



# Task Segregation as a Mechanism for Within-job Inequality: Women and Men of the Transportation Security Administration

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## Abstract

In this article, we examine a case of task segregation—when a group of workers is disproportionately allocated, relative to other groups, to spend more time on specific tasks in a given job—and argue that such segregation is a potential mechanism for generating within-job inequality in the quality of a job. When performing those tasks is undesirable, this allocation has unfavorable implications for that group’s experienced job quality. We articulate the processes by which task segregation can lead to workplace inequality in job quality through an inductive, interview-based case study of airport security-screening workers in a unit of the U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) at a large urban airport. Female workers were disproportionately allocated to the pat-down task, the manual screening of travelers for prohibited items. Our findings suggest that this segregation led to overall poorer job quality outcomes for women. Task segregation overexposed female workers to processes of physical exertion, emotional labor, and relational strain, giving rise to work intensity, emotional exhaustion, and lack of coping resources. Task segregation also seemed to disproportionately expose female workers to managerial sanctions for taking recuperative time off and a narrowing of their skill set that may have contributed to worse promotion chances, pay, satisfaction, and turnover rates for women. We conclude with a theoretical model of how task segregation can act as a mechanism for generating within-job inequality in job quality.

**Keywords:** task segregation, work content, sex segregation, work inequality, stratification, gender, job quality, emotional labor, Transportation Security Administration

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Inequality between worker groups continues to run rampant. By worker group, we mean some subset of a job's workforce characterized by a salient category, such as gender or race. Gender as a group categorization has garnered particular attention from work inequality scholars (for reviews, see Marini and Brinton, 1984; Cohn, 1985; Reskin, 2000; DiTomaso, Post, and Parks-Yancy, 2007; Stainback, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Skaggs, 2010; Ridgeway, 2011). A prominent line of gender inequality research is the sex segregation literature, which focuses on explaining relatively worse material outcomes, such as earnings, for women (e.g., Baron and Newman, 1990; Reskin, 1991; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993a; Blau and Kahn, 2000, 2007; Fernandez and Sosa, 2005). Such material disparities include the gender wage gap, viewed largely as a result of between-job differences, specifically that of women being more likely than men to be in lower-paying jobs (Petersen and Morgan, 1995; Padavic and Reskin, 2002). But extant sex segregation research does not address three important points.

First, though there have been prolific studies of gender inequality due to sex segregation across and within occupations and organizations (e.g., Bielby and Baron, 1984; Baron and Bielby, 1985; Reskin and Roos, 1990; Reskin, 1993), the literature generally does not seek to explain inequality in outcomes *within* a given job. Scholarly neglect of within-job gender inequality may be partly due to findings that highly gender-integrated jobs are not common (Bielby and Baron, 1984) and that even within a given job, in a given establishment, the gender wage gap becomes slight (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993a, 1993b; Kilbourne et al., 1994; Petersen and Morgan, 1995; Bayard et al., 1999; Petersen, Saporta, and Seidel, 2000; Padavic and Reskin, 2002; Petersen and Saporta, 2004). Yet within-job inequality is broader than simply wage disparity (Sen, 1997).

This leads to the second point, which is that the sex segregation literature neglects non-economic and subjective outcomes, mostly focusing instead on material ones like earnings (e.g., England et al., 1988; England, Allison, and Wu, 2007; Levanon, England, and Allison, 2009) and promotion chances (e.g., DiPrete and Soule, 1988; Maume, 1999). We conceptualize workplace inequality more broadly in terms of job quality, the bundle of rewards coming from working in a job that coalesce to distinguish "good" from "bad" jobs (Kalleberg, 2011) in the eyes of people working in those jobs. Conceptualizing inequality simply in terms of economic rewards misses the possibility of inequality in the subjective and noneconomic aspects of work (Hodson, 2001). Job quality, however, accounts for the multifaceted nature of a job, consisting not just of objective, economic components but also subjective, noneconomic components like experienced work intensity (Kalleberg, 2011), emotional exhaustion (Maslach and Jackson, 1981; Hochschild, 1983), and social resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar, 2010).

Third, the sex segregation literature neglects the importance of work content—namely, the actual tasks workers perform for a given job—as a key source of the inequality in outcomes. Past scholarship on workplace segregation offers a range of explanations to account for inequalities (e.g., Reskin, 2000; DiTomaso, Post, and Parks-Yancy, 2007; Stainback, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Skaggs, 2010; Ridgeway, 2011), but in most explanations the workplace seems surprisingly devoid of work content. Yet studies in a separate literature on job design have emphasized that work content is critical for explaining worker outcomes such as job satisfaction and turnover (e.g., Turner and Lawrence, 1965; Hackman and Lawler, 1971; Hackman and Oldham, 1975,

1980). Because work content is important for such outcomes, it should also be important to account for it when analyzing workplace inequalities. The limited scholarship that does account for work content as a source of inequality considers how work characteristics, such as degree of autonomy, work variety, and control, differ for men and women (Bielby and Baron, 1982; Crowley, 2013), but even then, these studies generally consider these characteristics as abstract dimensions of work rather than as being attached to particular tasks. A job, however, is often not a single task but a “bundle of tasks performed under an administrative job title” (Cohen, 2013: 452–453) that may vary widely in content. Understanding the content of work and how the performance of different tasks under the same job title might have divergent work implications for different groups of workers is central to more fully explaining the often-overlooked within-job inequality in job quality. Thus the literature neglects the notion that discrete tasks might be differentially desirable in content, and it thereby underplays the explanatory potential of segregation at the task level. In this study, we document and articulate the processes by which task segregation can lead to workplace inequality in job quality through a study of airport security-screening workers.

## WORK CONTENT AS A SOURCE OF INEQUALITY

Because inequality endures for subtle reasons and in spite of efforts to resolve it (e.g., Ely and Thomas, 2001; Ely, 2004; Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly, 2006; Dobbin, 2009; Castilla and Benard, 2010), there remains a theoretical and societal imperative to identify its hidden mechanisms. Particularly hidden as an inequality-generating mechanism has been the possibility of task segregation. By task segregation, we mean when a group of workers is disproportionately allocated, relative to other groups, to spend more time on specific tasks within a given job. Here, we construct a task segregation lens on within-job inequality in job quality. We build on gender inequality studies about a kind of task segregation, although not labeled as such by the researchers themselves: women disproportionately doing work that is socially constructed in gendered ways as low status. This literature—which we will call the “gendered work activities” literature for brevity—addresses the aforementioned three gaps of the sex segregation literature; that is, it acknowledges within-job gender inequality, the importance of considering noneconomic outcomes, and the possibility for work content to be important in explaining gender status inequality.

This gendered work activities scholarship has considered how work content matters for within-job gender status inequality in that it reveals that women tend to perform certain kinds of work that are constructed as low status. Daniels (1987: 404–405) noted that women, more so than men, perform “invisible work,” activities that go unrecognized by many in society as “real,” legitimized work. Early scholarship in this vein considered that women disproportionately did housework—invisible because it was viewed as part of the feminized, domestic realm rather than the masculinized, public realm—and volunteer work—also invisible because it was unpaid rather than paid (Rollins, 1987; Daniels, 1988). Later studies extended the notion of invisibility to include activities in the workplace, which are activities that most consider part of the realm of paid and publicly performed work, characterizing such invisibility as

referring to workplace activities socially constructed as low status (Nardi and Engeström, 1999; Star and Strauss, 1999).

Even within a given workplace and job, scholars have found that women more than men tend to perform activities that are constructed as low status or devalued, in part because both organizations and the work that takes place in them are gendered (Acker, 1990; Britton, 1997). Women like female design engineers disproportionately perform “relational practices,” such as enabling interdependence through affirming, thoughtful conflict management (Kolb, 1992; Fletcher, 2001). Such activities “get disappeared,” constructed as feminized, unvalued work (Fletcher, 2001: 3). Williams and Dempsey (2014) noted that even female leaders get stuck with “office housework”—so called because the activities are constructed as “wifely” (Kanter, 1977: 89; Huff, 1990)—that include undervalued yet time-consuming activities such as making copies and serving coffee. The culturally constructed devaluation of this work relegates women to lower status and influence, contributing to workplace gender status inequality. Other studies have also noted instances in which women spend more time than men on certain low-status activities. For example, female grade school instructors do teaching-related work more than male instructors, who spend more time on managerial work that increases promotion chances (Williams, 1992). Likewise, female investment bankers are more likely to work with clients in low-revenue areas like public finance, as opposed to higher-revenue areas like the technology industry (Roth, 2006).

