

Theories on the gender pay gap



Australian women earn about 83¢ cents for every \$1 a man earns, according to a new report analysing the gender pay gap. Linda McDowell suggests that gendered assumptions have a range of influences on contemporary workplaces. Analyse the gender pay gap, engaging with the theorists you have studied this semester.

INTRODUCTION

As Linda McDowell suggests, gendered assumptions coming from heteronormative ideals and rules significantly influence contemporary workplaces. This subsequently results in the gender pay gap (1995). This paper seeks to critically analyse the influences emanating from gendered assumptions on contemporary workplaces. Additionally, the link between these assumptions and the gender pay gap will be examined. This will be executed through examining the impacts of heteronormativity, which result in a never-ending binarised cycle that perpetuates the gender pay gap. Further, the possible challenges to gendered assumptions introduced by Judith Butler will be examined. However, to ensure a well-rounded analysis, the shortcomings of these challenges, and the subversive power of hegemonic masculinity will also be discussed.

WHAT IS THE GENDER PAY GAP?

The gender pay gap in society is something that is deemed 'distressingly evident', and continues to steadily control women in society (McDowell 2014 p. 829). In Australia, the Gender pay gap refers to the discrepancy in pay between men and women in employment. Current statistics highlight that full-time working women earn 84% of a man's pay, making the gender pay gap sit at 16%. (WGEA, 2017, p. 8). From this, it is obvious that progress is

necessary. However, progress is not only slow, but proving to be difficult, as the gender pay gap twenty years ago was sitting at 17%, meaning that it has taken up to two decades to improve women's pay by a mere 1% (WGGEA, 2017, p. 8). This is highly indicative of the stronghold that institutionalised gendered assumptions have over the workforce, even in the twenty-first century.

A key theorist on the gender pay gap, Linda McDowell, states that women in the workplace have fought to 'establish the right to be there at all' (1995, p. 80). This idea that women need to gain rights to earn money is embedded in historical ideologies that are not only out-dated but still guide the lives of many women today. Early feminist interventions to improve access to work and pay rates are still ongoing, such as the Liberal Feminist movement. The Liberal Feminist movement began in the early 1800s, with the aim of providing women with rights equal to those of men in education, the workforce and in society (Tong, 1989). Although some of the endeavours of the movement have been achieved, such as women acquiring corporate and authoritative jobs that were once male-dominated, there are new barriers (Bishom-Rapp, S & Sargeant, M, 2016). The gender pay gap is one of the most significant new barriers implemented by institutions to prevent further development of gender equality in the workforce.

The gender pay gap can be seen as originating from the three 'glass ceilings' embedded in contemporary society, and subsequently, contemporary workplaces (Bishom-Rapp, S & Sargeant, M, 2016, p. 102). The term glass ceilings refers to the invisible barriers that women confront as they approach the top of the corporate hierarchy. This term was established by the Glass

Ceilings Commission, which sought to identify the glass ceiling barriers, and remove the blockages to advancement of women and minorities in employment (USDOL, 1995). The commission found there were three levels of barriers. The first barrier is related to prejudice and bias, coming from educational opportunities, or lack thereof. The second barrier is concerned with the internal structures of a business. These structures are controllable by the business. They relate to the corporate climate and what is referred to as 'pipeline barriers' that come from lack of training and career development, which leads to the stunting of possible career advancement (Bishom-Rapp, S & Sargeant, M, 2016, p. 103). The final barrier is concerned with the government, and the lack of law enforcement, combined with dissemination of information about glass ceiling issues (Bishom-Rapp, S & Sargeant, M, 2016, p. 103). Although these three barriers cannot solely justify the widespread hold that the gender pay gap has on contemporary workplaces, they seek to pinpoint where the gender pay gap stems from, allowing work to be done in addressing these areas.

HETERONORMATIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY WORKFORCES

With the fundamental aspects of the gender pay gap now having been examined, the forces that perpetuate the existence of this significant issue within society require analysis. The most pressing force is the concept of heteronormativity, which is a harmful gender assumption that has a substantial influence on contemporary workforces. Heteronormativity can be defined as 'a body of lifestyle norms, in which people tend to reproduce distinct and complementary genders (man and woman)' (Herz &

Johansson, 2015, p. 1011). In contemporary society, heteronormativity is deemed to keep women *in* (within its confines) and also keeps women *down*, that is, subordinated (Jackson, 1999). Feminist discourse surrounding heteronormativity rose in second-wave feminism, the movement that broadened the feminist debate to address issues of inequality and sexuality, as well as workplace difficulties for women (Evans 1995). However, the origins of the 'normalised' heterosexual label within society can go back to the historical and cultural depictions of men and women from the eighteenth century (Boe & Coykendall, 2014).

