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SMITH, Maria

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# **"We're worth what we are paid": Unravelling the 'paradox of the contented female worker'**

Dr Maria Smith

Associate Lecturer

Sheffield Hallam University

Heart of the Campus

Collegiate Crescent

Sheffield

S10 2BP

[m.j.smith@shu.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.smith@shu.ac.uk)

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## **Abstract**

Pay satisfaction research has suggested that women are more satisfied with their pay than men, even though, in general, women earn less. This paper argues that this body of research has misconceptualised this phenomenon as an issue of women only. It also argues that previous explanations for this gender pay paradox have not adequately explained these patterns of satisfaction. A social constructionist approach to pay satisfaction is proposed which situates satisfaction within the context of structural inequality. This draws upon the scholarly work of feminist scholars and the conceptual ideas of Pierre Bourdieu. This theoretical approach is explored with data from qualitative interviews with support staff at universities in the United Kingdom. This evidence suggests that their pay satisfaction is influenced by beliefs about the 'value' of different occupations.

## **Key Words**

Pay satisfaction, pay inequality, gender inequality, universities, doxa.

## **Introduction**

For more than thirty years 'paradoxical' patterns in the pay satisfaction of men and women have been observed. Evidence suggests that women are often equally or more satisfied with their pay than men (Buchanan, 2005; Smith 2009; Valet, 2018). This 'paradox' occurs in spite of the fact that, on average, women tend to receive lower pay than men. In the United Kingdom, the difference between the average hourly full-time earnings of male and female employees, as a proportion of men's earnings, is 8.6% (ONS, 2018). The phenomenon is known as the 'paradox of the contented female worker' (Crosby, 1982).

This paper argues that research in this area has tended to misconceptualise this phenomenon by defining women's satisfaction as 'paradoxical', men's satisfaction as normative and as being an issue of women's employment only. It has also underestimated the importance of satisfaction levels amongst the low paid more generally, a shortcoming amplified by the predominantly quantitative approach utilised. It is argued that explanations for this paradox, which largely focus on the behaviour of women are problematic and unsatisfactory. In order to move beyond these limitations, this paper outlines a theoretical position which, drawing upon the work of feminist scholars and Bourdieu, argues that the social construction and shared understanding of the 'value' of different types of occupation is key to understanding paradoxical patterns of pay satisfaction. From this perspective, the pay satisfaction of the low paid is not 'paradoxical', but symptomatic and reflective of their inferior position in the labour market.

These arguments are informed by analysis of a qualitative dataset taken from a larger research project about the gender pay satisfaction paradox. Specifically, data is drawn from qualitative interviews with university staff who earned £30,000 or less. The evidence supports the idea that beliefs about 'appropriate' pay for different occupations influence evaluations of pay satisfaction amongst lower paid staff, irrespective of their gender, leading to ostensibly 'paradoxical' levels of satisfaction.

### **Is there a 'paradox of the contented female worker'?**

In the United Kingdom, the difference between average hourly full-time earnings of male and female employees, as a proportion of men's earnings is 8.6%. There is evidence to suggest that the pay gap is closing and the gap has fallen from 17.4% in 1997. However the rate of closure is slowing and potentially stalling

(ONS, 2018). Furthermore, the labour market is still segregated both horizontally and vertically; women are more likely than men to be employed in low paid, unskilled and part-time work (Sands, 2013) and are also less likely to be in senior roles (Sealy et al., 2016).

As a consequence, women's higher rates of pay satisfaction are considered 'paradoxical'. These higher satisfaction rates have been demonstrated in statistical studies from across the world, including the work of Valet (2018) and Davison (2014). However, there is also evidence to suggest that this phenomenon has been misnamed. It is recognised that this discrepancy between male and female levels of pay satisfaction is not necessarily a feature of *all* women. Indeed, the evidence has often suggested greater prevalence of the paradox amongst lower paid women than amongst higher paid women (Graham and Welbourne, 1999; Smith, 2009). Furthermore, there is consistent evidence that many patterns of pay satisfaction frequently oppose what common sense would predict (Thozhur et al., 2006), for example a meta analysis of 86 pay satisfaction studies, suggested that higher paid individuals, irrespective of gender, are not necessarily more satisfied with their pay than lower paid individuals (Judge et al, 2010). Clearly, far from this being a paradox of women, it may only be a paradox of some women. Furthermore, occupational group, irrespective of gender, appears to be key to understanding patterns of pay satisfaction.