Though such studies of gendered work activities point to the importance of work content as a source of status inequality, and in particular the possibility that women may disproportionately perform certain low-status activities within a job, in this article, we attempt to theorize a broader model of task segregation, drawing on a case study that presents empirical features not fully explained by existing literature on gendered work activities. First, we present a case of segregation to formalized work tasks that are organizationally legitimized as central to the organization’s mission, rather than the less formal activities constructed as invisible that are emphasized by existing literature. Second, and relatedly, rather than focusing on women’s intersubjective status loss from performing invisible activities, as existing literature does, our study examines—with a holistic notion of job quality in mind—the subjective experiences of women disproportionately performing formal, legitimized tasks and how task segregation can adversely influence women’s subjective outcomes of job quality such as emotional exhaustion. Third, we consider how task segregation might relate to women’s objective, material outcomes like promotion chances, pay, and turnover. Although there are mentions in existing literature of a possible link between task segregation and objective outcomes (e.g., Williams and Dempsey, 2014: 68), our study further investigates the processes through which task segregation can lead to inequality in such objective outcomes.

### **Task Segregation and Inequality**

Worker groups can be segregated to performing not only low-status activities that go organizationally unrecognized as “real” work but also tasks that are fully organizationally legitimized, work recognized as central to the job and the organization’s functioning. Even within the range of tasks explicitly and formally part of the job, there are task-level differences in work content. Jobs are bundles of

tasks (Cohen, 2013) that may, and often do, differ markedly from one another. For instance, a faculty member's tasks of teaching classes and grading students' assignments are not equivalent. The job characteristics literature acknowledges the potential for within-job heterogeneity in legitimized, formalized work content, suggesting that tasks can differ on characteristics like autonomy (e.g., Turner and Lawrence, 1965; Hackman and Lawler, 1971; Hackman and Oldham, 1975, 1980).

Scholarship on the complex and dynamic processes of job formation and modification provides further theoretical rationale for expecting within-job task heterogeneity. Research suggests that job formation may not be rationally designed but rather is opportunistically developed into "idiosyncratic jobs" (Miner, 1987: 327) or otherwise heterogeneously "assembled" by multiple actors with various interests (Cohen, 2013: 433). Much within-job task heterogeneity might therefore be present from the outset in a job's formation. In addition, a job's work content is subject to much modification by dynamic processes, such as workers accruing responsibility (Miner and Estler, 1985), benign managerial opportunism (Miner, 1987, 1990), technological change (Barley, 1986; Nelson and Irwin, 2014), jurisdictional contests over tasks (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2003; Anteby, 2010), and variation of work routines (Feldman and Pentland, 2003; Pentland, 2003a, 2003b). These dynamics can create heterogeneity in legitimized work tasks. For instance, librarians' task of helping patrons locate printed materials became largely irrelevant in the face of the new information technology of Internet search, yet helping patrons sort through online sources in turn became a new task (Nelson and Irwin, 2014), thereby resulting in unexpected heterogeneity in librarians' work content. Given this possibility for heterogeneity even across legitimized tasks, the content of these tasks can matter for inequality in the quality of the job if one worker group is segregated to performing particular tasks. Even though these legitimized tasks might not differ radically in terms of status in the organization, they may differ in the extent to which they are otherwise undesirable.

More specifically, because tasks might differ in the extent to which they are physically, emotionally, or relationally straining, it is important to consider not only the intersubjective status construction processes of being stuck doing devalued activities, as in the gendered work activities literature, but also task segregation's implications for gender inequality in subjective outcomes of job quality. Insights from studies of work give us starting points from which to understand how performing tasks could have implications for inequality in such outcomes. Studies of workers' bodily experiences suggest that doing various tasks may have negative physical implications for workers (Wacquant, 2004; Heaphy and Dutton, 2008; Michel, 2011). The performance of tasks also implicates emotional processes. In the emotional labor literature, for example, doing different tasks imposes varying levels of emotive dissonance on workers who must outwardly display emotions incongruent with their feelings (Hochschild, 1983; Wharton, 2009). Emotional processes may also arise from having to perform differentially stigmatized tasks (Kreiner, Ashforth, and Sluss, 2006) or tasks less central to workers' identities (Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006; Anteby, 2008a, 2008b). Additionally, task performance involves relational processes (Eyal, 2013). Some tasks may be isolating or promote conflict among workers (Hodson, 2001), while others may improve relationships with others (Huising, 2015). These studies each hold conceptual fragments for how the

performance of particular tasks can lead to unfavorable outcomes in job quality, but because they do not analyze cases in which a group of workers is disproportionately allocated to particular subjectively disadvantageous tasks, they have not provided a clear link between task heterogeneity and group inequality in job quality.

Furthermore, tasks might differ in the extent to which they are detrimental to objective job quality outcomes like pay, promotion chances, and turnover. To account for how task segregation mediates the relationship between work content and inequality, we aim to consider a conceptualization of job quality that spans subjective and objective dimensions. In so doing, we hope to build a theoretical model in which we show that task segregation can affect not just inter-subjectively constructed status but also subjective and objective job quality outcomes.

## METHODS

### Context

The research setting was a unit of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). In the wake of the passenger-plane hijackings used in the attacks on New York's World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and Washington, DC, on September 11, 2001, the United States Congress passed the Aviation and Transportation Security Act, establishing TSA as a federal agency (Congressional Record, 2002). The act assigned TSA responsibility for all passenger and baggage screening, as well as the broader charge of maintaining the security of the U.S. traveling public. Over the course of 2002, TSA came to encompass more than 60,000 employees; in 2011, it still employed close to 58,000 people (Hatch, 2004; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2011). TSA policies were organized at the national level, but implementation was decentralized to local TSA units operating mainly out of airports under the supervision of federal security directors (Fosher, 2009).

The particular TSA unit under study was based in a large urban airport, given the pseudonym LUA. The study focused on the TSA security-screening workforce—employees responsible for identifying and removing prohibited items (objects determined by TSA to be potentially dangerous to travelers' safety) from travelers and their baggage. At the time of the study in 2011, a total of 1,223 screening employees were employed by LUA's TSA unit. Most (71 percent) were entry-level transportation security officers (TSOs), the mainstay of the screening workforce and the primary focus of the study. The screening workforce also included lead transportation security officers ("leads"), who directly managed the TSOs (12 percent), and supervisory transportation security officers ("supervisors"), who oversaw both TSOs and leads (10 percent). Because they oversaw TSOs, we refer to leads and supervisors collectively as managers. The remainder of the screening workforce consisted of behavioral detection officers, officers trained to identify suspicious behavior within and outside of checkpoints (7 percent).

Starting pay for TSOs in 2011 was approximately \$12 per hour, and benefits included health insurance and a retirement plan. At the time of the study, the workforce had been unionized for only a few months; the American Federation of Government Employees started representing TSA employees in June 2011.

**Table 1. Demographic Overview of LUA TSA's Screening Workforce and Interview Sample**

	Population (N = 1,223)*	Interview sample (N = 89)
Male	839 (68.6%)	52 (58.4%)
Female	384 (31.4%)	37 (41.6%)
Race/ethnicity		
White	896 (71.7%)	72 (80.9%)
Black	131 (10.5%)	6 (6.7%)
Hispanic	160 (12.8%)	7 (7.9%)
Asian	40 (3.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Native American	7 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Other	16 (1.3%)	4 (4.5%)
Average age in years	39.2 (S.D. = 13.7)	43.2 (S.D. = 14.7)
Average years of service at TSA	4.6 (S.D. = 3.1)	5.0 (S.D. = 3.0)
Full-time employees	828 (68%)	70 (79%)
Part-time employees	395 (32%)	19 (21%)
Position at TSA		
Transportation security officer	874 (71.5%)	55 (61.8%)
Lead TSO	144 (11.8%)	21 (23.6%)
Supervisory TSO	123 (10.0%)	6 (6.7%)
Behavioral detection officers	82 (6.7%)	7 (7.9%)

\* These population numbers were calculated from a full roster of the 1,223 LUA TSA screening workers at the time of the study in 2011, except for the race/ethnicity breakdown. The race/ethnicity breakdown was calculated based on a separate self-report survey of the screening workforce in 2011 conducted by LUA TSA, which also included some TSA administrative staff and higher-level employees, bringing the total number of employees to 1,250 for the race/ethnicity calculation.