Though heteronormativity has a substantial presence within history and society, its impact as a gendered assumption within contemporary workforces is substantial. As heteronormativity conditions men and women to act a certain way according to their sex (which is also historically and socially defined), it leaves women boxed in. Heteronormativity and the strict, reinforced gender binaries within society reflect the systems of oppression, and the construction of gender hierarchies (Herz & Johansson, 2015, p. 1011). In order to maintain a hold on society, ideas of conforming to hyper-heteronormative behaviours are reinforced by institutions within society. Subsequently, these societal influences reverberate into education, family-life and in particular, the workforce. Although women have gained the right to coexist with men in contemporary workplaces, strict gender binaries prevent women from career development, strengthened abilities, and subsequently reinforce the gender-pay gap.

The work of Angela McRobbie, a key theorist in the area of gender inequality in the workforce is highly pertinent to this discussion. McRobbie's concept of <https://assignbuster.com/theories-on-the-gender-pay-gap/>

the post-feminist masquerade highlights the harmful impact of gender assumptions in contemporary workforces (2007). McRobbie critiques the hyper-gendered performances women have been encouraged to engage in, as they place emphasis on the sexed body, and in turn gender differences. The ' post-feminist masquerade' is a means for patriarchal law and hegemonic masculinity to gain dominance against feminism (McRobbie, 2007, p. 723). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the configuration of " gender practice, which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees the dominant position of men, and the subordination of women" (Bartholomaeus, 2013, p. 280). This is done through encouraging women to engage in feminine consumer culture, so as to reinscribe their femininity in the workplace (McRobbie, 2007). These hyper-gendered performances include subscribing to common feminine practices, such as wearing tight skirts, high heels and a face full of make up to assert their femininity (McRobbie, 2007, p. 722). As women are encouraged to perform hyper-femininity, institutions are able to reinforce fear of retribution from abandoning heteronormativity in the workplace. This forces women back within the rigid gender binary, creating an even greater divide between men and women in the workspace, ultimately perpetuating the gender pay gap.

THE LINK TO THE GENDER PAY GAP AND THE REPERCUSSIONS

Based on the analysis to date, the harmful nature of gender assumptions in the workplace has been examined. However, the way that these gendered assumptions impact the gender pay gap requires concentrated analysis.

Gender assumptions have a direct link to the gender pay gap, as they dictate the field of work that many women are in. Women are significantly overrepresented in the lowest paying occupations, as female-dominated jobs pay far less than male-dominated jobs (Ting, 2017). Feminised jobs include those relating to care-taking or domestic tasks, such as nursing, cleaning and childcare. These sex-segregated jobs are clearly indicative of the roles ascribed to women within heterosexual discourse.

These feminised jobs stem from what is known as the caregiver model. This model is a historical regime that took the inherent caregiver role of women, and limited their employment to areas relating to this heteronormative ideal (McRobbie, 2007). As more women are found in jobs that abide by the caregiver model, the influence of this troublesome ancient structure today is evident (McRobbie, 2007, p. 730)

However, this caregiver model cannot explain the fact that the gender pay gap in Australia has been found to exist in more than 1,000 occupations (Ting, 2017). This is due to the fact that men in workplaces are promoted into higher positions rather than their female counterparts (Jaffee, 1989, p. 377). This is problematic, as there is somewhat a double-disadvantage coming from these jobs. Women in feminised occupations are “twice disadvantaged—first by being in a “female” field, and second by being a woman in that field, since men make more than women, even in “female” fields” (Bishom-Rapp & Sargeant, 2016, p. 137).

Additionally, women in corporate jobs face vertical segregation. Vertical segregation refers to the exclusion of women from organisational positions of

autonomy and authority, due to the sex differences within workplaces (Jaffee, 1989, p. 387). Thus, the gender pay gap not only stems from the one area of feminised jobs, but also from a lack of career advancement that is within the power of organisations in society. According to Wolf and Fligstein, the sexual differences in power in the work setting 'are an important factor generating inequality in earnings between men and women' (1979, 235). This highlights how ideas about the femininity of women drive contemporary workforce standards, as women are expected to perform work according to their performance of heterosexuality.

Further, the long-term disadvantages that come from gendered assumptions and the subsequent gender pay gap will be critically analysed. Not only does the gender pay gap lead to disadvantage for women in social, financial and personal situations, but also leads to lifetime disadvantage.

Lifetime disadvantage refers to the factors that lead to 'the retirement ills of many women' (Bishom-Rapp & Sargeant, 2016, p. 190). That is, the risks that women face from being unequally paid. As women go into retirement, they are at risk of experiencing the critical impact of the gender pay gap. Women subsequently earn less over their lifetime, which results in lower superannuation, and a risk of poverty in old age. In 2012, 21.7% of women aged over 65 were at risk of poverty, whereas only 16.3% of men were likely to experience poverty (Bishom-Rapp & Sargeant, 2016, p. 116). Gender inequality in the workforce not only reflects current social position and power inequalities, but it also leads to detrimental outcomes of lifetime disadvantage for women.

TACKLING THE GENDER BINARY

Although gendered assumptions continue to drive workplaces, there are ways to tackle this blatant discrimination that women face in employment.

