Occupational Prestige and the Social System: A Problem in Comparative Sociology

J. CLYDE MITCHELL

University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, S. Rhodesia

STUDIES of the way in which people evaluate occupations have been a part of sociology since Counts, in 1925, first made a study of the prestige of occupations in the teaching profession. These studies have been made for different purposes: one of the pragmatic purposes has been to test the general validity of a priori classifications of occupations into strata so that these strata could be used in studies of social mobility. But by and large they have been stimulated by a broader interest in social stratification of which occupation has long been recognised as an important element.

Several studies conducted in the United States before 1940, were apparently directed to the problem of determining whether in fact there was a general ranking of occupations which the American public would recognise. The now classic study conducted by the National Opinion Research Centre and reported on by North and Hatt (1954) in 1947, clearly demonstrated that although there were certain variations by region, age and economic status, as many as ninety occupations could be arranged in some hierarchy of prestige. In Great Britain the study by Hall and Jones (1950) occupies the same position as North and Hatt’s study in the United States. The present paper discusses the possibility of examining the relationship between the social grading of occupations and the

1 For a brief history of occupational prestige studies see Barber (1957:101-107) and Davies (1952).

2 Davies (1952:143) argues that the consistency achieved in the social grading of occupations has arisen out of the “short stock-list test” used to study them. He writes: “Such tests, it will be remembered, of their nature work to produce high consensus, and writers have undoubtedly been somewhat naive in their readiness to be “surprised” over and over again at their .9 correlation coefficients.” The consensus produced even when different techniques are used suggests that Davies was being a little too sceptical. Inkeles and Rossi (1956:332) writes: “Similarities in the prestige hierarchy, particularly when they are striking, are somewhat strengthened by the same lack of comparability in research designs and in the occupations matched to one another. Similarities may be interpreted as showing the extent to which design and other differences are overcome by the comparability among the prestige hierarchies themselves.”
over-all social structure in different societies and explores the dimensions of occupational prestige.

Comparisons of Occupational Prestige Ratings

The decade 1950–1960 saw the extension of occupational prestige studies to countries other than the United States and Great Britain. Those by Congalton (1953) and Taft (1953) for example, used substantially the same techniques in New Zealand and Australia. These writers compared their results with those of Hall and Jones from which they apparently received their stimulus. In 1954, Montague and Pustilnik published the results of a study of the ranking in the city of Spokane, Washington, of the same occupations used by Hall and Jones. Montague and Pustilnik specifically set out to examine the generality of three findings from Hall and Jones’s study and not to compare the gradings in both samples. But in their first paragraph they write: “If occupational groups are conceived of as functional behaviour systems in relation to basic societal values and institutions, it has been assumed that the prestige of occupations will vary from one society to another.” (Montague and Pustilnik 1954:154). Later they remark that the Spokane respondents ranked three skilled-labour occupations higher than the English respondents and conclude that: “Accumulation of data from cross-cultural studies may provide the basis for further analysis of hypotheses and theories concerning the relationship between occupation and prestige, as well as throw light upon related problems of social structure and organization.” (Montague and Pustilnik 1954:159)

Inkeles and Rossi (1956) took a step in this direction when they compared occupational prestige rankings in six industrialized countries: United States, Great Britain, New Zealand, Japan, U.S.S.R., and Germany. Despite the differences in basic values and institutions of these societies, however, Inkeles and Rossi found that there was a great similarity in the ranking of comparable occupations in all these countries. This raised the problem of the extent to which the prestige hierarchies were merely the derivatives of industrialization and how much national, traditional and local values affect the grading of occupations. Inkeles and Rossi incline towards a “structural” interpretation of their findings, i.e. they “strongly suggest that there is a relatively invariable hierarchy of prestige associated with the industrial system even when it is placed in the context of larger social systems which are otherwise differentiated in important respects.” (Inkeles and Rossi 1956: 339). Where they found disagreement in the grading of occupations it seemed to involve mainly the agricultural occupations or personal services. These disagreements may have arisen partly because the occupations were difficult to specify e.g. is a farmer the owner of a large estate or merely the cultivator of a small holding? They must particularly be traced, however, Inkeles and Rossi suggest, to differences in the length or “maturity” of industrialization in various countries and to the “differentiations