LUA TSA's screening workforce was mostly full time (68 percent) and predominantly male (69 percent), with an average age of 39 years and an average tenure of five years. The workforce's self-reported racial/ethnic composition was approximately 72 percent white, 13 percent Hispanic, 10 percent black, 3 percent Asian, 1 percent American Indian or Alaska native, and 1 percent "other or more than one race." Table 1 provides more detail on the workforce's demographics.

### An Intensity Case of Task Segregation

LUA TSA serves as an "intensity case" that "manifest[s] the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely" (Patton, 1990: 182). Unlike extreme or deviant cases, which "may be so unusual as to distort the manifestation of the phenomenon of interest," intensity cases are "excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not unusual cases" (Patton, 1990: 171). An intensity case therefore offers the benefit of information richness on the phenomenon without the potential cost of being so deviant that the phenomenon might be regarded as idiosyncratic.

LUA TSA exhibited task segregation intensely and sustainably enough to be observable. Several enabling conditions made this possible: discrete task boundaries, managerial discretion to make and enforce task allocation decisions, and the rationalizing condition of operational strain that results from matching between task and worker-group type as well as insufficient numbers

of a particular group type. Below, we articulate these conditions as aspects of the context that allow for the emergence of sustained task segregation, making LUA TSA a rich setting for the study of how task segregation can lead to inequality in job quality.

First, adequately distinct tasks produce task categories into which workers could be segregated. At TSA, TSOs had a set of tasks that were clearly defined, formalized, and bounded, allowing both task assignment and a rotation system. TSOs' passenger screening tasks mostly took place at an airport security checkpoint, a space between the ticketing area and the "sterile area" where screened travelers board flights. Each checkpoint was divided into multiple pairs of security lanes. At each pair of lanes, managers assigned TSOs to discrete tasks. Managers were expected to rotate TSOs through different tasks every 30 minutes, although, as will be discussed, this rotation system was not implemented consistently because of operational strains. The tasks, however, were discretely bounded. Table 2 provides descriptions of TSOs' distinct passenger screening tasks. Our analysis focused on two key tasks that TSOs viewed as particularly undesirable, AIT (advanced imaging technology body scanner) pat-downs and backfield dynamic officer pat-downs, which we refer to collectively as the singular "pat-down task" for simplicity. The pat-down task involved the TSO informing passengers of the procedure they were about to undergo, asking them to hold their arms out, and running gloved hands along their bodies to check for prohibited items.

Second, an enabling condition for task segregation is for managers to have full discretion to allocate workers to tasks. At TSA, managers had a high degree of direct control, unilaterally directing workers to tasks (Edwards, 1979). Managers disproportionately allocated female TSOs to the pat-down task in multiple ways. Deviating from the usual rotation procedure, they kept female TSOs in the pat-down task; while women were ordered to stay at the pat-down task, men rotated. Managers also called for female TSOs performing other tasks at their checkpoint to temporarily rotate into the pat-down task. Finally, managers requested women from other checkpoints to conduct pat-downs.

Third, operational strain constitutes a managerial rationalizing condition for task segregation.<sup>1</sup> Such strain can result when a particular task is preferentially performed by a group and task demands are unmet due to a shortage of group members. This operational strain was present at LUA TSA. Federal TSA policy mandated that pat-downs for female passengers could be conducted only by female screeners (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2013), but the proportion of female screeners at LUA TSA was relatively low compared with the proportion of female passengers passing through LUA. Although we did not have archival information on the gender ratio of passengers passing through LUA in 2011, a U.S. Department of Transportation report (2009) indicated that women around that time made up approximately 40 percent of air travelers annually. In contrast, only 33 percent of the TSOs employed at LUA in 2011 were female. The resulting imbalance consistently created a backlog of female passengers waiting for pat-downs from female screeners, lengthening security lines, irritating passengers, and unnerving managers. Such backlogs gave

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<sup>1</sup> These operational strains are rationalizing in the sense that many observers (including passengers and managers) would view managers' disproportionate allocation of female TSOs to pat-downs as a rational, legitimate response to operational pressure.

**Table 2. Transportation Security Officers' Passenger Screening Tasks at LUA TSA\***

Task number and label	Description	Typical number of TSOs
1. Travel document checker	Examining passengers' ticket information and identification documents to screen for counterfeits.	1–4
2. Divestment officer	Making announcements ("advisements") notifying passengers about screening procedures and asking them to remove ("divest themselves" of) items such as coats and shoes to be placed alongside carry-on items on the conveyer belt leading into the X-ray machines. After passengers' documents are checked and their items are removed and placed on the conveyer belt, they line up to pass through either a metal detector or a body scanner.	1
3. Metal-detector operator	Directing passengers to wait or pass through the metal detector ("MAG," the detector's magnetic field). Asking the passenger to remove metallic objects or wait for a manual pat-down, if the metal detector alarm sounds.	1
4. AIT pat-down officer [pat-down task]	<b>Directing passengers to wait or step into the advanced imaging technology (AIT) body scanning machine. Conducting pat-downs if AIT image-viewer signals that a passenger needs a pat-down after a body scan.</b>	2 (1 male, 1 female)
5. AIT image-viewer	Apart from checkpoint, viewing the body-scanned image ("AIT image") of the passenger in an enclosed cubicle near the security lane, assessing whether the passenger should be given a pat-down, and signaling this assessment to AIT pat-down officer via telecommunication (i.e., a computer monitor near body scanner).	1–2
6. X-ray image-viewer	Viewing X-rayed images of passengers' bags that are moved through the X-ray machines to identify whether a bag needs to be checked manually, and calling for bag checks when deemed necessary.	2
7. Backfield dynamic officer [pat-down task]	<b>Standing in the back of the checkpoint nearest to the sterile area ("backfield") and responding to calls from X-ray machine operators for bag checks and calls from metal-detector operators for pat-downs.</b>	2 (1 male, 1 female)
8. Exit-lane monitor	Apart from checkpoint, guarding the exit door to prevent departing passengers who have not gone through security from entering the sterile terminal area. The exit door is where arriving travelers leave the sterile terminal area to collect checked baggage and exit the airport.	1

\* Task numbers indicate the approximate order in which passengers encounter TSOs performing the tasks. The bolded tasks—AIT pat-down officer and backfield dynamic officer—indicate the two tasks that involve pat-downs and that we collectively term the "pat-down task." The "Number of TSOs" column designates the approximate range of TSOs assigned to a particular task for a given pair of security lanes.

managers the rationale to allocate female screeners disproportionately to the pat-down task. The above conditions allowed LUA TSA to serve as a setting in which task segregation occurred sustainably.

### Segregation of Female TSOs to the Pat-down Task

We have strong reasons to believe that, at the time of our study, female TSOs were task-segregated. Although logs of TSOs' time use were not kept, interviews with both male and female workers strongly suggest that female TSOs spent more time doing the pat-down task than male TSOs. One female TSO noted, "There are never enough females. There is a constant demand for females. So often we [female screeners] are constantly doing pat-downs. I don't mind doing pat-downs, but I don't want to be constantly performing pat-downs all day." Another woman echoed this impression, saying, "Females have to pat down females, so you [are] doing a lot more of that than your male counterparts . . . because there are not enough females." Perspectives from male TSOs corroborate female TSOs' accounts. One male TSO said, "So if you're at a large checkpoint, especially if you're a woman, you can always be at a position where you're going to do pat-downs all the time."

Additional perspectives outside of LUA seem to validate these accounts of task segregation for women in TSA units more broadly. A 2011 newspaper article reported on a memo sent to TSA officers in Virginia's Washington Dulles International Airport suggesting that "females will be transferred to passenger" checkpoints from baggage duty to address the need for female pat-downs (Davidson, 2011). A similar memo was reported to have been sent to TSA officers in Nashville (WCSH Portland, 2011). Also, a union press release noted that "Transportation Security Officers across the country" were complaining of similar issues of "being forced . . . to the checkpoints because of the male to female ratio needed for passenger screening" (American Federation of Government Employees, 2011). A U.S. congresswoman also described in a congressional hearing that she "met with Transportation Security Officers who relayed that female TSOs . . . are held at the passenger checkpoints for pat-downs." She added, "Due to the increased demand for female TSOs at passenger checkpoints, they tell me they are not rotating positions per TSA policy, because of insufficient number of TSOs on duty at passenger checkpoints" (Laing, 2014). Thus there is evidence from a number of sources suggesting that female screeners were segregated to the pat-down task relative to male screeners. The task segregation at LUA TSA allowed us to explore the processes through which task segregation functioned as a mechanism for workplace inequality.

