

Measuring occupational prestige in Romania

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Abstract: - The paper presents the results of an exploratory study on occupational prestige measurement in Romania. It was targeted to identify the main criteria on which respondents operated when they were asked to rank 40 occupations, applying cards method (Goldthorpe and Hope, 1972). Research results indicate the aggregation of rating criteria into four main categories (mandatory studies, the income, the importance of the occupation for the society and personal recognition) and a number of methodological cautions on building the list of occupations, data collection and analysis.

Key-Words: - Occupational prestige, Occupational ranking, Exploratory research, Qualitative research, Coding procedures, Ranking criteria

1 Introduction

Starting with the second half of the 20th century occupational prestige started being researched and studied, the subject being traditionally filed under the study of the social stratification. Even though there is a rich literature in the English language there are no exclusive studies dedicated to the research of occupational prestige in Romania. In this context it can be said that there is no satisfactory answer to the question of “what does the occupational prestige mean to the Romanians?” Implicitly, we cannot answer to further questions derived from the latter: which are the criteria that subjects apply when they are asked to rate occupations and what do the scales/instruments measure in this rating. We have even less data related to the “national” definition of occupational prestige, considering that a series of studies reveal the fact that the hierarchy of occupations is dependent on the socio-cultural environment.

2 Prior work on occupational prestige

The measurement approaches of the occupational prestige are numerous, but the complexity of the concept and the absence of grounded theories that would fundament the measurement schemes raise a series of conceptual and methodological problems. What is more, the actual professional diversity, the dynamic character and the rethinking of the working place/job idea sheds more ambiguity on this problem.

Ever since the 1970s the difficulty of defining the occupational prestige has been noticed. Goldthorpe and Hope have pursued the clarification of the term “prestige”, defining it as “referring to a particular form of social advantage and power, associated with the incumbency of a role or membership of a collectivity: specifically, to advantage and power which are of a *symbolic*, rather than of an economic or political nature” [10]. Recently, Fujishiro, Xu and Gong consider that „occupational prestige explicitly represents the social status afforded by a particular occupation” [9]. Xuegang forwards a reconceptualization considering that prestige comprises collective beliefs and values that transcend the socio-economic barriers generated by the national differences in income and education level [12].

The acceptance variety of the term “prestige” is best illustrated by the instruments used to measure it. Responders are requested to rate the occupations function of the “social position”, “prestige”, “social prestige”, “social status”, “relative standing”, “personal general standing”, “desirability”, “their own personal opinion”. [3,4]. Some of the researchers have opted for purposely ambiguous formulations to diminish even more the guidance of the answer, when the measurement of general occupational prestige was being followed.

Blaikie draws attention to the dichotomy social reality-sociological reality, considering that researchers are more interested in the statistical analysis of the sociological reality than they are in the record and analysis of social reality [4].

Blaikie's conclusions are straight-forward questioning the whole research approach of the occupational prestige: "...researchers in the field of occupational prestige have failed to identify the relevant aspects of the social reality of the studied population and when they have obtained information about this reality, they have chosen to ignore it" [5].

The studies that present the results of occupational prestige measurement point out a variety of indicators used in the operational schemes: the socioeconomic status (measured by income and education); the income and the decision power [2]; the life standard, the power, the influence, the level of qualifications, value to society, initiative and autonomy, the social position [10, 1]; resources, the work style and the living style, authority and responsibility [8]; general desirability, material position, work satisfaction, security [12]; how serious is a typical professional error, the average income, the difficulty level of the training, the importance to society of the occupation, the required intelligence level, the scarceness of the qualified personnel, the years of education, the prestige that the responders think other people attribute the occupation [11].

Recently, the occupational scales have been classified into four categories: synthetic scales as opposed to analytical scales and subjective scales as opposed to objective scales [6]. Synthetic (composite) scales rate occupations in one dimension but use more aggregate items; analytical scales use only one characteristic to create the occupational rating. When speaking of the subjective-objective distinction, subjective scales are built on responder's perceptions of occupation's characteristics, the data generally being supplied by polls. In regard to objective scales, they are built on the basis of factual data supplied by official statistics.

Starting from this classification of scales, it can be easily noted that in the past 30 years the majority of the studies presented results of objective scale-centred researches. The construction of socioeconomic indexes is undisputedly productive, but it cannot comprise the whole complexity of the occupational prestige concept.

