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Review

Who gets to negotiate? Tracing gender gaps in structural empowerment with people analytics

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Gender differences in compensation and career advancement are often examined through the lens of negotiation behavior, initiation, outcomes, and stereotyping. We shift attention to the organizational structures that precede and shape formal negotiations. Drawing on organizational gender research, we use structural empowerment as an organizing framework to review and synthesize the literature on organizational structures that may shape who gains access to negotiations and the negotiation power employees bring to them. Existing research documents gender differences in access to opportunities, information, support, and resources, yet their implications for negotiation access and power remain underexamined. We explain how people analytics can help scholars and practitioners trace these dispersed and longitudinal processes and outline directions for future research. We conclude with methodological, ethical, and theoretical considerations associated with using people analytics to examine these questions.

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Background

Despite progress toward gender equality, women generally still earn less than men, remain underrepresented in leadership positions, and progress more slowly in their careers [1,2]. These persistent disparities have prompted policy interventions, including the EU Pay Transparency Directive [3], which aims to reduce inequalities by making pay disparities in organizations visible. In the academic literature, studies on gender inequalities in compensation and career advancement often focus on gender differences in negotiation initiation, outcomes, and stereotyping [4–8]. While these approaches have advanced our understanding of gender inequality, this work does not fully explain how disparities emerge and persist.

Disparities in negotiation outcomes, compensation, and career advancement may reflect underlying structural empowerment gaps that shape who gains access to negotiations and the power they bring to those negotiations. Using structural empowerment [9] as an organizing framework (Figure 1), we review research on gender in organizations and examine how gender gaps in access to opportunities, information, support, and resources may operate through pre-negotiation processes that position women and men differently. The relationship between structural empowerment gaps and negotiation access and power remains empirically understudied because these processes unfold over time, are dispersed across multiple decisions, and are difficult to observe when decisions are examined in isolation [10]. A structural focus does not negate the role of stereotyping or bias during discrete negotiation episodes. Rather, it offers a complimentary perspective by highlighting the organizational structures that may shape negotiation access and power before negotiations occur.

People analytics, a data-driven approach to people management, may help address this limitation in the literature by making these dispersed and longitudinal processes empirically traceable and linkable to negotiations. In this review, we consider people analytics both as an organizational management practice for diagnosing structural gaps and as a data source for academic research on the consequences of these gaps for negotiation access and power.

Structural factors in negotiation processes

Research on gender differences in negotiation has mostly focused on the individual and treated negotiation as a discrete episode. In this literature, gender inequalities in compensation and advancement are often attributed to stereotyping, gendered self-characterizations, women's lower likelihood of initiating negotiations, and less

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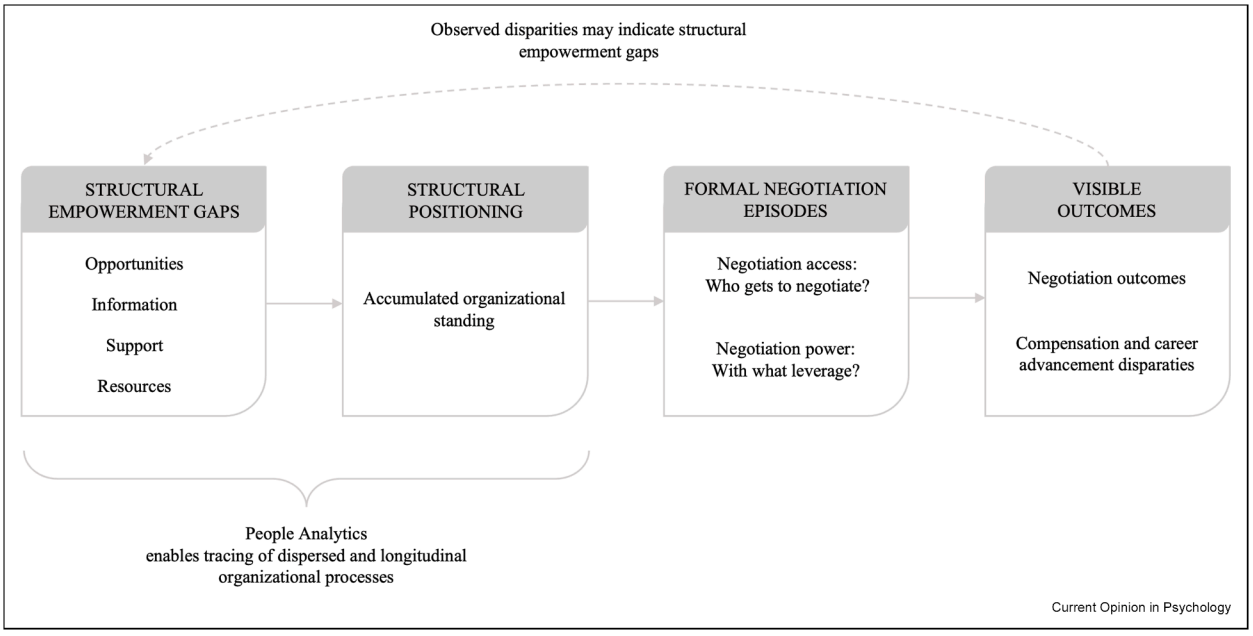
Figure 1



