

Occupational Prestige: A Sex-Neutral Concept?¹

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This study addresses the generalizability of measures of occupational prestige to men and women. Respondents were asked to evaluate the prestige of occupations and to rate male and female incumbents in these occupations. Results suggest that the general prestige of occupations is best predicted by the sex-typical jobholder. This research demonstrates that the seemingly sex-neutral concept of occupational prestige incorporates strong sex-linked assumptions. Implications of these findings for occupational prestige and for the social sciences in general are discussed.

In their seminal work, Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, and Vogel (1970) investigated the implicit sex-linked judgments individuals attach to the ostensibly sex-neutral concepts of maturity and mental health. Broverman et al. showed that the concept of maturity held by clinicians was far from sex neutral; indeed, numerous important attributes of the "mentally healthy adult" corresponded quite closely with the characteristics associated with men and differed substantially from the paradigmatic qualities attributed to women. This research spawned a series of studies which sought to identify differences in the characteristics attributed to women and men (Stricker, 1977; Wise & Rafferty, 1982).

Yet Broverman et al. (1970) approach has far-reaching implications beyond those regarding the stereotyping of sex-role attributes. It also

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highlights the susceptibility of the conceptual tools of the social science to prevailing assumptions about social roles. Even when a social science concept has no explicit link to sex roles, it may not be sex neutral in its foundations or in its application. Broverman et al.'s work suggests a broader reexamination of the fundamental tools in the social sciences to identify the ways apparently sex-neutral concepts and measures produce sex-biased theories and research. Their research demonstrates that this research must pay close attention to the relationship between the attitudes and assumptions of individuals, on the one hand, and the abstract reasoning embedded in social science concepts, on the other.

This study addresses the generalizability of measures of occupational prestige to men and women. Occupational prestige scales have played a major role in social science research, serving as the dependent variable in studies of social mobility, as the control variable for "family background" in a wide variety of social science research studies, and as the basis for alternative measures of social status (Treiman, 1977; Duncan, 1961). The first national study of occupational prestige used men as the standard occupational incumbents in two ways: The occupations rated in the questionnaire were restricted to those typically employing men, and the phrasing of the question implied a potential male job holder (National Opinion Research Center, 1947; Reiss, 1961). The result was a scale of male incumbents in male-dominated occupations.

Subsequent research, from which the standard occupational prestige scale are derived, attempted to correct for the sex bias in previous research by relying on questionnaires which included occupations in which women predominate, and rewording the questionnaire so that neither men nor women were explicitly referred to. The intended result was an occupational prestige scale uncontaminated by the sex of the incumbent. This scale is held to be a sex-neutral scale, since there is no reference to men or women in its construction (Bose & Rossi, 1983; Siegel, 1971). A great deal of research has applied this prestige scale equally to men and women holding occupations (Treiman, 1977).

Yet, as Broverman et al. (1970) demonstrated, the absence of an explicit reference to sex does not mean that the measure is based on no sex-linked assumptions. Important assumptions regarding sex may be built into the scale, despite the absence of an explicit reference to men or women. Since the occupational prestige scale is based on the ratings of respondents, the scale will embody the prejudices and assumptions of the respondents providing the rating scores. We consider several possible manifestations of this differentiation between the evaluation of male and female jobholders.

First, respondents may assume sex-typical incumbents when they rate occupations. The world of occupations is highly segregated by sex. In most

occupations, men are numerically predominant; in a minority of occupations, women are numerically predominant. A very high level of sex segregation in occupations has persisted over the century, despite dramatic changes in the occupational structure over this time (England, 1981; Jacobs, 1983). The sex-type of an occupation is a widely known feature of an occupation (Olson, 1979), and is learned by children at an early age (Papalia & Tennant, 1975; Rosenthal & Chapman, 1982). The first hypothesis, then, is that respondents assume sex-typical incumbents when they rate occupations. When rating the occupation nurse, respondents assume the nurse is a woman. When rating the occupation firefighter, respondents assume they are rating a man. The hypothesis is that sex-typed judgments about the prestige of occupations are built into the occupational prestige scale currently in use. These assumptions are implicit in the scales and will be revealed when respondents are enabled to distinguish between the ratings accorded to men and women in an occupation.

An alternative hypothesis is more directly analogous to Broverman et al.'s (1970) finding that "mature adult" implicitly meant "mature adult male." Perhaps respondents take male jobholders as their reference point in evaluating the desirability of all occupations. Perhaps the male jobholder is considered the desirable standard, regardless of the sex of the typical incumbent in an occupation. People may think about the desirability of occupations in male terms, despite the large and increasing presence of women in the occupational realm.