On first inspection it is, therefore, not clear why this is considered a 'paradox' of women. Several scholars have already argued that the research has neglected men and incorrectly focussed upon the idea that women are 'different' to normative men (Clark, 1997; Buchanan, 2005). A social constructionist

perspective is a useful approach to aid understanding of why this misconception has taken place. This ontological position asserts that social phenomena are produced by social actors and do not exist independently of human action (Crotty, 1998), reality is thus emergent and constantly being revised and amended. However, it is possible for dominant social constructions to emerge, resulting in constructions of the world being bound up with power relations (Burr, 2003).

Examining the gender pay paradox from this perspective suggests that dominant constructions of gender have influenced scholarly work in this area. There is the persistent enlightenment era belief that men possess scientific rationality whilst women are governed by their emotions (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2010). At the same time, masculinity is associated with independence whilst femininity is associated with passivity (Ridgeway, 2011). In addition, there are socially constructed beliefs and assumptions about what counts and does not count as work which tends to categorise 'male' activities, but not 'female' activities, as work. For example, work is linked with ideas of production and economic theory and generally does not refer to unpaid labour such as housework, caring for children or caring for elderly relatives, all of which is usually undertaken by women, ensuring that the concept of work itself is not gender neutral (Irving, 2008). Work has thus, been socially constructed as an extension of masculinity and as an alien environment for women, making it appear 'natural' that women are the 'paradoxical' object of study.

Furthermore, this socially constructed version of reality, whereby women are 'paradoxical' and men are not, has prospered because quantitative methodologies, as employed by most researchers in this field, offer no

opportunity for participants to challenge the assumptions of researchers (Reinharz, 1992; Yeatman, 1994), ensuring that this misconception of the paradox continues. Indeed, statistical and positivist approaches have been criticised for both transmitting and reinforcing gender inequality (Harding, 1986) and reproducing dominant discourses (Webb et al., 2008). Feminist scholars have argued that research is often conducted by men, within male dominated institutions and draws upon theoretical concepts that have been developed by men (Mies, 1993), ensuring that research is often influenced by power relations. In this way, the tools of data collection used by researchers in this field have tended to reproduce the original misconceptions of the researchers.

In summary, although the gender pay paradox has been defined as an issue of women and their employment, research suggests that not all women report paradoxical patterns of satisfaction. Additionally, low paid workers in general, irrespective of gender, are also likely to be paradoxically satisfied. A social constructionist perspective suggests that dominant constructions of reality have influenced how the paradox has been conceptualised. Furthermore, quantitative methods have encouraged this misconception to prosper. Overall, this suggests a need for data on pay satisfaction which is not focussed on women alone or their 'abnormality' within the labour market. It also suggests that qualitative data might provide new insight into the gender pay paradox.

## **The limitations of previous explanations**

Scholars who have tried to explain the cause of this pay satisfaction paradox have tended to focus upon women alone. Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, given that the paradox has been incorrectly defined as an issue of women, this narrow focus has provided limited insight. Indeed, attempts at explanation have been significantly less successful than showing that the paradox exists in the first place (Buchanan, 2005).

Explanations have tended to draw upon theories of 'justice' and/or 'relativity'. A 'justice' approach conceptualises pay satisfaction or dissatisfaction as arising from the discrepancy between how much an individual thinks they should receive and how much they actually receive, for example satisfaction might depend on the level of input into work a person makes or how difficult they think their job is (Lawler, 1971, 1981). The relativity approach suggests that dissatisfaction is not merely the outcome of absolute conditions, but also depends upon with whom comparisons are made (Crosby, 1982). Thus, both 'justice' and 'relativity' theories emphasise that it is not simply the level of pay that influences satisfaction, but also the individual's perceptions of it.

Both psychologists and sociologists have referred to these theories when attempting to explain the paradox, but neither discipline has provided compelling or consistent evidence. Generally speaking, psychologists have tended to focus upon innate/learned differences between the genders, such as the degree to which men and women value money or the pay expectations of men and women. However, the evidence to support these psychological explanations is not substantial (Buchanan, 2005; Mueller and Kim, 2008). Furthermore, the uneven distribution of the gender pay paradox across income levels, clearly



suggests that there are not psychological differences between men and women that cause women to be more satisfied (Valet, 2018).

