in employment. Within organizations such rules function "as a system of private law, . . . with its own interpretations, practices, and customs built up over time" (Thomson 1974:1). These rules are designed to protect employees against arbitrary authority and unjust punitive action and to provide for systematic review of complaints and grievances (Scott 1965). Most research on this topic focuses on the formal aspects of the rules themselves (e.g., variations in, or the effectiveness of, types of rules). Our conception of workplace dispute resolution includes its informal aspects (e.g., reputations of supervisors, union stewards, and other "gatekeepers"), because we believe informal aspects govern daily implementation of rules and can underlie how they change. Rather than focusing exclusively on the rules themselves, we also are concerned about the effects of rules as organization-level phenomena on individuals' (or groups') objective experiences in the workplace and employment outcomes.²

Conflict is a normal, unavoidable part of everyday human activity. In the workplace, conflict can range in severity from short-term disagreements over work assignments to long-term union-management disputes about wages, benefits, and hours. The means of resolving disputes can range from informal conversation to lengthy bitter strikes and binding arbitration. The resolu-

² Note that our conception is distinct from procedural or distributive justice, which concerns individuals' subjective perceptions of the equity of dispute resolution procedures or beliefs about the outcomes they justly deserve. For more information on this perspective, see Deutsch (1985), Hochschild (1981), Lind & Tyler (1988), Major (1987), and Thibaut & Walker (1975). Clearly, however, the social-psychological states of individuals can be affected by their experiences with workplace dispute resolution, as discussed in later sections.

tion of employment disputes is of interest to employers, unions, and employees, for it promotes fairness in treatment, legitimacy of the organization, and ultimately efficiency in production. Workplace dispute resolution is important to study because it is how employees resolve their everyday problems in employment.

Despite considerable interest in the study of "industrial justice" from the 1940s through the mid-1970s (Gouldner 1954; Kuhn 1961; Peach & Livernash 1974; Purcell 1953; Scott 1965; Selznick 1969; Slichter 1941; Wertheimer & Nelson 1975), these intra-organizational processes, patterns, and consequences have not been updated to account for the growth of women's labor force participation since World War II. Even recent contributions to the literature give little special attention to how women employees' experiences may be different from men's (Lewin 1987; Lewin & Peterson 1988; McCabe 1988; Westin & Feliu 1988). Following the specialization of academic disciplines, recent research in the study of workplace dispute resolution is fragmented into the fields of law, organizations and management, industrial sociology, and industrial relations.

Research in employment law has focused on dispute outcomes, disputing techniques, interpretation and the use of precedent, and the "shadow" law casts on workplace activities (e.g., Equal Employment Opportunity requirements; Oppenheimer & LaVan 1979; Carmel & Westerkamp 1987; Christovich & Stallworth 1985; Hoyman & Stallworth 1984, 1986; Schultz & Petterson 1992). Felsteiner et al. (1980–81) discuss the transformation of conflict as individuals react to, interpret, and act on perceived injurious experiences. Edelman and her colleagues have expanded the literature to document how legal environments influence organizational practices (Edelman 1990; Edelman et al. 1993), finding that management objectives tend to subsume individuals' legal rights.

The organizations and management literature offers taxonomies of workplace dispute resolution among firms, evaluations of their effectiveness, and case studies (Balfour 1984; Greenberg 1987; Henry 1983; Heshizer & Graham 1984; Lamont 1987; LoBosco 1985; Mauer & Flores 1986; McCabe 1988; McKersie & Shropshire 1962; Aram & Salipante 1981). Much of this research is normative rather than analytical in orientation, advising managers on the importance of effectively resolving workplace disputes, at least implicitly to avoid unionization attempts and maintain uninterrupted production of goods and services (e.g., Berenbeim 1980; Westin & Feliu 1988).

Major contributions from industrial sociology have examined the legitimating functions of grievance procedures for management, worker empowerment through unionized dispute resolution, the "interpenetration" of state law into "private justice," the dialectic between grievance arbitration and law in the evolution

of both, and the social roles of supervisors and union representatives in grievance procedures (Blauner 1964; Burawoy 1979; Fuller 1987; Henry 1983; Miller & Form 1980; Selznick 1969). For nonunion organizations, Evan (1961) advocated “due process of law” in organizations to combat the “ideology of conformity” among managers. The underlying theoretical principles of this body of research orient around organizational control theory.

Research in industrial relations is most extensive but focuses primarily on unionized firms’ dispute processing and settlement. This area’s underlying theoretical perspective is generally rooted in models of due process, in which the effectiveness of grievance procedures are judged by speed of dispute settlement and relatively balanced win-loss ratios between unions and management, and in models of exit-voice, in which unions articulate and mediate the collective complaints of workers (Freeman & Medoff 1984; Lewin 1987; see Edwards 1986 for a contrasting perspective). Research in industrial relations examines the roles, backgrounds, and attitudes of participants in arbitration and mediation, the effectiveness of various procedures and strategies, union-management conditions related to grieving, and distributive compared to procedural justice (Bohlander 1982; Briggs 1981; Glassman & Belasco 1975; Heneman & Sandver 1982; Dalton & Todor 1982, 1985a, 1985b; Weissinger 1976; Brett & Goldberg 1983; Diaz, Minton, & Saunders 1987; Gandz & Whitehead 1981; Gideon & Peterson 1979; Knight 1978; Lewin 1984; Nelson 1979; Shepard & Minton 1986; Turner & Robinson 1972). A recent and major contribution to this area is Lewin and Peterson’s (1988) examination of grievance procedure activity, effectiveness, and postsettlement as a function of individual, organizational, and union contract characteristics in four contrasting industries.

