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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