

Do We Need Sex-Specific Occupational Prestige Scales?

Christine E. Bose
Jobs and Gender: A Study of Occupational Prestige
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As sociological research on career development ("status attainment") proliferated during the 1970s, so did concerns about the validity of existing occupational prestige and socioeconomic status scales for studying the social mobility of women. The recently introduced scales had been developed primarily from data on males, and they provided no scores for individuals without paid employment. *Jobs and Gender* addresses such concerns, first, by reviewing research on the relation between gender and occupational prestige and, second, by documenting the author's development of separate occupational prestige scales for male and female workers and for the nonpaid roles of housewife and house husband.

There is a large literature in sociology on the meaning, measurement, and central importance of occupational prestige and socioeconomic status as outcome criteria in studies of "who gets ahead" (e.g., Blau & Duncan, 1967; Treiman, 1977). *Jobs and Gender* follows directly in that research tradition, although its brief text (99 pages) makes little reference to it. The book departs from the tradition by offering sex-specific scales as alternatives to the previous unisex ones. To facilitate their use, extensive appendixes list Bose Index scores for the several hundred detailed titles in each of the U.S. Census Bureau's widely used 1960, 1970, and 1980 occupational classifications.

In view of the book's stated purpose, it is best evaluated as an exercise in criterion improvement and validation. As such, it disappoints. Bose improved on the already strong sampling and social judgment techniques used to obtain prestige ratings in previous studies. However, samples of ratings, no matter how valid

themselves, are but the beginning of a chain of analyses that culminates in the estimation of prestige scores for all census occupations. The claims for the superior validity of the Bose Index scales rest almost entirely on the presumed superiority of the data collection procedures and faulty reasoning about the best way to create the scales. The book provides virtually no analysis of how the male and female Bose scales actually function relative to each other or to the National Opinion Research Center and Duncan scales to which they are sketchily compared. (Interested researchers can, however, use data in the appendixes to compare the internal properties of the various scales.) Similarly, the book never reevaluates the value of producing a Bose Index score for housewife or house husband, despite the fact that respondents differed sharply in their ratings of both roles.

Bose's explicit argument for sex-specific occupational prestige scales is essentially that the correlations between an occupation's prestige and the median income of its incumbents are not the same for male and female workers. The irrelevance of this fact for estimating the prestige of unrated occupations is obscured, however, by the author's failure to distinguish clearly between two types of occupational rewards: prestige (social regard, which probably stems from the nature of the work done) and socioeconomic status (more tangible rewards, such as income). The two may be interchangeable for male workers for all practical purposes but not for female workers, whose commitment to labor force activities is more problematic. The mean prestige ratings accorded to sample occupations held by hypothetical male workers correlate .84 with the income

and education of men actually employed in those occupations in 1960. Prestige ratings for females correlate only .79 with analogous census data for women, which means that female Bose Index scores are less accurate than those for males. This artifactual difference between the two scales, arising solely from differences in the predictive efficiency of the equations used to produce them, further obscures their interpretation.

Thus, two key questions remain unanswered. Namely, are sex-specific scales really justified? And are they actually superior to previous scales, especially for women? The former question assumes special importance because of the ambiguities involved in comparing the same social mobility processes of different populations when the criterion scales differ for each. Bose does not address either question explicitly, but her own references to the "near equity" in ratings for male and female incumbents suggest that the answer to the first question is no. The two sets of mean ratings for the 108 sample occupations correlate .97. (The male and female Bose Index scores projected for all 1960 census occupational categories correlate only .93, as described on page 119 of the author's 1973 doctoral dissertation.) Correlations of similarly high magnitude are typically used in the literature to argue that occupational rankings are invariant across time, place, specific ranking procedure, and type of respondent.

The book is also marred by unclear exposition (e.g., "little dramatic difference") and a distracting overlay of ad hoc theorizing, often in support of the feminist perspective that undergirds the book. For example, both men and women (unexpectedly) rated most occupations slightly higher when held by hypothetical female rather than male incumbents. Bose suggests that the men's responses may result from male "chivalry," and "since chivalry often reflects the presumed higher status of the giver, men may be indirectly recognizing their own status" (p. 42).

References

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