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Inequality in professional work

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The persistence of income inequality despite inclusion efforts is a paradox that remains central to academic and policy inquiry alike. In this special issue, we bring together *nine articles* published in the *Journal of Professions and Organizations* (JPO) to highlight the ways in which professional stratification is moderated by intersectional identities and organizational diversity initiatives.

Professions have long provided an excellent lens to investigate processes of social inequality and continue to be an important site to understand new formulations of identity and resource circulation globally (Harrington and Seabrooke 2020). We propose that the body of research around inequality in the professions answers three important questions; First, how do individuals experience and create strategies to manage their professional lives? Second, how do factors outside of the workplace influence professional experiences? And, third, how do organizations try to increase diversity and what are the outcomes of these initiatives?

Altogether, we see these articles as building on the argument that social structure and inequality are not static concepts and hence, addressing their challenges requires dynamic and interconnected solutions. Social structure and inequality are processes influenced by multiple interactions between people, organizations, cultures, and environments. Using empirical illustrations and new theoretical frameworks, these selected articles reinforce the premise that professional expertise is often 'done' (West and Zimmerman 1987) and that such performances call for attention across different levels of analysis (Risman 2004).

The *first two* articles by Brady (2018) and Gorman (2015) contribute theoretically and empirically to understanding how individual and organizational processes are racialized, gendered, and classed. Brady's (2018) critical feminist sociology of expertise offers a new macro framework for appreciating the manifestation of professional inequality. Brady argues that performances of expertise are also performances of other socio-material identities like gender, race, and class inequalities. Seen in this way, expertise is not an unbiased category or qualification, but, rather, an interactional mechanism central to the coproduction of power. The argument that social structure is a site of struggle extends the call for multi-level analysis to reveal that structure is also a relational environment that recursively generates and reproduces itself (126). For example, Brady (2018) writes about how critical food and nutrition studies have outlined the ways in which 'eating right' (i.e., nutritional expertise) is imbued with racializing and classes discourses (131): a revelation that reinforces their base argument that structure in this approach is not a noun but a verb (126). Brady's argument builds on an earlier empirical study in this journal by Gorman (2015) on the interplay between individual qualities, socioeconomic background, and organizational context. In useful symmetry, Gorman (2015) employs the idea of intersectional production of power by elaborating the ways in which employers' cognitive biases about gender, race, and class influence their perceptions and interpretations of a candidates' individual qualities. Key to Gorman's analysis is temporality as a way of thinking about these factors. Gorman's study (2015: 124) demonstrates the ways in which candidates' background characteristics impact their opportunities both before and after organizational entry including opportunities individuals have to develop technical abilities, cultural proficiency, and social connections.

The *next two articles* (Wilson 2022; Taminiau et al. 2022) contribute to uncovering individual strategies for navigating professional work addressing how individuals experience and create strategies to manage their professional lives. Drawing upon data from the craft beer

industry, Wilson's (2022) study shows how minority workers can leverage their race and gender identities as a strategy to counter to conventional expressions of professionalism. These alternative professional identities, what Wilson labels as 'marked professionalism', allow workers to construct a professional identity that reflects both the constraints they face as members of non-dominant status groups as well as the potential opportunities these status(es) can give when aligned with business goals in specific contexts. Similarly, the study by Taminiau et al. (2022) on female managers shows the difficulties women face in confronting notions of the 'work hard, play hard' ideal worker (Acker 1992) within consultancy. Specifically, life course choices that women might want to make may clash with the presentation and visibility demanded of a consultant ideal identity. In turn, this identity mismatch could have negative implications for women's leadership attainment within professional service firms. Both of these studies make a clear case for regarding career progression beyond the consideration of individual responsibility.

To further reinforce the argument that career progression should not be considered an individual task we have included *three articles* from Ballakrishnen (2017), Cohen and Duberley (2020), and Zhu, Zhau and Liu (2020). Together, these address the question about how factors outside of the workplace—like gender stereotypes—can influence professional experiences and have surprising outcomes in different global sites and contexts. For example, Ballakrishnen's (2017) study on elite professionals in India shows how gendered assumptions of work conversely made women in local law firms more desirable than their male counterparts. Instead of being passed over for opportunities or dismissed by clients, these women were seen as 'best suited for handling the important, global work they were entrusted with and often requested on transactions' (Ballakrishnen: 324). The Cohen and Duberley article (2020) uses the accounts of women professionals on a BBC radio program to show how external jolts, such as war, can provide new spaces for previously sidelined groups and potentially change the professional landscape itself. Cohen and Duberley use Gorman's three dimensions of professional occupations (technical ability, cultural proficiency, and social connections) to examine the interplay between structure and agency in each case. And finally, that findings from emerging countries offer much needed contrast to the Anglo-American accounts and illustrate how negotiations between global and local forces materialize in varying professional outcomes (Zhu, Zhau and Liu 2020). Zhu, Zhau and Liu's article on corporate lawyers in Beijing shows how social production of the Chinese corporate legal elite is primarily an outcome

of domestic social factors rather than international factors. The global flows of identity formation and resource circulation are a crucial area of study especially in transnational professions (Harrington and Seabrooke 2020). Together these articles tie back into the first two articles (Brady 2018 and Gorman 2015), providing clear evidence that inequality within the professions is produced through the interactions of a range of factors across levels of analysis.

