

Social and economic inequality persists even when it is believed to be too large, unjust, or incongruent with a desired social order. This is true of inequality in the distribution of rewards among individuals as well as of between-group inequality in the distribution of socially valued resources. It is a sort of a paradox that social inequality, although unjust, is commonly accepted — both by the advantaged and the disadvantaged. The broad acceptance of social inequality mean *legitimacy*, that is, validity, recognition that the principles of distribution of resources, giving rise to existing inequality, are *commonly shared* and *socially validated*. The paradox can be largely explained by pointing out to two dimensions of legitimacy: *individual* and *collective*. My private sense of injustice drives me towards challenging the existing order, but it is not enough to initiate actions aimed at changing the status quo, or voice my dissatisfaction publicly, if I expect that no one will back my up in my efforts. This expectation is a reflection of *collective legitimization* of the social order, or a belief that the order and the rules on which it is based, are *valid*, so that members of the social system are expected to comply with them. Thus, I can believe that “income differences are too large”, and therefore unfair, but if majority of the society believe that these differences serve a larger societal goal — e.g. by motivating those located towards the bottom of the hierarchy to work harder and thus contributing to general social order — my private discontent might be too weak a basis for challenging the status quo.

The focus of our project is on gender pay gap. Our objective is to determine conditions under which the gap are perceived as just or justified. In other words, we aim not only at establishing the level of gender pay gap that would be found acceptable, but also at defining conditions that are necessary for the inequality to be legitimated — by both men and women. To that end, we plan to *integrate* several sociological theories that rely on *status* as a mechanism generating and petrifying significant social inequalities. Status differences are related to differences in competence, prestige, recognition, or general social “worth.” For instance, if we say that university graduates have higher status than high-school graduates, we express our belief that the former are more competent, more highly valued, treated with greater deference, and generally more recognized than the latter. Status beliefs are social in nature: they are commonly held in a given collectivity and valid. Differences in status translate into difference in *social influence*, into *reward expectations*, or expectations as to who is entitled to greater share of the pie, or into *double standards for competence*, or a practice to require more evidence of competence from low-status individuals and less evidence to define them as incompetent.

There is a large body of research demonstrating that gender is a status characteristic giving a higher status to men. There is also a growing body of research showing that parenthood also has a status value: in comparison with childless women, mothers are a lower-status category and fathers — are perceived as a higher status group relative to childless men. Put in another way, parenthood enhances existing gender inequalities, as the lower status of mothers results not from their poorer productivity in the workplace, but from a tension between what is culturally attributed to mothers (i.e., protectiveness, tenderness, warmth, gentleness, and the like) and attributes of a good employee.

By combining the mechanisms of social inequality proposed by the aforementioned theories, we predict higher levels of approval for the gender pay gap in situations of *inconsistency* between gender and occupational status. For instance, a woman in a high-status occupation is an example of status inconsistency. The inconsistency gives rise to activation of the double standards for competence that require more evidence of competence from female employees. As a result, the gap in the earnings of men and women will not only be greater, but also more approved of in such situations. Motherhood will further enhance the inconsistency and, consequently, the gap and legitimacy. We are planning to test this predictions using state-of-the-art methodology, combining mathematical modelling, experimental designs, and a large-scale social survey.