A final possibility is that there will be few systematic differences in the ratings of male and female jobholders. If true, this finding would imply that the prestige scale does apply equally to male and female jobholders.

We will test these three hypotheses. We ask respondents to rate the prestige they would accord to occupations, and we also ask them to assess the social standing of male and female incumbents in the same occupations. We obtain three sets of occupational prestige ratings: one for the general prestige of occupations (no incumbent specified), one for female incumbents in occupations, and one for male incumbents in occupations. We will ascertain whether the prestige of male or female incumbents is more closely associated with the general prestige of occupations. Using correlational and multivariate regression analysis, we will determine which set of prestige ratings best determines the general prestige of occupations.

The analysis will be conducted separately for male-dominated and female-dominated occupations. For example, in jobs traditionally held by women, we can determine if the ratings accorded to female incumbents are better predictors of the general prestige of occupations than the prestige of male incumbents. If so, one can infer that when making judgments about the general standing of occupations in which women predominate,

respondents may have implicitly assumed a female referent. Alternatively, if the prestige of male incumbents is the superior predictor, then the second hypothesis is supported. Finally, if the ratings of male incumbents and female incumbents are equally good predictors of the general prestige of occupations, the third possibility would be confirmed.

Several studies have examined the possibility of sex differences in occupational prestige (Olson, 1979; Guppy & Siltanen, 1977; Nilson, 1976; Walker & Bradley, 1973; Powell & Jacobs, 1984; Bose & Rossi, 1983). Most (Bose and Rossi are the exception) find significant differences in the prestige accorded to male and female incumbents in the same occupations.³ These studies, however, do not address whether the general prestige of occupations is a reflection of the prestige of male or female jobholders. This study builds upon these efforts by examining explicitly the link between general occupational prestige and the ratings of male and female incumbents.

DATA AND METHOD

Three types of prestige questions were included in the questionnaire: (1) the general prestige of the occupation ("For each occupation, please indicate your opinion of the general standing of the occupation"); (2) the prestige of female incumbents ("For each occupation, please indicate your opinion of the general standing that a woman in such a job would have"); (3) the prestige of male incumbents ("For each occupation, please indicate your opinion of the general standing that a man in such a job would have"). The term "general standing" is the same as has been used in previous research on occupational prestige (Hodge, Siegel, & Rossi, 1964). Each respondent was asked to evaluate a list of 30 occupations for two of these forms, resulting in approximately one-third of the sample responding for general prestige and male incumbents, one-third for general prestige and female incumbents, and the remainder for female incumbents and male incumbents.⁴ Each form had an equal chance of appearing first in the questionnaire; the order of occupations was reversed in half of the questionnaires. Although respondents rated the occupations on a scale of

³Several explanations for the discrepancy between the results of Bose and Rossi and those of others have been offered (Nilson, 1976; Powell & Jacobs, 1984; Bose & Rossi, 1983).

⁴Since the questionnaire administered to the students included another series of questions about perceptions of income and education of male and female incumbents in a list of occupations, we decided that the inclusion of all three prestige questionnaires would have been too long and cumbersome to answer. We adopt to randomly administer two of the three questionnaires to each subject.

1-9, the mean responses were transformed to a scale of 0-100 to facilitate comparison with prior research on occupational prestige.

There may be some question why subjects were asked to complete two prestige inventories instead of one, given that the responses provided in the latter form may have been affected by their ratings on the first. Previous research assessing occupational prestige generally has employed one of two approaches: (1) a between-subject treatment in which prestige ratings of male incumbents by one set of respondents are contrasted with the prestige scores accorded to female incumbents (or general occupational prestige) by another group of respondents, and (2) a mixed treatment in which respondents are asked to rate more than one prestige inventory. When these two approaches have been compared, it has been demonstrated that the between-subject approach yields greater sex differences than the mixed treatment (Bose, 1974). The difference in methodologies has been used as a partial explanation for the varying magnitude of sex differences in occupational prestige observed in the United States and England (Powell & Jacobs, 1984). Thus, our choice of the mixed treatment allows for the more conservative test of sex differences. If certain patterns of implicit sex bias are found using our approach, the patterns should be even larger using the other. The mixed treatment approach allows for a between-subject test and therefore enables us to test our suspicions. We compared the prestige ratings obtained only from the first questionnaire completed by subjects. Indeed, slightly stronger patterns of sex bias were obtained using this alternative approach. (These tables are available upon request from the first author.)

