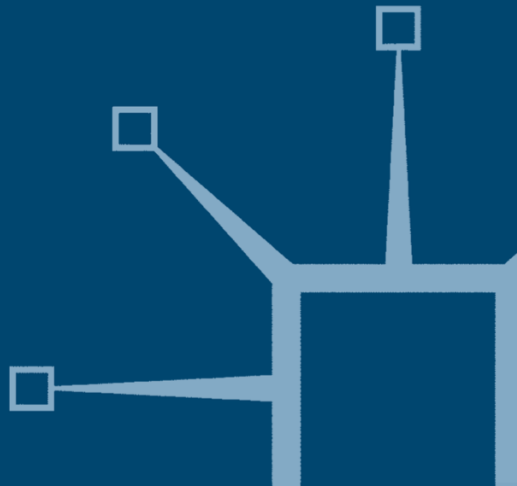


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What Women Want from Work

Gender and Occupational Choice in the
21st Century

Ruth Woodfield



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York Studies on Women and Men

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What Women Want from Work

Gender and Occupational Choice in the 21st Century

Ruth Woodfield
University of Sussex

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For my boys: Richard, Jess, Kim & Davy

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1

What Women Want from Work – An Introduction

The role women play in the paid-employment sector changed dramatically in the closing decades of the last century. More women joined the workforce, they worked for longer before having children and increasingly returned to work afterwards. Women entered occupations that were once considered closed to them, often in considerable numbers; and they climbed to positions previously thought impossible. It is, nevertheless, the case that gendered-occupational segregation, whereby women and men are concentrated into different areas of work (horizontal segregation), and at different levels (vertical segregation), remains a global phenomenon. Women have made some remarkable inroads, but they are still overwhelmingly concentrated in comparatively few occupational areas, and remain under-represented in the highest-paid and most senior and powerful positions.

How can we to best explain this? When surveyed, most children and adults – and especially girls and women – expressly support an individual's right to choose the jobs that most please and satisfy them (O'Brien & Fassinger 1993; Lightbody & Durndell 1998; University of Wisconsin Survey Center, 2003; McQuaid, Bond & Robinson 2004; EOC 2005a; HMSO 2005). Yet there is substantial evidence that these same adults maintain segregation through their own practical occupational choices. For some, in the context of extensive equal opportunities legislation, and girls' and women's considerable educational successes, the most persuasive explanation is fundamentally individualist, claiming that occupational patterns must be reflecting intrinsic differences and desires in individual men and women. There are less women construction workers, plumbers and sailors because less women actually want to undertake these employment roles. Similarly, there are fewer women in the boardrooms of major businesses, fewer women politicians, judges

and police chiefs because women simply have less strong desires to climb up career ladders, less evident abilities, or both. Given women's recent educational achievements, explanations that rely on their inferior abilities have lost some of their critical force, ceding ground to beliefs that women must *want* the work roles that they end up in. If this is the case, it is suggested, then academic researchers and policy makers need not expend so much time and energy chronicling and attempting to correct gendered employment imbalances.

This view is integrated into both our academic and common sense ways of talking and thinking about occupational decision-making (Padavic 1992). The touchstone image of much of the discussion around occupational 'choice' is the unfettered individual making a well-informed selection of their target job from the range of roles that match their abilities and desires. In the context of these assumptions, and the decline of critical perspectives to challenge them, some uncomfortable facts resist easy explication. How can we explain the gender gap in wages, for instance, whereby women earn less than men, even for the same kinds of work and in female-dominated sectors? Similarly, how can we explain some women's claims that they are victims of discrimination within the workplace, and have their career desire thwarted by factors external to them? Are individual workplaces and managers, with anomalous cultures and attitudes, to blame? Or are there wider, systemic and powerful aspects of modern society that conspire to maintain a gender regime that persists in privileging men's interests above women's? Is it the case that, although many formal barriers to greater occupational choice and progression have been removed, many informal ones remain and these restrict women's employment patterns? These questions require an examination of structural factors within society to assess the role they are playing in producing segregation patterns.