3 Research design

Keeping in mind that in Romania no systematic studies regarding the measurement of occupational prestige had been conducted, we considered being opportune to conduct an explorative research. The main objective of this study followed the

identification of the criteria used by the Romanian responders in the rating of occupations.

It has been made use of the semi-structured interview and the method of "cards" [10]. There have been selected 40 occupations through the application of the criteria proposed Adler and Kraus [1]: (1) each major group of the official occupational classification is well represented; (2) each occupational title is sufficiently general and familiar, to ensure a higher rate of answers; (3) the selected occupations have an important share of the active population.

The limitation of the list to 40 occupations has been considered both on grounds of the subject's capacity to efficiently handle the cards, and on the experience of previous studies realized in different cultural contexts: [10] SUA – 40 occupations; [1] Israel – 25 occupations; [3] China – 46 occupations; [7] Australia – 33 occupations; [11] SUA – 10 occupations; [14] Poland – 29 occupations; [2] Romania – 11 occupations.

A number of 251 individuals were interviewed, their selection being based on a non-probability sampling scheme. Responders have been requested to rate occupations by the general criterion of "how prestigious do you think they are". The operators had been instructed to ask the subjects "what do you think of when you place them in that order" as the subjects were arranging the cards. As well, they were required to identify the most important 3 criteria used to rate the occupations in the top positions, respectively in the bottom positions.

The analysis of responder's ranking criteria was realized through the coding of the answers – the codes identification and their classification in suitable categories and subcategories.

4 Results

Keeping in sight the exploratory objective of the study, the occupational rating by the general criterion of "prestige" has an illustrative character (Table 1).

The responder's answers to the question "Which were the three most important criteria that you have considered to rate the top occupations?" can be grouped in the following main categories: mandatory studies, the income, the importance of the occupation for the society and personal recognition.

The most important criterion is strictly related to the studies and knowledge one possesses to qualify for the specific work of an occupation.

Table 1: Occupational prestige

Rank	Occupation	General prestige	Standard deviation
1	Doctor	2.94	7.83
2	University professor	3.91	9.70
3	Lawyer	4.88	5.87
4	General manager	5.00	8.09
5	Mayor	6.46	7.30
6	Minister	8.24	11.75
7	Harbour master	8.39	7.87
8	Sociologist	8.43	10.16
9	Journalist	9.95	10.71
10	Fireman	10.39	8.43
11	Painter	12.67	6.73
12	Foreman	13.10	11.22
13	Printer	13.59	9.77
13	Salesman	13.59	8.83
14	Secretary	13.81	10.51
15	Electrician	14.37	11.27
16	Train conductor	15.12	9.17
17	Chef	15.60	7.40
18	Driver	18.27	6.55
19	Tailor	18.55	4.91
20	Agricultural worker	19.36	9.82
21	Postman	19.41	9.56
22	Miner	19.42	10.35
23	Hairdresser	19.56	10.85
24	Customer Assistant	20.27	9.37
25	Butcher	20.43	6.43
26	Mason	20.86	10.93
27	Welder	21.25	7.11
28	Miller	22.10	6.58
29	Poultry grower	22.86	4.99
29	Gardener	22.86	8.65
30	Birder	22.92	6.59
31	Pig breeder	22.94	8.33
32	Tractor driver	23.62	10.72
33	Fisher	24.00	9.47
34	Animal caretaker	24.66	7.56
35	Doorman	25.23	10.45
36	Shepherd	26.57	9.20
37	Laundress	27.49	6.79
38	Maid	27.55	9.55

This category comprises two important subcategories: knowledge resulted from studies and professional experience and knowledge resulted from an elevated level of intelligence.

Thus, occupations seem to be rated amongst the most prestigious mainly function of the supposed abilities that one carrying the job possesses: professional abilities (accumulated through studies) – *how much one needs to study, how much one needs to go to school to hold such a position, abilities, professional competences, the level of professional training, qualification level, professional improvement, specialization, necessity of well-trained personnel, necessity of higher education degrees, to have knowledge, to be well-educated, years of experience, degree of training and schooling, difficulty in training* and intellectual abilities – *you have to be very smart to become a doctor or to run a company, the IQ level, the necessary intelligence, the smartness you have to prove, the intellectual effort, one's wisdom and a superior thinking.*

Another important criterion in the rating of occupations amongst the most “prestigious” is the income: *the best paid, it offers a decent level of living, financial benefits, money, the earnings, material benefits that would allow me to live the life I want, the income it generates, material stability, well-paid, financial satisfaction, a living standard.*