### Data and Sampling

For our analysis of the link between task segregation and inequality in job quality, we relied on 89 in-depth interviews conducted as part of an inductive study on the work experiences of a range of LUA TSA security screeners in 2011. The sample included mostly TSOs (N = 55); it also included leads (N = 21), supervisors (N = 6), and behavioral detection officers (N = 7), most of whom were previously TSOs. Because we sought to understand how differential allocation to tasks within a job might explain inequality, we focused on the 55 interviews conducted with TSOs, but the other interviewees were largely former TSOs or worked closely with TSOs, and they also had valuable perspectives on TSO experiences that we incorporated into our analysis.

The two coauthors and a research assistant each conducted approximately equal numbers of interviews. Collectively, the interviewers represented a diverse set of individuals in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity. Because “dynamics of power and professional status, gender, race, and age may affect the direction and content of interviews” (Charmaz, 2006: 27), this diversity attenuated the potential for biases introduced by interviewers’ positions. Interviews were conducted at airport hotel lobbies, cafés, restaurants, and interviewees’ homes. Each interview lasted about an hour and was digitally recorded and transcribed with the interviewee’s consent. For three interviewees who did not consent to be recorded, detailed notes were taken during and immediately after interviews. Interviews followed an open-ended protocol that included such topics as a typical workday and job challenges. We encouraged interviewees to tell us what they thought we should know to understand their work. The Online Appendix (<http://asq.sagepub.com/supplemental>) provides sample interview questions.

The interview sample was constructed as a random sample of LUA TSA screening employees. Following an informational e-mail sent to the entire workforce by LUA’s federal security director, we sent electronic interview invitations to a randomized set of employees, drawing from the full roster of TSA screening employees—TSOs, leads, supervisors, and behavioral detection officers—provided by LUA TSA’s management. To increase awareness of the study and maximize response rate, we sent two electronic reminders at two-week intervals after the initial invitation, posted informational flyers in TSA break rooms, and made visits to training sessions to introduce ourselves and answer questions. Interviewees were also compensated for their time.<sup>2</sup> The response rate was about 40 percent. The general informational e-mail and flyer included our contact information, and five volunteers who contacted us were also interviewed.

We followed a logic of sampling for range, which entails identifying theoretical categories of interviewees and ensuring sufficient numbers of sampled interviewees in each category (Weiss, 1994; Small, 2009). Early on in the study, it became apparent that gender dynamics were salient among interviewees, so we checked that our sample included enough female ( $N = 37$ ) along with male interviewees ( $N = 52$ ) to study those dynamics. We found that it did, while not deviating much from the population’s overall demographic characteristics described in table 1.

Interviews are well suited for an analysis of task segregation’s processes. First, interviews enabled access to interviewees’ reported experiences of performing tasks at security checkpoints. Because upper management of LUA TSA did not permit us sustained observational access to checkpoints, interviewees’ accounts of tasks effectively allowed us to learn about such experiences in “settings that would otherwise be closed to us” (Weiss, 1994: 1). Second, interviews were appropriate for understanding interviewees’ subjective reactions (Weiss, 1994; Yin, 2014). Purely observational data would not give us as privileged access to individuals’ articulations of perceptual and affective

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<sup>2</sup> We decided to compensate interviewees at \$40 per interview after realizing that TSOs could volunteer for overtime and that our study occasionally competed with such opportunities.

responses to task segregation, critical for understanding subjective aspects of job quality such as emotional exhaustion.

### Data Analysis

We began our analysis by reading through interview transcripts and writing analytical notes for each interview. As we compared accounts across interviewees (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1994), the particularly intense, negative work experiences of female workers emerged as an important theme, and a puzzle arose around what best explained this gender inequality. To seek answers, we continued to analyze and write notes for interviews, returning to previously analyzed interviews to revise those notes. Reading transcripts and writing analytic notes was an iterative process (Charmaz, 1983; Golden-Biddle, 2001).

Soon themes around the undesirability of the pat-down task as compared with other tasks and the disproportionate allocation of women to this task emerged from the data. This posed another puzzle around how task segregation affected workers. We addressed this puzzle in the same iterative fashion of analyzing and note taking as above, revealing themes such as emotionally disconcerting interactions with passengers during pat-downs. We also iterated with and drew on key information from news articles and reports to check the validity of our interpretations. We continued this process until reaching theoretical saturation (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

## FINDINGS

We found that workers' experiences of task segregation related to inequality in proximal (short-term) and distal (long-term) outcomes of job quality. By proximal outcomes, we mean relatively immediate consequences reflecting workers' day-to-day job experiences. By distal outcomes, we mean eventual consequences reflecting workers' longer-term experiences of their jobs. Segregation to the pat-down task disproportionately exposed female screeners to intertwined processes of physical exertion, emotional labor, and relational strain that gave rise to proximal, subjective outcomes of high work intensity, intense emotional exhaustion, and lack of coping resources. The findings also suggest that task segregation may have inequality implications for distal outcomes of job quality, including economic and non-economic outcomes. More specifically, we found that task segregation may disproportionately subject women to processes of managerial sanctions for "anomalous" time off and narrowing of skill sets, with potential adverse implications for promotion chances, pay, job satisfaction, and turnover.

### Physical Exertion and Work Intensity

We uncovered several processes through which task segregation can lead to inequality in subjective, proximal outcomes of job quality. The first process involved the physical exertion of workers conducting pat-downs, prompting proximal outcomes of high perceived work intensity. Both female and male TSOs agreed that pat-downs were physically tiring. Pat-downs required TSOs to stand for the duration of their assignment. A female TSO described her

experiences of being assigned to the pat-down task: "I'm standing still in a pit most of that time. It starts with my feet. By the end of the day, I'm hurting from head to toe" (231\_TSO-F).<sup>3</sup> A male TSO echoed this sentiment, complaining that pat-downs required "stand[ing] still in one place" for long periods of time. He continued, "My feet start to burn and my joints . . . tight[en] up" (101\_TSO-M).

Though men and women agreed that conducting pat-downs was an especially tiring task, there were some gender differences in interviewees' reactions to the pat-down task's physicality. On one hand, female TSOs emphasized the exertion required to meet demand, rushing back and forth between different security lanes to conduct backlogged pat-downs on female passengers. Male TSOs, on the other hand, who did not have to meet such demands, did not mention such taxing experiences. A woman described her stressful experience of "running around": "We [female TSOs] have to work double-time. Like, there have been times where . . . there's no females [TSOs] . . . I'll be at the gate. [Someone will call,] "Female assist. This woman needs a pat-down." . . . "Female assist" . . . So I'm going to go here. Go back there. So I'm, like, running around" (310\_TSO-F).

In contrast to pat-downs, most other screening tasks were regarded as less physically demanding. A prime example was the X-ray viewer task because TSOs could sit down while assessing X-rayed images of passengers' bags for prohibited items. "Everybody likes X-ray," said one male TSO, "because you usually can sit down" (111\_TSO-M). A female TSO agreed, saying that she enjoyed being "able to sit . . . like sitting at the X-ray" (207\_TSO-F). Other examples include the travel document checker task, where TSOs sat at a podium to check passengers' documents, and the exit-lane monitor task, where TSOs sat on a stool near the exit door to prevent passengers who have not gone through security from entering the terminal area.

Even if female TSOs were assigned to these other tasks for a given rotation, however, they were often not allowed to stay sitting for as long as their male counterparts. Managers often temporarily reassigned female TSOs to pat-downs to deal with pat-down backlogs of female passengers. As one female TSO recalled, "I used to get tapped off the X-ray, which means someone will come up and say, 'I'm going to do this. You go and do [pat down] that female'" (219\_TSO-F). Though there were tasks other than pat-downs that were seen as physically demanding as well, neither men nor women were segregated to these tasks. The divestment officer task, for example, entailed standing for the whole shift while delivering verbal advisements to passengers. Because this task required no gendered matching of worker to task, women were not disproportionately assigned to it.