As this overview suggests, research on workplace dispute resolution tends to be balkanized into disciplinary subfields. Several researchers in the four disciplines outlined above note the lack of both cumulative findings and linkage to theory and findings in the social sciences (Gordon & Miller 1984), although some recent contributions at the junction of law and sociology are bridging the gap (Dobbin et al. 1993; Edelman 1990; Edelman et al. 1993). Still, relatively little research on this topic has examined sex or gender (Conaghan 1986; Okin 1986, 1987) and, before this article, it has not been linked to the voluminous research on employment inequality.³

³ A growing body of literature, primarily in social psychology, addresses gender differences in conflict resolution behavior *outside* the organizational context. While this research tends to yield inconsistent results (Rubin & Brown 1975), some common findings are: Women more than men describe themselves as nonargumentative (Rancer & Dierks-Stewart 1987), report using a compromising style to resolve conflicts (Berryman-Fink & Brunner 1987), express negative views about arguing (Rancer & Baukus 1987), and re-

What little empirical research has been conducted on gender and workplace dispute resolution focuses almost exclusively on arbitration, the final step in union grievance procedures, and is often contradictory in its findings. Small group experiments have contradictory findings concerning possible gender discrimination on the part of dispute referees (on adjudicators, see Bigoness & DuBose 1985 and Dalton & Todor 1985a, 1985b; on supervisors, see Dobbins et al. 1983; on the severity of disciplinary action, see Larwood et al. 1979). Studies of legal cases and arbitrations on gender-related issues also are contradictory: some researchers find sex differences (Bemmels 1988a, 1988b, 1988c; Rosenberg 1979; Salipante & Aram 1978) and others find none (Bigoness & DuBose 1985; Wolkinson & Liberson 1982; Rodgers & Helburn 1984; Rosen & Jerdee 1975; Scott & Shadoan 1989; and Zirkel 1983). These contradictory findings are possibly due to differing institutionalized work structures or to sex segregation in employment, which are typically unaccounted for by researchers who explain sex differences using gender role theory. Contradictory findings also may be explained as cohort or period phenomena, if younger or more experienced women workers' use of dispute resolution forums increases and becomes more sophisticated with repeated use (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach 1993). Even the most recent and comprehensive texts on workplace dispute resolution tend to ignore the possibility that the experiences of men and women in grievance processing can be different (McCabe 1988; Westin & Feliu 1988), although Lewin and Peterson (1988) include sex as a control variable in multivariate analyses and discuss some sex differentials.

This essay draws on the many valuable insights of research in the disciplinary subfields briefly reviewed here to develop a new conceptual and theoretical model of gender and workplace dispute resolution. Specifically, we propose that gender differences exist in workplace dispute resolution and that these are part of the key to unraveling the puzzle of gender differences in wages and other employment outcomes. There are many reasons to expect that workplace disputes experienced by women workers are different from those encountered by men, that women workers are differentially treated by the gatekeepers of dispute resolution forums within unions and firms, and that such experiences could result in differential outcomes for women and men in employment. For example, many women workers have primary responsibility for children, homes, and aging parents. Unless union-negotiated grievance procedures or management-sponsored dispute forums can respond to these unique constraints on women em-

port using verbal aggression (Billingham & Sack 1987), criticism, and anger (Canary et al. 1988) in conflict situations. For a comprehensive review of this literature see Stockard & Lach (1989).

ployees, women may be more likely than men to experience workplace disputes over leaves, absenteeism, and scheduling.

To the extent that the problems and disputes experienced by working women are different from those encountered by men, and to the extent that the means for resolving such conflict are less effective for women workers than for men, gender differences in workplace dispute resolution will help explain other aspects of employment inequality, including employment intermittency, job turnover, job satisfaction, and ultimately earnings.

II. A Conceptual and Theoretical Model of Gender and Workplace Dispute Resolution

A model for understanding gender differences in workplace disputing must include behavioral components concerning individual choice, voice, and agency. It must also include structural components concerning constraints posed by differences in women's and men's social roles, differences in women's and men's employment experiences (such as occupational segregation), and variations in the organizations and work structures in which disputes occur. We address each of these conceptual and theoretical components successively.

In the abstract, dispute resolution in the workplace is an attempt by a participant in the workforce to resolve a problem in the employment relationship. We conceive of dispute resolution as comprised of three stages: origins, processes, and outcomes. That is, in the course of ordinary workday activities, problems arise over issues such as wages, discipline, promotions, parental or family emergency leave, affirmative action, discrimination, job posting, life insurance, job performance, or hours. Felsteiner et al. (1980–81) have shown how individuals transform these problems into workplace disputes through naming, blaming, and claiming. Once an individual articulates a dispute origin in this way, it can be heard and resolved by various means, including informal settlement in conversation or formal procedures within firms or unions (e.g., grievance procedure, peer review forum, open-door policy, employee assistance program). The intended outcomes of such processes are to resolve disputes and achieve justice in the workplace. Existing research on workplace dispute resolution generally focuses on just one of the three stages without considering how it affects and is affected by the others.⁴ We maintain that the three stages operate in a reflexive relationship;

⁴ As discussed above, Felsteiner et al. (1980–81) focus on transforming perceived injurious experiences into disputes, which in our model falls within the origin stage. Bemels (1988a, 1988b, 1988c) examines the differential effect of employee sex on arbitration outcomes, assuming all cases are of equal strength and importance and assuming the processes used in the entire grievance procedure preceding the arbitration are comparable and equitable. His inconsistent results may reflect sex differences in the origins and processes of these disputes.

if we are to effectively understand workplace dispute resolution, we must examine all three stages.

We propose that all three stages of workplace dispute resolution—origins, processes, and outcomes—are patterned by individuals' sex and, given the highly sex-segregated nature of employment, by sex type of jobs. In particular, we propose that women and incumbents of highly sex-segregated jobs have (1) different problems and disputes, (2) different processing of disputes, and (3) different outcomes in the settlement of disputes, in comparison with men and the incumbents of mixed-sex jobs. We also propose that the three stages of dispute resolution are patterned by work structures and that these interact with gender roles and sex segregation.

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical underpinnings of the conceptual model. We utilize gender role theory to examine gender differences in workplace disputing at the individual level (*A* in Fig. 1). We rely on sex stratification theories in sociology to examine gender differences in workplace dispute resolution at the level of jobs (*C* in Fig. 1). We draw selectively from the institutional literature on organizations, management, industrial relations, and dual economy to examine gender differences in access to, and experiences with, various dispute resolution forums (*E* in Fig. 1). We also address the interactions between gender roles and jobs, jobs and work structures, and roles and work structures in the discussions that follow (*B*, *D*, and *F* in Fig. 1). Below, we elaborate this conceptual and theoretical model.

III. An Explication and Assessment of the Model

In this section, we apply the theoretical perspectives named above—gender roles at the individual level, sex segregation at the job level, and institutionalized work structures at the macro level—to our conceptual model of the origins, processes, and outcomes of workplace disputes. We raise hypotheses suggested by the model, and we assess the extent to which existing empirical research supports the hypotheses generated by the model.⁵

A. Gender Roles and Workplace Dispute Resolution

Dispute Origins

Our model suggests that the etiology (origins) of workplace disputes experienced by women is different from that for men (*A* in Fig. 1), and we find some support for this in the empirical literature on gender roles. Many sociologists and economists

⁵ The empirical literature presented, while extensive, should not be considered an exhaustive review or a meta-analysis, for findings exist in many disciplines with different empirical traditions, units of analysis, and theoretical orientations.