Structural empowerment gaps and negotiation access, power, and outcomes.
The figure summarizes potential links among gender gaps in access to opportunities, information, support, and resources; negotiation access and power; and visible negotiation outcomes.

assertive behavior during negotiations [4–6,11,12]. More recent evidence suggests that women now report negotiating pay as often as or even more often than men [13], yet they continue to receive lower compensation. Because much of this literature begins at the negotiation table, it offers limited insight into whether structural factors afford women and men comparable access to negotiations and position them to enter with comparable power.

At the same time, negotiation power, the "capabilities negotiators can assemble […] to increase the probability of achieving their objectives" [[14], p. 256], can derive from structural factors, including access to information, alternatives, and organizational position. Structural empowerment offers a framework for integrating research findings on how organizational structures position employees before negotiations. Structural empowerment theory suggests that individuals' structural positions, rather than their characteristics alone, shape behavior in organizations. People experience structural empowerment when they have access to organizational conditions that enable effective work and career advancement [9,15]. Gender differences in organizational outcomes may therefore reflect systematic differences in structural empowerment of men and women.

Kolb and Williams's work on shadow negotiations provides an early account of how gendered organizational processes shape recognition of negotiation legitimacy. To negotiate effectively, women in particular may need to establish that an issue is negotiable, gain recognition as legitimate negotiators, and build leverage [16,17]. The broader proposition that pre-negotiation positioning may shape perceptions of legitimacy, readiness, and promotability is echoed in recent research on academic career progression [10]. This work suggests that those with greater structural empowerment are more likely to obtain positions that signal value and promotability, for instance, through a record of high-visibility work. Together, gendered empowerment gaps may place women and men in unequal positions prior to negotiations and enable men to accumulate more negotiation access and power over time.

Using people analytics to analyze structural empowerment gaps

Research documents gender differences across many organizational processes but does not yet directly assess whether systematic gender gaps in structural empowerment exist and how they relate to gender differences in negotiation access and power. People analytics offers a way to investigate such questions. People analytics is a multidisciplinary effort involving the systematic use of organizational and workforce data and advanced analytical methods to understand people-related processes and support organizational decision-making [18,19].

Enabled by the digitalization of human resources, people analytics allows organizations to integrate and analyze diverse and longitudinal employee and business data [18].

We organize existing evidence on gendered organizational processes around four interrelated structural empowerment dimensions — opportunities, information, support, and resources [15] — and show how people analytics could examine whether gaps in each dimension relate to negotiation access and power (Table 1).

Opportunities

Opportunities refer to access to challenging work and experiences that build skills and knowledge for professional growth [35]. Access to such opportunities can help employees establish visible track records signaling promotability. Challenging work experiences predict

Table 1

Structural empowerment dimensions, example research questions, and organizational proxies in negotiation processes.