Sociologists, conversely, have focussed upon the greater incidence of the paradox amongst lower paid employees. Women, it is argued, tend to choose other women as pay 'referents' and additionally, structural disadvantage and gendered occupational segregation encourage women to compare their pay to other similarly low paid women (Loscocco and Spitze; 1991; Valet, 2018). However, there is contradictory evidence which suggests that women who work in 'feminised' occupations may be more dissatisfied with their pay than women who work in non-female dominated environments (Dockery and Buchler, 2015). Furthermore, the role of gendered occupational segregation may have been overstated (Buchanan, 2008). In addition, there is no compelling explanation as to why women should choose to compare their pay to other women rather than other types of pay referent, such as social, financial, historical, organisational or market (Blau, 1994). Indeed, evidence suggests that gender is rarely mentioned as a reason for choosing another individual as a pay referent (Davison, 2014). People tend to compare their own pay with others at a similar level of employment (Bygren, 2004). Additionally, although this sociological approach makes reference to structural inequality within the labour market, it relies upon a somewhat mechanistic theory of who compares their pay to whom. Significantly, there is no discussion of *why* some jobs are paid more than others, and whether structural pay inequality in itself might be integral to understanding apparently paradoxical patterns of pay satisfaction. Consequently, this paper now turns attention to the question of why some jobs are paid more than others.

## **The social construction of occupational 'value'**

Feminist scholars have argued that the pay of women is lower than men's because the concept of 'men's work' is socially constructed to be more valuable than 'women's work'. Thus, the neo-classical perspective which views pay levels as the outcome of simple supply and demand mechanics is not considered adequate (Cotter et al., 2003). Early functionalist theories of pay which argued that reward was linked to a job's importance in society are also insufficient (Steinberg, 1990). Similarly, the Weberian perspective (1964[1947]) which suggests that in large bureaucratic organisations, job roles and pay are standardised into a clear hierarchical list reflecting skills, experience and merit also has limitations (Halford and Leonard, 2001).

Instead, it is argued that the pay awarded to any occupation is based upon a devaluation of tasks associated with femininity and a championing of tasks associated with masculinity (Acker, 1990). Some types of work skills are valued more than others and at the same time, men and women are deemed to have different skills. Skills understood to be possessed by women, such as nurturing, cleaning, waiting on other people and public relations work (Steinberg, 1990) are rewarded less than those requiring other skills. Conversely, senior roles, such as management, are often seen to need masculine skills (Kanter, 1977). Thus, the work of many women is low paid, not because the work is intrinsically of low value but because both women and women's work are considered of little worth. Thus, women's low pay is a social construct that is connected to power. Furthermore, this social construction does not 'accidentally' perpetuate gender inequality, it has been developed over time by men, is sustained by men and has the interests of men in mind (Halford and Leonard, 2001). However, beliefs of occupational value are not fixed but are an ongoing construction and may

develop and change over time. They are thus, not simply learnt in childhood, but are actively constructed on a daily basis.

The idea that pay inequality is a social construct that benefits some groups at the expense of others can be further developed by borrowing some of the conceptual ideas of Pierre Bourdieu. This enables us to consider pay inequality, not just between men and women, but also between different occupational groups. Bourdieu used the conceptual term 'doxa' to describe a social construct which, over time, has established itself as a self evident 'truth' (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992). A doxa is the shared, unquestioned belief that established ways of doing things are both natural and the correct order of things. A doxa is likely to advantage some groups and disadvantage others, however it is largely accepted by everyone. Those who are disadvantaged might not tolerate everything about their own disadvantaged position, however, on the whole, they largely see the doxa as legitimate (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992).

Bourdieu argued that the continued existence of a doxa relies upon a process of 'misrecognition' by those who may be disadvantaged by it. This is achieved by a subtle and indirect process of 'symbolic violence' against those who are disadvantaged. Indeed, it is usually invisible because members of dominant groups may simply adhere to the rules that already exist and their position of privilege is maintained (Bourdieu, 1995[1972]). This process of symbolic violence is demonstrated by Bourdieu's work on education. He argued that middle class students find it easier to succeed at school because they share 'cultural capital' (types of knowledge and beliefs) with their teachers and thus find it relatively easy to understand the expectations and tasks that are set before them (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). This is not the case for working

class students who are more likely to struggle at school. However, they 'misrecognise' their disadvantage and largely accept the legitimacy of a doxa that equates success with ability. They, thus, see their own lack of educational success as a reflection of their own inadequacies rather than as the result of structural disadvantage (Bourdieu and Egleton, 1992).