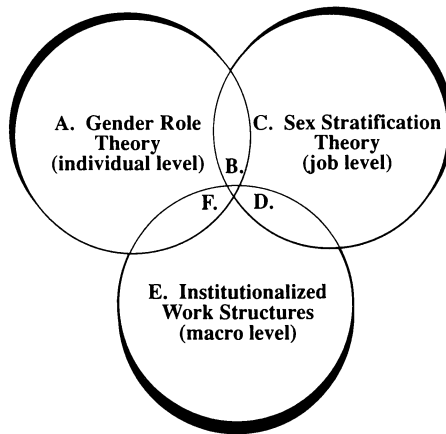


Figure 1. Theoretical approaches for understanding gender differences in workplace dispute resolution

have documented how household and family responsibilities for women workers interfere with employment (Abel 1991; Berk 1985; Hersch 1985). Because many full-time women workers also have primary responsibility for children, homes, and the care of aging parents, they should more often than men experience workplace problems over issues of leaves (maternity, child care, family), absenteeism (family illness, school holidays), and scheduling (shifts, compulsory overtime, weekend hours). Because family care is also associated with shorter and more intermittent work histories for women than for men (Gwartney-Gibbs 1986), women workers could also have more workplace disputes associated with seniority issues (layoff, bumping, recall, upgrading, promotion, tenure, reappointment, transfer).

Gender role theory suggests that some origins of workplace conflict are male typed. Men's greater propensity for aggressive behavior should be associated with more workplace disputes concerning discipline, such as insubordination, physical violence, and verbal threats (Stockard & Johnson 1992). Sex-based military conscription suggests that more men have disputes over veterans' issues (e.g., preferential hiring and nondiscrimination). Because more men than women are involved in union activities, they should more often have workplace disputes over union issues, such as conducting union business at work and strike activity (Cornfield et al. 1990). We also speculate that men more often act on disputes over reverse discrimination than women act on discrimination disputes (Hoyman & Stallworth 1986).

But not all origins of workplace conflict necessarily have gender designations. Both women and men employees experience problems over wages, fringe benefits, job classification, evaluation, substance abuse, or discrimination related to age, race/ethnicity, or handicap, among other issues. There are also rare

fathers who demand paternity leave and rare women veterans. Nevertheless, gender role theory strongly suggests that some types of ordinary workplace conflict will be more often experienced by one sex than the other.

Little prior research addresses the different kinds of workplace conflict that women workers face in comparison with men, except for sexual harassment (Stanko 1985; MacKinnon 1979). And Marmo (1980) finds that 18 of the 19 sexual harassment arbitration cases filed between 1958 and 1978 had nothing to do with women victims; rather, they involved reinstatement of men perpetrators. Case studies of some organizations find that women are more likely than men to pursue disputes regarding performance, mobility, pay, job classification and assignment, and discrimination (Lewin 1987; Lewin & Peterson 1988), but the researchers do not speculate on why this happens (e.g., whether differential origins could be associated with gender differences in roles or jobs). Moreover, types of disputes interviewees chose from in these studies were preselected by the researchers without discussion of the range of possible workplace conflict, and many of the disputes we call “female-typed” have no place on the list (cf. Lewin & Peterson 1988:245–46). We have examined Quality of Employment Survey data and found some suggestive gender differences in workplace problems, but the number of respondents answering positively to specific questions of interest are too small to allow detailed analysis. Thus, there is some suggestive but not systematic evidence about the patterns and prevalence of gender differences in the origins of workplace disputes.

Dispute Processing

After workplace disputes arise, our model suggests that women workers’ experiences in the processes of resolving them will differ from men’s, and the existing literature on gender roles provides some support for our hypotheses. Women’s differential socialization compared with men’s can be associated with lack of self-confidence, avoidance of conflict, and avoidance of confrontation with authority (Stockard & Johnson 1992). This in turn suggests that women with workplace disputes will less often act on them and, when they do, will more often drop out at every stage of formal and informal dispute resolution procedures.⁶

Not acting on workplace disputes experienced, however, can be a rational response to conditions of the workplace and the legal system (the overlap of individual-level response to macro-level work structures; *F* in Fig. 1). Collective bargaining agreements may not have provisions for female-typed disputes, such as

⁶ Technically, unions may pursue a grievance without the continued involvement of the grievant, but the extent to which unions are willing to do this on behalf of women members or women’s issues requires investigation.

family emergency leave, so women with these types of disputes will be unable to use the union-negotiated grievance procedure. Even if union contracts contain provisions for female-typed disputes, stewards responsible for implementing the union-negotiated grievance procedure may be less practiced in dealing with them than with male-typed disputes, such as discipline. The economic and noneconomic costs of filing a lawsuit could also dissuade women, given their historical secondary status in labor law (Hoyman & Stallworth 1986; Schultz & Petterson 1992). Related to this, women employees may perceive a lack of support or sympathy for female-typed disputes from supervisors, personnel managers, union stewards, and attorneys; thus, they may also perceive a lack of access to these gatekeepers of dispute resolution forums for their unique workplace difficulties (Costello 1985; Gannage 1986; Stanko 1985).

The gatekeepers of workplace dispute resolution forums play critical roles in forming employees' attitudes toward these forums and willingness to use them (Clark 1988; also see Reskin & Padavic 1988). Gatekeepers may practice sex discrimination, consciously or not, in hearing and actively pursuing the workplace disputes more often articulated by women. If gatekeepers practice statistical discrimination, they may expect an individual woman's work history to be more intermittent than any man's and, on that basis, not invest in understanding or pursuing her complaint, operating in the belief that she is likely to leave soon anyway. (If her complaints are not heard and resolved, she probably is more likely to leave the job, laying the groundwork for a self-fulfilling prophecy.) If gatekeepers practice taste discrimination, they may prefer not to associate with women employees generally; more particularly they may wish to avoid any issues concerning female biological functions (e.g., menstruation, pregnancy, and other "women's troubles"). More subtle than taste discriminators who desire social distance are taste discriminators who maintain social relationships with women employees but express their preferences by seeking to maintain socially appropriate gender roles. Gatekeepers with these tastes may not demonstrate sympathy or support, for example, for women employees whose household responsibilities intrude on the workplace and create workplace problems. To the extent that union stewards, supervisors, personnel managers, and other gatekeepers practice sex discrimination or otherwise discourage women workers from voicing workplace problems, women will be dissuaded from using formal and informal dispute resolution forums in the workplace.