It is one of the paradoxes associated with occupational-segregation research, that literature focusing on individualist explanations rarely derives evidence for its arguments from talking to people directly. Much of the literature that assumes that extra-individual factors are key determinants of work patterns does not do this either, but the approach is more centrally embraced within this broad perspective. There is, nevertheless, a lack of literature that examines how women understand and account for their own occupational choices, including how and why they orient towards gender-atypical careers, as well as how and why most orient away from gender-atypical roles, and very senior and well-paid careers. There is a need to examine in more depth how women account for their own agency in the decision-making process, for the

influence of micro-sociological factors such as parental expectations and peer pressure, and the effects of macro-sociological factors such as equal opportunities policies and media representations.

This book seeks to address each of these lacunae, and the research questions that emerge from the currently uncertain social context of occupational segregation, through an analysis of a large and original data-set that comprises accounts from 186 girls and women. The book focuses exclusively on female participants for a number of reasons. It follows the research tradition that has developed since the 1970s in so doing, reflecting the fact that it is this group who have historically been the most restricted in terms of employment patterns (Hensley 1998). Moreover, it is the changes in women's employment that represent the most significant shifts in overall segregation patterns over recent decades, against which men's employment has been comparatively static, suggesting that the specific attention is warranted (Proctor & Padfield 1998). Girls and women are also particularly interesting when considering occupational segregation and choice. It has been argued that they are simultaneously *more* expressive of vulnerability to stereotype pressure, *less* likely to stereotype jobs themselves and *more* likely to go into atypical occupations than males, although the overwhelming majority of girls choose not to (O'Brien & Fassinger 1993; O'Brien, Friedman, Tipton and Linn 2000; McQuaid, Bond & Robinson 2004; EOC 2005a). Notwithstanding this, the book is conceived of as the first of two, with the second focusing exclusively on boy's and men's employment choices.

Just under 100 of the interview participants were still in full-time education, and were therefore still at the stage of formulating their occupational preferences. Interviews sought to explore their views on a range of employment-related issues via general questions and specific examination of a gender-atypical occupation – firefighting – and the gender-typical role of teaching. Both of these occupations, but especially firefighting, have been neglected within the literature to date. These interviewees' contributions have been teamed with interviews from women in both of these occupations. This design is aimed to ensure adequate cognisance of the perspective of those still engaged in making their initial occupational choices, as well as those who have already chosen a specific occupation. It therefore captures data during the initial identification of a career, a period that is crucial because, 'once people have chosen an occupation, it becomes incredibly difficult to change to a new one . . . the choice of first job is very important' (HMSO 2005: 7), and allows for analysis of this data alongside the more experienced reflections of seasoned women workers.

The initial part of the book comprises an extensive literature review of research examining gendered-occupational segregation, within two chapters. The first, Chapter 2, deals with individualist and more socially focused explanations of segregation that are based on information sources other than directly accessed accounts. Chapter 3 then focuses on the smaller sample of research which centrally deploys qualitative interviews to understand segregation, focusing on the contribution this methodological approach can make to our comprehension of segregation phenomena, before introducing the data presentation that will follow in the subsequent three chapters. Although this original data derives from the UK alone, the literature it reviews, and within which its empirical findings are contextualised, is international.

The second part of the book comprises an introduction and three data presentation chapters. Chapter 4 examines views on atypical work generally and through the lens of views on the role of firefighting. It explores the perspective of those still in full-time education, and of those already in the firefighter role, or attempting to become firefighters. Chapter 5 examines views on gender-typical work generally and through the lens of views on teaching, as evinced by both those in full-time education and teachers themselves. Chapter 6 examines all the participants' commentary that relates to the phenomenon of vertical segregation, how those in education see themselves in relation to ambition and career progress, and how female teachers and firefighters understand their own experience of advancement opportunities and costs.