Structural empowerment dimension	Example empirical studies	Example research questions	Example organizational proxies
Opportunities	De Pater et al. [20]; de Pater et al. [21]; Babcock et al. [22]; Bircan et al. [23]; Benson et al. [24]	Who receives career-accelerating work? Are men and women equally likely to receive high-visibility, challenging, and promotable work? Who receives non-promotable work and how much time does this cost? Are there differences in what is considered (non-)promotable work for men and women? Do different departments/projects differ in the value associated with (non-)promotable work? Do early opportunity differences predict later promotion, compensation, and negotiation outcomes?	Assignment to high-visibility or strategic projects; projects with access to senior leaders; project leadership/support roles; challenging task assignments; high-potential ratings; promotion-track assignments; mentoring; committee/service work; organizing social events; onboarding assignments.
Information	Gibson et al. [25]; McPherson et al. [26]; Barrington and Hallock [27]; McDonald [28]; Durbin [29]	Who has access to strategic organizational information? Are men and women equally connected to senior leaders and decision-makers? Who is included in meetings, networks, client dinners/lunches, projects where strategy and upcoming opportunities are discussed? Who receives information related to career advancement? Does information access predict negotiation access and outcomes?	Network centrality; access to senior leadership and other decision makers; invitations to strategic meetings or socials; invitation to accompany leaders to strategic functions or conferences; participation in cross-functional projects; access to promotability/pay criteria; referral flows.
Support	Faniko et al. [30]; Ibarra et al. [31]; Jampol and Zayas [32]	Who receives performance-advancing feedback? Are men and women equally likely to receive mentoring and sponsoring? Do mentoring and sponsorship effects differ for men and women? Who has sponsors with sufficient seniority to affect advancement decisions? Does support access predict negotiation opportunities, promotability evaluations, or career outcomes?	Mentorship/sponsorship records; sponsor seniority; nominations by senior leaders; feedback frequency, quality, and content; manager check-ins; talent-review advocacy; succession-plan nominations.
Resources	Babcock et al. [22]; Stojmenovska [33]; Thompson et al. [34]	Who receives the time, staffing, budget, and support needed to succeed? Are men and women equally resourced when assigned similar responsibilities or leadership roles? Who does more administrative, service, helping, or low-promotability work? Who receives more protected time? Do resource gaps limit performance signals and negotiation power and outcomes?	Budget allocation; staffing support; protected time; workload allocation; administrative burdens; non-promotable tasks; committee-service work; access to assistants/tools; project resources; extra-role helping.

Note. Example studies indicate research relevant to gendered access to organizational structures. Example research questions and organizational proxies are illustrative rather than exhaustive and should be tailored to the organizational context.

promotability evaluations beyond job performance [20]. Evidence suggests that women often have less access to opportunities. Despite having preferences similar to men's, women receive fewer challenging assignments in mixed-gender settings [21], are more often asked to perform lower-promotability tasks [22], are less likely to receive project leadership rather than support roles [23], and receive lower potential ratings despite comparable or stronger performance [24]. Although gender gaps in career-accelerating work are well documented, how they impact women's compensation and career advancement negotiations remains unclear. People analytics could help examine questions such as: Does women's access to opportunities predict their likelihood of gaining access to negotiations? Under what conditions does access to opportunities strengthen women's negotiation power? Which opportunities matter most?

Information

Information refers to access to organizational aims, values, policies, and decisions [35]. Strategically useful information about upcoming opportunities, decision criteria, influential actors, and unwritten rules often travels through informal networks [25], helping employees recognize when negotiation is possible, how to position themselves, and which claims align with organizational goals [14]. Because informal networks are affected by homophily [26] and senior positions remain male-dominated [27], organizational networks often reproduce "old boys' network" dynamics, limiting women's access to strategically valuable contacts [28] and informal knowledge channels [29]. Men's professional networks may thus partly explain their advantage in negotiation performance [36]. Although pay transparency may theoretically help, evidence suggests that salary information does not always mitigate gender gaps in negotiations, thus such information alone may be insufficient [37]. Whether and when information affects women's negotiations is unclear. People analytics could examine: Does women's access to strategic information predict access to negotiations? Under what conditions does information strengthen negotiation power? Which types or sources of information are the most impactful?

Support

Support refers to feedback and help from colleagues, subordinates, and management [35]. This support helps employees improve performance and provides the relational backing to become visible, credible, and better positioned [14]. Research shows that women, despite similar ambitions, often report receiving less organizational career support [30] and may experience less active advocacy and endorsement from influential actors [31]. Women also often receive overly favorable feedback [32], which may limit opportunities for improvement. Implications of such support gaps for women's negotiations are understudied. People analytics could assess: Does women's access to sponsorship, advocacy, and actionable feedback predict negotiation access and power? How might support gaps impact negotiations? Which forms of support are most consequential?

Resources

Resources refer to receiving (temporary) help when needed and having sufficient time for performance-relevant work [35]. Resource gaps may emerge through direct under-resourcing or indirectly through resource drain. Women are more often asked to do non-promotable work that consumes time and effort while offering fewer career returns [22], report fewer resources and greater strain in senior positions [33], and perform more extra-role helping despite lower perceived support [34]. How structural differences in access to resources needed for performance-relevant work affect women's eventual compensation and career advancement negotiations is unclear. People analytics could examine: Do staffing, protected time, and workload relief predict the leverage women bring to negotiations? How might resource gaps impact women's negotiations?