Prior empirical research offers some supporting evidence for these arguments on gender differences in the propensity to pursue workplace disputes through to resolution. Ewick and Silbey's (1992) findings suggest that pursuing disputes and disputing tactics are conditioned by ascribed characteristics (sex, race, class).

Westin and Feliu's (1988) examination of firms with nonunion dispute resolution forums suggests women less often pursue complaints than men because gatekeepers of these policies (who tend to be white men) are seen as nonresponsive. Lewin (1987) finds employees who filed appeals in three nonunionized workplaces were mainly men. In a study of four unionized firms, Lewin and Peterson (1988) find lowest use of the grievance procedure in the two female-concentrated unions (retail sales and teachers). In case studies of unions and unionized firms, Gwartney-Gibbs and Lach (1993) provide evidence from in-depth interviews about gender differences in the decision to pursue grievances, while Wertheimer and Nelson (1975) and Lewin and Peterson (1988) find women and men persist to third and fourth steps of grievance procedures at different rates in some types of disputes. Hoyman and Stallworth (1986) find that sex is a less important predictor of suit filing on work-related issues than race, union activity, and single parenthood, but they provide detailed explanations of how their findings are probably data artifacts.

Dispute Outcomes

These differential origins and processes of workplace dispute resolution at the individual level suggest several hypotheses about the outcomes of women's disputes. The less women use formal dispute resolution forums, the less often will female-typed disputes, or women workers with any type of dispute, reach formal settlement. Rather, we expect women workers will more often than men drop their complaints or exit the employment setting (transfer or quit) and thus not appear in the formal records of dispute resolution outcomes, such as arbitration, litigation, or government agency action. Consequently, cases that do appear in formal outcomes are likely to be unusual in strength of case and nonrepresentative of working women's daily workplace problems. Moreover, to the extent that women's employment disputes go unresolved, women workers will exhibit greater job turnover, lower job satisfaction, and poorer performance evaluations. When repeated across time, place, and circumstance, gender differences in dispute resolution at the individual level should contribute to, or be precursors of, aggregate gender differences in earnings and other features of employment.

Despite extensive empirical research on the outcomes of employment disputes, particularly arbitration records, and gender differences in these outcomes, few consider whether, or why, fewer female-typed disputes reach formal decisions, how this might affect the success of such issues, and how such selectivity could bias analyses of gender differences in dispute outcomes (e.g., Dalton & Todor 1985a, 1985b; Bemmels 1988a, 1988b, 1988c). It has been shown that employees' use of union and non-

union grievance procedures is associated with greater involuntary turnover, lower performance evaluations, and lower promotion rates, but not known is how these outcomes may affect women and men workers differentially or whether female- or male-typed disputes have different consequences (Lewin 1987; Lewin & Peterson 1988). In a study of judicial decisions in job segregation cases, however, Schultz and Petterson (1992) find that judges' interpretations of facts and evidence rely on sex-typical assumptions about women's work aspirations. Finally, the voluminous literatures on job turnover, job satisfaction, and job performance do not systematically examine workplace dispute resolution as a causal mechanism for explaining gender differences in them.

B. Sex Segregation of Jobs and Workplace Dispute Resolution

In addition to the individual-level influences on the origins, processes, and outcomes of workplace disputes, our model suggests that job-level features of employment shape disputing (*C* in Fig. 1). Sex stratification theory in sociology indicates that the sex segregation of jobs is among the most important features of employment for women (Reskin & Roos 1990). Jacobs (1989) finds for 1985 that 60% of all women workers would have to change occupations to have the same occupational distribution as men, and over two-thirds were employed in occupations comprised of 70% or more women workers. Within firms, Bielby and Baron (1984) find that occupational sex segregation is virtually 100%. Here, we describe how sex segregation can be related to workplace disputing for workers in both sex-typical and sex-atypical jobs. The literature on sex stratification and tokenism informs hypotheses derived from our model and provides mixed empirical support.⁷

Dispute Origins

We hypothesize that sex segregation is most likely to become a disputable issue for “tokens”—for women in male-typed jobs and possibly also for men in female-typed jobs. Tokens experience subtle and not-so-subtle discrimination in evaluation, task assignment, scheduling, pay, and promotion. Associated with gender roles, particularly interpersonal male dominance, women tokens also experience social isolation and exclusion on the job, even among those who have “gone native” and behave like men in male-dominated management positions (the overlap of individual-level behavior with job-level experiences; *B* in Fig. 1;

⁷ “Jobs” are distinct from “occupations.” Whereas “jobs” refer to the positions that persons hold in employing organizations, “occupations” refer to aggregates of persons with similar job titles and duties, as in census classifications.

Segura 1989; Kanter 1977a, 1977b; Swerdlow 1989). On these bases, tokenism serves as a point of origin for workplace disputes involving sex discrimination and harassment.

But we hypothesize that sex segregation also can relate to the origins of workplace disputes for nontokens. Nieva and Gutek (1981) maintain that women in highly female-concentrated jobs are treated on the basis of gender stereotypes no matter what their individual tastes, behaviors, skills, performance, or job requirements (the overlap of individual-level role behavior with sex stratification at the job level; *B* in Fig. 1). Thus, a secretary may experience expectations to behave in a manner consistent with female stereotypes—passive, cute, friendly, and likable. This is disputable if such treatment is independent of her job requirements or unrelated to her own personality. Nontokens also have workplace conflict concerning the valuation and compensation of female-typed jobs, that is, pay equity or “comparable worth,” if the skills required and the duties performed in female-typed jobs are discounted (e.g., those involving “emotional labor”) and those performed in male-typed jobs are overcompensated by employers (Acker 1989; Hochschild 1983; James 1989). On the other hand, nontokens are less likely to receive gender-based harassment and ostracism to the same degree tokens do.

We know of no direct empirical tests of the hypotheses presented above, although some information can be indirectly gleaned. Roos and Reskin’s (1984) synthesis of numerous case studies on institutional mechanisms blocking women’s access to male-typed jobs provides evidence for how the origins of workplace disputes differ for token women (see also Swerdlow 1989). Segura’s (1989) findings for token Latinas show how condescension, teasing, avoidance, and discrimination on the job are perceived as conflict origins. For nontoken Latinas, positive social relations at work compensated for low wages, few promotional opportunities, and harsh working conditions, and thus help perpetuate segregated work.