Women's higher exposure to the physical exhaustion because of task segregation to pat-downs was linked to a proximal outcome of high perceived work intensity. Work intensity can be defined as the subjectively assessed "amount of work a person does in a given time period" (Kalleberg, 2011: 154). Male

<sup>3</sup> Designated in parentheses here are identifiers providing information on unique interviewees. From left to right, first is the interviewee's identification number, in which the first digit identifies the member of the research team conducting the interview (e.g., 1xx or 3xx), and the last two digits indicate the interview's temporal order in the sequence of interviews (e.g., x08 or x26); second is the interviewee's job position; third is the interviewee's gender, where "F" is female and "M" is male.

screeners also framed the disproportionate assignment of women to pat-downs as overwork. One male interviewee said that female screeners “were extremely overworked” because “a female [screeener] can only deal with a female passenger [pat-down]” (320\_TSO-M). A supervisor noted that a “top issue” he had heard among female TSOs was that the “workload is higher because they’re doing more physical pat-downs, more physical work than the male counterparts” (301\_Supervisor-M). A male TSO added that occasionally female TSOs were prevented by managers from taking breaks with the justification that they were the only ones able to do pat-downs. He explained, “. . . when it’s time for a break or something like that, the supervisor may look at you [female TSO] or the lead may look at you and say, ‘Oh, I can’t take you [out for a break]—not yet—because you’re the only female here’” (327\_TSO-M). In this process, female TSOs experienced higher work intensity from the sheer physical exertion of being relatively more frequently assigned to pat-downs. In the next two processes, however, the negative outcomes resulted from the nature of interpersonal interaction in the pat-down task.

### Emotional Labor and Emotional Exhaustion

The second process through which task segregation led to worse job quality for women involved the repeated performance of emotional labor, giving rise to a proximal outcome of intense emotional exhaustion. Both men and women agreed that conducting pat-downs was a particularly undesirable task because of the affectively negative interactions with passengers it often entailed. To TSOs, performing pat-downs meant being likely to be the target of passengers’ negative emotions. A female TSO remarked, “I’ve had to pat down women who have called us every name in the book, which is very degrading. . . . I am not a molester. I’m not a rapist. I’m not a pervert. I am not any of these things. I am doing my job” (114\_TSO-F). A male TSO likewise noted his frustration, saying, “I’ll give you [passenger] a pat-down. That’s my job. But don’t be an asshole on top of it. . . . Don’t just give me an attitude [and say,] ‘This is bull-shit’” (314\_TSO-M).

In response to such negative affect from passengers while doing pat-downs, TSOs also occasionally got emotional themselves during the interaction. This issue tended to be more salient to female interviewees than male interviewees. A female TSO said she became infuriated when a passenger she was patting down resisted:

[The female passenger] took my hands and slapped them down and we got into a confrontation. And I said to her, “First of all, don’t ever touch me. Number one, don’t touch me.” And she said, “Well, you are touching me.” And I said, “I have the right to touch you.” . . . [She was] just being intentionally defiant, so I was very, very upset. (114\_TSO-F)

Another female TSO recalled getting exasperated during a pat-down: “I explained to [the passenger] the procedure; I told her what I was going to do. And she . . . just kept [saying], ‘No, no, you can’t do. No, no, no.’” The TSO laughed in disbelief as she said, “And I’m like, ‘Okay, somebody. . . .’ I nearly abandoned my post and walked away. I was so upset” (124\_TSO-F). In such an interaction, this TSO had to engage in emotional labor, managing “feeling to

create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (Hochschild, 1983: 7), to hide her frustration. The disconnect between her public display and her exasperation entailed emotive dissonance, the maintenance of emotional displays different from what one is feeling (Hochschild, 1983: 90). In instances in which TSOs failed to suppress their emotions, they occasionally expressed indignation to passengers, intensifying the negative emotionality of the interaction.

In contrast, TSOs saw other tasks as more desirable than pat-downs because these tasks separated them from interactions with passengers and from needing to perform emotional labor. A woman noted that the X-ray viewing task insulated TSOs from passengers. She said, "You do get a little break from the public when you're on X-ray because you don't have to deal with them at all" (109\_TSO-F). That is, the conveyer belt and X-ray machine separated passengers from TSOs sitting behind the X-ray scanner. Another woman noted that the exit-lane monitor task could also be desirable because "it's a zone where you can be away from the maniac attitudes and all the stress of the checkpoint a little bit" (207\_TSO-F).

Other tasks, like the travel document checker task, were considered more appealing than pat-downs because although they did not separate TSOs from passengers, they were associated with more positive interactions with passengers. A male TSO claimed that he had "great interaction with people when I'm checking out IDs" but that "passengers' moods were radically different" after that point: "It's like night and day. They're coming up, they're handing you their ID, and they're all happy, you know, 'We're going on our trip. We had a great time.' Once they hit that line where they have to start taking their stuff off, they're a totally different person" (214\_TSO-M). Female TSOs experienced this difference between tasks, too. When asked if she liked doing certain tasks, a female TSO said she generally enjoyed checking travel documents: "Doing tickets, I don't find that stressful. . . . [Passengers] are always so pleasant when they come up to the [travel document checker] podium. Have a little chat, and smile and laugh" (207\_TSO-F).

Because female TSOs spent a disproportionate amount of time doing pat-downs, women were disproportionately exposed to the emotional labor of this task. One female TSO said, "I think a lot of people take their anger out on us directly because we're the person they see. We're in the uniform. . . . So we get a lot of that confrontation for [doing pat-downs] probably" (108\_TSO-F). Likewise, a male TSO recognized the difficulty that female TSOs face due to the emotional challenges of the pat-down task: "Females are in very short supply because the work they do is very difficult, embarrassing, demeaning . . . 'Okay, now you're going to go up to the lady and feel every private part of her body, and then, you know, smile'" (226\_TSO-M).

TSOs linked these emotionally laborious passenger interactions with the proximal outcome of strong emotional exhaustion. An important part of burn-out, emotional exhaustion occurs when people feel their emotional resources are depleted (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Emotional labor and emotional exhaustion are intimately connected (Wharton, 2009). Female TSOs noted that the negative interactions from pat-downs led to a sense of fatigue that extended even beyond the workplace. One said, "Passengers will give you a really [hard] time. Like sometimes when I leave work, it's like, 'No talking. Nobody touch me, all right, I've had enough. . . . I just want to go to sleep. I am so tired.' It is draining" (124\_TSO-F).

Emotional labor also interrelates with the process of physical exertion; they are in practice intertwined and mutually reinforcing. For example, the female TSO whose passenger “slapped [her hands] down” noted, “Hopefully [this incident] does not happen on a daily basis, because if it did, my blood pressure would be through the roof and I’d probably have to go to my doctor to get a prescription to get through the day. It can be challenging. It is a burnout job. . . . When you deal with constant criticism from passengers, it can really wear you [down]” (114\_TSO-F). Thus the emotional labor from such passenger interactions could also have bodily implications, resulting in an overall “wear and tear of everyday life” (Lamont, Welburn, and Fleming, 2013: 137).

### Relational Strain and Lack of Coping Resources

The third way task segregation led to worse job quality for women involved processes of relational strain, giving rise to a proximal outcome of lack of coping resources. Although, for the most part, male and female TSOs similarly reported that performing pat-downs gave rise to physical exertion and emotional labor, the performance of the pat-down task seemed to be relationally straining for women but not for men. Women described how performing pat-downs negatively influenced their ongoing relationships with coworkers. Female TSOs reported that being segregated to the pat-down task made them resent male coworkers who appeared to be doing comparatively less work. One woman captured this frequent relational strain: “At a small checkpoint with twelve people to run it, and there’s only one female. What are you [female TSOs] doing all day? You’re patting down females. . . . We [female TSOs] feel it a lot more, because there’s twelve of them [male TSOs]. They’re not doing anything . . . so we’re doing everything. That’s how it feels” (109\_TSO-F). A quote from another female TSO supports this notion. After describing her physical exhaustion of “running around” doing pat-downs, she said, “And the guys are just standing there, like twiddling their fingers, making jokes, doing nothing” (310\_TSO-F).

One might expect that female TSOs could commiserate with one another about being segregated to the pat-down task and seeing their male peers “not doing anything.” In fact, however, several women reported feeling resentful toward other female TSOs in the pat-down task who appeared apathetic or lazy. Being segregated to the pat-down task, then, generated among female TSOs feelings of bitterness toward *both* men and women. As a female TSO explained, “. . . if it’s me and another female [in the pat-down task], I’ll feel like I’m working way too hard and she’s not working as hard because she doesn’t care” (109\_TSO-F). In addition, a second female TSO recalled her incredulous dismay when another woman complained about the number of pat-downs she had to do: “One day I heard this girl that I trained [say] ‘I had to do three pat-downs!’ . . . I have worked in one terminal . . . [where] I was the only female. And it was for three hours and 20 minutes [that] I did one pat-down after the next. . . . Over and over. And that girl was complaining about three pat-downs. . . . It’s just unreal” (221\_TSO-F).

