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[Keith Hamm](#)

In the battle of the sexes, the pay gap persists

Conceived by famed sociologist Paula England in the mid-1990s, the occupational devaluation theory helps explain why workers in occupations with more women get paid less than workers in occupations with more men.

“The theory says that we devalue women’s contributions in society” and sheds light on the persistent pay gap between men and women, said Catherine Taylor, an [associate professor of sociology](#) at UC Santa Barbara. “Women still earn 85 cents for every dollar men earn, and we know part of the reason is because women are in occupations that pay less. But our research is asking, do we actually pay occupations less *because* women are in them?”

Principally authored by Taylor, a recently published study, “[Occupational gender composition is related to occupational wages: Causal evidence from a survey experiment investigating occupational devaluation](#)” puts the theory to a new test.

Taylor and co-authors — Safa Salim (New York University), Asaf Levanon (University of Haifa), Tamar Kricheli-Katz (Tel-Aviv University) and England (NYU Abu Dhabi) — developed an experiment in which respondents were presented with an occupation composed of different percentages of women and asked what they thought the job ought to pay.

As their model occupation, the researchers choose management consulting, which is generally viewed as gender neutral. They then presented that occupation with three distinct gender demographics: the first as male-dominated (composed of 25% women); the second as gender-mixed (45% women) and the third as female-dominated (67% women). Study participants were then asked to suggest a salary to each group.

Taylor and her team found that respondents recommended a lower salary — close to \$1,000 less per year — to the female-dominated group.

“Our study showed a causal mechanism,” Taylor said. Occupations with a higher percentage of women pay less precisely because women are associated with them. And the gender of the respondent did not influence his or her salary recommendation; both women and men respondents recommended lower pay to the occupational group more heavily populated with men employees.

The study suggests that reasons rest more with inherent societal biases than overt sexism, and real world takeaways could help employers combat biases, Taylor said. “I think it’s important that employers understand that they themselves — well-meaning individuals — sometimes devalue women without thinking about it. The pay gap is not about some inherent preference in women for jobs that offer lower wages, but rather it is that we actually do pay women’s occupations less because we devalue women. Having that message out there is valuable.”

“One suggestion,” she added, “would be for employers to make sure that their criteria for paying people is standardized, based on, for example, a certain level of education and the number of years of experience an employee has, regardless of gender. For an employer, it’s worth doing that work of creating equity. [It’s better for organizations if there’s more equity.](#)”

Tags

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#)

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