Dispute Processing

We expect that women’s experiences in the processes of pursuing workplace disputes to resolution are also related to sex segregation in employment. Kanter (1977a, 1977b) indicates that women tokens’ high visibility generates pressure to conform to stereotypically female behaviors (the overlap of individual-level response to job-level pressures; *B* in Fig. 1). Moreover, their social isolation on the job results in powerlessness and conformity to the dominant workplace culture. This suggests that when women in male-dominated jobs experience workplace problems associated with tokenism, they also feel pressure not to voice these disputes, in an attempt to gain acceptance from the dominant

group. Even if they do voice workplace difficulties, Kanter's research suggests they will receive little sympathy or support from men coworkers or the gatekeepers of formal dispute resolution procedures. This in turn can be associated with a lack of access to informal networks that supply information and other resources to pursue workplace disputes through formal channels.

For women in female-concentrated jobs, in contrast, we hypothesize that they receive understanding and support from (women) coworkers for the female-typed disputes they have in common. In office settings, for example, we have observed clerical workers covering for coworkers with errands and family emergencies. This exemplifies an informal solution to a potential dispute, but it also could be a first step in collectively voicing such disputes and pursuing formal resolution. Even in an organizational climate collectively regarded as inhospitable to women's unique workplace difficulties, the concentration of women workers with similar gender-typed disputes in a geographical setting can promote cooperative efforts to informally resolve problems apart from formal procedures (Costello 1985). This hypothesis is not limited to women workers. Men who work mainly with men also may have supportive networks to assist in resolving workplace disputes.

Thus, we propose that sex segregation in employment is associated with the origins and processes of workplace disputes and their resolution but in different ways for tokens and nontokens. We expect that tokens are pressured to conform to stereotyped gender expectations and that women who work in jobs dominated by men less often articulate their workplace disputes. When disputes are voiced, we expect that those of tokens are less often heard and resolved by the gatekeepers of formal dispute resolution forums (who are expected to be predominantly men) but are resolved informally or not at all. This reasoning also should apply to men in jobs predominated by women; because of a tendency to conform to gender stereotypes, we expect male tokens to more aggressively pursue their workplace disputes through formal channels as far as they can, with roadblocks related more to the nature of the claim than to the person. We expect nontokens, whether women or men, to rely on informal networks of information and support to resolve their workplace disputes both formally and informally.

Again, we know of only indirect empirical evidence for these hypotheses. When the token Latinas studied by Segura (1989) attempted to resolve workplace disputes with supervisors, it heightened tensions and often resulted in quitting. Lewin and Peterson's (1988) results on dispute processing (grievance and arbitration rates, level and speed of settlement) show greater similarity between two female-concentrated public schoolteacher and retail sale unions compared to a male-concentrated steel-

workers union. Regarding outcomes, however, Lewin and Peterson's examination of postsettlement promotions, turnover, and evaluation show fewer differences between the female- and male-concentrated unions. Whether these differences, or lack of them, are due to the sex composition of jobs in the unions studied or something else cannot be determined by the information published.⁸

Dispute Outcomes

The differential origins and processes of workplace disputes related to the sex composition of jobs suggest at least one important outcome. That is, if women and men in sex-typical jobs experience fewer workplace problems, receive greater understanding or support from coworkers and same-sex supervisors for gender-specific disputes, and perceive more fairness in the processes and outcomes of dispute resolution than tokens, then this could explain in part the persistence of a sex-segregated workforce. To the extent that sex-segregated work environments are more conducive to the settlement of everyday workplace disputes, and to the extent that workers exercise choice in the sex types of jobs in that they work, it makes sense for women to prefer to work among other women, even if it means earning much lower wages than men (Segura 1989 and Martin & Harkreader 1993 reach similar conclusions.) Moreover, if it is true that women prefer to work among women because of fewer disputes and greater cooperation in resolving potential disputes, such findings could be a factor in explaining the development of individuals' occupational and career aspirations and in explaining contradictory longitudinal patterns of occupations desegregating and then resegregating (Reskin & Roos 1990; Gwartney-Gibbs 1988).

C. Work Structures and Gender Differences in Workplace Dispute Resolution

Work structures refer to "institutions, regularities, and arrangements that characterize the activity [of work]" (Kalleberg & Berg 1987:2).⁹ Work structures pattern and organize employees' access to and experiences in workplace dispute resolution forums (*E* in Fig. 1). Work structures are not gender neutral; rather, gender inheres in them (the influence of individual-level

⁸ An application of our arguments concerning tokenism and dispute processing to the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas case may be found in Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach (1992).

⁹ Kalleberg and Berg (1987:2) further describe work structures as "the rules on which many people have agreed and thus legitimated . . . as effective means of solving the economic and political problems of production and distribution. Work structures also represent the hierarchical orderings of persons and clusters of interests, configurations of norms, and the rights and obligations that characterize the relations among different types of actors in the economy. These structures describe the ways in which labor is divided, tasks allocated, and authority distributed."

characteristics on macro-level structures; F in Fig. 1; cf. Acker 1990; Martin 1990). Here we draw selectively from the vast literature in this area to posit gender differences in dispute resolution related to the following work structures: unions, organizations, industries, and, to a lesser extent, occupations. In contrast to the preceding two sections, we propose here that origins, processes, and outcomes of workplace disputes are intertwined with work structures, particularly concerning access to workplace dispute resolution forums and the intra-organizational environments created by these forums. We use these two concepts, access and environments, as organizing devices for this section.

The mechanisms of dispute resolution in the workplace range from informal settlements (the first step of most collective bargaining agreements, or “open-door” policies in nonunion forums) to formal settlements through arbitration, litigation, or government agency action (for intermediary types see McCabe 1988; Thomson 1974; Westin & Feliu 1988). Union contracts, negotiated bilaterally between management and union representatives, provide regularized and well-exercised mechanisms of resolving disputes and securing and protecting employee rights through the grievance procedure. Such grievance procedures are widely regarded as the most systematic and effective means of workplace dispute resolution and as a model for internal labor market practices in nonunion firms (Kochan 1980; Kreps et al. 1980; Osterman 1987; Williamson 1975). Nonunion firms increasingly offer varieties of dispute resolution forums to employees unilaterally, as part of human resource management and administration, including open-door policies, peer review, ombudspersons, counseling, and employee assistance programs, and these parallel increasing government concern for employee rights, particularly federal enforcement of Equal Employment Opportunity and affirmative action (Westin & Feliu 1988; Dobbin et al. 1993; Edelman 1990; Edelman et al. 1993).

