



SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND WAGES

Ivan Pontiff

Loyola University New Orleans, New Orleans LA, USA

Walter E. Block

Harold E. Wirth Eminent Scholar Endowed Chair and Professor of Economics Loyola University New Orleans, New Orleans LA, USA

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Abstract

We wrestle with the issue of whether or not discrimination, in favor of or against straight and gay people can account for wage divergences between these two groups of people. Section II is devoted to empirical evidence supporting the existence of a discrimination wage gap due to sexual orientation. The majority of studies provided have concluded that sexual orientation diminishes wages for homosexual and bisexual men, whereas it increases wage premiums for homosexual women. Discrimination due to sexual orientation, specifically homo/bisexual males, is present in foreign labor markets as well as in the United States. In these calculations, all other factors, such as age, education, race, marital status, etc., are identified and taken into consideration when calculating the effect of sexuality on wage differences. Section III strives to explain why the discrimination wage gap cannot exist through a theoretical approach. In equilibrium, sexual preference can play no role whatsoever in wage gaps. We are never in full equilibrium, but the "expected value" is that we are always exactly on point, in the absence of any reason to expect over or underestimating prices or wages. We expect that discrimination cannot account for gay people being paid less than straights, assuming equal productivity. At equilibrium, these economic boycotts are impotent due to profit opportunities. We conclude leaving the reader to decide which perspective is more true.

Keywords: *Discrimination, prejudice, wage differentials*

1 INTRODUCTION

While race and gender are generally the focus of wage discrimination issues, the awareness of sexual orientation as a possible discriminatory element has increased with the heightened

visibility of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the workforce. For decades, researchers have questioned whether the pay gap between these two demographics in the job market is due to overt prejudice or a result of other factors. Many studies¹ have concluded that sexual orientation diminishes wages for homosexual and bisexual men, whereas it increases wage premiums for homosexual women.

The address of the corresponding author:

Ivan Pontiff

[✉ ijpontif@my.loyno.edu](mailto:ijpontif@my.loyno.edu)

¹ Berg & Lien (2002); Blandford (2003); Black, Makar, Sanders, & Taylor (2003); Badgett, Sears, Lau, & Ho

(2009); These studies all reported results supporting the statement in the text.

In section II, we consider the case in favor of discrimination as an explanation for wage gaps based upon sexual orientation. Section III is devoted to exploring the very opposite perspective. We conclude in Section IV.

2 DISCRIMINATION ACCOUNTS FOR WAGE GAPS

Lee Badgett (1995), an economist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, conducted some of the first studies on wages and sexual orientation. She used data from the General Social Survey (GSS) which began collecting data on sexual behavior with partners of either sex in 1989. While the GSS did not specifically ask about sexual orientation or identity, Badgett believed that same-sex sexual experiences were likely to be highly correlated with a self-identified gay or bisexual orientation. She used two definitions in her analysis. Homosexuality was defined as having had a same-sex partner since age 18. It was also defined as having had more same-sex than opposite-sex partners since age 18. Sample size can vary considerably depending on how sexual orientation is defined and which set of data is used.

Varied definitions, data collection methods, and researcher interpretation can yield different conclusions based on examinations of the same data sets. For example, studies using data collected from the National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs), the General Social Survey (GSS), the United States Census, and the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES III)² show that gay men earn anywhere between 10% to 32% less than their heterosexual male counterparts (Badgett, Sears, Lau, Ho 2009). Results involving lesbians are more complicated. In some studies, they earn more than heterosexual women but less than heterosexual or gay men. While the majority of early studies used the General Social Survey, new research³ has been conducted on a global scale.

Articles addressing labor market discrimination in Sweden, Greece, France, Canada, Australia, and

the United Kingdom have all come to the same conclusion. Discrimination due to sexual orientation, specifically homo/bisexual males, is present in foreign labor markets as well as in the United States. In these calculations, all other factors, such as age, education, race, marital status, etc., must be identified and taken into consideration when calculating the effect of sexuality on wage differences.

It may not be surprising that gender has an effect in addition to sexuality on wages. Blandford (2003) finds that lesbian and bisexual women enjoyed a wage premium of 17–23% but that differentials previously attributed to marital status, may reflect unobserved effects of sexual orientation. “The findings reported here for lesbian and bisexual women stand in sharp contrast to those reported by Badgett. The statistically significant findings for lesbian and bisexual female workers in this study likely result from more accurate identification of lesbian and bisexual female workers and the availability of a larger database” (Blandford 2003). This is one instance where lesbian and gender-associated factors produce more complexity compared to men.

