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# Grading Occupational Prestige: The Impact of Gendered Stereotypes

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*The question of whether gender affects occupational prestige has been an interest in gender studies and in studies on occupations. Different researchers reach dissimilar conclusions and they generally use quantitative data to reveal the relation between prestige and occupations. Since gender is a cultural phenomenon, affecting images and valuations, it is questionable if surveys alone can provide substantial explanations. This article draws on a qualitative focus group study and approaches the questions of how people reason when grading occupational prestige and on how ratings are affected by gendered images of occupations. The study revealed that raters that are grading occupations according to prestige use gendered images of occupations and often conclude male superiority in ranking. From these findings there is reason to ask whether occupational prestige is in fact masculine biased.*

*Keywords: Gender, Images of occupations, Occupational prestige*

## Introduction

In research on occupations there is a discussion of whether gender influences occupational prestige or not (Bose and Rossi, 1983; England, 1994; Magnusson, 2008). A widespread assumption is that the proportion of women in an occupation leads to lower prestige as well as lower wages. In studies on occupational prestige and gender, the results are difficult to summarize since they point in different directions. For instance, England (1979) concluded sex equality in occupational prestige, while another study reached contradictory conclusions (Bose, 1985; c.f. Bose & Rossi, 1983):

It is occupational segregation that causes the lower average prestige received by woman as a group. Female-dominated jobs have a lower average status than male-dominated ones. (Bose 1985:98)

Jacobs and Powell (1985:1070) stress that occupational prestige 'incorporates strong sex-linked assumptions' due to the general gender segregation in society, prejudices and stereotypes. They showed that the occupational prestige in an occupation to a larger extent is associated with male incumbents. Magnusson (2008), on the other hand showed dissimilar effects due to the sex composition. In her study, mixed occupations (41-60 percent females) had the highest prestige.

Studies on occupational prestige have been criticized for simplifying complex relations (Haller and Bills, 1979; Coxon, 1983) and of being gender-neutral and even gender-blind (Acker, 1980; Jacobs and Powell, 1985). Occupational prestige is primarily measured by surveys (Treiman, 1977; Haller and Bills, 1979; Nakao & Treas, 1994; Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2006, Svensson & Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2009). Coxon (1983:488) states that the research tradition has a tendency to simplify social relations in the search for linear relationships, and that 'data cannot be interpreted without reference to subjects' accounts and the cognitive context within they were generated'. He claims that researchers should bring the subject back in and approach the question 'What are people doing when they grade occupations' (Coxon, 1983:489).

The subject matter of this article is to study the evaluation process when ascribing prestige to an occupation and discuss occupational prestige from a gender critical perspective. By

focusing the grading process additional knowledge is reached on the question of whether occupational status is a gender biased concept (Acker, 1980; Jacobs and Powell, 1985). The theoretical assumption is that gender is a fundamental mechanism behind unequal and stereotyped assessments of femininity and masculinity, and, hence, affecting perceptions of occupational prestige (c.f. Bourdieu, 2001; Hirdman, 1988; 2001; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Connell, 2009). Empirically, the article draws on qualitative data from focus groups interviews, since qualitative interviews are an appropriate method to get hold of images and common stereotypes. This article focuses on *how people reason when grading occupational prestige* and on *how ratings are affected by gendered images of occupations*.

The article departs with a reminder of the concept of occupational prestige and of gender segregated occupations. This is followed by a note on methods. The next section presents the empirical findings from the focus groups. A final section sums up the article and considers some implications flowing from the analysis advanced.

## **Occupational Prestige and gender segregated labour**

The notion of occupational prestige has its origin in social stratification research and theory (Davis, 1942; Davis and Moore, 1945; Reiss, 1961). The concept aims to describe how occupations are valued in terms of social honour rooted in power relations (Treiman, 1977). Prestige, thus, is a cultural notion based on values such as reputation, honour and respectability (Sennett, 2003). The concept is unclear and vaguely defined in the research tradition (Turner, 1988; Rothman, 2002). Previous research has also shown that people activate a wide range of criteria in determining occupational prestige (Reiss, 1961; Rossi and Inkeles, 1956; Thielbar and Feldman, 1969). When grading occupations according to prestige respondents may recognize more measurable and, in that respect, objective aspects. Such factors that most researchers specify are income, education, authority and power (i.e. number of subordinates) (Reiss, 1961; Lenski, 1966; March, 1977). This is sometimes described as achieved prestige (Rothman, 2002). But respondents also take other, less measurable aspects into account. The ascribed prestige derives from socialization, cultural representations, media, networks, and in personal meetings (Thielbar and Feldman, 1969; Rothman, 2002). Thus, Rossi and Inkeles (1956) maintain, as does March (1971), that occupational prestige is multidimensional, which is more or less salient in previous studies (Svalastoga, 1959; Reiss, 1961; Lenski, 1966; Treiman, 1977). Different types of criteria also seem to work in different ways when lending prestige to an occupation (March, 1971; Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2006), i.e. an economic resource can be of value for top-level managers, but not to professors who rather gain prestige from cultural resources (c.f. Bourdieu 1979/1989).