The manifest organizational function of both union and nonunion dispute resolution forums is primarily judicial. In practice, these forums coordinate and regularize the interests of workers and management while simultaneously acknowledging their potentially antagonistic relationships (Burawoy 1979). Insofar as these forums provide “voice” to employee complaints and disputes, access to them and favorable outcomes in them are likely to have consequences for employees’ attitudes, attachment, and achievement on the job.

Access to Dispute Resolution Forums

Access to workplace dispute resolution forums is stratified by several structural features of employment, including the firm size, industry, occupation, and unionization. Large private firms,

particularly in durable manufacturing, trades and services, and public sector agencies are more likely to be unionized than small firms. Large private firms, whether unionized or not, more often than small firms have regularized internal labor market practices including dispute resolution forums, and they are more likely to receive state scrutiny, for example, in the form of federal contracts that require affirmative action programs. Large firms are also known to establish union-like grievance procedures in order to avoid unionization attempts (Brown & Pechman 1987; Westin & Feliu 1988). Thus, few small firms have formal and established mechanisms of dispute resolution, and they have greater latitude in the use of particularistic and arbitrary procedures for dealing with disputes. If women workers are more often employed in small firms and nonunionized occupations and industries, they will have less access to regularized means of due process (the juncture of job-level opportunities with macro-level organization; *D* in Fig. 1).

Empirical evidence supports the notion that women workers are more often in employment situations that structurally lack dispute resolution forums. It is well documented that fewer women than men are union members or covered by union contracts, and therefore fewer have access to union-negotiated grievance procedures (e.g., Fiorito et al. 1986). Gender differentials in unionism are attributable in part to structural features of employment, such as industry, firm size, occupation, and occupational sex segregation (Antos et al. 1980; Gwartney-Gibbs & Hurdley 1988). Research on the dual economy and segmented industrial sectors also provides suggestive evidence for women's lack of access. From this theoretical perspective, firms in "core" industries are characterized as having larger profits, greater capital intensity, more employees and associated internal labor markets, and greater unionization, among other things, than firms in "periphery" industries (Averitt 1968; Edwards et al. 1975). Several of these characteristics are related to our discussion above about the presence of formal dispute resolution mechanisms in firms. Particularly important is that fewer women are employed in firms in the "core" sector than men; indeed, Taylor et al. (1986) speculate that one of the reasons for women's, particularly black women's, significant shift to employment in the public sector between 1960 and 1980 was to gain the benefits of due process and fairness in treatment that followed equal employment opportunity legislation.¹⁰

¹⁰ Women may have access to federally mandated Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) and affirmative action (AA) programs to dispute workplace issues related to sex or race discrimination. These channels, however, generally are regarded as excessively long and expensive. In addition, Edelman (1990) suggests that organizational EEO and AA programs preserve and promote the status quo, raising questions about their efficacy as dispute resolution forums.

Thus, the empirical evidence indicates that women workers' access to dispute resolution forums is constrained by their typical positions in unions, firms, industries, and occupations. Structured inaccess can be related to both the origins and outcomes of workplace disputes. Our model suggests that the absence of dispute resolution mechanisms in firms results in individual employees' discontent, lowered productivity, and so forth. Clearly, such outcomes can relate reflexively to dispute origins concerning discipline (e.g., performance, attitude). Because workplace due process is less accessible to women workers than men, women are likely to have different origins and outcomes of workplace disputes than men. Moreover, women will be less likely to have the mechanisms available to resolve their disputes.

Intra-organizational Environments for Dispute Processing

Within firms, dispute resolution forums establish environments for resolving day-to-day disputes. For example, open-door policies, which can be regarded as institutionalized versions of informal dispute resolution, can create expectations that a problem should be resolved simply by walking into a supervisor's office and discussing it. But some problems are not resolvable informally, which can make voicing them nonnormative and difficult for individuals to do. On the other hand, union-negotiated grievance procedures typically involve numerous informal and formal steps to resolve workplace disputes. Knowledge that there are many steps at which a case must be proved and justified, or the discovery that a particular problem is not covered by the union contract, can dissuade problem-solving for women and men. In these ways, dispute resolution mechanisms can create new workplace disputes.

Here again, the gatekeepers of dispute resolution forums within firms are in key positions to hear complaints and suggest steps toward their resolution. If the gatekeepers of dispute-handling forums, or the wording of union contracts and stewards who interpret them, are insensitive to the unique workplace disputes encountered by women, fewer women's disputes will be voiced and pursued. If gatekeepers interpret claims in ways that subsume Equal Employment Opportunity and affirmative action laws and employees' legal rights under management goals of good working relations and efficient production, women's (and minorities') employment disputes are also more likely to be subsumed (Edelman et al. 1993). Stories of one worker's bad experience with an unsympathetic supervisor, personnel manager, or union steward in an attempt to resolve a dispute can become part of workplace legend and dissuade many succeeding workers from pursuing their workplace disputes through formal channels (cf. Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach 1991, 1993, forthcoming 1994). This

in turn can create a climate of distrust or disattachment, in which pursuing resolution of workplace problems is perceived as risky or not worth the effort. Thus, the very mechanisms designed to give employees “voice” in the workplace can operate to exclude a whole class of voices.

These intra-organizational environments for resolving workplace disputes may be related to the origins, processes, and outcomes of workplace dispute resolution much as structural inaccessibility is. That is, workers’ lack of access to workplace dispute resolution forums can affect how many and what kinds of disputes get voiced, processed, and resolved, and it can also create new workplace problems over lack of access.

We expect that neither union nor nonunion forums are particularly receptive to what we call female-typed disputes. Dispute resolution forums, whether negotiated by unions or unilaterally determined by management, are the product of historical circumstances—decisions on previous cases establish precedent and custom. In spite of women’s increasing labor force participation since World War II, they are relative newcomers to unions and large firms, and workplace dispute resolution forums are probably less equipped by precedent and custom to handle female-typed disputes. Thus, we maintain that the environments created by workplace dispute resolution forums may disadvantage women workers more than men. But as women’s labor force participation becomes more continuous over the life cycle and as women form a larger share of new labor force entrants, the experienced labor force, and unions, some firms and unions appear to be adopting policies with them in mind (Bell 1985). How these become incorporated into the body of precedent and custom that comprise dispute resolution forums has yet to be seen. We have no reason to expect, however, that statistical and taste discrimination will evaporate. Rather, we expect that firms’ and unions’ lack of practice in dealing with female-typed disputes will be intertwined with gender role stereotypes and discrimination as precedent is established, as Martin (1990) has observed.

