**Title**
Economic Representations, Academic and Everyday



**ISBN**
9780203927649

**Author**
Bielby, DD

**Publication Date**
2008-05-15

**DOI**
10.4324/9780203927649

Peer reviewed

# 6 Economic sociology

## Reflections, refractions, and other re-visions

*Denise D. Bielby*

### Introduction

In 1998, the Wharton School of Business and the Department of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania initiated a series of sponsored conferences to integrate sociological approaches ~~into~~ the study of economic phenomena. In their call for a "new" economic sociology, the organizers of the conference series emphasized the need for an institutionally informed and culturally rich analysis and understanding of economic life that drew upon the legacy of contributions to early sociological thought. That work~~,~~ by Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel, which analyzed production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services, engaged as a central concern the relationship between the economy and the larger society. Fundamental to the insights of these early social theorists, the Penn conference organizers observed, were the analytical frames of domination and power, structure and agency, solidarity and inequality, and ideology and culture that persist to this day as core concerns ~~in~~ the discipline of sociology (Guillen, Collins, England, and Marshall, 2002). "The classics thus planted the seeds for the systematic study of social classes, gender, race, complex organizations, work and occupations, economic development and culture as part of a unified sociological approach to economic life" (p. 1).

The goal of bringing sociological insight into economic life is not without its challenges. While ~~both~~ economists and economic sociologists seek understanding of the economic activity of markets and firms, ~~and~~ of small groups (such as households) and individuals, they differ in their explanations. Consider, for example, the association between gender and career outcomes. It is well documented that men are more likely than women to participate in the labor force, and that men average more hours of paid labor per week and more weeks of employment per year. They tend to hold different occupations, work in different industries, firms and jobs, and men out earn women, hold more complex jobs, and they are more likely to supervise workers of the other sex and to dominate the top positions in their organization. Economists and sociologists agree that gender is linked to employment incomes, but they differ in explaining the associations. As Reskin and Bielby (2005, p. 1) observe about the neoclassical approach to these differences: "Economists have sought explanations in the characteristics and preferences of *individual workers* or *employers* … [and have looked to] sex differences in training and experience, career commitment, or competing demands on time and energy as other reasons. Others focus on employers' preferences for workers of one sex or the other (*taste discrimination*) or on employers' beliefs that workers of one sex or the other are more costly or less profitable to employ (*statistical discrimination*)." Sociologists, on the other hand, view the segregation of men and women's career outcomes as a causal mechanism that accounts for some of the explanations economists consider to be exogenous. Central to sociologists' explanations of the sex difference in career outcomes are the concepts of social differentiation and social stratification, that is, the social location of individuals within social structure, which is consequential to life outcomes. In terms of differences in career outcomes, the occupational segregation of women and men exposes them to different employment practices and reward systems that can amplify or diminish sex differences in other work outcomes.

In this chapter, I consider three social institutions of importance to sociology in which the representation of economic phenomena makes a central contribution: the family, the workplace, and the media. The family comprises the economic activity of households; it is also where the feeding and caring of individuals traditionally takes place. Household labor and marital decision-making are fundamentally organized by gender, and explanations for it are analyzed and understood differently by economists and sociologists. The workplace is the location for the productivity of the firm, but the labor force attachment of employees entails work effort and job commitment. Neoclassical economists attribute the earnings gap between men and women to gender differences in the allocation of effort and of commitment to work and family roles, but to what extent do those differences actually exist, and under what circumstances on the job and in the family? The media includes the mass culture industries of television and film, and as businesses they seek production efficiency and profit-maximization. However, industry production takes place under short-term contracting in a context of considerable ambiguity, risk, and uncertainty, and its products, each unique, are made up of artistic and other aesthetic elements. How does culture *per se* affect the social organization of this industry and the trade of its products, in particular, in the marketplace of global exchange? In the sections that follow, sociological representations of economic phenomena are elaborated, and the conditions and effects of how these representations operate are discussed. The conclusion addresses the question of what is at stake in using and/or producing one set of representations against others in doing sociological research.