The *two final papers* we chose for the special issue (Briscoe and von Nordenflycht 2014; Cecchi-Demeglio 2022) highlight the opportunities and challenges inherent in organizational responses to workplace inequalities, and, especially, the relationships between well-intentioned initiatives and their outcomes. Attention to social policy has been an important response to inequality and as papers on structural change suggest (e.g., Gorman: 129) variations in such policy (e.g., on-the-job development experiences) can have important implications for hiring and promotion. In their paper, Briscoe and von Nordenflycht (2014: 45) make a case for the gains to be reaped following such intentional change beyond the individual level. Particularly, they argue that policies that secure organizational support for diverse junior partners to learn rainmaking strategies can, beyond individual advantage, yield payoffs not just for diversity goals but also in terms of the firm's overall revenue. At the same time, policies alone are unlikely to produce expected positive outcomes, and despite well-meaning intentions, it is likely that many equality programs will fail to produce substantive change. To illustrate this point, we include a final paper by Cecchi-Dimeglio (2022) which presents data on how the application of the Mansfield Rule (a strategy aimed at increasing diversity within the applicant pools) within law firms ultimately shows no measurable impact on actual organizational diversity in hiring. Cecchi-Dimeglio further articulates the ways in which formal equality can hinder the possibilities for substantive progress by showing how the increase in the number of women in an applicant pool, as the Mansfield Rule aims to do, does not always impact the outcome at selection, and instead helps in creating a false sense of equality. This research reminds us that peripheral changes without structural overhauls are unlikely to address any of the complex drivers of decisions or behaviours within organizations. Without these immersions into systems of planning, seemingly immutable fixes at mechanisms have little success in actually changing the *processes* of inequality.

In summary, although irradicating discrimination might be a lofty goal, striving for recursive incremental progress is an urgent one. We trust that these contributions to the research on inequality in professional work

will give researchers, individuals, and organizations new ideas into how they might improve peoples' working lives for the better. It is a collective effort to generate new data and theoretical concepts which can help answer the key interrelated questions these authors urge us to consider about individual professional experiences, interactional strategies, and organizational initiatives. We continue to welcome and applaud studies that contribute to these important conversations.

FEATURED ARTICLES

(Numbered below in order of discussion)

1. Brady, Jennifer (2018). Toward a critical, feminist sociology of expertise. *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 5(2): 123–138. https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/joy004.
2. Gorman, E. (2015). Getting ahead in professional organizations: individual qualities, socioeconomic background and organizational context. *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 2(2): 122–147. http://jpo.oxfordjournals.org/content/2/2/122.abstract.
3. Wilson, E. (2022). 'It Could Never Be Just About Beer': Race, Gender, and Marked Professional Identity in the U.S. Craft Beer Industry. *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 9(2): 232–245. https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/joac010.
4. Taminiau, Y., Teelken, C., Berkhof, N., and Kuyt, T. (2022). In or out of the game? Exploring the perseverance of female managers leaving consultancy and its implications. *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 9(2): 216–231. https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/joac009.

5. Ballakrishnen, S. (2017). 'She Gets the Job Done': Entrenched Gender Meanings and New Returns to Essentialism in India's Elite Professional Firms. *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 4(3): 324–342. https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/jox009.
6. Cohen, L., and Duberley, J. (2020). Women in extraordinary times: The impact of external jolts on professional women's careers. *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 7(3): 247–264. https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/joaa019.
7. Zhu, J., Zhao, Y., and Liu, S. (2020). Inside the 'Red Circle': The Production of China's Corporate Legal Elite. *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 7(1): 87–100. https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/joaa006.
8. Briscoe F., and von Nordenflycht A. (2014) 'Which Path to Power? Workplace Networks and the Relative Effectiveness of Inheritance and Rainmaking Strategies for Professional Partners', *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 1: 33–48. http://jpo.oxfordjournals.org/content/1/1/33.full.
9. Cecchi-Domeglio, P. (2022). Is the Mansfield Rule moving the needle for Women and Minorities? *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 9(2): 246–272. https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/joac007.

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Harrington, B., and Seabrooke, L (2020) 'Transnational Professionals', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46: 399–417.

Risman, B. J (2004) 'Gender as a Social Structure: Theory Wrestling with Activism'. *Gender & Society*, 18: 429–51.

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