Several of the factors that are assumed to have impact on occupational prestige have also been defined as masculine in gender studies. Power, high income, possibilities of advancement, leading positions, and influence in society, are all factors associated with masculinity (c.f. Westberg-Wohlgemuth, 1996; Bourdieu, 2001; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and van Engen, 2003). Acker (1980) claims that the research design in occupational prestige studies has been developed for studying men and men's occupations, while women's jobs have only been absorbed in the on-going research. Therefore, there is a male bias in occupational prestige studies since prestige scales are based on desirability in men's occupations, thereby missing what is desirable in women's occupations (c.f. Jacobs and Powell, 1985). Acker (1980) states that socioeconomic differences of importance for occupational prestige, such as income and authority, are dissimilar in female and male occupations. Perhaps prestige scores measure different things for women and men. The desirability of women's occupations might be judged on different criteria than men's occupations (Acker, 1980:28). A clear-cut example of gender bias within the factors (or interpretations of them) is found in March's (1971) reasoning about

responsibility. He links responsibility to number of subordinates, which implies degree of authority and power in a position. This definition of responsibility is relevant for leading positions mostly held by men, and may obscure aspects of responsibility in other positions. For instance, in a female occupation such as nurse, child minder or school counsellor, responsibility relates to interpersonal relationships between a care giver and a care receiver, not necessarily to number of subordinates. Thus, there is a risk that 'the scale will embody the prejudices and assumptions of the respondents' (Jacobs and Powell, 1985:1062) as well as assumptions of what conveys occupational prestige as in (male) earnings, (male) authority, and (male) education.

The labour market in the western nations is segregated by gender; women and men tend to be found in different occupations, branches and even sectors (Charles and Grusky, 2004; Hansen, 2001; c.f. England, 1979). Women prevail in the public sector, engaged in education, care, health and medical care and in occupations such as nurse, social worker, teacher, assistant nurse and child minder. These occupations include different aspects of caring for other persons and thereby correspond with dispositions assumed to be held by women (Cornell 2009: Cejka and Eagly, 1999). Men, on the other hand, primarily work in the private sector in manufacturing or with diverse technical occupations making use of capacities such as physical strength, technical skills and logic. However, occupations with relatively equal representation of men and women often suffer from an internal sex-segregation (SOU, 2004:43; cf. Einarsdottir, 1999). Men and women within the same occupation tend to do dissimilar tasks corresponding with images of femininity and masculinity and where male assignments are ascribed higher prestige. For instance, Einarsdottir (1999) studied the internal segregation within the medical profession. Medical specialists with a high proportion of men were ascribed higher prestige. An example of this is surgeon with only about 8 percent women. Similar tendencies have been found in studies of other occupations as well (Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2006). The fact is that occupations are not so uniform, but vary within their titles. Hughes (2008:357) states that: 'Many of our leading named occupations are inwardly so varied that to call them by one name is close to misleading. Ratings based on the name alone tell us little or nothing about the actual images which people have of the occupation'.

The separation of men and women in the labour market, between and within occupations, can be explained by the structural relationship between the sexes and contributes to stereotyped images of occupations. Both tasks and occupations tend to be sex-typed and we associate them with being either female or male (England, 1994; Westberg-Wohlgemuth, 1996; Cejka and Eagly, 1999; c.f. Jacobs and Powell, 1985). Sex-typing is an ongoing process, part of the overall gender system in society and is related to hegemonic cultural beliefs (Westberg-Wohlgemuth, 1996; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; cf. Bourdieu, 2001). These facts are context of relevance in evaluations of occupational prestige because it might affect stereotyped images of occupations.

An occupational prestige study was conducted in Sweden 2002 (Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2006). International studies have repeatedly demonstrated stability in occupational prestige hierarchies, within and between countries and over time (c.f. Treiman, 1977). There is a strong consensus on occupational prestige and factors such as gender, social class, age or education do not affect the occupational prestige in any significant way (c.f. Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2006). Results from the Swedish study were similar to previous research (c.f. Nakao & Treas, 1994, Reiss 1961). Among the 20 top rank-ordered occupations, twelve were dominated by men and only three were dominated by women. Male-dominated high-status occupations such as lawyer, physician, executive manager and professor are characterized by high educational degree, high salary, independence and authority (power) – criteria also recognized as determinants of prestige (Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2006) and as male characteristics (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Westberg-Wohlgemuth, 1996). Female-dominated occupations with high prestige, such as veterinarian, dentist and psychologist are characterized as care-giving, thus attributed as feminine.