## The family

Families are the sites of the production and consumption of household labor, but they are also the places of sexuality, eating, sleeping, and of the thick and close forms of relatedness imaged by biological ('blood') ties of kinship"

(Thorne, 1992, p. 10). In any domestic relationship, an unequal division of labor in household and paid work shapes the relative power each partner has to pursue her or his interests within the family. Social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976), applied to couples' decision-making (Blood and Wolfe, 1960) and marital conflict (Scanzoni, 1970), reveals how financial resources provide leverage in bargaining between spouses; the partner with the greater earning capacity is consistently better able to pursue his or her self-interest (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Duncan and Duncan, 1978).

Exchange theory is gender neutral in its treatment of power in domestic relationships.[1] Gender differences in the distribution of resources and in alternative opportunities are exogenous; whichever partner happens to have greater resources and better alternatives brings more power to the relationship. However, research motivated by feminist sociological concerns shows how gender ideology and gendered institutions shape exchange within domestic relationships (Pyke, 1996). England has suggested that women are more likely to invest in relationship-specific skills, placing them at a disadvantage relative to partners whose skills and resources are unaffected by the dissolution of an intimate relationship (England and Kilbourne, 1990). England also emphasizes the effects of a cultural ideology that devalues traditionally female work and encourages women to pursue altruistically joint familial interests rather than personal self-interest, what Heimer (1996) refers to more appropriately as a normatively prescribed obligation rather than altruism.

Sociological research on gender, power, and marital relations has also shown that gender ideology introduces asymmetry in husbands' and wives' decision-making in the family. In research that tested the neoclassical economic model of family migration decisions among dual-earner couples (Mincer, 1978), Bielby and Bielby (1992) show that gender ideology introduces asymmetry in husbands' and wives' decision about relocating for a better job. The neoclassical model is also gender neutral: both husbands and wives should be unwilling to relocate if doing so disrupts a spouse's career and fails to improve the economic well-being of the family. Accordingly, the model predicts that, all else constant, one's willingness to move for a better job will be negatively related to the spouse's current income. In fact, contrary to the predictions of the neoclassical model, willingness to relocate for a better job was highly contingent on both gender and gender-role beliefs. Women behaved as predicted by the model: the higher their husband's earnings, the less willing they were to relocate for a better job for themselves. In contrast, traditional males – those who believed in the primacy of a husband's role

1 Social exchange theory was developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s by Peter Blau, Richard Emerson, George Homans, and John Thibaut and Harold Kelly to provide a theory of power that is present in all social relations, even intimate ones, and does not involve intent to harm, coerce, or even influence. As such, it differs from traditional conceptions of power as coercive, and it is consistent with the principles of supply and demand that govern economic exchange. Emerson's exchange conception of power included two central ideas: dependency is the source of one actor's power over another, and power is an attribute of a relation, not an actor (see Molm, 1997).

as provider and who disapproved of employed mothers – were not influenced at all by their wives' earnings. Instead, they gave primacy to their own careers or overall family well-being. However, not all placed their own career interests ahead of those of other family members. Men who rejected traditional gender-role ideology were deterred from relocating if their spouses were in well-paid jobs, although even these men were less sensitive to disruption of their spouses' careers than were employed wives under comparable circumstances. These findings suggest the extent to which the household decision-making is negotiated around symbols of masculinity and femininity (see Brines, 1994; Goffman, 1977) and is contingent on the degree to which spouses hold themselves accountable to cultural definitions of gender (see also Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Bolak, 1997; Pyke and Coltrane, 1996; Thompson, 1991).

## The workplace

Longstanding sociological interest in work commitment (e.g. Selznick, 1949, Salancik, 1977) invites two questions relevant to economic sociology: "Who works hard for the money and are there differences by gender?" and: "Is part of the earnings gap between men and women attributable to gender differences in the allocation of effort to work and family roles?" Becker's (1985) elaboration of human capital approaches to earnings inequality proposed a formal model of the allocation of effort that explains gender differences in labor market outcomes solely on the basis of the utility-maximizing choices of job seekers. In the standard human capital model, women who are burdened by family responsibilities and anticipate intermittent employment seek jobs that are compatible with the demands of family life. Such jobs rely more on general training than on firm-specific training, and they involve lower wage penalties for leaving and reentering the paid labor force than do the jobs most likely to appeal to individuals who anticipate continuous labor force participation (Polachek, 1981; Tam, 1997). According to this model, a substantial portion of the gender gap in earnings is attributable to the fact that women have fewer years of labor market experience and acquire different kinds of human capital (more general, less specific) than do men.