The importance of the occupation in regard to the well-being of the society also appears among the criteria of rating a job as “prestigious:” *a university teacher seems to be more important than a cleaning lady, how much it affects the society, it's influence over others, how important you are, the social importance, it's importance to people – community – life, it's role in the society, it's impact on those around, the commitment to the community, the impact the occupations have, their place in society, the way the occupations can influence other people's lives, how much do the decisions taken influence people's lives, their contribution to the society, the commitment to the good functioning of the society.* Two distinct categories of the importance are utility – *how useful are these occupations (public utility, its usefulness to society, social utility, its contribution to society, community work, the effects of the job on the social environment, the help for those around, people's contribution to society, social benefits, help given to society)* and indispensability – *the need for these occupations (society's need for that occupation, people's necessity for that job, it's vital to the society, jobs that should not miss from a civilized society).* Occupation's importance is given by what

they produce or the services they offer: *their financial importance, a doctor is important to me because people's lives depend on him, without university teachers, nobody would become a real person, their importance in society for maintaining it civilized, their importance... anyway, unless for the train conductors, shop-keepers etc. how would we live our lives, what would we eat?, jobs that educate people, insure public health, coordinate different activity fields, responsibility towards the physical and moral health of the society, the role of each job in the formation of future generation, the contribution to the education of the young generation.*

A job that is endorsed by the population is a job that is categorized by the responders as being “prestigious:” *being renowned, famous, recognized by the society, the recognition I get from the others if I get such a job, how well-known are they, the way people are perceived in society when having that occupation, notoriety, popularity, each job's reputation, attitude, image in the society.* The endorsement of these occupations offers a high social status (*status among others, occupational status, the status it gives you, the social status the job offers, the position and the title of the job are considered superior by the majority of people, the important positions, the place occupied in society*), respect (*the respect paid to the one who holds the position, you gain respect, inspire respect, respect from the others, society's respect*) and appreciation (*the rank of the occupation in the Romanian system of values, the importance that the population gives to these occupations, admiration from other people*) – and these are as well criteria that make the responders rate an occupation among those “prestigious”.

The four main criteria that responders consider when rating an occupation can be grouped into two big categories: individual criteria – the effort one has put into holding such an occupation (how much one studied, how smart one is) and how much one makes after all this effort, and group criteria – how useful this occupation is to other people and how recognized it is.

Other important criteria mentioned by the responders refer to job description. Prestigious jobs are those that imply big responsibilities (*the responsibility one has towards a number of people, a mayor is a mayor: one has a town to take care of, responsibility, leadership jobs*), those that imply difficult tasks/that are complex (*the difficulty of the job, the difficulty of the work, difficult jobs because you have to deal with people, the complexity of the job, the physical work that you have to carry, even*

though it does not require upper education, is not easy to do), those that require a sustained volume of responsibilities and effort put into fulfilling them (*the volume of work each position requires, a job that requires a lot of work, how demanding a job is, the quantity of the work*) and those that imply risks and stress. Nevertheless, “prestigious” are not only those jobs that have big requirements and costs, but also those that bring satisfactions and various advantages: *personal development, personal evolvment, how much it 'helps' one, the possibility to get promoted, personal rewards, the number of free days, the number of work hours, the professional satisfaction, the level of satisfaction in helping and raising others – in getting involved in people's lives, the satisfaction received, the satisfaction of the work done, the advantages of a job in the public sector.* Accounted among the criteria are also the advantages obtained by implications by those having a certain occupation: *how solicited you are, how much power you have, the social circles you frequent, connections that can be more easily be established in the society when holding these jobs.*

The four major categories have registered insignificant variations in the way they have been formulated, and at least one of them was mentioned by each responder. If these criteria benefited from a fair uniformity in options, the criteria related to the characteristics of the work (more exactly those that refer to advantages) are much more diverse (and at the same time vague). These four main criteria of evaluation the “prestigious” occupations – as well as the criteria that enumerate the ‘price’ one has to pay for them, seem to result from an unbiased, impartial analysis of the jobs to be ranked. However, there is still a rating criterion totally different from all those already mentioned (it seems to result genuinely from emotions and feelings). Therefore, a small part of the responders confess that they have rated certain occupations in the category of the “prestigious” following this criterion: *the preference (a job I would've liked to have, the joy that I would have doing these jobs, to see me having that position/job, what I would like to do, there are some jobs that I would like to do).*

As there were also jobs like farmer, shepherd, fishing man, gardener etc. to be rated, criteria related to the working place have been mentioned: *a clean and favourable environment, the location where the activity takes place, the work environment* (there has been made a differentiation between the working places specific to the rural and urban environment, being considered more “prestigious” those in the urban environment).