## Methods and Material

Questionnaires on occupational prestige say less about images of occupation held by people and do not show how images of occupations might differ due to the respondents' own references (Hughes, 1971/2008). Nor do they reveal much about the process the raters are in when grading an occupation. To reach a better understanding of how people reason when confronted with the assignment of constructing a rank order of occupations due to prestige, four focus groups were studied. Focus group interviews are suitable when reasons and arguments about a certain topic are of interest and when the topic consists of a specific task (Tursunovic, 2002).

This study was conducted in 2002 as part of a larger research project on occupational prestige (Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2006). The purpose was to gain insight in how people reason when rank ordering occupations. The settings of the focus groups were carried through in the same way: A moderator presented the group assignment that was to construct a mutual rank order on occupational prestige. Each focus group got 20 cards with occupational titles and the instruction to arrange the occupations in order of their social standing in current society. These 20 occupations were selected to match the survey study. The groups consisted of three to five participants from different social settings. One group was recruited from an undergraduate course in sociology. The other participants were recruited from acquaintances of friends and colleagues, as well as from employees in businesses in the departments' neighborhood. The participants were both men (ten) and women (seven) and they were of different ages, from their early twenties to their late fifties. We did not ask for background data, but from what the participants told during the sessions they had different experience and had background working in different areas such as tailoring, home care, and business administration.

The interviews, lasting one to one and a half hours, were recorded and entirely written out. In the analysis I searched for thematic talk, similarities and differences in how respondents approached the occupations and the evaluations. This article focuses on statements involving aspects of how respondents make use of personal experiences, stereotypes and differences within an occupation.

Concerning interactions within the group two points should be noted. First, the male participants were more talkative and to a greater extent colorful in their associations and images which will be revealed in the illustrations below. The male domination might have influenced the statements within the groups. The female respondents agreed upon statements and the groups managed to construct a rank order. Second, during the interactions differences between occupations were disclosed. It might be that uniformity is produced in need to fulfill the assignment, but it might also be a reflection of hegemonic cultural beliefs operating.

## Talking occupational prestige

The analyses of 'talking occupational prestige' were inductively grouped into three empirical grounded themes that in different ways show how respondents argue when assessing professions. The theme *Espying images of occupations* demonstrate how people track down and discover images of occupations with references to their own experiences. *Gendered images* is a theme on how occupations are gendered and tend to be masculine. The last theme, *Internal segregation* show how respondents reason about differences within occupations.

## ***Espying images of occupations***

When respondents are exposed to an occupational title they use different ‘tools’ to figure out the occupation and the prestige attached. In this section I show how the interviewees made use of personal experiences, or lack of them, and used of feelings to reach for an understanding of the occupation at hand. The importance of personal meetings is revealed when they relate to their own experiences and knowledge. For instance, a female participant claimed, ‘I think that medical doctor might be on the top since everybody comes across a physician’.

People meet different kinds of incumbents in their everyday life – some meet lawyers, businessmen and economists while others meet factory line workers, motor mechanics and hairdressers. Meetings influence images and how evaluations are made, and also relate to class and gender differences that may color understandings and images of occupations. Incumbents of different occupations might also approach people in dissimilar ways, with regards to, for example, gender, class and age which in turn influence images and perceptions of prestige (Rothman 2002; Hughes 2008). This is illustrated when two male participants in the same focus group expressed two very different images of a professor.

1: A professor for me... It’s too diffuse...what they do. /---/ Well, I have tried to understand people who...Well, they study for their doctor’s degree, and other things, but I don’t get what they actually are doing.

2: The professors that I have been in contact with have been so clever that I hardly dared to talk to them. I have presented papers for the professor and he just said ‘Well, you can read the dissertation thesis ‘this and that’ and you haven’t thought about this, and here you must do something, and this section you can write better.’ And I can only think, ‘It took you two seconds to see what I have been struggling with for two weeks.’ The worst part is that they are right! Every word they say is just totally right. There is nothing that I can...they are right. For me that’s very authoritative.

These raters have different images because they have dissimilar experiences. This might affect how they perceive prestige as well, since it can influence what they recognize as valuable aspects in work. For the latter person in the quotation above, a professor is an admirable figure with plenty of knowledge and power, while the former does not recognize these merits in the same way. Even so, they did manage to reach an understanding in how to order this specific occupation, since, at the same time, they share common cultural beliefs.