The earnings of men and women, Becker argued, are expected to differ even when they have the same amount and type of investments in human capital. That is, women with family responsibilities allocate less effort to their jobs outside the home than do men with comparable skills and labor market experience. Therefore, hour for hour, men are more productive than are women (who have greater household responsibilities), and men receive more pay and better career opportunities as a result. Moreover, gender segregation results because "married women seek occupations and jobs that are less effort intensive and otherwise more compatible with their home responsibilities" (Becker, 1985, S52).

The findings of two studies – one on the wage penalties for time spent on housework (Hersch and Stratton, 1997) and the other for motherhood (Budig and England, 2001) – are consistent with Becker's reasoning. Both of these analyses pose the allocation of effort and discrimination (not against women as a class but against those who somehow signal a greater commitment to household work) as alternative explanations for the wage penalties, and neither study is able to differentiate definitively between the two. However, the notion that women's productivity suffers from family demands is at odds with several lines of empirical research. In a study that used self-reports of effort expended on the job from the 1973 and 1977 Quality of Employment Surveys, Bielby and Bielby (1988) showed that on average employed women allocate just as much if not more effort to work than do men. In fact, the results showed that compared to men with similar household responsibilities, human capital, and work contexts, women allocate substantially more effort to outside employment. They found that to the extent that women do allocate effort away from the workplace in order to meet family demands, those trade-offs bring their work effort back to the level of the typical male with no such family responsibilities. Overall, however, the impact of household and family arrangements on work effort was small, a finding that was replicated with data from the 1991 National Organizations Study (Bielby, Bielby, Huffman, and Velasco, 1995).

In the mid-1980s, economists began writing about the concept of "efficiency wages" – above-market wages that elicit greater effort and commitment from employees. Labor economists who apply this model to gender differences in earnings assume that women have a higher propensity to leave a firm than do men and, therefore, anticipate a lower return for a given wage over the course of their tenure with the employer. In Becker's model, women earn less because they do not work as hard as men. Other versions of efficiency wage models (e.g. Robinson and Wunnava, 1991) suggest that men work hard because they have been bought off with a wage premium, whereas women work hard because they are closely supervised. The efficiency wage model implies that job segregation mediates the relationship between gender, work effort, and earnings, and if it is based on employer's' beliefs about gender differences in monitoring costs or turnover rates, it is also fully consistent with statistical discrimination as an underlying mechanism. Evaluating the explanatory power of efficiency wage theory to account for gender differences in labor market outcomes requires consideration of research on worker discipline, the notion of a gift exchange between employer and employee, and stereotypes about gender differences in work commitment and other-regarding behavior, and further, to scholarship designed to test more directly the relationship between work context and work effort. Although some labor market economists recognize the concept of gift exchange (Akerlof, 1982), although in a characteristically "stylized" form (under norms of reciprocity the recipient of a gift from an employer in the form an above-market wage is obliged to return the favor in the form of high work effort norms) analysis of the implicit contract and of the trust it generates does not attempt to undertake exploration of the circumstances under which social ties between economic actors become infused with distinctive meanings and obligations, particularly those shaped by gender, as called for by sociologists (see Zelizer, 2002).

## The media

### *Hollywood*

Hollywood prides itself in its ability to find and reward the most talented creative workers, but when it comes to writers, young, white men write about three-fourths of the scripts for feature films and television series. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Writers Guild of America, West, the union that represents television and film writers, commissioned a series of monographs to determine the basis for the widespread perception among its members of sex, race, and age discrimination in employment and earnings in the entertainment industry (Bielby and Bielby, 1987, 1989, 1993, 1998). In seeking understanding of the institutional structures and business practices that shape the distinctive patterns of writers' careers, first, the research considered how gender plays a key role in the relative valuation of women's' contribution in the television industry (Bielby and Bielby, 1992), while analysis of the film industry described the ways in which women lost positions of central importance to the creation and production of films between the founding of the industry and the rise of the studio system, and the marginal position they hold as writers in the contemporary era (Bielby and Bielby, 1996). The study of older writers identified how professional experience can become a liability rather than an asset in creative industries, and documented the precipitous decline in the value of reputation and experience of older writers, illustrating how the relentless pursuit of a younger audience demographic has pushed older, experienced writers out of the employment picture altogether (Bielby and Bielby, 1993; 2001). Analysis of typecasting of writers of color indicated that they are channeled into minority-themed genres that are vulnerable to the inevitable cycles in genre popularity (Bielby and Bielby, 2002).