Bourdieu developed and explained his theory of symbolic violence in relation to education and social class, however, it was clearly intended to be understood as a general way of conceptualising power relationships between different groups (Jenkins, 2002). It can therefore be used to consider why lower paid groups are often equally or more satisfied than higher paid ones. From this perspective, occupations are paid different amounts of money because there is a doxa of occupational value which rewards some occupations more than others. Consequently, symbolic violence is inflicted against those on lower pay which subsequently influences pay satisfaction. Thus, theoretically, those working in manual, administrative or support roles might feel that their jobs do not deserve high pay because the symbolic violence of the doxa defines these jobs as being of low value and they are thus, 'paradoxically' satisfied. Conversely, professional employees might believe that their jobs deserve relatively high remuneration because the doxa of occupational value encourages them to believe this. Furthermore, this doxa is not gender-neutral and, because of the systematic devaluation of women's work (Acker, 1990), women are more likely to experience symbolic violence.

As well as considering pay satisfaction in terms of doxa and economic capital, there is also the scope for considering cultural capital, which refers to certain activities, knowledge or belief systems which may vary by social class. In

'Distinction,' Bourdieu argued that certain forms of entertainment, such as opera, are elevated and defined as superior to others in a way that confers social advantage (Bourdieu, 2010 [1979]). In a similar way, different work skills or educational qualifications may be viewed as superior forms of cultural capital and correspondingly, those who possess them as worthy of higher pay. However, although there is clearly value in studying cultural capital (and its relationship with social class) and pay satisfaction, this paper focuses on the concepts of doxa and economic capital alone.

The idea that social norms of appropriate pay for different occupations or groups of people might be influential upon pay satisfaction has been discussed previously (Lalivie and Stutzer, 2010). However, this has been peripheral to the majority of gender pay paradox explanations which have sought understanding through the theoretical concepts of 'justice' and 'relativity,' whilst simultaneously defining women as 'different' to men. Applying Bourdieu's concept of doxa to pay satisfaction has not been previously undertaken, and thus might be useful to explaining gendered 'paradoxical' patterns of satisfaction which have long defied explanation.

The evidence presented in the following sections is taken from a larger study of the gender pay paradox amongst university staff. This qualitative data supports the theory that beliefs about occupational value influence the pay satisfaction of those on lower pay, encouraging them to consider low pay satisfactory. It is argued that this analysis contributes to our understanding of the gender pay paradox.

## **The Research Study**

The qualitative data presented in this paper is taken from a mixed method study of pay satisfaction, work orientations and home lives undertaken with staff from two universities in the United Kingdom. One university was an old, research intensive institution, the other received its charter in 1992, when it changed its status from polytechnic to university. Ethical permission for the study was obtained from both universities and interviewees provided written consent. The evidence presented in this paper focuses on data from interviews with lower paid, non-academic staff. Six of the interviewees were women and four were men, reflecting the higher proportion of women working in lower pay grades in universities (HESA, 2017) and the gendered inequality inherent within organisational pay scales (Acker, 1990). These interviewees were each earning £30,000 or less and worked in various manual, technical and administrative roles, although two interviewees also worked part-time as 'associate' lecturers. Additionally, a couple of relevant comments are included from a professor and a senior manager. Clearly, earning £30,000 or less does not automatically qualify these individuals as 'low paid', for example their salary may exceed the amount specified by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that is needed for a minimum income standard (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017). However, they were all working alongside other staff, including managers and academics who were paid more than they themselves were, placing them in an economically disadvantaged position in comparison to others. Furthermore, the grading structure of universities, discussed below, limits the pay rises that these employees might anticipate.

Universities were chosen for a study of pay satisfaction for a number of reasons. Firstly, they employ a large number of, and a wide range of occupations enabling

comparison between different groups. Additionally, like other public sector institutions, most employees (excluding the most senior staff) are paid on a standardised pay scale. In universities based in the United Kingdom, the single pay spine is negotiated between representatives of university trade unions (Unite, Unison, British Trade Union, and University and College Union) and higher education employers at the Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff. The single pay spine represents the agreement between these bodies about the roles, responsibilities and levels of pay for different types of work. The spine is divided into bands, with minor variations across institutions concerning the number and exact positioning of the bands. Employees are appointed on a starting salary in a particular pay band with specified roles and responsibilities. Subsequently, they have an annual increment until they reach the top of their band. The lowest point on the scale is £15,417 and the highest is £60,410 (University and College Union, 2018).