Together, these four dimensions integrate extant evidence on gendered structural empowerment gaps and their potential implications for women's compensation and career advancement negotiations. These structural empowerment dimensions may influence one another, interact, or vary in relevance across contexts. For instance, challenging work without sufficient resources may increase the risk of failure, weakening performance records that support career advancement negotiations. The same organizational process may also span dimensions: non-promotable work may reflect restricted opportunities, resource drain, or both, depending on the analytic focus. Given the limitations of current research, we encourage the systematic assessment of the potential implications of gender gaps in structural empowerment for women's ability to gain access to and bring leverage to compensation and career advancement negotiations. For scholars, people analytics may help address the limitations of existing research by linking organizational data and testing whether and how these gaps accumulate and interact over time, how they vary across roles, teams, and career stages, and whether they translate into unequal negotiation initiation and power. For organizations, people analytics can reveal nuanced insights regarding how gender gaps in salary and career advancement emerge, informing context-specific interventions.

Ethical, methodological, and theoretical considerations

The application of people analytics requires careful attention to ethical, methodological, and theoretical considerations. First, advanced analyses of detailed employee information can raise ethical concerns, reproduce bias, and enable misuse [38,39]. Predictive models trained on historical data may reproduce existing

structural inequalities [39]. For instance, behavioral patterns resulting from structural empowerment gaps could be interpreted as indicators of individual turnover risk, potentially reinforcing inequality if organizations invest less in employees predicted to resign. More broadly, systematically collected detailed employee data can be used to identify and reduce inequality or to unjustly intensify surveillance and managerial control. Clear ethical guidelines are needed [38,40,41].

Second, people analytics requires careful and transparent methodological choices. Organizational data are often collected for administrative purposes and might be incomplete or insufficient proxies for theoretical constructs, such as sponsorship or negotiation access [42]. To avoid the risk of overfitting claims [43], scholars and practitioners should consider data quality, construct validity, and theoretical grounding [42]. Collaboration between scholars and practitioners can support the conceptualization of constructs and the analytical approach [38]. Finally, because people analytics findings are highly context-dependent [44,45], generalizability constraints are likely [38]. For example, the content of challenging work, the value of non-promotable tasks (e.g., committee membership), and how sponsorship is enacted and becomes relevant in negotiations might differ across organizations, even in the same sector. Thus, the boundary conditions of findings need to be communicated, and academic research should be replicated [38].

Conclusion

Gender differences in compensation and career advancement cannot be fully understood by focusing solely on formal negotiation episodes. Here, we review literature suggesting that even before formal negotiations occur, structural empowerment gaps may leave women with less negotiation access and power than men. Systematic differences in opportunities, information, support, and resources may shape who arrives at the negotiation table with a record of promotability-signaling work, knowledge of decision criteria and unwritten rules, and the social backing needed to be credible and visible. Prior research offers limited empirical evidence on how these difficult-to-observe conditions relate to negotiation access and power. Recent advances in people analytics offer a promising way to systematically examine these links and inform both negotiation theory and organizational interventions. Advancing negotiation theory and reducing gender inequality require not only assessing what happens at the negotiation table, but also studying the structures affecting who arrives there in the first place and with how much negotiation power.

CRediT author statement

Shayda Shwan: conceptualization, investigation, writing - original draft, writing - review and editing.

Corine Boon: conceptualization, investigation, writing - review and editing.

Deanne N. Den Hartog: conceptualization, investigation, writing - review and editing.

Tanja Hentschel: conceptualization, investigation, writing - review and editing.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

While preparing this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT to assist with editing of some sentences for clarity and language. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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* of special interest
** of outstanding interest

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Further information on references of particular interest

10. * This paper conceptualizes academic career progression as negotiated across repeated formal and informal episodes. Legitimacy, readiness, and promotability are shown to be evaluated across interactions rather than only at the point of formal decision-making. The research is relevant for understanding career advancement as a cumulative negotiation process.

23. * This paper presents recent evidence on gender promotion gaps in knowledge work, with emphasis on the role of task assignment in teams. Differences in access to leadership and support roles are shown to affect the visibility and career value of employees' work. This is relevant for understanding how everyday allocation of work shapes advancement outcomes.

24. ** This paper examines how assessments of "potential" contribute to the gender promotion gap. Even when performance is comparable, potential ratings are shown to differ in ways that disadvantage women's advancement. This is relevant for understanding how talent evaluations shape promotability signals and career progression.

38. ** This paper discusses how data from within organizations can be used to study organizational processes and build theory. Internal organizational data are presented as a way to examine mechanisms that unfold over time and across multiple decisions. This is relevant for understanding the opportunities and challenges of using organizational data for research.

42. ** This paper considers data-driven theorizing in organizational research. The promise of large-scale organizational data is discussed alongside risks related to construct definition, theoretical grounding, and methodological transparency. This is relevant for understanding how people analytics can be used carefully in theory development.