Finally, the book ends with Chapters 7 and 8, and an analysis of the key findings from the empirical data, how they contribute to the existing literature base and to our understanding of women's work choices in the UK and elsewhere. These chapters confirm that the individualist approach, focusing as it does on women's 'choices' in relation to work, has experienced an ascendancy that is premature, and, indeed, will probably never be opportune, ignoring as it does the still-extensive, extra-individual factors that shape and inhibit women's employment desires and career outcomes, and the probability that they will always do so. To be sure, we need to account for an individual agent negotiating her way in the context of these factors towards what is experienced as a personal biography in relation to work, but the accounts examined here confirm that she is far from unfettered in her choices, and that what women want from work is, ultimately, as much a function of forces beyond immediate experience, than it is of desires from within.

2

Gender and Occupational Segregation – Setting the Scene

Occupational segregation in the UK and elsewhere

Introduction

This chapter begins with a review of literature focusing on gendered occupational segregation in order to delineate the extent and nature of this employment feature within the UK and elsewhere. It will then consider the various accounts of what causes segregation patterns, and the issues and debates that emerge from the different explanatory modes adopted.

A great deal has been written on the subject of occupational selection and segregation, and this review is by no means exhaustive. Only literature that has a clear gender dimension is examined here, for instance. A key aim is to cover the most pertinent themes to emerge within the literature over the past few decades.

Horizontal and vertical segregation

Three decades have passed since the landmark Sex Discrimination Acts of the 1970s that outlawed discrimination on the basis of a person's sex in educational and occupational settings. In the intervening years, there have been significant changes in the gendered composition of many occupational sectors and roles, and women's participation in the paid work economy has increased substantially. Despite this, gendered occupational segregation of some sort and to varying degrees persists in all countries (Elder & Schmidt 2004; Miller *et al.* 2004; Charles 2005; Blackburn & Jarman 2006).

Commonly, two types of interlinked segregations are described in the available literature: horizontal and vertical. The term 'horizontal segregation' refers to the phenomenon whereby women are disproportionately

concentrated within particular occupational sectors while being significantly under-represented within others. 'Vertical segregation' refers to the phenomenon whereby women are disproportionately present at certain levels of all occupational sectors, and disproportionately under-represented at other levels.

Along with the general nature of occupational segregation, there are some salient global trends in female employment. One is the significant growth of female participation in the labour force, but this growth has developed in tandem with features that put women at a disadvantage as compared to men. On average, women are paid less than men, even for the same type of work, and even in female-dominated sectors. They are more likely than men to be employed within an informal economy, to be in receipt of irregular wages or be unsalaried, and to be in employment that is highly vulnerable and with inferior conditions. Women are far more likely to work part-time; such employment brings with it more vulnerability, poorer career prospects and even larger pay gaps (Elder & Schmidt 2004; Miller *et al.* 2004; EOC 2006).

The majority of research into segregation has identified both horizontal and vertical types as mutually reinforcing determinations of gendered inequality. The employment features that differentiate women's work have therefore been linked to segregation of both kinds.

Horizontal segregation

Various analytical techniques have been utilised to measure the unequal distribution of men and women across different occupational sectors (DeLeire & Levy 2001; Blackburn & Jarman 2006). A commonly adopted definition for an occupation being considered gender-typical or atypical as far as women are concerned, however, is whether they comprise more than 75 per cent or less than 25 per cent of its incumbents, respectively. Analysis of occupational compositions has shown that the scale of skewed distribution has declined in past decades but remains remarkably persistent and somewhat fixed in its fundamental characteristics.

Recent estimates suggest that 60 per cent of UK women workers are employed in just 10 out of 77 occupations, with most employed within the '5 Cs: Caring, Cashiering, Catering, Cleaning and Clerical' (HMSO 2005: 6). The UK is by no means alone in this pattern. Women's near-global association with domesticity, and its related tasks, means that occupational sectors and roles that are identified as reproducing these tasks are almost always female-dominated, from national contexts as diverse as Japan, the US, Switzerland, Portugal, Sweden, Italy and Iceland (Proctor & Padfield 1998; Elder & Schmidt 2004; Miller *et al.* 2004; Charles 2005).

