Proceedings of The National Conference
On Undergraduate Research (NCUR) 2014
University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY
April 3-5, 2014

Doctors and Garbage Men: Unpacking Post-Secondary Students' Perceptions of Occupational Prestige

Alexandra Shoichet
Sociology and Social Anthropology
Dalhousie University
6299 South St.
Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 3J5 Canada

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Liesl Gambold

Abstract

Research in the field of occupational prestige often involves ranking occupations or their attributes in an attempt to understand the variables that, taken together, produce a collective understanding of prestige that justifies the hierarchy of occupations in society. These studies acknowledge, generally, that while the ingredients of prestige may differ, it is an unavoidable feature of social interaction. What is less well-researched is how prestige affects the individual, particularly regarding his or her personal occupational aspirations. This study is a preliminary comparison of idealized and prestigious occupations in order to determine whether there is a correlation between the jobs esteemed by society and those idealized by the individual. In other words, it is an attempt to see whether the "best" jobs are what people actually want for themselves. After surveying three hundred and forty-four students at five post-secondary institutions in Nova Scotia, Canada, it was found that although prestigious and idealized occupations may be highly correlated in children, perceptions of prestige alter as children age and become more cognizant of cultural and societal values. Yet, although prestige is an abstract social concept, with components that differ due to the socioeconomic status and culture of those qualifying it, it is evaluated through attributes that are inherently personal. It is time to set aside debates on the location of occupations in the prestige hierarchy and instead question its very formation and continuing existence. Ultimately, this paper argues that prestige is an outdated concept propagating the discourse of the "good" job that is based on symbolic social consensus rather than objective reality. The implications of this research may not only serve to debunk the prestige hierarchy and permit a more nuanced understanding of those suffering from occupational inferiority, but it may help to show at what point personal preferences are supplanted by those of society and how the relationship between the ideal and prestigious may be mediated. This research will hopefully stimulate discussion on occupational prestige in order to help eliminate the discrimination faced by those who perform low prestige occupations whose personal worth is evaluated on the basis of their job alone.

Keywords: Occupations, Jobs, Prestige

1. Introduction:

Over thirty years ago Hodge wrote that "occupations require skills, albeit different kinds of skills…Knowing the type of work [people] do and *nothing more* does not suffice to rank them."[1] Despite his claim, the field of occupational prestige has historically been committed to establishing a fixed hierarchy of occupations. Rather than create another prestige index, this study takes a different approach, asking how the occupational hierarchy is formed and questioning the effect it has on society. How do people excuse the casual discrimination they exercise in their daily lives that causes them to privilege not only certain occupations but their workers? Is prestige an outdated or imaginary concept reflecting social values no longer based in reality? Are the attributes used to evaluate prestige the

same qualities that characterize an ideal occupation? How is prestige structured in society and how does it influence the educational and occupational decisions made by those attempting to manage its pressures?

To address these questions, a number of socio-psychological theories are considered. Chief among them is symbolic interaction, most famously proposed by Herbert Blumer. This theory "examines the meanings emerging from the reciprocal interaction of individuals in social environment with other individuals."[2] The fundamental assumption is that the meanings derived from objects and experiences are not universally accepted. Blumer writes: "meaning is a condition that emerges as a result of the interaction of group members and not an intrinsic feature of the object."[3] Similarly, this paper argues that prestige cannot be understood as naturally embodied in occupations, but that its meaning is necessarily dependent on a range of attributes as they are interpreted by people. In other words, prestige does not objectively exist; it is created due to variable social and cultural processes that endow it with a supposedly common meaning.