The prestige inventories were completed by 325 students enrolled in introductory economics classes in a large nonselective university located in the Northeast. Two lists of 30 occupational titles were distributed, with a total of 56 sample occupational titles matching census occupational titles and having National Opinion Research Center (NORC) prestige scores.⁵ The sample occupations were selected to match the distribution of workers in the prestige hierarchy, to include occupations typically held by women,

⁵Occupations included airline steward/stewardess, architect, automobile mechanic, baker, banker, barber, bartender, bookkeeper, bank teller, building superintendent, bus driver, carpenter, cashier, chemist, child care worker, college professor, dentist, dressmaker, dietician, electrical engineer, electrician, elementary school teacher, farm laborer, firefighter, funeral director, gas station attendant, hairdresser, high school teacher, insurance agent janitor, journalist, judge, key punch operator, lawyer, librarian, miner, minister, physician, plumber, police officer, postal clerk, practical nurse, professional actor/actress, professional athlete, psychologist, registered nurse, sales clerk, secretary, social worker, stenographer, tailor, telephone operator, textile worker, truck driver, typist, and waiter/waitress. The occupations included in the questionnaire but excluded from this analysis were housewife/househusband (in both lists), army captain, and mayor. The exclusion of these occupations do not alter the pattern discussed here.

and to maximize the comparability of our findings to previous occupational prestige research. The methodology of this study is described more fully elsewhere (Jacobs & Powell, 1984).

While caution is in order in evaluating a study based on a sample of college students, the potential sample bias in this case is not likely to significantly distort the results. For decades sociologists have observed the unusually high consistency in the ratings of occupational prestige across most segments of society (Hodge et al., 1964). This argument has been applied specifically to the use of college samples (Balkwell, Bates, & Garbin, 1980). Moreover, prestige ratings from this study that are directly comparable to prior studies support this conclusion. The correlation between the general prestige ratings of this study (no incumbent specified) and the 1963 NORC study for the 56 matching occupational titles included in both is $+ .91$. The removal of one outlier increases the correlation to $+ .94$.⁶ We should add that since the subjects are younger and more highly educated than the population at large, any bias from the sample should be in the direction of minimizing the actual sex differences (Bose & Rossi, 1983). Furthermore, the use of a college sample allow for inferences regarding the formation of career aspirations among young individuals.

RESULTS

The correlations between the general prestige of occupations (the sex of the incumbent unspecified) and the separate ratings of male and female incumbents are summarized in Table I.⁷ The first row displays the correlations for all 56 occupations. The correlations in the first row suggest that the general standing of occupation is more highly associated with the prestige of male incumbents ($r = .89$) than with the prestige of female incumbents ($r = .63$). This finding appears to provide support for the second hypothesis, which predicts that occupational prestige is a surrogate measure of the ratings of male jobholders.

Further investigation modifies this conclusion. The second row of Table I provides the correlations for occupations in which men predominate

⁶The occupation bank teller, the sex composition of which has changed substantially in the last few decades, was the outlier.

⁷Means and standard deviations of ratings of general prestige, female incumbents, and male incumbents for this sample have been reported elsewhere (full citation omitted to preserve blind reading). Results indicated significant differences in the ratings of male and female incumbents; moreover, the degree of agreement about female incumbents is considerably less than that about male incumbents or general prestige. Since both male and female respondents found significant differences in the ratings of male and female incumbents, results in this study are reported for the entire sample.

Table I. Correlations of General Prestige of Occupations with Prestige of Incumbents, by Sex Type Occupations^a

	General prestige of occupations with prestige of male incumbents	General prestige of occupations with prestige of female incumbents	Prestige of female incumbent with prestige of male incumbents
All occupations (N = 56)	.89	.63	.31
"Men's" occupations (N = 33)	.99	.86	.80
"Women's" occupations (N = 23)	.73	.84	.51

^aAll correlations are statistically significant, $p < .01$.

($n = 33$), and the third row is restricted to occupations in which women are predominant ($n = 23$). Female-dominated occupations were defined as those with 50% or more women, and male-dominated occupations were those with fewer than 50% female incumbents.⁸ The correlation for male-dominated occupations indicates the close convergence of the ratings of male incumbents and the ratings of general occupational prestige ($r = .99$). In contrast, when female-dominated occupations are considered, the general prestige of occupations is more closely related to the prestige of female incumbents ($r = .84$) than it is to the prestige of male incumbents ($r = .73$).

The correlation results indicate that the relationship between the prestige of incumbents and the general prestige of occupation reflects the sex-segregated nature of the occupational structure. The general prestige of occupations seems to reflect the prestige attributed the sex-typical occupational jobholders—men in male-dominated occupations and women in female-dominated occupations.