* * *

In section III, we have raised many hypotheses about how workplace dispute resolution is patterned by gender and we have assessed the existing empirical evidence for these hypotheses. Table 1 summarizes this effort. By synthesizing the ideas and evidence from a wide range of research, Table 1 also clarifies the agenda for future research needed in this area.

Table 1. Summary of Hypotheses Gender and Workplace Dispute Resolution

Hypotheses	Existing Evidence
Gender Role (Individual Level)	
<i>Dispute origins:</i>	
H1. Women experience more workplace disputes associated with care of children, home, and aging parents than men.	None
H2. Men experience more workplace disputes associated with discipline, veterans' issues, and union activity than women.	Mixed
H3. Women and men experience workplace disputes over wages, benefits, job classifications, evaluation, substance abuse, and discrimination with similar frequency.	Nonsupport suggested
<i>Dispute processes:</i>	
H4. Women less often act on workplace disputes than men.	Support suggested
H5a. Women more often use informal dispute resolution forums to resolve workplace problems than men.	None
H5b. Men more often use formal workplace dispute resolution forums than women	Support
H6. Women who attempt to resolve workplace disputes are more likely than men to drop out of formal and informal processes before resolution is achieved.	Mixed
H7. The gatekeepers of workplace dispute resolution forums less often pursue women's complaints than men's.	Support suggested
H8. The gatekeepers of workplace dispute resolution forums less often pursue female-typed complaints than male-typed, whether brought by women or men.	None
H9. Men workers more often file reverse discrimination suits than women.	Support
<i>Dispute outcomes:</i>	
H10. Women workers' disputes less often reach formal settlement than do men's.	None
H11. Female-typed workplace disputes less often reach formal settlements than male-typed disputes, whether pursued by women or men.	None
H12. Workers' disputes that are formally resolved are not representative of day-to-day workplace problems.	None
H13. Sex differences in formal workplace dispute resolution records are not representative of sex differences in day-to-day workplace problems.	None
H14. Workers with unresolved workplace disputes have lower job attachment and performance than those whose disputes are resolved.	Support
Sex Segregation (Job Level)	
<i>Dispute origins:</i>	
H15. Tokens experience more workplace disputes than nontokens.	Support suggested
H16. Tokens experience more workplace disputes over discrimination, harassment, and gender stereotypes than nontokens.	Support suggested
H17. Men tokens' workplace disputes less often concern gender-related issues than do those of women tokens.	None

Table 1—Continued

Hypotheses	Existing Evidence
Sex Segregation (Job Level)—(continued)	
<i>Dispute processes:</i>	
H18. Tokens have less access to informal dispute resolution forums than nontokens.	Support suggested
H19. Women tokens have less access to informal dispute resolution forums than men tokens.	Support suggested
H20. Tokens have less access to formal dispute resolution forums than nontokens.	Support suggested
H21. Women tokens have less access to formal dispute resolution forums than men tokens.	Support suggested
H22. The gatekeepers of workplace dispute resolution forums less often pursue tokens' complaints than nontokens'.	None
<i>Dispute outcomes:</i>	
H23. Tokens' disputes less often reach formal settlement than nontokens'.	None
H24. When they are nontokens in the workplace, women and men experience similar levels and speed of settlement through formal dispute resolution forums.	Support suggested
H25. When they are nontokens, women and men experience similar levels of postsettlement performance review, promotions, and job turnover.	Support suggested
H26. Postsettlement, tokens have fewer promotions, poorer performance reviews, and higher turnover than nontokens.	Support suggested
H27. Workers prefer to be nontokens in their workplaces for the dispute resolution advantages.	Support suggested
Institutionalized Work Structures (Macro Level)	
<i>Access to dispute resolution forums:</i>	
H28. The probability that firms have formal dispute resolution forums varies by structural features of employment.	Support
H28a. As firm size increases, the probability that firms have formal dispute resolution forums increases.	Support
H29. Women are more likely to be employed in firms that structurally lack access to formal dispute resolution forums.	Support
H29a. Women are less likely than men to be employed in large firms with formal forums.	Support
<i>Intra-organizational environments for dispute processing:</i>	
H30. The more formal the corporate culture of disputing, the less often employees pursue workplace disputes.	None
H31. Corporate legends facilitate and deter employee dispute resolution independently of the type of formal dispute resolution forum.	Support
H32. The resolution of female-typed disputes is unrelated to the type of formal dispute resolution forum.	None

IV. Discussion

This essay was motivated by the failure of statistical studies to account for well-documented earnings differentials between women and men. It also was motivated by the promise of recent research on the gendered nature of the social organization of

work which suggests that intra-organizational processes structure opportunity (e.g., promotions, on-the-job training) independently of individual agency or ability. We have proposed that workplace dispute resolution is one such intra-organizational process that contributes to gender inequality in employment. That is, the way workplace problems are transformed into disputes and processed through formal and informal dispute resolution mechanisms has important consequences for women as a class as they attain, hold, perform, and are compensated for jobs.

We have drawn on the insights of previously unintegrated research about workplace dispute resolution in law, organizations and management, industrial sociology, and industrial relations. We have proposed that gender roles, sex segregation in employment, and institutionalized work structures are related to the origins, processes, and outcomes of workplace disputes in both formal and informal proceedings. More particularly, we have proposed that relatively few women employees or female-typed disputes proceed to formal resolution; rather, we have hypothesized that women employees and female-typed issues drop out along the way to formal resolution, because women use informal dispute resolution strategies, abandon their issues, quit their jobs, or transfer. If this is so, female-typed issues that do reach formal settlement, whether through arbitration, litigation, or government agency action, are not representative of the day-to-day conflict encountered by women workers and are unusually strong cases. The Appendix provides a concrete example of the subtleties of transforming a workplace problem into a dispute, using organizational dispute resolution mechanisms to resolve the dispute, and living with the consequences for one woman clerical worker's future employment.

