

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE PRESTIGE LEVEL OF OCCUPATIONAL ALTERNATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed university students' perceptions of the prestige level of 53 diverse occupations. In addition, factors contributing to the construct of occupational prestige were identified.

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

It is interesting that whenever two adult strangers are brought together in a social setting one of the first questions that is asked in order to get to know the other person is "what kind of work do you do?" In a system where people are defined by what they do for a living, as Michael Solomon (1992) notes, occupational prestige is another way to evaluate their worth.

Although many college students are studying subjects that will allow them to attain occupational prestige and success, some still value contribution to society over prestige and emphasis of personal development and family over career success. Many 18-30-year olds, affectionately referred to as baby busters or Generation X, are less likely to be prestige motivated when compared to members of the older baby boomer generation (Coupland 1991, Landler 1992, and Garland, et al. 1991).

Several studies have been conducted that focus on occupational prestige. Of interest to this study is not how the whole of adult America views occupations, but how university students, tomorrow's leaders, value those occupations. Of interest, also, is how various segments such as gender and major, view those occupations and the determinants of their prestige level. Such understanding can give us insight into how the popularity and supply/demand factors of certain occupations might be changing. It can also provide valuable information to academicians for shaping their curricula and student advising.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Research has shown that hierarchies of occupational prestige tend to be quite stable over time and that they also show some similarities in different societies (Beeghley 1978). Such similarities have been reported by Beeghley in countries as diverse as Brazil, Guam, Japan, Ghana, and Turkey.

Consumer analysts consider occupation to be the best single indicator of social class (Engel, et al 1990), although most indices are multidimensional in nature. Although not all members of the same occupation or social class lead identical lives, there tend to be patterns of thinking and behavior that show similarity within social classes and differences between the classes. As an example, Solomon and Assael (1987) found varying product constellations associated with occupational roles. Even in similar occupations with differing levels of prestige, different product possessions are associated with each.

Some job types have images that seem to be on the decline. Bottoms (1993) reports that manufacturing in the United States is held in generally low esteem by the general public. As a result, the occupational prestige of an industrial manager is disturbingly low. In another article, Day (1992) laments that the lack of respect for secretaries and salesmen has caused many people not to seek jobs in these important positions.

Nam and Powers (1983) developed a multiple item index to measure occupational prestige. Their score is based on census data and includes occupation, education, and income factors. Medical doctors topped their occupational status list with a score of 99. Other selected occupations and their scores included accountants (89), retail sales managers (74), non-retail sales managers (94), and bank tellers (49).

The prestige of ten non-managerial occupations was assessed in a survey by Greene (1989). Occupational worth was determined to be a function of value to society, fair return on human resources, and economic value added. His survey sampled members of the American Compensation Association and students in a university class in organizational psychology. Of the 10 occupations ranked, nurse, computer programmer, and secretary were ranked highest with the occupations of guard, laborer, and janitor being ranked the lowest. Perceptions of social value proved to be similar for the two samples except for the occupation of laborer.

Stevens and Lawrence (1991) note that a favorable public image is very important in the banking industry, but that several studies show them receiving lower ratings than other occupational groups in both overall occupational prestige and honesty.

In an effort to determine why few women enter non-retail selling, Cook and Hartman (1986) surveyed male and female business students. Although both gender groups view sales careers in a negative manner, women viewed sales careers in general and wholesaler and manufacturer sales positions in particular more negatively than men.

Although the previous literature demonstrates that some work has been done in the area of occupational prestige, there is still a need to assess a broad range of occupations through the eyes of university students--tomorrow's leaders. The majority of studies which gauged student perceptions focused on just a few occupational areas. This descriptive study hopes to provide a broader perspective on the value of occupations by today's university student.

RESEARCH METHODS

A self-administered questionnaire was given to 204 undergraduate students at a medium-sized western state university during the spring of 1992. Eight classes were chosen with each student in the chosen classes invited to participate. A quota sample was designed to yield approximately one-half each of business and non-business majors. To accomplish this, classes were chosen that were either university-wide requirements or major-required classes so that a good

cross-section of each group could be obtained.

The questionnaire asked respondents to rate 53 occupations on a five-point scale given "their opinion of the general standing of a person engaged in that occupation." A score of five represented high standing, while a score of one represented a low standing. Respondents were then asked to explain the factors that contributed to rating an occupation as excellent. Demographics were also collected in the areas of gender, race, and major.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of the Sample

Females comprised the majority of respondents in the study (61.8%). On the basis of race, 76.6% of the sample was Caucasian, 18.6% Asian, 2.7% Hispanic, and 2.1% Black. Students represented numerous fields of study, including: business administration (48.5%), liberal arts and sciences (27.5%), applied science and engineering (6.4%), and assorted other majors (17.6%).