Indeed, the substantial increases in female labour force participation over the past decades have dovetailed with the burgeoning of service and clerical occupational sectors, with many women taking employment roles in these areas. More specifically, women in the UK comprise 79 per cent of those in the Health and Social Work sector, and 73 per cent of those in Education (EOC 2006). In terms of roles, they account for 84 per cent of 'Personal Service' workers, 95 per cent of receptionists, 88 per cent of nurses and care assistants, and 80 per cent of 'Administrative and secretarial' workers (EOC 2005b). Female concentration looks set to continue in the immediate term if we take the gendered distribution of the current pool of trainees as an indication. Girls and women represent 97 per cent of those taking apprenticeship training in Early Years Care and Education, 91 per cent of those in Hairdressing, 87 per cent of those in Health and Social Care and 69 per cent of those training in Customer Service (EOC 2006).

Conversely, female under-representation in many sectors and occupations characterised by manual work (for example, construction), as well as professional scientific and technical occupations (for example, Information Technology work), is also marked in the majority of countries (Rees 1998; Roger & Duffield 2000; Woodfield 2000; Sian & Callaghan 2001; Miller *et al.* 2004).

To be sure, some remarkable inroads have been made by women into occupations previously dominated by men, and across the globe (Davey & Lalande 2004; Elder & Schmidt 2004). In the UK, some sectors that were male-dominated have become far more balanced or have even achieved gender equity, such as public administration (EOC 2006). Many key sectors, however, remain heavily male-dominated (EOC 2006; Woodfield 2006a). Although there are important variations according to the level of work (for example, professional/non-professional; graduate/non-graduate), the evidence consistently shows that women are significantly under-represented in agriculture, industry, financial services and science, engineering and technology (SET) occupations (Rees 1998; Miller *et al.* 2004; EOC 2005a). As with female-dominated sectors, the situation in relation to pre-entry qualifiers for these areas does not herald change in the immediate future. Women have, for instance, comprised less than a quarter of those undertaking Computer Science degrees in the UK since the 1990s (Woodfield 2006b). Figures on apprenticeship recruits in the UK show that only 1 per cent of those for construction and plumbing are currently female. This is despite, in the case of the latter occupation, the work's reputation as skilled and well-remunerated.

This ghettoised pattern has been identified as a key factor in perpetuating women's disadvantage in the paid labour force. Recent assessments have identified occupational segregation as a major factor behind the persistent gender pay gap (Elder & Schmidt 2004; ILO 2004; EOC 2005a; HMSO 2005). Female workers in the UK, on average, are paid 17 per cent per hour less than males for comparable full-time work. The pay gap is significantly wider for women who work part-time – they earn 40 per cent less per hour than full-time male workers (EOC 2007) – and in the private sector where it reaches 22 per cent (ILO 2004: 30). The status attached to work associated with women is also lower than that associated with men.

The areas of work within which women traditionally tend to be concentrated, are generally those with lower average pay and lower status. . . . For women to obtain better paid (and higher status) work, it is usually necessary for them to consider working in occupations typically perceived as male.

(Miller *et al.* 2004: 22)

As well as the pay and prestige, horizontal segregation is also damaging to women's employment and personal prospects insofar as it limits their opportunities. This could equally be said of men's opportunities for working in areas traditionally associated with women. The difference being that, when men do enter female-dominated sectors, they are more likely to enter at higher levels, be promoted with relative speed and generally receive higher than average wages. By contrast, women who enter male-dominated occupations may fare better than they would in female-dominated work in terms of status – although this is by no means unproblematically conferred – and sometimes initial pay benefits, but they enjoy mixed fortunes in terms of the longer-term pay gap, and have lower retention and promotion rates as compared to men in the same field (Davey & Lalande 2004; ILO 2004; Miller *et al.* 2004; EOC 2005a; Woodfield 2006a). Moreover, this mixed picture holds for male-dominated *professional* work; in skilled and semi-skilled manual work, women fare even worse than they do in gender-typical areas (ILO 2004).

This gendered occupational segregation has also been highlighted as damaging to the economies concerned insofar as markets are not recruiting employees from the widest possible pool of workers, and 'there is a clear correlation between employment sectors where men

predominate and skills shortages' (Miller *et al.* 2004; HMSO 2005; EOC 2005a: 11; see also, EOC 2006).