This pay spine both represents and legitimates the belief that different occupations intrinsically 'deserve' a particular level of pay. The single pay spine is, thus, a tangible representation of a doxa of occupational value. Having a tangible manifestation of the doxa makes universities a good vehicle for examining the impact of beliefs about occupational value upon pay satisfaction. Employees are likely to be aware of the pay spine and to consider it when evaluating their pay. Conversely, within the private sector, although individuals may have beliefs about the value of different types of occupations, salaries tend to be agreed individually between employer and employee rendering the doxa of occupational value much less visible.

Interviewees were invited to participate in the interviews during the first stage of the research; an online survey of over 700 participants. Interviewees were chosen, from this list of volunteers, to be illustrative of university staff in terms of gender, occupational group, salary, age and whether they worked full-time or part-time. They were also selected on the basis of their survey responses to ensure that participants reflected a range of satisfaction levels, orientations to work and had varying work and/or domestic circumstances. The interviews were semi-structured and participants were asked a range of questions about home and work, including pay satisfaction. Interviewees were simply asked 'Are you satisfied with your pay' and encouraged to consider this issue at depth. They were not prompted to consider their pay in terms of an occupational value doxa and as such, the interviews were participant led. The interviews were thus conducted along 'feminist research' principles which emphasise the situated nature of social reality and allow participants to speak for themselves and within the context of their own lives (Reinharz, 1992). This enabled a view of the world from the perspective of the interviewees themselves (Flick, 2009). The approach was a good fit with social constructionism because it reflects the idea that knowledge is situated and contextual (Mason, 2002) and was also particularly appropriate given the misconceptualisation of the gender pay paradox outlined earlier.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were all audio recorded, transcribed in full and anonymised. The data was analysed using a thematic approach whereby the transcripts were divided into themes and concepts (Mason, 2002). Common elements and dissimilarities among the responses were then noted. Analysis of the qualitative transcripts was abductive and ideas developed from the data itself, rather than specific evidence being searched for



and then extracted. Ideas were not firmly in place at the start of the analysis and the words of the interviewees themselves guided the findings presented (Becker and Bryman 2004). Thus, although the research was designed with reference to the work of feminist scholars and the social construction of pay, it was the interview data itself which suggested that the Bourdieusian concept of doxa might also be useful to understanding pay satisfaction. Finally, this analytical approach was informed by the desire for the research to be participant led and to challenge the power relationship between researcher and 'subject' (Reinharz, 1992).

### **Research findings**

This section presents the findings from the qualitative interviews conducted with university staff who were earning £30,000 or less. The findings suggest that interviewees largely accepted that different occupations are paid different amounts, even when this was clearly to their own financial disadvantage. This may be conceptualised as evidence of a Bourdieusian doxa of occupational value. Furthermore, the data presented here suggests that this affected how interviewees evaluated their pay satisfaction.

First of all, the data suggested that interviewees largely accepted the legitimacy of the university pay spine, which they believed reflected the 'appropriate' level of pay for their own occupation. Staff tended to compare their pay with other jobs that were either similar in task or pay level, a line of thought which led interviewees to the conclusion that their pay was satisfactory. This included Jenny, who works as a parking warden earning £10,001-£20,000. She compared her pay and responsibilities to other manual staff in the same university: "I do think we get paid the right amount...I don't know what the catering staff get,

but I presume we are all on about the same grade anyway...I think we are about equal, in the scheme of things". Similarly Bradley, who earns £10,001-£20,000 working as a multi-skilled operative (driving, postal duties and portering), favourably compared his pay with that of manual staff in other universities: "I think we are paid very well for what we, well what we are worth and I know for a fact that we are paid more than a lot of universities". Thus for both of these interviewees, their pay was considered in relation to what similar occupations received. Not only did these interviewees consider their position on the university pay spine to be appropriate but they also accepted the relatively low level of pay awarded to their type of work. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this is a 'misrecognition' of the true nature of their low pay. Their low pay is thus, not an accurate reflection of the value of their work, but instead is the outcome of a doxa of occupational value which operates to the advantage of those in higher paid occupations.