Occupational Prestige Ratings

Of the 53 occupational categories tested, physicians, judges, and architects (see Table 1) received the most positive occupational prestige scores. Physicians and architects also had very low standard deviations--indicating a high level of agreement in their ratings. These three occupations, along with dentists, topped the Nam and Powers (1983) rankings a decade earlier. This reflects little change in opinion taking place, at least for the high prestige professions.

In contrast, relative rankings for salespersons, social workers, insurance salespersons, and lawyers were marginally lower in this study compared to the Nam and Powers (1983) results.

Five of the professions tested--lawyer, professional athlete, child care worker, farmer, and politician--produced ratings with high standard deviations indicating a large amount of disagreement by the respondents. It is understandable that numerous moral indiscretions reported in our media might tarnish, in the minds of some, the prestige levels of these professions.

TABLE 1
Occupational Prestige Ratings

Occupational Category	Mean Rating
Physician	4.512 +
Judge	4.402
Architect	4.299 +
Pilot	4.275
Business Owner (Large)	4.206
Engineer	4.152
Business Owner (Medium)	4.150
College/Univ. Teacher	4.147
Dentist	4.125
Chemist	4.081
Business Owner (Small)	4.020
Systems Analyst	3.990
Accountant	3.980
Computer Programmer	3.975
Biologist	3.926
Nurse	3.904
Firefighter	3.897
Lawyer	3.846 *
Secondary Teacher	3.814
Finance Manager	3.799
Psychologist	3.792
News Anchor	3.716
Professional Athlete	3.686 *
Marketing Manager	3.662
Advertising Manager	3.637
Journalist	3.623
Law Enforcement Officer	3.588
Stockbroker	3.583
Electrician	3.490
Actor	3.426
Dietician	3.419
Human Resource Manager	3.419
Production Manager	3.382
Social Worker	3.375
Office Manager	3.365
Clergyman	3.343
Banker	3.324
Musician	3.299
Child Care Worker	3.243 *
Dental Hygienist	3.206
Athletic Coach	3.201
Retail Buyer	3.191
Farmer	3.137 *
Interior Decorator	3.059
Real Estate Agent	3.015
Postal Worker	2.975
Auto Mechanic	2.936
Politician	2.892 *
Military	2.877
Construction Worker	2.809
Salespeople	2.755
Insurance Salesperson	2.745
Bartender	2.493

Ratings ranged from 1 = Poor to 5 = Excellent
 * = A high standard deviation (> 1.00)
 + = A low standard deviation (< 0.70)

Perhaps of greatest interest to business schools is how university students rate business-related occupations. This, of course, can have a bearing on the demand for education in these areas. Business owners (large, medium, and small) fared the best with mean ratings ranging from 4.020 to 4.299 and overall rankings of 5th, 7th, and 11th, respectively. Systems analysts and accountants were rated slightly below 4.000, with rankings of 12th and 13th. Finance managers, with a mean rating of 3.799, were the 20th highest ranked occupational category.

Marketing-oriented occupations do not appear until near the middle of the distribution. Marketing and advertising managers were the 24th and 25th highest ranked occupations on the list. Other marketing-related occupations (stockbrokers, retail buyers, real estate agents, general salespersons, and insurance salespersons) did not fare as well with mean ratings from 2.745 to 3.583 and rankings of 28th, 42nd, 45th, 51st, and 52nd out of the 53 occupations tested. These results suggest that as a profession, marketing has an upward hill to climb to educate university students about the value of marketing-related activities.

Demographic Differences in Occupational Prestige

Significant differences in ratings between certain demographic groups are reported by T-test in Table 2.

On the basis of race, Caucasians and non-Caucasians differed in their ratings of dental hygienists and politicians.

Of the three defined demographic categories, gender produced the greatest number of rating differences. Female respondents perceived journalists, human resource managers, dieticians, and architects significantly more positively than did males. On the other hand, males rated firefighters, interior decorators, and accountants significantly more favorably than did females.

Finally, three occupations produced significantly different ratings between business and non-business majors. In each of these comparisons the ideology of the major seemed to greatly influence the perceived value of the occupations.