The answers to the question “Which were the three most important criteria you have considered to rate the occupations in the last places?” can be classified into categories that are opposed to those already mentioned. Less “prestigious” jobs are those that do not require a lot of school degrees, nor much abilities or “logic”, which are paid poorly, are unimportant (one can live without them), have a bad reputation among people, offer you a social status none envies; these are jobs that do not imply great responsibilities, that are not complex, but hard, that do not offer satisfactions or advantages.

Less prestigious occupations are those that can be performed by anyone: *it is the job that anyone would do, anyone could do that, the ability of any given person to perform that, anyone can carry that job, these are jobs that any of us can do, the easiness to find available people to take these jobs.*

Distinctly related to these “disreputable” occupations are the epithets used by responders to characterize them (and here also emerges another somehow surprising element: responders felt the need to tag people that held the jobs they were rating). Consequently, “disreputable” occupations are described as follows: *the worst job in the society, crappy tasks, filthy, horrible work, the infamy of the job, jobs somehow degrading, I somehow find them degrading and bad-smelling.* The fact that you hold such a position, will have unpleasant and unwanted effects: *it brings insult, the humiliation you have to endure from those ‘higher-ranked’, these are some jobs that you cannot brag about, these are embarrassing jobs, they should provide a ‘humiliation’ bonus.* And those having these jobs are described as follows: *they are no better than this, they have no other abilities, mistrust towards those that have these jobs, thieves, bribe givers, the lack of respect at these people, their sheer arrogance, forgetting where they have come from, and people without goals.*

These surprising characterizations are due to the fact that contrary to the unbiased analysis of “prestigious” occupations, when ranking “disreputable” occupations more biased criteria are applied. Responders tend to consider very unhappy past experiences with people having these types of jobs, or on the other hand the rating might be as is due to the lack of experience with people carrying these jobs (seem to be enumerated either personal frustrations or preconceptions about the occupations to rate and about those they have them).

What interferes here is a shortage of the applied sampling. The operators (MA students) have interviewed individuals from their personal entourage (which, in general, was made up of urban residents

which are instructed above the Romanian average). This is why it can be noted their identification with those that have prestigious occupations or their relation to these occupations through idealization.

5 Conclusion

The diversity of the criteria used by the responders in the occupational rating shows that the evaluation of an occupational prestige is subscribed to an individual’s axiological system. Even though there is a clustering of the answers into four main categories (studies, income, occupation’s importance to society and the personal recognition), there has been identified a varied range of criteria used in the occupational rating.

The occupational prestige is measured most frequently through the application of simple or composite scales. This approach is based on the premise of the one-dimensional studied phenomenon. The data of this exploratory study reveal the fact that responders operate with one set of criteria to evaluate the prestigious occupations and a different set of criteria to evaluate the less prestigious ones. In this context, questions may appear when talking about the adequacy of applying occupational scales.

Again, bearing in mind the exploratory character of the study, the most valuable results are related to the paths that the future researches have to take. Important information has been provided also by the “journals” the interviewing operators – MA students in the field of human resources management – have kept. Thus, a problem appearing frequently and noted by the operators was the ambiguity of the request – the occupational rating in regard to “prestige”. A part of the responders have requested further clarifications regarding the signification of the term. The cards method was received well by the responders, though some subjects have complained about the length of the occupations list suggesting its reduction to a half.

The most frequent limit of the study signalled by most of the responders was related to the selected occupations. In the application of the suggested criteria by [1], a random selection of occupations have been done from the official occupational classification (the Occupational Classification in Romania), but also keeping the proportions to the statistical data regarding the occupation of the work force. Bearing in mind that the biggest share (25%) of the population in Romania has an occupation from the class of “Farmers and skilled agricultural workers” (major group VI, according to O.C.R), 6 occupations have been included in the list from this

group (farmer, pig breeder, gardener, shepherd, poultry grower, fishing man). These occupations are mainly to be found in the rural environment and the differentiation regarding the job description is quite low. Consequently, a reconsideration of the selection criteria of the occupations is necessary as well as a consideration of the gap between the diversity of occupational titles and the official classification in Romania.

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