Secondly, as well as interviewees accepting low pay, there was also evidence of approval for pay inequalities, even though this legitimated financial disadvantage to themselves. Niamh, who works in Estates earning £20,001-£30,000 stated of academic work: "It's a tough, tough job and it's pressure piled up on top of pressure". Similarly, Gill an administrator, earning £10,001-£20,000 said "I can understand them getting a heck load more because they have that extra responsibility". Amanda, a food technician, earning £20,001-£30,000 pondered the thought of equal pay for all occupations and approved of variations: "I suppose in a perfect world, no, but that can't happen, can it? It has to be relative, I suppose it just has to be, for society to work." Thus, inequalities in university pay were misrecognised and regarded as legitimate and furthermore, several interviewees explicitly stated that they believed their jobs were of low

value. Jason who earns £20,001-£30,000 working as an administrator, pointed out that he believed his work to be "just admin". Similarly, Anna who works in Student Support, earning £20,001-£30,000, justified the lower pay of administrative staff because "Admin. staff are more replaceable than somebody who has got in-depth knowledge in a certain area." Thus, the low status of administrative work is self-evident. Not only is it placed lower on the single pay spine than academic work, there is also the traditional association with women. Anna, in particular, sees a large proportion of her work as "looking after the students as best as I can", a type of caring employment that is an extension of the unpaid traditional female role undertaken for no wages in the home (Irving, 2008). Her view of the low 'value' of what she does is thus likely to be a reflection of the low value ascribed to 'feminine' skills within the workplace and the way that pay systems institutionally discriminate against women who undertake jobs requiring so-called feminine skills (Acker, 1990).

Thirdly, pay inequality was only questioned in relation to specific individuals that interviewees felt were not fulfilling the role that they were being paid to do. It was not a criticism of the system as a whole. For example, Anna works closely with academic staff and said "I don't really mind lecturers getting paid more because they are experts in their field aren't they? Or they should be, it's when they are not that it becomes annoying". Similarly, Leo, who works in a department that organises work experience for students and earns £20,001-£30,000 stated "The negative side of me would say if they are getting paid that amount of money they should...be able to do that role." Bradley, the multi-skilled operative recalled the dedication and workload of one particular lecturer who, Bradley argued, was worth a "fifty thousand" salary. However of some others he disparagingly concluded "I wouldn't pay them in washers!". Similarly

Niamh, from Estates commented on some highly paid staff "You kind of look at some people and you can go 'I do know vaguely what you are earning and you know, step up to the blade a bit'". Thus, the specific criticisms raised did not challenge the belief that a doxa of occupational value is both fair and legitimate. Instead, individuals misrecognised the inequalities justified by the single pay spine and although some higher paid individuals were regarded as incompetent, these were a 'blip' in an otherwise fair and functioning system.

Bourdieu explained that a doxa is largely accepted by individuals but that it is not necessarily *totally* accepted (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992). Sometimes interviewees indicated dissatisfaction with their own personal placement on the hierarchical single pay spine, but not the wider doxa of occupational value. For example Sasha, works as a part-time administrator, earning £10,001-£20,000 argued that "An equivalent role based in the faculty and student support office, they are on the next grade band". Similarly, Amanda, the food technician stated "I think I should be on the scale above, for the responsibility that I'm on". This misplacement of individuals suggests that the system of pay grade allocation was occasionally subject to error, which was noted by interviewees. In order to resolve this kind of 'misplacement', universities provide a re-grading system which theoretically provides a way for support staff to progress onto a higher pay band and subsequently be paid appropriately for the tasks they do. Unfortunately however, in practice, this system was perceived as being unfair, inconsistent and weighted towards the benefit of the employer. Indeed, evidence from the interviews suggests profound dissatisfaction with the re-grading system. Furthermore, this system was perceived to be working *against* the values embodied in the occupational value doxa because it prevented individuals

from receiving the level of pay that the single pay spine stipulates should rightfully be theirs.

Pay bands in the lower sections of the single pay spine are more compressed than they are at the top and lower grade staff, who have reached the top of their pay band may attempt to improve their pay by applying for re-grading to a higher band. However, in the first instance, the process is so daunting that some individuals are reluctant to apply, for example, Amanda, the food technician explained "I have thought about it a couple of times and I have virtually been there...but it is not worth that kind of fight and upsetting myself". Indeed, it is not an easy process. Gill the administrator had spent three years obtaining a re-grading and improved her pay by several thousand pounds a year. She discussed the long drawn out and difficult process, during which she had frequently doubted that she would ever achieve the desired re-grading or indeed, whether this was a real 'carrot' offered by employers. She joked that much to her surprise, she had been successful: "The carrot actually exists!".