Cumulatively, this work showed that the distinctive features of work in Hollywood – entailing a high level of risk and uncertainty, an emphasis on reputation, demographically-based marketing, and a product that embodies cultural idioms about age, gender, and race – builds an especially insidious form of discrimination into everyday business practice. Decisions about employment and work assignments are made in a corporate context where accountability for equal employment opportunity is absent, and the tendency to rely on imitation, hunches, rules-of-thumb, and typecasting allows stereotypes to influence those decisions. As in other areas of the corporate world, when managers have unfettered discretion concerning personal judgments about who best "fits" the job, more often than not, the person deemed most suitable matches the gender, race, and age of those already doing the job. Who you know can determine access to positions of influence in organizations.

In a fuller analysis of the ways in which project-based labor markets like Hollywood's contribute systematically to the disparities across socio-demographic groups of writers, a focus on the consequences of brokering among talent agencies demonstrated how they create labor market segmentation (Bielby and Bielby, 1999). Elite or "core" agencies are those that transcend their role as market brokers between the suppliers and purchasers of writing services by participating actively in the production process. Writers who are represented by such agencies are substantially more likely to find employment, and they earn considerably more than equally accomplished writers with non-core representation. Shifting focus to the institutional arrangements that underlie the organizational structure of Hollywood, other work documented the ways in which network executives, who must balance competing commercial (e.g. investors, advertisers) and creative (e.g. critics, writer-producers) constituencies in the television industry, rely upon symbolic markers of legitimacy, including ironically, the reputation of writer-producers, to create the impression that decision-making about programming is rational and minimizes risk and uncertainty (Bielby and Bielby, 1994). Further work on Hollywood addressed the thesis that concentration of ownership among media companies reduces diversity in media content in the context of the FCC's phasing out of ownership restrictions in network television in the 1990s (Bielby and Bielby, 2003). That work revealed that the impact of deregulation reduced the number of organizational settings in which those who create television series are employed, and increased corporate control over the circumstances under which they practice their craft.

### *Global markets*

The culture industries of television and film have a global reach and research that has analyzed the culture world of exported television programming reveals how its economic vitality is organized through embedded social networks and aesthetic valuation of its commodities (Bielby and Harrington, 2002). Sustained by the syndicated market where primetime programming recoups its exorbitant production costs through sales to individual stations around the country, by programming produced for non-primetime blocs to augment. The primetime lineup, and increasingly, with productions created specifically for the global market, this "blue collar" neighbor of the elite primetime market has been in existence since television's earliest days. Westerns aired in Japan in the early 1950s, and US daytime dramas and their Latin American counterpart, telenovelas, compete for space in the expanding number of networks globally. According to industry analysts, the international market's vitality is due to the hypercompetitiveness of US series, although profits come less from license fees (revenue from the sales of a series to air on a network elsewhere in the world) than from the asset value of the distribution network and the preservation of a future market for subsequent productions. The dominance of US products in the global market underlies the worldwide debate about the often-presumed cultural hegemony of exported American programming.

Although profit-orientation is paramount to this industry, and its success is unmistakable, its market can be characterized as chaotic, unruly, and unpredictable, at best. Sociological analysis of this market demonstrates how the business practices of this industry must adapt to the inevitable ever-shifting complications introduced by import quotas, regulations imposed on content, and the “cultural discount” effected by local audiences who, given the choice of programming of equal technical quality, prefer domestic over foreign series (Bielby and Harrington, 2002). To economists, a television series is merely “an asset consisting of a bundle of broadcast rights” (Owen and Wildman, 1992, p. 181). However, analysis of the business of selling exported television reveals that television’s aesthetic properties must be carefully managed to achieve a sale, the series themselves transformed in order to cross borders, and that the cultural embeddedness of social networks comprising this culture world is pivotal to transactions (Bielby and Harrington, 2002, 2004). In short, examining the international industry of television sociologically as a culture world enables us to go beyond strictly business considerations such as risk, transaction costs, and profit, and instead focus upon the forms of cooperation and patterns of collective activity that create television as a cultural product and render it available and accessible to audiences worldwide. Although those in the business are motivated by profit, a central feature of this culture world is the ways collaboration among individuals with disparate understandings about the cultural product shape its production, distribution, and reception globally.