Vertical segregation

As with horizontal segregation, vertical segregation has been eroded considerably since the Sex Discrimination legislation of the 1970s. At that time, in the UK, approximately one in ten professional workers was female, whereas the figure now is two-fifths (EOC 2006). Despite this upward trend, the UK still does not compare well against many other countries in this regard. In North America, Australia and New Zealand, women comprise more than 50 per cent of professional workers (ILO 2004). More generally, women's inroads into professional work are further decisive – around 60 per cent – in some Eastern European and South American countries.

The presence of women in senior and managerial positions has also increased (Crompton 1997; Holton 1998; Wacjman 1998; Jones & Goulding 1999; Miller *et al.* 2004; HMSO 2005). It is nevertheless the case that women in the UK comprise less than 40 per cent of workforces in 'high-paid' jobs. They account for 34 per cent of managers and senior officials, 29 per cent of marketing and sales managers and 17 per cent of directors and chief executives of major organisations (EOC, 2006). At the other end of the scale, they account for over 70 per cent of workforces in very 'low-paid' jobs, including 96 per cent of school midday assistants, 72 per cent of sales and retail assistants, 76 per cent of cleaners and domestics and 73 per cent of kitchen and catering assistants (*ibid.*).

Women in the UK are still under-represented in the most powerful public positions – they comprise only 39 per cent of public appointments, 8 per cent of senior judges, 15 per cent of university vice-chancellors, 10 per cent of senior police officers, less than 1 per cent of senior ranks in the armed forces and only account for 35 per cent of workers in all government departments (EOC 2005b; EOC 2006). In addition, there is evidence that women have less likelihood of being successful in senior managerial roles (Holton 1998). To pick up on a point made above, it is further noteworthy that men occupy a disproportionate amount of senior positions even in occupations and sectors where women are concentrated, such as Health and Social Service. Less than 6 per cent of managers are employed part-time, but the majority of these are women (*ibid.*).

The pattern whereby women are under-represented in managerial ranks is evident elsewhere. In 2002, women only accounted for between

20 and 40 per cent of managerial positions in the majority of countries surveyed by the International Labour Office for its *Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling* report (ILO 2004). In the US, women comprise 46 per cent of administrative and managerial workers, but only 12 per cent of actual managers, and are 'particularly under-represented in higher positions' (ibid.: 17). In Japan, Bahrain, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia, females represent less than 10 per cent of administrative and managerial workers.

Moreover, in only one – Costa Rica – of the 48 'Group 1' countries surveyed women held more than 50 per cent of the most senior and powerful positions – legislators, senior officials and senior managers. In all countries, bar four, the number of women in senior positions is below 40 per cent, and in half of these countries is below 30 per cent (ibid. 2004). The global average for female representatives in national governments is less than 16 per cent, although women have made inroads into cabinets in many countries, albeit, again, in gender-typical areas such as Health, Education and Social Affairs (ibid.: 22).

In terms of top positions in the private sector in particular, women fare even worse. In Australia they comprise only 8 per cent of board members. The percentage is higher in the US, where female board membership with the Fortune 500 list has reached 14 per cent (ibid.: 20). Even in Sweden, usually identified as a beacon country in terms of its egalitarian policies, it is noted that 'far more men than women occupy top positions' (Dryler 1998: 375; see also ILO 2004). This pattern is not simply a function of female workforce participation rates. The ILO survey found that 'after several years of work, a woman is more likely to be found in a lower position than a man with the same qualifications who joined the labour market at the same time' (2004: 17).

Gender-based vertical segregation affects all sectors. To build on points made above, even within the female-dominated sectors, women are disadvantaged by vertical segregation. In the service sector, for instance, women are concentrated within social and personal services work, and far less likely to be found in financial and business service work; in the education sector, they are far more likely to stay in the junior ranks than male counterparts (Elder & Schmidt 2004; Miller *et al.* 2004; Charles, 2005).