Indeed, it is understood amongst support staff that re-grading of jobs is not the preferred option of management. Gill noted "Normally to get a better grade I would have had to leave and go to a different department and a new job". Similarly, Niamh who works in Estates said: "The way to get more really is to apply for a higher grade job, that is how you progress". Furthermore, the reluctance of university managers to fully and fairly administer the re-grading system was noted by some senior staff. Penny, a professor spoke of how she encouraged several administrative staff to apply for re-grading but feared that the system is unfairly applied due to pressure on the Deans of Faculties to save money: "If they are operating at a grade higher than they are getting paid for,

then there is no argument, you have to pay them that, but she [the Faculty Dean] is not keen to increase her salary bill for the faculty". Thus, the re-grading system was seen as something of an 'illusion' which ostensibly provided a route for lower paid staff to progress and receive higher pay but which, in reality, did no such thing. However, although interviewees were aware of the unfairness of the re-grading system, it was the interviewees own personal position in the hierarchy that was questioned and not the hierarchy itself. This suggests that beliefs about occupational worth are deeply entrenched within our culture, providing further support for the argument that they are a Bourdieuisan doxa. Furthermore, this doxa has successfully inflicted symbolic violence against lower paid employees by persuading them that its manifestation in official pay scales, such as the single pay spine, is a fair representation of the value of different types of work. This is in spite of the system's commonly known failure to pay all employees at a grade commensurate with the tasks that they undertake.

It is possible that part of this acceptance is driven by a sense of powerlessness to change the system. Indeed, the reluctance of some participants to engage with re-grading would certainly suggest a profound structural power imbalance. However, the interviewees showed little hesitation in criticising the high pay of vice chancellors, suggesting that there are limits to the levels of inequality that are considered acceptable. In the United Kingdom, there has been a recent trend within universities to increase the pay of Vice Chancellors. In 2014-2015, the average pay of Vice Chancellors was £252,745 (Times Higher Education, 2016) while at the same time, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, elected in 2010, placed pay restrictions upon all public sector staff as a part of government cuts and austerity measures (Dolton et al., 2014). Furthermore, within universities in the United kingdom, the appointment of the

most senior staff is outside of the parameters of the single pay spine. It is generally agreed privately between the employer and the employee and is not negotiated by the trade unions. As a consequence, rank and file employees may consider the high pay of the most senior staff separately and differently to pay that is covered by the university pay spine.

It is therefore unsurprising that the legitimacy of the high pay of Vice Chancellors was questioned. Gill, the administrator, stated "I just don't understand what you do with £500,000 a year, with that much money". Similarly Jason, also an administrator stated "I'd be happy pretty much with anything as long as it is a job I'm enjoying, the bit that is grating is comparative, you know when you see the VC getting his hundred grand a year pay rise". Similarly, Euan, a part-time student advisor and associate lecturer, who earns £10,001-£20,000 said "I think there is an argument for the very high salaries in the university, like the Vice Chancellors...if the university was going to save money, the fair way to save that money would be...to bring those down". Indeed, the high pay of senior managers was conspicuous even to those fortunate enough to receive high levels of pay themselves. A senior manager stated that he occasionally felt uncomfortable about earning a salary that was high in comparison to most other employees in the university: "There are times when I think I feel a bit embarrassed about how much I am paid".

The way that these lower paid employees questioned the legitimacy of the high salaries of Vice Chancellors is in marked contrast to their apparent acceptance of the smaller, but still not insignificant differences in pay represented in the university pay spine (the highest point on the pay spine is approximately four times greater than the lowest point). This might suggest that there are limits

either to the levels of pay that is included within the occupational doxa and/or that trade union involvement helps to legitimate inequality. Alternatively, the unhappiness regarding the high pay of the most senior university staff may reflect a wider trend of discontent manifested beyond the university campus, including popular protest movements such as 'Occupy' (Graeber, 2013) and concern over the high wages of business executives (Kaplan, 2013).

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Taking inspiration from feminist perspectives on the social construction of pay and using elements from the theoretical toolkit of Bourdieu, this paper has described an unusual approach to pay satisfaction, a topic dominated by quantitative analysis. It is not intended to offer a replacement for these traditional ways of studying pay satisfaction. Indeed, a study of 'paradoxical' patterns of satisfaction, arguably, necessarily requires some form of quantitative comparison in order to conclude whether one group is more satisfied than the other. However, the theoretical approach outlined and the qualitative data presented may be useful to scholars who are seeking to understand why some groups of individuals ostensibly present paradoxical levels of satisfaction.