In addition to examining gender by itself, the gender of same-sex relationships also seems to matter. Black, Makar, Sanders, and Taylor (2003) ran an updated analysis of Badgett’s research, using more current data from the GSS and a varying definition to determine sexual orientation. The two definitions of homosexuality were “having had exclusively same-sex sex or having had sex with both men and women over the past year, and having had exclusively same-sex sex or sex with both men and women over the past five years” (Black, Makar, Sanders, Taylor 2003). Black and his colleagues’ study resulted in a similar conclusion. “Depending largely on the definition of sexual orientation used, earnings are estimated as having been between 14% and 16% lower for gay men than for heterosexual men, and between 20% and 34% higher for lesbian than for heterosexual women” (Black, Makar, Sanders, Taylor 2003). The explanation of this evidence is consistent with

² NHSLs: <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/HMCA/studies/6647/summary>; GSS: <https://gss.norc.umd.edu/>; NHANES III: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhanes/index.htm>; US Census: <https://www.census.gov/data.html>

³ Sweden: Ahmed (2013); Greece: Drydakis (2014); France: Laurent and Mihoubi (2012); Canada: Mueller (2014); Australia: La Nauze (2015); United Kingdom: Aksoy (2017)

Gary Becker's theory of household specializations or optimal human capital accumulation.

Gender association segues into traditional male and female roles as they relate to marital status. Becker's model of household specialization is the theory that people at a younger age will make human capital investment decisions based on the expectation of forming a traditional household in the future. Individuals will have different specializations in the market and non-market production varying with their partner. Becker believed that men who remain single would earn less than married men because they would specialize less intensely in market production skills. This concept would follow through to a gay man, who are statistically less likely to be married. In planning for a future to support a family, heterosexual men may be more willing to accept more stressful jobs with longer work hours than gay men. This may contribute to a large part of the apparent earnings differences.

Whether income is reported as individual earnings or household income affects these analyses. Mueller (2014) tried to identify if there is any disparity in the wages of same-sex vs. different-sex couples in Canada. He used data from two different sources for the analysis: The General Social Survey 2006-10 and the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS)⁴. Men in same-sex couples earned roughly the same as their different-sex counterparts. For women, there was a 17% percent earnings loss in lesbian couples compared to heterosexuals. Although this was not a conclusive study, the results could be used to argue that there is no discrimination in the workplace.

Laurent and Mihoubi (2012) came to an opposing conclusion using data from the French Employment Survey. This data set accurately identified same-sex couples and estimated the wage gap due to sexual orientation in the private and public sectors. Even when controlling for the marriage premium, Laurent and Mihoubi still concluded that there was a wage gap in the French labor market for homosexual men. The estimated differences were 6% to 7% in the private sector and 5% to 6% in the public sector, which

are similar percentages to that of gender wage discrimination. Their study also discovered a higher level of education does not protect against sexual orientation discrimination. The higher the degree, the higher magnitude of wage discrimination felt by gay employees. The "pink glass ceiling" effect is more evident in highly skilled jobs that come with a significant "visible representation" component.

Laurent and Mihoubi also touched on the subject of perceived sexual orientation specifically from one's employer. They made a point to keep in mind that this analysis does not take into account whether the employer knows about the individual's sexual orientation or not. It is a variable that is hard to quantify in most data collection methods and usually cannot be considered due to a lack of information. Those who are identified as homosexuals in the workplace suffer a more significant wage penalty. One researcher was able to produce employer prejudice data by focusing on the job application process.

Drydakis (2014) investigated the potential discrimination of homosexual men compared to heterosexuals when applying for a job in the Greek private sector. Gay men faced a significantly lower rate of invitation to interviews measured solely on sexual orientation. He used a correspondence test to evaluate what factored into the disadvantages gay applicants were facing in the Greek job market. He focused on the rate of interview invitations, rather than the wages offered. Yet another study explored the opposing perspective: do gays and lesbians actively avoid prejudice in employers/occupations?