As we might expect, vertical segregation has also been, somewhat truthfully, cited as a cause of the gender pay gap (ILO 2004: 30). What is of greater interest is the fact that even women who achieve top positions receive less pay than their male comparators, and the average pay gap in the higher echelons is bigger than the national average; indeed

it further widens the more senior the position (EOC 2002; ILO 2004: 31; Miller *et al.* 2004).

Occupational segregation and inequality revisited – the overall picture

As has been indicated, the majority of research characterises both horizontal and vertical segregation as phenomena significantly associated with occupational gender inequality, and with female disadvantage. In relation to both types of segregation these claims have been challenged, and the case made for a more sophisticated, empirically accurate and operationally useful deployment of segregation concepts.

It is suggested that, while all occupational segregation entails some inequality, the degree to which this is *always* to female disadvantage, and male advantage, has been overplayed (Blackburn & Jarman 2006). Although the systemic and systematic disadvantages to women are acknowledged within this perspective, what is also highlighted, therefore, are the heterogeneous gender effects of segregation (*ibid.*: 291).

A major point to emerge from this approach is that, if we take into account the *overall* diverse and complex effects of both horizontal *and* vertical segregation, occupational segregation, as it has developed over the last three decades in the UK, holds some advantages for women. Notwithstanding the very considerable opportunity costs to both sexes in relation to their restricted choices, women fare better than men within this framework in certain important respects.

In terms of vertical segregation, they are advantaged because they are concentrated in the middle and above-middle occupational ranks, in non-manual occupations, albeit with far great frequency in the lower echelons of these roles. Their employment is focused in 'Professional', 'Associated professional and technical' and clerical and service and sales occupations (Charles 2005: 296; Blackburn & Jarman 2006). Although many of their jobs are low-paid, as a group, women are not frequently found in the very lowest occupational categories of 'Process, plant and machinery operatives' and 'Elementary occupations', which are characterised by the lowest levels of required skill.

Men, as we have seen, are undoubtedly dominant when it comes to the top occupational categories, and consequently are better remunerated overall, but they are a polarised occupational group and so are also dominant at the bottom of the occupational ladder, in skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled and manual work. It is suggested that 'the net result is the slight advantage to women' (Blackburn & Jarman 2006: 305). This is reported to currently be the case in the US, Canada, Japan, Belgium, France, Sweden, West Germany, Italy, Portugal and Switzerland

(ibid.; Charles 2005), and the 'strong similarity across country groups' is taken as evidence of a general and fundamental shape of sex segregation patterning (Charles 2005: 298). This patterning represents an improvement on the picture in the 1970s. Then, the same polarised pattern of male employment, versus the comparatively homogenous and bunched pattern of female employment, was noted (Shinar 1975; Gottfredson 1981), but it was concluded that 'employed men and women have the same occupational prestige on the average' (Gottfredson 1981: 553). The dangers of overlooking the overall picture of segregation by focusing only on male domination at the top end was equally highlighted then as 'misleading about sex differences' (ibid.: 553).

There is certainly a tendency in the available literature to deploy the term 'dominated' when referring to sectors where men are concentrated, but not when referring to those where women are over-represented. This tendency has obviously grown out of a desire and need to reflect the qualitative dominion of masculinity within the occupational sphere, and not simply men's quantitative advantage, and this requirement remains very much a live one. Equally, however, the researchers cited here are right that we need to keep the overall segregation patterning in mind if we are to understand the complexities of its relationship to inequality.

In this light, Blackburn and Jarman have also reviewed horizontal segregation and reconsidered its disadvantages to women alongside possible advantages. Indeed, the claim is that, contra the common assumption that vertical and horizontal segregation are inextricably bound up with each other and mutually reinforcing, there is a 'striking' tendency for them to move in opposite directions (Blackburn & Jarman 2006: 300). Horizontal segregation, when more effectively and systematically developed, reduces the opportunities for the occurrence of gender discrimination within gender-typed occupations. Overall, it is argued, women will be less discriminated against within male-typical work as there are fewer of them in it, and, more importantly, they will be less disadvantaged within female-typical work as, with fewer men, they will have more even opportunities of reaching the upper echelons. Blackburn and Jarman state that the best-case scenario would be low horizontal *and* vertical segregation, but also that 'this is not what we have observed' (300).