Another image in the same line of reasoning is when an interviewee recalls friends when giving his opinion on postmen: ‘I don’t feel sorry for the friends I have who have worked, or still work, as postmen’. In this quote yet another interesting aspect of the evaluation is revealed: The fact that the interviewee *feels* for his friends. In order to figure out the occupation he makes use of ‘a second hand’ experience, as well as his own emotions. To use feelings as a clue about a specific object is one way to discover images of the world, to see a viewpoint (Hochschild, 2003). This brings on emotions as a tool in the evaluations process – how one feels about an occupation or the incumbent holding it, is to ‘feel’ the social standing of an occupation. This is illustrated in the quotation below.

Well, listen, ‘I’m a professor’ or ‘I’m a managing director’ – it still feels like managing director strikes higher.

It is as if the respondent tastes the occupational titles to sense and try out how the occupations feel according to prestige. It demonstrates the imaginary phase in the evaluation process and the fact that rank orders are based upon people’s perceptions of occupational prestige, concerning how people feel about an object.

## ***Gendered images***

Images of occupations are connected with hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and contribute to reproducing the gender system. When meeting a new acquaintance it is almost an automatic process to determine that person's sex. Likewise, when confronted with an occupational title such as nurse or carpenter, assumptions of tasks, conditions and qualifications are activated together with images of the incumbent's assumed sex. As Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and van Engen (2003:572) conclude on executive managers: 'People's beliefs about leaders are thus more similar to their beliefs about men than to those about women, as Schein (2001) demonstrated in her "think manager, think male"'. These mechanisms may operate in occupational prestige ratings as well.

The focus groups exemplified the occupations as gendered in various ways but one commonality was that illustrations, images and figurative associations to a vast degree were male. When discussing high-prestige occupations the interviewees often named actual and well-known male incumbents. Only in one occasion did they actually name a female incumbent – a well-known and well-respected actress. They also used men as examples, as in the quotation below, where one male respondent describing his image of a professor.

I'm thinking...professor... That's a man with a black polo-neck and brown corduroys...and has a beard.

Hence, the persons they imagined were mostly men, also implied in the extensive use of 'he' or 'him'. However, when discussing nurses, they pictured the incumbent as a 'she' and several times they corrected themselves instantly by adding statements like 'or he, I mean'. It is noteworthy that these corrections were not present when using 'he' or 'him' in orienting the occupational landscape which suggests a masculine norm in perceptions and preferences.

In one story, narrated by a male participant, he depicts the differences between the physician and the nurse, but even if he did not make use of the pronominal 'he' or 'she' in his story images of gendered competencies is revealed. The medical doctor seemed to have a male character, solid and firm with no nurturing capacities, while the nurse is depicted as feminine with salient caring competencies (c.f. Cejka and Eagly, 1999).

I have been to hospitals a great deal and the nurses actually do a fantastic job. If you compare with the doctors, who come in when I'm about to be examined and just say 'well, well' and 'bye bye', and, then just take a quick look. It is the nurses that calm you down if you are nervous. The nurses are the ones being nice to you.

The gendered occupation of nurse and physician might be one of the most traditional ones and even if physician today is a gender equal occupation the image of the male doctor and the female nurse is well established (Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2006). The anecdote was the only proclamation where femininity was recognized as a resource. This does not mean that the participants were oblivious – quite the opposite actually. They discussed the occupations with regard to gender-typing and they agreed that tasks and occupations associated with traditional masculinity had higher prestige than if associated with femininity (c.f. Jacobs and Powell, 1985). In a comparison between nurse and construction worker, one male respondent argued as follows:

It is typically a male-female dimension. Construction work is an occupation that is rated higher and there are historical explanations for that since it is technical work, very handy and masculine.

The focus groups disclosed male superiority when consequently rank-ordering male-typed (male-dominated) occupations over female-typed (female-dominated) ones. And even if they did notice this mode of action there was no self-correction at all. In some cases, tasks traditionally associated with femininity were also recognized as low prestige as illustrated in the quotation below where the image of cleaning personnel is revealed.

Women: And lots of repetitive strain injury, lots of women, and lots of immigrants.

Man 2: A very bad salary.

Man 1: Poor working hours. At my job they clean up at night-time and weekends.

These empirical findings shows how gender effects images of occupations and, as a consequence, how they are differently valued accordingly. It brings some clarity to the impact of gender on occupational prestige in the rating process.