According to leading gender theorist, Judith Butler, there is a means to challenge heteronormativity, which forms the foundation for the gender pay gap. Butler believes that gender is reiterated through regulatory practices, and is culturally constructed through the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990, p. 9). The heterosexual matrix refers to the re-stabilisation of gender through women repeatedly engaging in feminised behaviours and appearances (Butler, 1990). Therefore, the sexed body only gains significance from its constant reification and institutionalised endorsement within society. As the gender binary requires engagement by society, an inherent instability within this social construct can be made out (Butler, 1990, p. 11). Because of this, women are able to exploit gendered assumptions through their constant reinforcement, as it becomes obvious to those looking to challenge it. Women in the workforce have already taken charge in this area, as the overall gender pay gap in full-time employment decreased in 2015 to 2016 (WGEA, 2017, p. 15).

By viewing sex and gender as something culturally, historically and socially constructed, society will be able to define themselves with their own limitations and freedoms by challenging these constructed ideals. In particular, the feminist movement will make significant headway in this area through challenging normative heterosexuality. This effect will reverberate in the workforce, as the structures seeking to restrain women from challenging hegemonic masculinity will destabilise. The gender pay gap, in particular,

has improved among men and women in trades including machinery operating and building, decreasing by 4% in terms of total remuneration between 2015 and 2016 (WGEA, 2017, p. 16). This is indicative of the progress being made by women in challenging the preconceived capabilities of their bodies. By going beyond the behaviours of gender that limit their capabilities, they are able to challenge both gender constructs and inequality in the workforce.

As McDowell suggests, women's sexed bodies are threatening in the workplace for the very reason that they are not meant to be there - 'They challenge the order of things' (1995, p. 80). Not only have women challenged order through entering the workforce; they have also challenged the very structured foundation of the order. This provides women with the means to break through the metaphorical glass ceilings that limit equality in the workplace. Additionally, if women persevered with obtaining both equality and equity, it would 'liberate not only women but also human personality from the straitjacket of gender' (Herz & Johansson, 2015, p. 1010). Therefore, by furthering the feminist movement, those reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and the institutions that enforce gendered assumptions will be disembodied. This includes the governing of each individual of society through the heterosexual matrix.

THE PARADOX THAT IS GENDER EQUALITY

In current gender studies, there are now ways to challenge gender assumptions that feed the gender pay gap. However, the gender pay gap is not in steady decline, and is expected to hold its position, if not rise in areas of managerial roles (WGEA, 2017, p. 6). As individuals are provided with the

previously mentioned means to challenge the reification of gender binaries, the institutional stronghold over sex and gender conception tightens, finding new ways to subvert these challenges.

By virtue of the fact that women are entering the workforce and fighting for equal pay, hegemonic masculinity is weakened. Because of this, institutions use any perceived gender equality improvements to set the fight back, rather than enhance it.

This can be seen through the concept of 'attribution of capacity' enunciated by Angela McRobbie (2007). This attribution of capacity refers to the freedom given to women in the workforce. In a post-feminist context, women are provided with roles of accountability and autonomy, with the expectation of embodying a strong, can-do attitude to work. However, McRobbie argues that these improvements are instead reinscription of hegemonic masculinity, leading to drawbacks in the fight for equal pay. Women are 'invited to recognise themselves as privileged subjects' and are expected to be grateful for achieving (with a fight) the fundamental human right of equality (McRobbie, 2007, p, 722). As institutions have relinquished this control over who enters the workforce, they apply new barriers under the façade of equality. Women are now expected to be accomplished subjects who can come forward, however this is only on the condition that feminism fades away despite neither equality nor equity being achieved (McRobbie, 2007, p. 720).

Therein lies what Raewyn Connell refers to as the patriarchal dividend, which is the advantage given to men as a group from maintaining inequality within

society (2009). Monetary income from the workforce is just one of the benefits, in addition to respect, safety, institutional power and autonomy. (Connell, 2009, p. 142). From the reinforcement of hegemony, the patriarchal dividend and gender binaries within society as a response to feminist movements, women are once again placed back into the labels and categories that they first sought to escape from, subverting years of feminist work.

Additionally, the critique of the 'VirginAtlantic: 25 years: Still red-hot' highlights the drawback that women face in the postfeminist struggle for equality (Duffy et al., 2016). The article critiques the marketing strategies used to evoke idealised gender appearances in a postmodern context in order to facilitate the perpetuation of gender binaries. The advertisement ultimately utilises 'good old-fashioned sexism while simultaneously distancing themselves from it', which suggests that the institutions that seek to retain a hold over postmodern feminism have utilised the newfound freedom of women and bent it to their will, making women slaves in their own emancipation (Duffy et al., 2016, p. 266).

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, by examining the structures within the contemporary workforce, the gender pay gap has been critically analysed. By examining the institutionalised gender binaries entrenched within society, the root causes of the gender pay gap have been established and evaluated. The analysis reveals that through heteronormativity and the enforcement of gender binaries, the gender pay gap is perpetually reified, with lifelong effects. Although Butler provides an outlet for change through challenging these

binaries, the institutional stronghold over the sexed body and its link to societal outcomes proves to be rigidly in place, as discussed by a key theorist studied within the unit, Angela McRobbie.

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