The conceptual and theoretical model we have presented helps to explain the continuing puzzle of gender differences in employment more generally. If women employees have different workplace disputes than men, if their workplace disputes are more often left unresolved or are resolved in ways they perceive as unfair or unsatisfactory, this may help explain previously observed gender differences in employment attitudes, attachment, and achievement, including women's greater intermittency in employment, higher turnover, fewer hours of work, and associated lower earnings. If women in female-typed jobs have fewer workplace disputes, receive greater understanding or support for female-typed problems, or perceive more fairness in the processes and outcomes of dispute resolution, this may help explain the persistence of a sex-segregated workforce. If certain types of workplace dispute resolution forums operate less equitably for women than for men, it may help explain women's persistent secondary position in employment independently of individual predilections or human capital.

V. Conclusions

Workplace dispute resolution is a topic that has been largely neglected within the context of research on gender and employment inequality. And gender is a topic that has been largely neglected in research on workplace dispute resolution. We have attempted to stimulate thinking and research on this issue by reasoning that this nonpecuniary aspect of employment has consequences for understanding gender inequality in employment more generally. This subject matter—gender and workplace dispute resolution—is inherently interdisciplinary and likely to have research and policy applications in several academic disciplines. While we have undoubtedly left many ideas unexamined, our essay sheds conceptual and theoretical light into the “black box” of intra-organizational processes that may create, maintain, or nullify gender inequality in employment.

Appendix: A Real-Life Example

We present here a true example to illustrate the conceptual and theoretical model presented in this article. Because it is a true story, not every piece exactly fits the hypotheses explicated above (e.g., the all-female work environment did not save this woman worker any grief). All names are pseudonyms. More detailed empirical support may be found in Gwartney-Gibbs and Lach (1991, 1993, forthcoming 1994).

Karen was a clerical worker at a large, unionized public agency for 12 years. She and three coworkers provided administrative support duties in an office serving 12 professionals and over 100 clients. Karen’s two promotions, from Secretary I to Secretary III, included pay raises but no change in duties, and she had been in the top pay rank for 8 years. Her annual reviews were excellent, and she enjoyed cordial office relations.

In Karen’s first 11 years, office staff responded directly to assignments and requests from professionals and clients. Then Sonia was promoted from within the clerical group to a newly created Management Assistant position. In her new position over the remaining three clerks, Sonia introduced new procedures to improve efficiency, and now all work goes through her to the clerks. To Karen the new office procedures were inefficient; she had to explain to irritated professionals and clients that she could not respond to their needs as before. Sonia was also younger, better educated, and more ambitious—but less experienced—than the coworkers she was now supervising. With the new office atmosphere, all three clerks expressed dissatisfaction.

Karen’s performance evaluations remained excellent in her first year with Sonia as supervisor, but Sonia verbally reprimanded her regularly. The situation stressed Karen. She sought to understand it by talking with coworkers, family, and friends, with no concrete result. Karen explained the situation to her seasoned union steward; because Sonia was breaking no contract rules, he said, the union could do nothing. Karen tried to talk with her former supervisor, now Sonia’s, but he re-

fused, saying she must talk to Sonia first; Karen felt this was impossible. By chance, Karen met another union steward, Shelly, and told her what was going on. Shelly sympathized and had Karen keep a record of incidents with Sonia as they occurred.

To escape the difficult work situation, Karen tried transferring to another position in the agency. Sonia knew this, but only indirectly. One morning at coffee break, Karen prepared to leave to drop off her resume at another office. Sonia said she could not leave. Karen replied that no rule existed to stop her and departed on her errand. Sonia placed a reprimand in Karen's personnel file.

At her union steward's urging, Karen filed a mental harassment grievance against Sonia concerning the reprimand and the many accumulated small disputes she had documented. Karen's case proceeded slowly, step by step through the grievance procedure. Shelly attended all meetings between the disputing parties, helped Karen keep track of grievance procedure requirements and her rights, and acted as a sounding board in the nine-month effort. To Karen the procedure was confusing and sometimes humiliating (e.g., a psychiatric evaluation was required). Throughout the ordeal, Karen's job remained in Sonia's office and stress mounted. On her physician's recommendation, Karen used all her sick leave and vacations to avoid the chilly work atmosphere. She received no internal transfer offers and heard through the grapevine that she was blacklisted.

Eventually, Karen "won" her grievance. The reprimand was removed from her file, but her department was not required to formally admit mental harassment. Eventually, she found another agency job, but it was not covered by the union contract because she was "promoted" to the management track (although her duties remained the same). Karen is grateful to Shelly, the steward, and the union but worries about no longer having union representation. She also worries that her long and difficult experience will become part of workplace legend and deter other potential grievance filers.

Karen's workplace dispute is typical, we believe, of many women's experiences with ordinary workplace difficulties. The *origins* of her workplace dispute lay in issues that clerical workers often call "personality conflicts"—concerns about interpersonal relations in a small group, a traditional domain of women's roles. These origins operated both on a job level (changes in supervisor and procedures, a reprimand) and on an interpersonal, individual level (social distance, ostracism, stress). A nontoken in a sex-segregated work setting, Karen conformed to her gender role by avoiding direct challenges to her supervisor.

Her *processes* of dealing with the dispute were first informal (talking to friends, family, and coworkers—individual and job levels), and then formal (talking to her former supervisor and to union stewards—job level; attempting to transfer to another office in the agency—job level; and using the grievance procedure—work structure level). Karen was lucky in a way, because clerical workers in her agency are organized by a union that has tried to include women (i.e., she did not lack structural access to formal dispute resolution mechanisms because of the type of firm or industry she works in). But when she first took her problem to the union, the gatekeeper deterred her. The first steward, an experienced blue-collar worker in another part of the agency, could not find

a category to classify the problem. By chance, Karen found a supportive woman steward, a clerical worker also, who showed her how to document the case as mental harassment, a case Karen eventually won.

When Karen could not resolve her workplace dispute, one *outcome* was low job satisfaction and accumulated stress that probably affected her performance (job and individual levels). The ultimate outcome of Karen's dispute was a new position and removal of the reprimand (job level). But she also lost accumulated leave (job level) and union protection (structural level), and along with those she lost peace of mind (individual level). By transferring to another office, she must again prove herself if she wants to be promoted, diminishing her human capital, and she contributed to women's job turnover rates. Without the union's support, Karen's female-typed dispute would not have reached the type of formal settlement that most researchers use to study dispute resolution.

Karen's case also illustrates how our conceptual apparatus for examining workplace dispute resolution (origins, processes, outcomes) usefully disentangles her complicated experiences. When this conceptual model is cross-classified by the three theoretical components to help explain variation in workplace dispute resolution, it heightens our understanding of how everyday workplace problems such as Karen's contribute to gender inequality in employment more generally.

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