## Conclusion: what’s at stake?

In this chapter, I have intentionally covered a lot of ground – from the household to international markets – in order to demonstrate just how central economic representations are to enduring lines of inquiry in sociology, including inequality and stratification, among other fundamental social processes and conditions. It was not my intention to draw lines in the sand between the disciplines, but rather to demonstrate the deep interconnections among them. Sociological analysis of social systems of all levels of complexity presumes that they are highly dynamic, and the economy of the household and of the international marketplace are both determinative and consequential to the social institutions and social processes that command the attention of my colleagues. So, what’s at stake in the ways in which the economy is represented in the realms of sociological inquiry I’ve described? In the family, power, gender-role ideology, and symbols of masculinity and femininity are fundamental to decision-making about improving economic well-being of the family. As a unit of production and consumption the family is also a site of gender production, and the symbols and enactments that entails (Brines, 1994). In the workplace, analysis of women’s greater allocation of effort on the job indicates that the wage gap between men and women is not consistent with economic arguments that women’s productivity is lower than men’s due to family demands. That is, gender stratification of the labor force is not solely due to sex differences in labor market experience and different kinds of human capital, but also to consequential attributions made about women’s investments in household responsibilities. Of perhaps more direct relevance to the theme of this book are the ways in which the organization of production within and across firms fundamentally shapes the labor market outcomes and career trajectories of individuals. Contrary to assumptions about human capital and job experience, labor market segmentation is affected by firms' actions alongside distinctive features of work, as revealed by analysis of the project-based culture industry of Hollywood. When coupled with a high levels of risk and uncertainty, an emphasis on reputation, demographically-based marketing, a product that embodies cultural idioms, and a corporate world where managers are not held accountable for the stereotypes which they rely upon for evaluating "talent," employment and the organizations that structure labor markets are segmented in ways that are consequential to career outcomes. In short, careers that are profoundly shaped by stereotypes and typecasting are even more profoundly affected by the strategic actions taken by firms within their own network of relational ties. Finally, ongoing research on the culture worlds of the global syndication market for television reveals the importance of shared cultural understandings of the norms that guide economic transactions, of trust and the embeddedness of social relations to exchange relations, of the relevance of cultural properties of products to consumption, and to the ways in which each of these contribute to the formulation of the global economy.

There is little doubt of just how potentially fruitful the pursuit of a "new" economic sociology can be for the field of sociology. That agenda entails consideration of how culture (including gender), social networks and social capital, trust, and effort and motivation – among other considerations – contribute to the understanding of economic phenomena. As economic sociologist Paul DiMaggio observed, scholars are: "accustomed to the view … that economic relations influence ideas, worldviews, and symbols. That the reverse is true, that aspects of culture shape economic institutions and affairs, is less well understood" (1994, p. 27). One would hope that the nuance sociology has brought to the study of economic phenomena would be reciprocally valued. The challenge for the reductionism of dominant economic paradigms, such as neoclassical theory, is to engage the equally important findings of sociology (and of other fields for that matter, such as social psychology) on the determinative consequences of societal-level systems of differentiation and stratification, and of the impact of social structure on a variety of life outcomes. One would also hope that the findings of economic sociologists would have impact on the questions asked by economists, the analytical approaches they rely upon, and the conclusions they draw. Indeed there appear to be developments on that front, as indicated by the recent publication of a series of lectures on gender inequality presented at Cornell University by leading economists and sociologists in the field (Blau, Brinton, and Grusky, 2006). This collection offers fresh insight into the composition, history, and persistence of gender inequality over the past half-century. While the volume's primary focus is to provide an up-to-date assessment of the status of the gender pay gap, its other central aim is to evaluate whether the elimination of inequality can be anticipated in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, economic sociologists have a rich agenda to explore that may eventually reset the priorities of this vital field of analysis.

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