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Study of *The Weakest Link* Game Show Looks at Gender and Racial Discrimination

Women typically favor other women, and whites do not discriminate against blacks, a new study of voting patterns on the popular television game show *The Weakest Link* has found. The research, published in the *Journal of Human Resources*, provides a window on human behavior in a specific high-stakes situation, and could help improve understanding of labor-market discrimination, the researchers suggest.

"Labor economists are interested in understanding issues of discrimination, but studying discrimination in the real world is difficult," explains study co-author Randall Walsh, Ph.D., professor of economics at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

"As an alternative, researchers sometimes bring people into a laboratory and have them play games or compete in different ways for small financial rewards," Walsh says. "A shortcoming with those studies is that the money on the table is really low—only \$15 to \$20. Game shows offer an attractive alternative because the stakes are much higher—often thousands of dollars."

The research team, led by economics professors at three universities, analyzed voting patterns on 103 episodes of *The Weakest Link* to determine whether contestants discriminate on the basis of gender and race.

They also explored which of three theories of discrimination best explain contestants' voting behavior: preference-based discrimination, which occurs because people simply prefer or do not prefer members of other groups; statistical discrimination, which occurs because of real or perceived differences in the average ability of members of certain racial or gender groups; and strategic discrimination, which occurs when people strategically collude against others based on gender or race.

The high monetary stakes found on *The Weakest Link* could influence the extent and nature of discrimination, just as they might in the "real world" of the labor market, the researchers suggest. Another advantage of studying the game show is that contestants base their decisions on what they see on the show and the researchers can observe everything that the players see.

Each episode of *The Weakest Link* is divided into a series of six or eight timed rounds, during which players take turns answering trivia questions on behalf of their teams. Correct answers by individual players lead to

prize money or a loss of prize money for the team. After each round, players independently cast votes against their team members, and the person who receives the most votes must leave the game. In the final round, two players compete against each other, and the winner receives all of the money in the team bank.

Walsh and co-authors Kate Antonovics, Ph.D., of the University of California, San Diego, and Peter Arcidiacono, Ph.D., of Duke University were surprised to find that women were more likely to vote against men than against women, even though there was virtually no difference in males' and females' ability to answer the questions correctly. In the initial round, the probability of a woman voting against a particular man was 23.3 percent, while the probability of a woman voting against another woman was only 15.1 percent.

They were also surprised to find no evidence of discrimination by men against women or whites against blacks in the initial rounds of the game.

The researchers conclude that neither statistical discrimination nor strategic discrimination explained the female contestants' pattern of voting for other females. Instead, the evidence points to preference-based discrimination — women simply preferred to play the game with other women, the co-authors assert.

Walsh points out that *The Weakest Link* clearly is not the labor market and that the study may raise more questions than it answers. However, the research adds to the growing body of knowledge about gender and racial discrimination in a variety of situations.

The findings can be found in the Fall 2005 issue of the *Journal of Human Resources*, published by the University of Wisconsin Press.

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