Women’s segregation to pat-downs may also have generated resentment among male TSOs toward female TSOs. Some male interviewees suggested that they became resentful while waiting for female TSOs—who are busy conducting pat-downs—to “tap” them in order to rotate tasks. One man noted,

I want to know who the hell is following me in the rotation. What are you [female screener] doing? . . . A female is requesting a private screening [a pat-down in a closed room]. You have to go do this because you're the only female. . . . And that's why you're late tapping me out. . . . I'm angry. I'm aggravated because I've been here for too long. . . . Now secretly I'm mad at you because I was tapped out late. (208\_TSO-M)

Due to their overexposure to the relational strain that comes from being segregated to pat-downs, female TSOs had as a proximal outcome relatively fewer social coping resources in the form of cohesion with coworkers. Cohesion can be understood as a sentiment characterizing members' positive liking of the overall collective (Hogg, 1992; Kelly and Barsade, 2001), and coping resources are sources of resilience to stressors (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Because women's task segregation to pat-downs was associated with resentment of women toward men, women toward women, and men toward women—but not men toward men—resentment disproportionately tainted women's relationships with coworkers. As one woman described it: "You don't sort of develop relationships [in this job], I feel. People talk about their relationships. But I don't see that" (313\_TSO-F). Another woman added that not only did she not form positive relationships, but her coworker relations made her job more stressful, bemoaning, "if it's not passengers, it's your coworkers, seriously" (310\_TSO-F).

By contrast, male TSOs did not describe pat-downs as related to their social cohesion, and they seemed to have more cohesion with their coworkers than female TSOs. A male TSO mentioned that his relations with his coworkers were "very nice," saying, "I get along with my colleagues, my fellow TSOs" (312\_TSO-M). "We all bonded very well," another man said, adding, "We all try to kind of stick together" (113\_TSO-M). A third male TSO concurred, "Yeah, I like the camaraderie with all the TSOs. . . . Very nice people working here, you know? Very salt of the earth type of people, you know?" (104\_TSO-M).

These processes of relational strain were intertwined with physical exertion and emotional labor. First, coping resources in the form of coworker cohesion can serve as a source of resilience that makes it easier to deal with physical exertion. Human physiological systems, after all, are beneficially affected by positive social interaction (Heaphy and Dutton, 2008). Because they had fewer coping resources, women were less able to endure their work intensity. Second, coping resources can help workers deal with emotional exhaustion. Coworker cohesion was a way to "brush off" wrenching confrontations with passengers. Here, too, women's lack of coping resources was disadvantageous. Though male interviewees noted that emotionally upsetting interactions with passengers could be palliated through positive coworker interactions, female interviewees did not. A male TSO recounted an incident when a passenger yelled profanity: "That's when you rely on your fellow workers. . . . That's where you get your strength. That's where you get your tougher skin" (210\_TSO-M). Another male TSO supported this idea, saying, "If you enjoy working with [your coworkers], then when you're, you know, dealing with . . . the dumb stuff, it makes it easier, because they understand you" (314\_TSO-M).

### Inequality in Distal Outcomes

A number of processes could link task segregation to more distal outcomes of job quality, both objective (e.g., pay) and subjective (e.g., job satisfaction). As there is a greater analytical distance between task segregation and distal outcomes, we have relatively less direct empirical support for these processes than for those leading to proximal outcomes. In addition, because LUA-specific archival data from 2011 on promotion rates, pay, and turnover rates were unavailable, we could not use such data in our analysis. We drew instead on LUA-specific interview data, press releases about other TSA units or TSA in general, and existing theory. We thereby posit tentative relationships between task segregation and distal outcomes to further specify our model of how such segregation can lead to inequality.

First, task segregation may overexpose female TSOs to managerial sanctions and narrowing of their skill sets, which can be linked to distal outcomes of lower pay and promotion chances. Second, these distal outcomes, in tandem with proximal outcomes of high work intensity, emotional exhaustion, and lack of coping resources, may be linked to lower overall job satisfaction for women. Third, these distal and proximal outcomes might also be linked to higher female turnover; higher turnover, in turn, may intensify the relative lack of female workers, potentially giving rise to a self-perpetuating cycle of task segregation.

**Promotion chances and pay.** Women's promotion chances and pay might have been adversely affected by task segregation. This possibility is explicitly asserted in a union press release, which claimed, "In a number of airports, female TSOs are being forced . . . to the checkpoints because of the male-to-female ratio needed for passenger screening. This affects . . . seniority and pay" (American Federation of Government Employees, 2011). There are two possible paths by which task segregation may have adversely affected promotion chances and pay for female TSOs.

One path might be through managerial sanctions for workers taking time off. High job demands predict a high need for recovery (Sonnentag and Zijlstra, 2006), and workers may seek recovery (Hobfoll, 1998) by taking vacations and sick days to relieve stress and burnout (Westman and Eden, 1997). Proximal outcomes of higher work intensity, emotional exhaustion, and lack of coping resources might compel female TSOs to desire more vacation and sick days off. Interviewees suggested that attempts to take time off were tracked by a monitoring system. They claimed that this system identified patterns in attendance records that may suggest that workers were taking days off "suspiciously" (e.g., to extend their weekends rather than actually being sick); the system would then flag these attempts as "anomalies." One TSO characteristically said, "If you do take advantage of your time off, you get penalized. . . . Oh, you better not take a sick day before your RDO [the two scheduled regular days off]." She added, "If you take a sick day before your RDO, you're going to hear it when you come back to work" (221\_TSO-F). An accumulation of "anomalies" was believed to result in formalized managerial sanctions that adversely affected workers' promotion chances and pay.

Another path by which task segregation could adversely affect promotion chances and pay for women is through a narrowing of skill sets, a relative

deprivation of broad skills and experience across tasks. When women are disproportionately allocated to pat-downs, they may gain relatively less experience performing other tasks. Because a variety of tasks are evaluated on a skills examination—the scores of which affect bonuses and promotion chances—women might be disadvantaged in this examination process and thereby may have lower promotion chances and pay as a result of task segregation. As the previously cited congressional hearing noted, “. . . female TSOs are finding it more difficult to be promoted, because they are held at the passenger checkpoints for pat-downs rather than gaining experience at other stations. . . . The result is that female TSOs are not getting the experience at other stations to be considered for a promotion” (Laing, 2014). In addition, the president of a local chapter of the TSA union for Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama said in 2011 that female TSOs being forced to the checkpoints to conduct pat-downs “limits their marketability” and makes “female TSOs hesitant to apply for lead positions” (Davidson, 2011).

**Job satisfaction.** As described above, task segregation generated gender inequality on multiple dimensions of job quality—including the proximal outcomes of work intensity, emotional exhaustion, and lack of coping resources, as well as distal outcomes of lower promotion chances and pay. A worker’s self-assessment of the quality of his or her job has been conceptualized as job satisfaction, defined as “an overall affective response on the part of individuals to their jobs” (Kalleberg, 2011: 164). To illustrate, one woman at TSA said, “The job itself is really a shitty job. It’s very—it’s not rewarding” (105\_Lead-F). Although she was a lead at the time of the interview, she had previously been a TSO and was describing that job. Another woman, prompted to describe what “being a woman at TSA” meant, succinctly summed it up: “It sucks” (102\_TSO-F). A third woman said, “It’s, like, the most stressful job I’ve ever had in my life” (310\_TSO-F), with a fourth echoing, “I find it [the job] incredibly stressful. I have to psyche myself up every day” (313\_TSO-F). In contrast, a male TSO said, “I really enjoy it. I really do enjoy it. It’s an enjoyable job” (101\_TSO-M). “Overall,” said a second man about his job, “it’s pretty satisfying” (212\_TSO-M). Another man insisted, “I like to work here” (320\_TSO-M), and a fourth male TSO claimed, “I actually like coming to work. You know, I come in early, I don’t mind staying late. Those are things that I think, if anyone likes the job that they’re at, they don’t mind doing” (214\_TSO-M).