Sweden is taken as an example in point. It is very heavily horizontally segregated. Although, as we have seen, women are still under-represented at the highest occupational levels (Dryler 1998: 375; ILO 2004), vertical segregation is comparatively low as compared to many

other countries, most notably the UK and North America. According to Blackburn and Jarman, women suffer fewer disadvantages on four key variables designed by the United Nations to measure women's empowerment: proportion of seats in parliament, proportion of women in key managerial positions, proportion of women in professional and technical posts, and proportion of women who share earned income (ibid.: 295). They conclude that segregation causes and reflects inequality, that we should not be misled into thinking women in any country have gained equality, but the picture with regard to female disadvantage needs to be examined alongside the elements of advantage (Blackburn & Jarman 2006: 305).

Blackburn and Jarman have, in particular, challenged the use of the terms 'horizontal' and 'vertical' segregation, and have argued that they can be misleading and analytically problematic. These terms will, nevertheless, still be used here, as they are used in the majority of existing research on segregation, although it is also acknowledged that they are contestable, and that the overall perspective is crucial.

Key explanations of occupational segregation patterns

Introduction

A variety of explanatory modes have been proposed to account for gendered occupational segregation patterns. The process of categorising them is both challenging and open to contestation, not least by the authors of the research being categorised. The range of approaches are commonly classified, on the one hand, as those giving emphasis to the 'individual' (these have also sometimes been grouped as 'supply', 'actor' or 'choice' factors), and, on the other hand, as those emphasising extra-individual factors, or, what might loosely be referred to as the 'social' (these have also sometimes been grouped as 'demand', 'organisation', 'materialist', 'structural', 'cultural' and 'institutional' factors). This broad and necessarily somewhat crude typology will be adopted here, despite its bluntness, as it highlights key underlying assumptions on each side which, in turn, point to particular conceptions of occupational 'choice' and its limitations, and different perspectives on the need, or not, for 'solutions' to address perceived occupational imbalances.

The differences in perspective between 'individual' versus 'social' accounts lie, not *necessarily* in the overall fundamental ontological assumptions of the positions – beliefs about what the human world is composed of – but where analytical and explanatory priority is granted. An important point of distinction is, for instance, the locus of the primary

attribution of agency. Broadly speaking, 'individual' approaches tend to theorise, either implicitly or explicitly, the individual as the primary site of occupational choice, and the most rational focus of academic enquiry. Those that emphasise extra-individual factors conversely tend to attribute agency primarily to forces outside of the individual, which act upon the individual, and therefore which should be the primary focus of study if we are to understand occupational segregation patterns.

Explanations that posit segregation as primarily a function of individual choice do not necessarily, however, claim the 'social' is of minimal importance, or that 'choice' is completely unfettered. Some of the individualist literature that takes the individual as the primary unit of analysis also assumes, often explicitly, that they are a product of early socialisation, or biological influence, both of which may be taken as important factors in shaping 'choice' processes and outcomes. The distinctiveness of this research, however, lies in the researchers' decision to place the primary analytical emphasis on the individual, and all that this implies: that, to understand crucial decision-making about work, the focus needs to be on the processes taking place within the individual, even if these are partly expressions of extra-individual influences, and that research needs to identify the 'effects' of these individual processes on work outcomes. Many individualist approaches derive from an attempt to critique alleged 'social determinism', or perspectives placing primary emphasis on social factors such as employers' attitudes, discrimination, disadvantages in education etc. These approaches, while they might admit of structural, institutional or organisational constraints on individual decision-making processes, usually fail to delineate in any detail what these might be and how they might operate; sometimes their effects are not addressed at all and the individual is posited as relatively fixed or given. Conversely, while some 'social' perspectives may, implicitly or explicitly, admit of a role for individual agency, they often fail to delineate or explore of what this might consist, or largely sideline it in their analysis. Even when focusing on individuals and how they generate their decisions, therefore, they are largely seeking to identify the 'effects' of the social.

