1. The Determination of Occupational Prestige

KAARE SVALASTOGA
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

In searching for factors that not only predict occupational prestige but in addition control or generate it, the author has arrived at the partially substantiated conclusion that four such factors may be identified. These factors are not conceived of as equipotent. Rather the factors seem to range widely in importance in prestige determination.

The dominant factor seems to be the responsibility or authority associated with the occupation. It is this factor which must account for the high prestige generally accorded to top administrative or political positions.

The most adequate macrosocial measurement of occupational responsibility will have to take into account size of enterprise and hierarchical level occupied in the enterprise. Hence for those who are employers or self-employed a good measure of size of enterprise is all that seems needed. Due to absence of relevant research it is hard to say under what conditions one or another size indicator should be preferred. The most likely indicators would be total economic value of enterprise or of its annual economic transactions, or number of persons employed, or the volume or amount of information handled per time unit.

Next in order of importance comes the difficulty of the job. It is easy to see that job difficulty cannot compete with job responsibility in the generation of occupational prestige. Circus artists may execute feats which takes years of intensive training to do correctly. Still the prestige of circus artists is only moderate.

It seems likely that job responsibility and job difficulty taken together will account for about 9/10 of the variance of occupational prestige so that very little is left to explain once these two factors are adequately measured. This circumstance probably accounts for the well established prestige consensus across nations, sex groups, age groups, and occupational groups. The remaining two factors are hence both weak and it is of no major importance to try to establish a rank-order among them. I refer to two characteristics of the population performing prestige ratings: its job information and its job ideology.

Information or its negation, ignorance, seems to have a rather unique influence on prestige ratings. Ignorance seems to push ratings towards the mean, thus punishing jobs of high responsibility and difficulty and rewarding jobs of low responsibility and difficulty. The most dramatic confirmation of this levelling effect of ignorance comes from a classic American study in which a
group of villagers rated members of the medical profession (Hartmann 1936). The result showing that of a long list of medical specialists only the surgeon outranked the common medical practitioner could only be explained by drawing upon the factor of job information. Thus it is well substantiated that there is such a thing as the levelling effect of ignorance.

Ideology may raise or lower the prestige of a job. Its prestige raising effect may perhaps be seen most clearly when people judge positions close to their own or representing their own religion higher than others do. Its negative effect may sometimes be inferred from the evaluation of military occupations. Thus in Denmark most people rate the colonel high but some place him at the bottom of the prestige scale. The latter rating seems caused by a generalized negative attitude towards military pursuits.

It should be noted that it follows necessarily from the theory here developed that studies of occupational prestige centering on jobs that vary little in job responsibility and job difficulty e.g. in terms of educational or training requirement should find information and ideology as main explanatory factors in prestige variation. Hence they should also report lower consensus on ratings.

A study of prestige in isolated parts of Brazil (Haller, Holsinger, and Saraiva 1972) showed decreased correlation with the NORC American prestige scale with increasing isolation. By our theory the most plausible explanation is lack of relevant information among raters. This explanation is further substantiated by the fact that the villages revealed a very low level of division of labor. In the most isolated village only 17% had a non-farm occupation. Haller and Lewis (1966) reported a near zero correlation with NORC ratings (8 occupations 24 raters) in a 15% non-farm Japanese community. It may be hazardous to make inferences from such a limited sample of jobs rated and of raters. Certainly the job ignorance hypothesis can not be easily dismissed. In this connection it is notable that Armer (1968) obtained a correlation of .89 between prestige ratings in the rather traditional Hausa society of Northern Nigeria, and NORC ratings. Another possibility is that a social system in a state of transition from agrarian to industrial economy may be influenced by both an agrarian and an industrial rankorder of jobs in regard to responsibility and/or difficulty. Duncan (in Reiss 1961) and later Blishen (1967) demonstrated that occupational prestige may be approximated well by taking job income and job education into account. These findings are here taken as corroborative evidence of the theory outlined in the present paper. It is maintained that job income will be a good, although not perfect, predictor of job responsibility.

The model of prestige determination verbally described above may be expressed in the language of path analysis

a) by means of the pathdiagram of figure 1

b) by means of a path analytic equation (Equation 1 below).

Since this is a theoretical model we assume as axiomatic that the four factors explain prestige completely i.e. without error factors. Under the general assumptions of path analysis and with certain added specific assumptions considered plausible, it is possible to spell out in more detail the factors determining the values of the path coefficients $p_{13}$ (effect of job difficulty on prestige), and $p_{12}$ (effect of job responsibility on prestige).

1 Only applicable for prestige scores above mean of scores. See figure 1, note.