**Turnover.** A lack of job satisfaction is an important predictor of turnover (Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner, 2000). Task segregation may have as a distal outcome the higher turnover of female TSOs, which would intensify a condition that exacerbated task segregation to begin with: a relative lack of female workers. The issue of higher turnover among women than among men at TSA was salient among interviewees. A female TSO attested that “the turnover rate here for females is like twice as much [as that] for males” (325\_TSO-F). Another woman said, “Yeah, I think there’s a high turnover. . . . With women mostly. They [TSA] have a tough time keeping females” (112\_Lead-F). A male TSO also noted that most of the people who leave TSA are women: “Some people leave—it’s mostly females that leave . . . [but] you don’t hear [about] that many [men] leaving” (212\_TSO-M). According to one female TSO, there

was even a task force formed to understand why women left TSA at higher rates. She said, "So you have a lot of females who leave. . . . The female turnover rate here is horrible. Like, it's so bad, they tried to start a—I remember seeing an email when I first started—a group about why there were so little females here" (310\_TSO-F). Higher turnover of female TSOs would effectively intensify the relative lack of female workers, which was a condition that rationalized task segregation. Thus it is possible that if higher female turnover is a distal consequence of task segregation, task segregation could be part of a self-reinforcing feedback loop that perpetuates itself.

## DISCUSSION

### A Model of Task Segregation

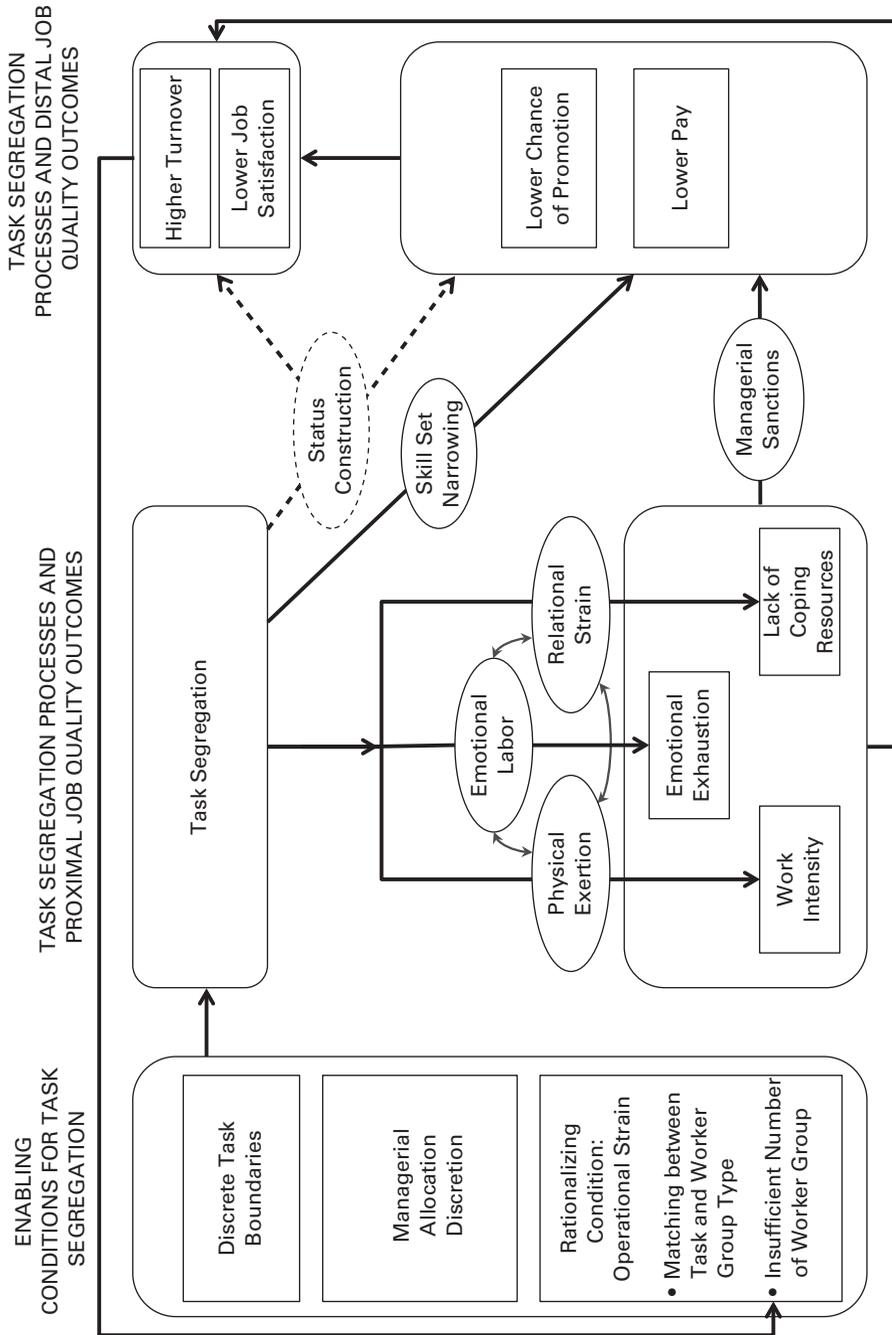
Based on our case study, we built a broad model summarized in figure 1 of how task segregation may function as a mechanism for within-job inequality, drawing from contextual details of our setting and from our findings, positing relationships indicated by solid lines. We also drew from existing literature, positing relationships indicated by dotted lines. In this model, we propose conditions that may allow for the emergence of task segregation, processes by which task segregation can give rise to proximal job quality outcomes, ways in which task segregation may relate to distal job quality outcomes, and the suggestion that task segregation could perpetuate itself.

As the leftmost part of the model illustrates, we suggest that some conditions, like those present in our study, allow the emergence of task segregation. We highlight the enabling conditions of discrete task boundaries, managerial discretion in allocation decisions, and operational strains. As the center part of the model illustrates, and as our findings show, task segregation overexposes one worker group—relative to other groups—to intertwined processes of physical, emotional, and relational disadvantage, thereby yielding proximal outcomes of work intensity, emotional exhaustion, and a lack of coping resources for the segregated group. Such adverse proximal outcomes could become part of workers' assessment of poor job satisfaction and rationale for turnover.

In the rightmost part of the model, we suggest that task segregation can give rise to more distal outcomes, such as lower chances of promotion, lower pay, lower job satisfaction, and higher turnover through processes of managerial sanctions and skill set narrowing. From existing literature on gendered work activities (Fletcher, 2001; Williams and Dempsey, 2014), status construction is another process through which task segregation can lead to such distal outcomes; that is, evaluators' devaluation of tasks disproportionately performed by a group may lead to group members having lower pay or promotion chances, and the status loss of group members may also lead to lower job satisfaction and higher turnover intentions for these members. Finally, the arrow that loops from the rightmost part to the leftmost part illustrates our suggestion that task segregation can perpetuate itself because the distal outcome of higher turnover would exacerbate the operational strains that rationalize task segregation.

This grounded model of task segregation provides a theoretical framework for further elaboration. We do not claim to empirically examine the conditions for task segregation's emergence; we theorize these conditions from aspects

Figure 1. Model of Task Segregation as a Mechanism for Within-job Inequality.\*



\* Conditions or outcomes are shown in rectangles; ovals represent processes. Solid lines show inference from the current study; dotted lines represent inferences from existing literature.

of our setting and look to future empirical research to further develop them. Instead, the empirical data for this case study emphasize how task segregation can lead to proximal inequality outcomes. And although we do not claim to have definitive empirical support for distal outcomes, we posit these analytical connections and suggest that future research test this model. Overall, our study offers a conceptual model that provides a starting point for theorizing how task segregation can lead to within-job inequality.

### Contributions to Theory

Despite growth in the literature on workplace inequality (Reskin, 2000; DiTomaso, Post, and Parks-Yancy, 2007; Stainback, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Skaggs, 2010; Tilcsik, Anteby, and Knight, 2015), past scholarship has focused on explanations that reside mostly outside the content of work. Here, we paid more attention to work content per se as a general source of within-job inequality and proposed that task segregation in particular might serve as one such inequality-generating mechanism. As a result, we make several contributions to scholarship on workplace inequality. A first, general contribution is to emphasize the importance of understanding work content in studies of inequality. Though researchers have noted women's disproportionate performance of informal work activities that are devalued (Fletcher, 2001; Williams and Dempsey, 2014), we found that even segregation to legitimized, formalized work tasks that are organizationally valued can be detrimental. For the most part, researchers of workplace inequality have overlooked this task-level focus, perhaps because of a general presumption that differences between tasks in a given job are too minor to warrant close examination. But our study reveals possible within-job heterogeneity in tasks. Tasks can vary in their desirability, and this task heterogeneity can have important implications for different worker groups. Our case study therefore suggests that inequality scholars "bring work back in" (Barley and Kunda, 2001). Closely examining workers' experiences of performing tasks was crucial to understanding the processes through which task segregation influenced inequality. Without such attention to work, the link between tasks and inequality would have been missed.