Plug, Webbink, and Martin (2014) conducted a study using data derived from the Australian Twin Registry. They specifically focused on a 1992 sex survey detailing each twin's sexual orientation, attitude toward homophobic sentiments, and their respective occupation. The results were consistent with Becker's model of employer and employee prejudice. It suggested that discriminatory tastes play a significant role in workplace segregation between homosexual and heterosexual workers. The study also showed that sexual prejudice was a factor contributing to

⁴ CCHS:
<https://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/survey/household/3226>

homosexuals' choices in occupation. Lastly, personality traits could explain an apparent wage differential.

La Nauze (2015) conducted research specifically on the sexual orientation-based wage gap in Australia. Her methods of analysis included ordinary least squares and Blinder–Oaxaca decomposition. She used the battery of Big Five personality traits in wage regressions and estimated the contribution of endowments and returns to these traits. The results were that individuals sharing the same personality traits, but differing in sexual orientation had varying wages. Homosexual men specifically suffered a substantial unexplained wage penalty. These unexplained contrasts suggested discrimination due to sexual orientation may also exist in Australia. La Nauze focused on the role that personality traits play in wage determination and how it may explain wage differentials due to sexual orientation. “To identify the impacts of personality on wages, I use the ‘Big Five’ classification of personality traits as covariates in a wage regression. The Big Five is a classification of personality types based on five traits: Extroversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness to Experience” (La Nauze 2015). Using data from the household panel HILDA, she concluded: “ In Australia, women in same-sex relationships earn a positive wage premium of 0%–13%, whereas men in same-sex relationships experience a negative wage premium of 8%–18% depending on the model. These gaps are economically significant and consistent with those found internationally” (La Nauze 2015).

Even so, wage disparities due to sexual orientation were not all negative. A substantial number of studies have shown that lesbians, compared to their heterosexual counterparts, earn more money. Blandford concluded that “Gay and bisexual men experienced a 30–32% income disadvantage relative to heterosexual peers, while lesbian and bisexual women enjoyed a wage premium of 17–23%” (Blandford, 2003). Black and his colleagues (2003) goes further to include marital status in his study and determined that lesbians make more than their heterosexual single or married counterparts. When focusing on couples, the same findings were true: men in cohabiting same-sex couples earn significantly

less than men in different-sex relationships, and women in cohabiting same-sex couples earn significantly more than women in different-sex relationships (Aksoy 2017). Contrary to the findings of gay men earning less than their heterosexual counterparts, in this instance, identifying as a lesbian did not necessarily correlate to lower wages than heterosexual women.

Yet another factor to consider when comparing households' financial standing is the possibility of children and dependents. Berg and Lien (2002) uncovered that being a parent and being a homosexual are not correlated. This contradicts the theory that becoming a parent can account for the earnings differentials. The methodology used to discount the notion that most homosexuals are affluent was estimating a single earnings equation using categorical earnings data and a maximum-likelihood approach. While the estimates provided strong evidence, the results were inconclusive to resolve the question of whether homosexuals face workplace discrimination. They believed that gender specificity should be reconsidered when analyzing the sexual orientation discrimination question since males and females have such different results. All of this data should be considered when writing rules to address sexual orientation inequality.

Years of data struggle to support legislative initiatives to protect gay, lesbian, and bisexual members of the workforce. The Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) was proposed in the mid-1970s to protect gay workers but was defeated in the U.S. Congress. Although it failed at the national level, 10 states and the District of Columbia enacted it. In the remaining 40 states, it is legal to differently compensate, fire, harass, not hire, or withhold promotions to workers due to sexual orientation (Berg and Lien 2002). Extensive research concludes that gay men are making less than their heterosexual counterparts. Research suggests that this is predominantly due to bias.

To conclude, sexual orientation is a driving factor for lower wages for homosexual men. However, it may be a cause of income premiums for lesbians. This data has been corroborated in studies across the globe. Additionally, various research has examined the relationship between same-sex

couples, dual-income, and having children and concluded that sexual orientation is the cause of wage disparities. The legislation is one tool to rectify inequality as social norms play catch up. Ideally, the vast research performed at institutions worldwide will provide the support necessary to develop a more equitable society.