Moreover, as this meaning is interpreted over time it is "legitimated", gaining "a cognitive and moral basis."[4] This process of legitimation solidifies the value of symbols; occupations are intuitively represented as having low or high prestige, rather than having a variable status resulting from societal consensus. This process precludes an awareness of unique personal circumstances and instead prescribes a cognitive and moral judgment on those occupying different occupational strata. Given that the particular determinants of prestige vary due to a number of social factors, it is likely that different legitimations exist in numerous cultures and societies that occasionally come into conflict through interactions between these closed social groups.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses:

Much of the literature on occupational prestige appears to support this symbolic interactionist interpretation, although no social scientist examined in this study explicitly identifies symbolic interaction as his or her foundational theory. For example, Ramsey and Smith researched occupational prestige and status perceptions as they differ between Japanese and American high school students, arguing that prestige cannot objectively exist if it is given different values by people cross-culturally.[5] In the early 1960s, Garbin and Bates concluded that "the significant ingredients of occupational prestige may not necessarily be the same for all occupations", indicating that those occupying different roles in society may value different occupational attributes and, therefore, different jobs.[6] Vanneman and Pampel state explicitly that "the prestige differences that are important to the middle class may have little significance to the working class."[7]

If perceptions of prestige differ due to the varying assessment of occupational attributes by different members of society, one begins to wonder which attributes are being evaluated and how. Throughout the twentieth century, a number of social scientists have overwhelmingly agreed that occupational prestige is at least partly determined by the amount of education required for a job and the average income earned in that job, the so-called "rewards hypothesis."[8] However, educational expectations and requirements have changed over the course of the last century in North America. Gorman notes:

> Although hard work and rugged individualism had previously been the overriding dominant ideology in the United States, a new element has recently been added to the ideological mix – a college education. Those who work hard *and* get a college degree are now seen as deserving the better paying and more prestigious jobs in the occupational hierarchy.[9]

The new demand that one must be college educated in order to get a "good" job has altered the rewards hypothesis, since those enrolled in higher education are no longer necessarily pursuing professional careers, but may simply be buying into the dominant ideology that more education leads to a "better" occupation. The link between education and prestige is complicated further by considerations of socioeconomic standing. Vanneman and Pampel state that "[m]iddle class in American society now implies having gone to college."[10] Consequently, people may enroll in higher education through a desire to be perceived as belonging to a higher social class, rather than through intent to attain a professional career.

To address these social shifts, a number of social scientists have proposed alternative ways to measure occupational prestige. Various occupational attributes are increasingly considered to be prestige indicators.[11] Prestige has also been linked to the functional importance of an occupation and the training it requires.[12] Lewis and Lopreato argue that occupations "which contribute highly to the economy of a system have also a high functional importance for that system."[13] The implication is that those whose occupations serve a functionally important role in society are given more material and psychic rewards than those that do not.

Additionally, some researchers have chosen to examine how one's occupational setting may affect one's prestige,[14] while others have questioned how the occupations of one's parents affect one's own career aspirations.[15] Still others have noted that people generally give unusually high prestige rankings to jobs similar to their own[16] and, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century, sociologists have begun to analyse how occupational prestige may differ according to the values held by people cross-culturally.[17]

Further differences in prestige perceptions are influenced by socioeconomic status. Baxter argues that members of the middle class are more likely to emphasize the psychic rewards of a job rather than its material gains.[18] Working class respondents, on the other hand, are thought to focus on the immediate economic benefits of a given occupation rather than deferred rewards,[19] while also placing less emphasis on occupational prestige overall.[20] These differences are highlighted by Gorman's study on cross-cultural perceptions of social class. He finds that working-class respondents who "struggle to find dignity in a society that is quick to judge one's worth on the basis of income, educational credentials and occupational prestige" evaluate prestige in relation to other attributes.[21] Consequently, the occupations and occupational attributes deemed prestigious by working- and middle-class respondents differ.

There is also evidence that differences in prestige standing may be due to variation amongst ethnically-diverse cultural groups. These differences may be explained with reference to socio-psychological theories of collectivism and individualism. Collectivism and individualism are terms designed to describe the social tendencies of population groups. Members of Asian cultures, for example, are thought to emphasize collectivist values, such as group membership and conformity, while those belonging to more individualist Western cultures are thought to value individual freedom and autonomy.[22] These differences are directly related to whether one has an interdependent or independent view of the self. An interdependent view involves "defining oneself in terms of one's relationships to other people and recognizing that one's behaviour is often determined by the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others."[23] Conversely, an independent view involves "defining oneself in terms of one's own internal thoughts, feelings, and actions."[24] Theoretically, those from interdependent, collectivist cultures should value occupations associated with belonging, group orientation, respect and duty, while those from independent, individualist cultures should award more prestige to occupations associated with independence, competition and self-maximization.[25]