### ***Internal segregation***

As already has been mentioned, several studies of specific occupations show that they often suffer from an internal segregation where men and women in the same occupation are doing different tasks. From an analysis of several studies of different occupations it turned out that those assignments within the occupations that gained less prestige were female-coded whereas male-coded tasks were assigned high prestige (Ulfsson, 2006). For instance, female police officers are more often assigned commissions including women, children and elderly people and as reception clerks while male police officers do the 'real' police work such as night shifts, high-speed chases, and dealing with violent criminal minds (Andersson, 2003; c.f. Cejka and Eagly, 1999). 'Real' police work is additionally recognized as the most prestigious tasks. Even within an occupation with low prestige, such as cleaner, the male and female workers perform different tasks with men doing the more advanced assignments and receiving higher wages and social standing. This is a reflection of the fundamental gender dichotomies in society where men and women are separated and where men are ascribed higher prestige (Hirdman, 1988; 2001; Bourdieu, 2001). The focus groups also gave notice to differences within the occupations. They made distinctions in occupational prestige due to specific conditions within particular occupations and sometimes even related to specific incumbents. A frequent comment on several occupations was, for example, 'It depends on what kind of [occupation]', implying a differentiation within the occupation. The interviewees discussed the distinction between different kinds of hosts on television. They called attention to differences in prestige depending on what kind of TV show is held by a specific journalist or host. A male participant stated:

This can be an anchor for a society-oriented program like Janne Josefsson [well known journalist], for instance, and he has huge impact in society and has an influence on elections and everything. But it can also be someone hosting a children's program and not prestigious at all.

The participants noticed that occupational prestige can vary internally. News media journalism was associated with higher prestige than more entertaining journalism which also has been proved by previous research (Djerf-Pierre, 2003). This corresponds with how men and women are represented in different kinds of media with more men in critical investigative journalism. Further distinctions within single occupations were made on different status levels. These findings bear witness to complications in occupational prestige calling for attention to the



internal segregation within single occupations and especially how this relates to prestige and gender.

## Concluding remarks

The critical standpoint in this article was that since gender is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and stereotyped images – seldom explicit in the individual's orientations – gendered images may affect perceptions of occupational prestige. The investigation has brought in evaluating subjects, the raters, to clarify how images of occupations influence occupational prestige and to display how the evaluation process works.

With regards to the valuation process, it became clear that the respondents use common representations of occupations, use emotions and memories in order to figure out occupational prestige. The analysis also showed the complexity in the process where raters take a number of different criteria into account and that these can differ from occupation to occupation but also that respondents acknowledged different prestige within a single occupation, implying that the raters recognizes and takes into account effects of internal segregation.

The focus groups were rather unaware of how their images were related to masculinity. They used male associations when imagining the occupations, and consequently rank-ordered in line with male superiority, and they used criteria usually called upon in prestige that also correspond with a stereotyped image of masculinity. Reasoning about femininity and female-dominated occupations was virtually absent. The respondents were oriented by a masculine norm when consequently using male references in images and disclosing male superiority when gendered occupations were compared. These findings strengthen, as suspected by Acker (1980) and Jacobs and Powell (1985), the idea that a gender bias is built into the scale. Respondents may recognize aspects of an occupation more often found in male-dominated occupations as being the valuable aspects since these aspects are generally more often appreciated. The desirability in occupations that lends prestige is gendered (high income, authority and power). Considering this, occupational prestige studies reflect hegemonic discourses, cultural beliefs stating an androcentric perspective perceived as natural and neutral (Bourdieu 2001).

The study, in consequence, verifies that evaluations are built upon images of occupations and, further, that ratings are gendered. Hence, an overall conclusion to be drawn from this study is that images of high-prestige occupations are anchored in the logic of a masculine norm. Thus, criteria and occupations associated with masculinity are what is being recognized, it is reasonable to conclude that occupational prestige studies reproduce the asymmetrical relation between genders, and masculinity as a valuable resource. Consequently, femininity *might* be a resource but only when expressed in female-coded occupations, as was also recognized by the interviewee whom had spent time in hospital. Jacobs and Powell (1985) argue that an accurate approach would be to measure occupational prestige for men and women separately due to gender and sex-linked assumptions.

The results from this study have implications and are of relevance for a number of areas. On a general level it is important to acknowledge that occupations are gendered and thus valued differently, for instance, in career guidance and recruitment. Within an organization it is highly important to identify gender-biased divisions of labour and how different tasks and occupations are valued (c.f. Acker, 1990; Williams et al., 2012). However, it is also important to recognize biased valuations at the individual level since it may affect job evaluations and wages (England et. al., 1994; Magnusson 2008).

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