TABLE 2
Demographic Differences in Occupational Ratings

Occupational Category	Demographic Group	Mean Rating	T-Value
Dental Hygienist	Caucasian	3.07	2.82 a
	Non-Caucasian	3.50	
Politician	Caucasian	2.76	2.08 b
	Non-Caucasian	3.21	
Journalist	Female	3.72	2.00 b
	Male	3.46	
Interior Decorator	Female	2.86	4.75 a
	Male	3.39	
Human Res. Mgr.	Female	3.54	2.77 a
	Male	3.23	
Dietician	Female	3.57	3.13 a
	Male	3.18	
Firefighter	Female	3.67	5.27 a
	Male	4.27	
Architect	Female	4.38	2.17 b
	Male	4.17	
Accountant	Female	3.81	4.16 a
	Male	4.26	
Interior Decorator	Business major	2.92	2.42 b
	Non-bus. major	3.19	
Accountant	Business major	4.16	3.32 a
	Non-bus. major	3.81	
Stockbroker	Business major	3.75	2.55 b
	Non-bus. major	3.42	

a = $p < .01$
b = $p < .05$

Factors Contributing to Occupational Prestige

Underlying the perceived value of these occupations are the reasons why some are considered more prestigious than others. Students were asked to review the occupations that they rated as excellent and were asked to explain the reasons why they rated those occupations as excellent.

The data contained in Table 3 shed some light on the factors that contributed to the occupational prestige ratings. Educational requirements, the ability to serve humanity, and income potential accounted for 61.7 percent of the reasons mentioned. The rewarding and fulfilling nature of the occupation ranked a distant fourth place as a contributing factor. No significant differences in magnitude of these reasons between races, genders, or majors were found.

Income being ranked a distant third may have taken some by surprise, but there are compelling reasons that support this logic. Several years ago,

baby boomers valued income, status, and getting ahead more than today's college-aged students do. Baby busters seem more content to make a difference and enjoy the work they do than to strive for success and all the trappings that accompany it (Coupland 1991). In other words, there has been a fairly decent shift in values for the current college-aged generation.

TABLE 3
Factors Contributing to Occupational Prestige

Factor Mentioned	Number of Mentions	Percentage of Mentions
Education	36	23.9 %
Service to humanity	33	21.9
Income	24	15.9
Rewarding fulfilling	16	10.6
Status	8	5.3
Skills required	7	4.6
Respect	7	4.6
Miscellaneous responses	20	13.2
Totals	151	100.0 %

CONCLUSIONS

University students still seem to perceive most professional occupations as having the highest levels of prestige. Notable exceptions include lawyers and psychologists who ranked 18th and 21st. Clergy, once a revered profession, ranked 36th on the same list.

Business-related occupations did not fare particularly well, except for business owners, accountants, and systems analysts. Marketing-related occupations ranked at about in the middle, at best, down to near the lowest part of the list. To put this comparison in perspective, there were 14 non-owner business-related occupations that were rated. Half of those were marketing related and their rankings ranged from 24th to 52nd, averaging a ranking of 38 out of 53. The other seven business-related professions fared much better, having rankings ranging from 12th to 37th, and possessing an average ranking of 26.

Why do marketing occupations rate so low? Perhaps some answers can be found by examining the values of current university students and the

reasons for the rankings (presented in Table 3). As discussed, most of today's university students are in the 18-30 age range that defines the baby buster generation (Coupland 1991). They have grown up in an era where lawyers, businesspersons, politicians, airplane pilots, and even child care workers and clergymen have been openly exposed and investigated in the media for their indiscretions. As a result this group is quite cynical. At the same time they are quite skeptical of the marketers and advertisers who typecast them and sell to them.

Other reasons for marketing's poor showing in this study might originate in factors contributing to the occupational prestige rating. As seen in Table 3, the top two factors mentioned were education and service to humanity. Today some people still believe a person does not need any specialized educational background, or even a university degree, to be a marketer. Some businesses may also hold this belief. A review of companies interviewing at career centers reveals listings for retail or sales trainees that invite persons from "any major" to apply. This implies that "anyone can do it" whether formally educated in the area or not.

Service to humanity was the second most mentioned reason for ranking an occupation as excellent. Again, in the minds of today's baby busters, marketers are people who are trying to sell us things and who might stretch the truth (Landler 1992). They view marketers as people working for big corporations who are greedy and who value sales and profits for their investors over anything else. This perception is 180 degrees from the idea of serving humanity.

The solution to the problem of marketing having a marginal prestige rating extends beyond any short-term efforts by marketing professors. It most probably lies in the re-engineering of business into an entity whose prime focus is to serve the customer rather than the investors who are short-term oriented and greed-driven.

One avenue for marketing educators to pursue is to develop a better understanding of this baby buster generation. Effective marketing strategies can only then be employed to more effectively cater to this group in the future. This foundation of understanding can be a positive step in the path toward restoring our credibility.

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