This paper has suggested that previous study of the 'paradox of the contented female worker' has misconceptualised the nature of the phenomenon. Evidence from previous research suggests that paradoxical patterns of satisfaction are often observed amongst lower paid staff, irrespective of gender. It is argued here that dominant beliefs about men, women and their participation in the labour market have encouraged scholars to define the issue as being a phenomenon of women and their employment alone. Additionally, this paper has argued that previous research has not provided adequate explanation for the



gender pay paradox. Therefore, in response, an alternative, social constructionist theoretical approach to the study of the gender pay paradox is proposed.

This approach draws on the work of feminist scholars such as Acker (1990) and utilises some of the conceptual ideas of Bourdieu, in particular 'doxa', 'misrecognition' (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992) and 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). These Bourdieusian terms are useful to conceptualise the idea that there are dominant beliefs about how much different occupations should be paid which may impact upon pay satisfaction. This paper is the first time that an analysis of pay satisfaction has utilised the concept of doxa.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, the high satisfaction of the low paid is not 'paradoxical' but is a reflection of their disadvantaged position in the labour market; their pay satisfaction is high because the value of their work is considered low and thus undeserving of higher pay. This manifested in several ways amongst the interviewees. First of all, they tended to compare their pay to other occupations that were similarly paid, which reinforced the low status of their employment and justified their own low pay. Secondly, they also tended to believe that higher paid staff deserve their pay and that their own jobs were of low value. Thirdly, although they might express dissatisfaction with specific higher paid individuals, the system of unequal pay itself was not questioned. In addition, the re-grading system was understood to disadvantage workers, however the overall hierarchical system of pay was not questioned suggesting that beliefs about levels of pay are deeply entrenched. In contrast, the conspicuously high pay of the most senior university staff, was disapproved of by many interviewees. This suggests that either the doxa of occupational value

does not extend to very high salaries or that trade union involvement helps to legitimate the inequality embodied in pay scales.

There is also evidence to suggest that the impact of the doxa on pay satisfaction is gendered. The theory and data presented in this paper therefore helps to explain the gender pay paradox. From this perspective, the pay satisfaction of all individuals is a reflection of the structural inequality embodied in the doxa of occupational value. However, the concentration of women into low paid work means that women are more likely to be disadvantaged by the doxa and thus more likely to believe that their work is of low value.

This approach challenges psychological explanations for the paradox which rely on the idea that there are 'differences' between men and women. The research presented here suggests that men and women behave in a similar way; both are making reference to a doxa of occupational value. The 'difference' between men and women is the degree of structural disadvantage that they are likely to experience, not their psychological make-up.

Additionally, the evidence presented here may aid our understanding of sociological explanations. The sociological approach has previously suggested that because women are more likely to be employed in female dominated, low paid occupations, they are more likely to make comparisons with other equally low paid women. This sociological explanation acknowledges structural inequality, however, the cause of the paradox is essentially women's choice of pay referent, albeit a 'choice' that takes place within an unequal system. The new approach and qualitative evidence presented here suggests that it is the shared perceptions of 'value' that is ascribed to low paid work that influences pay satisfaction. This may be considered a doxa of occupational value that

reinforces and perpetuates disadvantage to low paid workers. As a consequence high levels of pay satisfaction amongst the low paid are actually a reflection of their disadvantaged position in the labour market.

This paper has limitations because it does not explain how social class is reproduced through education or how this relates to subsequent employment pathways, pay levels and pay satisfaction. Clearly, considering only pay inequality and a doxa of occupational value fails to accommodate the complexities of Bourdieu's analyses of social, economic and cultural capitals and their impact upon the reproduction of inequality. The findings presented here however, do suggest that there is scope for future research which could fully consider the impact of Bourdieu's concepts of social, economic and cultural capitals upon pay satisfaction. Such a study would need to comprehensively consider the family backgrounds, educational histories and career/pay trajectories of individuals in order to provide a robust and comprehensive Bourdieusian approach. This future research might consider the wider context of a range of pay inequalities for example between professional and non professional occupations, between different professional groups, or between craft and industrial working class occupations. This is beyond the scope of this paper, however the use of Bourdieusian concepts and theory has great potential to further our understanding of pay satisfaction paradoxes.

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