A second contribution of this article is that we theorize the concept of task segregation as a mechanism for how work content can be a source of inequality. We contribute to inequality scholarship and the literature on gendered work activities by producing a holistic model of task segregation that considers a wide variety of job quality outcomes—economic and non-economic, subjective and objective—incorporating insights from existing literature and theorizing novel processes. Our model theorizes conditions for task segregation and processes through which task segregation can lead to both proximal and distal outcomes of job quality. We posit that three features of task segregation as an inequality-generating mechanism may make it particularly useful for future scholarship: analytic generality, naturalistic generality, and relatedness to existing constructs.

**Analytic generality.** The concept of task segregation may enable analytical generalization by shedding light on ideas "at a conceptual level higher than that of the specific case" (Yin, 2014: 40–41). Our case study does not allow us to

infer population-level patterns like the proportion of jobs that exhibit task segregation, but it does highlight a novel mechanism by which inequality might emerge. Though our setting was an intensity case such that task segregation was sustained and visible, the various conditions of task segregation may appear in other contexts as well.

First, discrete task boundaries may be common in settings in which task standardization has prevailed as a way of increasing organizational efficiency (Taylor, 1911; Guillén, 1994). It occurs across industries, including the growing service economy (Leidner, 1993). Second, high managerial discretion in task allocation might also be prevalent. The decline of unions in the United States (Western and Rosenfeld, 2011) has likely provided managers with yet more room for increased discretion in task allocation. Furthermore, even in settings in which workers seem to have more discretion in allocating tasks, managers may still exercise control through subtle forms of normative control (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979; Kunda, 1992).

Third, the condition of operational strain that rationalized task segregation in our setting may prove more prevalent than it seems at first glance. Matching tasks and worker-group types need not be as explicit or formalized by regulation as it was in our setting. Here, task-worker matching was legalized, akin to a bona fide occupational qualification, enforced by law. In many other settings, however, task-worker matching is implicit and based on informal expectations, thus more closely resembling a de facto occupational qualification. There might be a tacit gendering of tasks (Acker, 1990; Britton, 1997) whereby assumptions about the worker characteristics appropriate for certain tasks have been constructed (Skuratowicz and Hunter, 2004), resulting in ideal worker images or cultural preferences for certain task-worker matching (Gorman, 2005; Turco, 2010; Reid, 2015). For example, this matching might take the form of assigning female engineers to the task of relationally coordinating teamwork (Fletcher, 2001). Moreover, there may be insufficient numbers of a particular worker group preferred for certain tasks. Various literatures have considered the proliferation of settings in which occupations are demographically imbalanced (Reskin and Roos, 1990; Reskin, 1991; Fernandez and Sosa, 2005). In work contexts in which matching preferences meet demographic group imbalances, the resulting condition of operational strains would further enable and rationalize task segregation, which might advantage one worker group over another. Task segregation might not be as rare as it appears, and future research could explore its extent across settings.

**Naturalistic generality.** Task segregation also has the potential for naturalistic generalization, in which readers might see affinities between the concept and their own or others' experiences (Stake, 1995: 85). Evidence suggests, for example, that female faculty advance more slowly, are paid less, and are tenured at lower rates than men, across a variety of fields (Valian, 1999). One mechanism that could explain some of these differences would be task segregation of female academics to committee service (Menges and Exum, 1983). Such an example illustrates how a theory of task segregation might be useful and how our modeled processes and conditions may be used as "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer, 1969) to elucidate what may be happening in other cases.

Applying our theorized conditions of task segregation as sensitizing concepts, we see committee service as discrete from other tasks like conducting research or teaching. The urgings of administrators may disproportionately allocate female faculty to, say, diversity committees. Administrators might draw on a rationalized justification for such a disproportionate allocation. They might argue that female faculty are uniquely qualified to serve on diversity committees and should be matched to them. Administrators might also further point to the insufficient number of women in the department and thus the need for a given female faculty member to be allocated to the task of committee service.

If female faculty are indeed task-segregated in this regard, our theory might also provide sensitizing concepts for processes through which they are disadvantaged. Serving on diversity committees may not be physically exhausting in the same way that pat-downs are, but knowledge work can be surprisingly draining (Michel, 2011). Also, emotional labor may result from feeling torn between personally held principles and pragmatic needs to concede over potentially sensitive issues of diversity. Cohesion with coworkers could become strained if committee members experience resentment of other faculty unburdened by this duty. Furthermore, task-segregated faculty members might find their skill set narrowed, as their time spent on committees gives them less time to hone research skills. Ultimately, task segregation might then help explain adverse distal outcomes of promotion, pay, satisfaction, and turnover for women. Although these hypotheses ought to be empirically tested, our model provides sensitizing concepts for future inquiry of contexts like academia, and we encourage scholars to consider other settings in which our model might have naturalistic generality.

**Relation to existing concepts.** The task segregation mechanism could also relate to existing concepts that may integrate into a larger picture of how work content and tasks relate to workplace inequality. First, certain processes that are analytically distinct may occur alongside task segregation. One process that might exacerbate the adverse effects of task segregation is tokenism. The relative lack of a group in an organization can place burdens on tokens such as performance pressures, boundary heightening, and role encapsulation, worsening tokens' experiences (Kanter, 1977; Turco, 2010). Tokenism is about the perceptual and interactional dynamics resulting from being perceived as a token minority, while task segregation is about the social and psychological processes resulting from the performance of work. For example, tokenism might occur when a female professional is role-encapsulated as a "pet," which can diminish her status because "pets" are seen as amusing, subservient companions (Kanter, 1977: 235). This tokenism might co-occur with and be related to task segregation; "pets" may be segregated to menial tasks like "being asked to order lunch" (Williams and Dempsey, 2014: 110). Thus tokenism can be understood as a phenomenon that is distinct from but can occur alongside and worsen the negative experiences of task segregation.

Second, some existing concepts can be analytically subsequent to task segregation. Though task segregation at LUA TSA was substantial, task segregation could become even more severe. Highly acute task segregation would involve one group of workers spending nearly all of their time allocated to

certain tasks within a job, effectively being almost completely excluded from other tasks. The resulting distribution of work can entail two different sets of tasks performed by two different groups under a single job title. As an illustration, for the job title "product manager" in a particular organization, female product managers may be ordered to exclusively perform supplier-management tasks due to a particularly difficult set of suppliers and cultural stereotypes that women have distinctive relational inclinations and capabilities; meanwhile, male product managers exclusively perform other tasks. One possibility after such acute task segregation is "job hiving" (Hughes, 1958), which occurs with an "established profession's allocation of its more routine duties to others" (Nelsen and Barley, 1997: 621). Such hiving off of tasks can create an entirely new job, and the resulting new job may be highly overrepresented by the formerly task-segregated group.

Such job hiving could help to explain phenomena like how the proliferation of job titles along gender lines contributes to the sex-segregation of job titles and careers (Bielby and Baron, 1984; Baron and Bielby, 1985, 1986). It is thus possible that if task segregation occurs acutely, is followed by job hiving, and occurs widely across organizations, task segregation can lead to widespread job segregation. Future research should pay particular attention to the role that tasks play in defining jobs and when and how task segregation might lead to job emergence or job segregation, including the conditions that precede the transitions and the processes that accompany them.

In the face of a lingering prevalence of workplace inequality, researchers have mobilized various analytical and theoretical lenses to understand mechanisms of inequality. The resulting scholarship has been both heartening and vital but has largely overlooked work content and neglected the possibility of task segregation as a mechanism of within-job inequality. Disadvantaged groups will continue to be worse off unless mechanisms of inequality continue to be recognized and addressed. Because of its subtlety, task segregation is a particularly insidious mechanism that nonetheless has important implications. Being sensitized to task segregation's potential to explain within-job inequality is a first step toward better attenuating it.

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