3 DISCRIMINATION DOES NOT ACCOUNT FOR WAGE GAPS

In equilibrium, racial, gender, sexual preference, can play no role whatsoever in wage gaps.⁵ It cannot be denied that we are never in full equilibrium. Yet, we are always and ever tending in the direction, sometimes overshooting it, undershooting it. But the “expected value” is that we are always exactly on point, in the absence of any reason to expect over or underestimating prices or wages. Thus, we expect that tastes for discrimination cannot account for gay people being paid less than straights, assuming equal productivity.⁶

Suppose, then, that the productivity of both a gay and a straight person was \$20 per hour, and that, in equilibrium, they were both paid precisely that amount. However, we now incorporate sexual preference discrimination into the analysis; it is against the former. As a result, homosexuals now earn \$15 per hour, while the wage of heterosexuals remains at \$20 per hour.

How much profit can an employer earn from having a straight person on his shop floor, or in his factory, or working his computer? Well, profits are

revenue minus costs. So, $\$20 - \$20 = 0$. This creates no problem since in equilibrium⁷ profits are zero. However, what of the gay individual? The calculation for him is as follows: $\$20 - \$15 = \$5$. Does anyone think this can be the end of the story? That we have reached equilibrium? That this discriminatory wage will not call forth further market responses?

The obvious answer is that someone, some employer⁸ will offer this “exploited” worker \$15.01 and earn a profit from hiring him of \$4.99. Will this hypothetical bidding process end at this point? No. It will go on to \$15.02, \$15.03, ... etc. Where will it end? Assuming there are no transaction costs (Coase, 1960), and there are none, can be none, in the long run, the bid will rise, again, to the original \$20. The point is, economic boycotts⁹ are impotent, at least at equilibrium. The difficulty with this kind of economic activity is that it contains the seeds of its destruction. Every time the boycott is successful, and, to the extent that it is, it opens up profit opportunities for those who act to destroy it.¹⁰ If sellers boycott a group, any group, the targets have to pay more for what they buy. But this makes it more profitable for others to supply them with the good in question. Or, as we have seen, if the buyers, employers, boycott a group, any group, the targets suffer lower recompense, but this means competitors can earn a profit by buying from them, labor in this case.

4 CONCLUSION

Section II made the case for discrimination based on sexual orientation as an important explanation

⁵ This is true unless these characteristics are intrinsically related to discounted marginal revenue productivity (Block, 1994) of labor. For example, in the Spike Lee movie on Malcolm X (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0104797/>), it was imperative for artistic purposes that the lead role be played by a black actor, Denzel Washington, in this case. A lesbian would be unlikely to seek a position in a house of prostitution, nor would a homosexual make a good gigolo. Similarly, a child actor would not be a good candidate to play the role of an old person.

⁶ For support of this claim see Becker, 1957; Benbow & Stanley, 1980, 1982, 1983, 1984; Block, 1982, 1985, 1992, 1998; Block & Walker, 1985; Block & Williams, 1981; Block, Snow, & Stringham, 2008; Gottfredson, 1986; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1981; Levin, 1987, 1997; Lynn & Vanhanen. 2002, 2006; MacDonald, 2018; McMaken, 2016; Mercer, 2005; Murray, 2007; Rothbard, 1982; Seligman, 1992; Sowell, 1975, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 2000; Vance, 2017;

Walker, Dauterive, Schultz, & Block, 2004; Whitehead, Block, & Hardin. 1999; Whitehead & Block. 2002, 2004; Williams, 1982, 2011; Wood, P., 2015; Woods, T. 2016

⁷ Barnett, 1990; Cachanosky, 2011; Davidson, 2012; Fillieule, 2013; Garrison, 1991; Hülsman, 2000., 2018; Kirzner, 1976; Machlup, 1958; Manish, 2014; Newman, 2015; Tang, Unpublished

⁸ There are three sources of discriminatory behavior in the labor market. We are now considering only that on the part of the employer. The alternatives are that it can emanate from fellow employees (this leads to a segregated work force), or from customers (the analysis of the text applies here, too)

⁹ Of which discriminatory hiring is a sub-set

¹⁰ Anderson, 2003; Carden, 2011; Cwik, 2000; D’Amico, 2004; Futerman, et al, 2020; Sanchez, 2010

for wage divergences between straight and gay people. It heavily relied upon empirical findings. Section III offered the very opposite case and relied on theoretical considerations. We leave it to the reader to decide which perspective is more nearly correct.

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