One of the most important issues to highlight is that most of the research on segregation is based on methodological approaches to data that do not involve actually engaging with individuals in an in-depth manner. Somewhat paradoxically, this is especially the case with research taking a more 'individualist' perspective. Here, at most, individual-level data are derived from test instruments, or from national labour surveys that pick up on indicators of employment activity without

engaging directly with individuals at all. Those accounts that treat social, extra-individual factors as the primary units of analysis are far more often deployers of genuinely *individualised* accounts.

The remainder of this chapter will review the key research that has attempted to explain occupational segregation from both 'individual' and 'social' perspectives, but which also has deployed methodological approaches that do *not* involve accessing individual women workers' narrated accounts directly, although it may involve eliciting individual information via questionnaires, including open-ended questionnaire items in some cases. Chapter 3 will then focus on those far fewer examples of research that are based on directly accessed accounts of women workers narrating their occupational decisions, and which use qualitative methodologies to ensure in-depth descriptions from participants.

Modes of explanation giving primacy to individual factors

Individualist perspectives usually take as their starting point the assumption that broad, underlying and fixed differences between men and women exist, which are reflected in their employment choices and behaviour. This is most obviously the case in literature that seeks to demonstrate that a significant part of occupational segregation is a function of biological or 'brainsex' differences between the sexes.

'Brainsex' approaches

Doreen Kimura has been a key advocate of the 'brainsex' approach. In her influential book *Sex and Cognition* (2000), she summarises research on the relationship between basic sex differences and the production of cognitive effects, arguing that differences in both prenatal and life-course sex hormone levels are the chief factor in determining adult levels of spatial ability, mathematical reasoning, verbal ability, as well as other cognitive abilities (ibid.; see also Kimura 2006). These ability differences, she suggests, manifest themselves very early on in the development of children, notably before exposure to major differences in life experience, and remain regardless of different cultural gender norms that might exist in varying national contexts, and across changing historical periods (Kimura 2006). Women's roles have changed radically since the 1960s, in terms of their access to previously male-dominated educational and employment opportunities, for instance, and yet, she argues, their measured cognitive differences have not. Our sex differences, in this sense, parallel those found in non-humans where social influences are deemed less determining of behaviour, or are artificially minimised (such as in laboratories) (ibid.).

What should be noted here is that this research does not claim that *all* men are superior to *all* women in terms of, say, mathematical reasoning. Rather, that the average man is superior to the average woman in this regard, and that, despite there being a lot of overlap between many men's and women's abilities, there will be far more men who 'naturally' fall at the top end of the ability spectrum, and far more women who fall at the bottom end. Furthermore, ability differences dovetail with interest differences, so more men than women will be attracted by mathematics. Similarly, it is argued that women's innate cognitive composition and abilities naturally predispose them to more interest in animate rather than inanimate phenomena, and in particular, in people, nurturance and verbal memory and expression (Kimura & Clarke 2002; Kimura 2006). We should expect occupational segregation patterns to reflect such differences, and eschew perspectives that misrecognise these patterns as a function of social determination. Women will be attracted to nursing in far higher numbers than men, although some men will want to undertake nursing work, and men will be attracted to engineering in far higher numbers than women, although some women will excel in this field. However,

We need to face the fact that men and women may be disproportionately represented across a wide range of occupations and professions, without the inference that there must have been either deliberate or systemic obstacles being put in the way of either sex. Rather, it appears that self-selection on the basis of talents and interests now largely determine such career choices. Engaging in coercive social engineering to balance the sex ratios may actually be the worst kind of discrimination. It also serves to entice some people into fields they will neither excel in nor enjoy.

(Kimura 2001: 3)

On the basis of the evidence she surveys, Kimura condemns much of the debate on occupational segregation that has taken place since the 1970s. The use of terms such as 'under-representation' and 'discrimination', she views as preventing an appropriate level of rational discussion (2006). Although she does acknowledge that some significant contextual variations (national variations, for instance) exist in the numbers of women participating in 'male' fields, such as engineering, and that these are due to *some* social amplification of natural differences, she concludes that the basic, widespread patterning of male and female occupations (as well as, in some cases, men in very senior positions)