Although these findings are suggestive, the use of first-order correlations by themselves is insufficient to reach any firm conclusion. Thus, in the second stage of this research, general occupational prestige is estimated in a stepwise multivariate regression model. By including both the prestige of male incumbents and the prestige of female incumbents as predictor variables, we can test for the relative importance of each, controlling for the other. The regression equation is estimated three times, with the analysis focusing in turn on all sample occupations, male-dominated occupations, and female-dominated occupations. These models are presented in Table II.

The prestige attributed to male incumbents is the better predictor of the general prestige of all occupations ($R^2 = .79$). Nonetheless, the addition of the prestige of female incumbents significantly improves the explanatory power of the equation ($R^2 = .93$). The general prestige of all occupations, then, is determined by a combination of the prestige of male and female incumbents.

When the focus is restricted to male-dominated occupations, the general prestige of these occupations is best predicted by the prestige of male incumbents. The prestige of female jobholders adds a statistically significant but comparatively unimportant amount to this equation (multiple R^2 rises from .97 to .98). Thus, the general prestige of male-dominated occupations is primarily a function of the prestige of male incumbents.

⁸Alternative dividing lines between male-dominated and female-dominated occupations were examined and do not alter the results presented here.

Table II. General Prestige of Occupations Predicted by the Prestige of Male Incumbents and the Prestige of Female Incumbents by Sex Type of Occupations^a

	N	Constant	Male incumbents		Female incumbents		R^2
			B	Beta	B	Beta	
All occupations							
1	56	.2	.94 ^b (.07)	.89			.79
2	56	-20.0	.81 ^b (.04)	.76	.45 ^b (.04)	.40	.93
"Men's" occupations							
3	33	-22.6	1.22 ^b (.04)	.99			.97
4	33	-22.6	1.04 ^b (.05)	.83	.23 ^b (.05)	.19	.98
"Women's" occupations							
5	23	-28.3			1.09 ^b (.16)	.84	.70
6	23	-31.9	.51 ^b (.14)	.41	.82 ^b (.14)	.63	.82

^aStandard errors are given in parentheses.

^bSignificant at the level .01 level.

For "women's" occupations, the prestige of women incumbents is a more powerful predictor of the general prestige of occupations. Respondents' judgments regarding the general prestige of "women's" occupations more closely match their evaluations of female incumbents than of male incumbents. The prestige of female incumbents explains the bulk of the variation in general prestige ($R^2 = .70$). Including the prestige of male incumbents does add to the explanatory power of this equation ($R^2 = .82$). The general prestige of female-dominated occupations, then, is predominantly, but not exclusively, determined by the prestige accorded to female incumbents.

CONCLUSION

These results have important implications for occupational prestige and for the social sciences in general. Just as Broverman et al. (1970) demonstrated that the apparently sex-neutral concept "mentally healthy adult" embedded strong sex-biased assumptions, the present research indicates that the seemingly sex-neutral concept of occupational prestige

incorporates strong sex-linked assumptions. These results differ from Broverman et al.'s in that the male standard is not the universal standard for occupational prestige. Rather, the prestige accorded to an occupation reflects the sex-typical incumbent—men in male-dominated occupations and women in female-dominated occupations.

These results have two important implications for occupational prestige. As far as the theory of occupational prestige is concerned, these results suggest a different view of the occupational prestige hierarchy. The prevailing view is that the prestige of occupations reflects the socioeconomic characteristics (income and education) of the occupations (Treiman, 1977; Duncan, 1961). The present research indicates the sex-linked assumptions which are embedded in the prestige structure. Reflecting the sex-segregated nature of the occupational world, the occupational prestige scale is actually a composite of two scales. Occupational prestige for male-dominated occupations coincides with the ratings of male incumbents; occupational prestige for female-dominated occupations predominantly follows the ratings of female incumbents. What is usually conceived of as the occupational prestige hierarchy is really an artificial superimposition of two separate sex-segregated hierarchies.

As far as practical implications, the results suggest that implicit in the occupational prestige scales currently in use are sex-linked assumptions which reflect the sex-segregated nature of the occupational world. It may be inappropriate to use this scale to measure both men and women, for the scale applies to them only in the sphere of occupations in which they are deemed appropriate. Incumbency in an occupational role in which one is a sex-atypical jobholder is not accurately measured using the present occupational prestige metric.

These findings also have implications for the debate over the sex bias in basic models of the social sciences. For over a decade, feminist social scientists have emphasized the need to remove the sex biases in many social science theories and research methods (Acker, 1973; Haug, 1975). The present study suggests that the simple elimination of the reference to males is not necessarily sufficient to resolve the problem of sex bias in social science measures. Rather, the extent and nature of the sex bias may be merely obscured. We hope that this study has underscored the necessity of continuing the reassessment of the basic concepts in the social sciences, even when they appear to have no direct link to sex roles.

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