Cultural differences may also influence a person's occupational choices depending on how they are communicated from parent to child. Tamis-LeMonda et al. write that "[p]arents transmit values, rules, and standards about ways of thinking and acting [to their children]."[26] They go on to argue that "parents in individualistic cultures have been described as encouraging their children to develop into independent, autonomous individuals who have fragile ties to the larger group"[27] while "parents in cultures considered to be more collectivistic are thought to promote relatedness and interdependence."[28] Even without the cultural element, parents influence the career aspirations of their children. Hughes' 1961 study found that the "prestige level of a father's occupation tends to set up, for the respondent, a minimal standard of what is expected of him. Not to meet this standard constitutes a species of failure."[29] Decades later in 2006, Hitlin concluded similarly that "[f]athers' prestige scores are positive direct predictors of children's career aspirations."[30] Evaluating the occupation of one's parents therefore contributes to an understanding of perceptual differences in prestige.

The final justification in the literature for variation in occupational prestige relates to age. In the 1960s and 1970s, Baxter surveyed boys from blue and white collar backgrounds to examine how age and social class affect prestige perceptions. Her hypothesis was that as children age their perceptions of prestige increasingly parallel those of adults. Baxter identified a number of reasons why childhood aspirations shift, including the Hartmann effect and occupational familiarity.[31] However, she was unable to confirm that any one of these factors comprehensively explains changing perceptions of occupational prestige.

When considering the effect of parents' occupations or societal influences on childhood perceptions of prestige in this paper, prestige is understood through the occupational aspirations of the child. Although it may initially seem like a mistake to evaluate these two concepts together, Jean Piaget's model of cognitive development describes why idealized and prestigious jobs may be equated in children under twelve years of age. Piaget argues that as children age they pass through four stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor from birth to age two, preoperational from ages two to seven, concrete operational from ages seven to twelve and formal operational after age twelve.[32] Crucially, it is only in the formal operational stage that children gain the ability to reason abstractly. In earlier stages, children's thinking is "egocentric", meaning that they "believe that other people perceive things in the same way they do."[33] Since prestige is related to the perceptions of others, it is unlikely that a child under the age of twelve would be able to grasp the concept the same way it is understood by an adult. Instead, a child will likely believe that the occupation he or she desires is not only the best occupation for his or her self but the best or most prestigious for society overall. Accordingly, childhood perceptions of prestige in this study are analyzed by examining the occupations respondents listed as their childhood ideal, in answer to the question "When you were a child (under the age of 12), what job did you want to have when you grew up?"

Following prominent ideas in the literature, this study proposed a number of hypotheses to determine the variables at play in perceptions of occupational prestige. First, it was hypothesized that although income and education may play a large role in the production of prestige, a number of other variables contribute to prestige perceptions. Second, variations in the prestige hierarchy can be explained through cultural differences in socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Members of the middle class, for example, should be more likely to esteem jobs that require a university education, while those from the working class should attribute more prestige to relatively high income jobs that do not demand post-secondary schooling. Further, those from independent backgrounds should place more value on autonomous jobs, while those from interdependent backgrounds should value group-oriented jobs. Third, it was hypothesized that the occupations of one's parents would influence perceptions of prestige, either by establishing a minimum threshold for the child to overcome or by providing the child with an idealized occupational model. Fourth, it was hypothesized that perceptions of occupational prestige would change with age, with children valuing different occupations as they cognitively and socially develop.

As an additional comparison, this study focuses on the relationship between prestigious and idealized jobs. Nothing in the literature reviewed attempts this comparison. While it is likely that the occupation one desires as a child mirrors one's childhood perceptions of prestige, it is not necessarily true that the occupation one idealizes as a post-secondary student is prestigious. One may believe that being a doctor is the most prestigious occupation, for instance, yet have no personal desire to become one. As a result, this study attempts to evaluate the relative influence of occupational attributes in determining both occupational ideals and prestige. It was hypothesized that the attributes which factor into job desirability and those that contribute to prestige perceptions will differ due to the assumption that prestige is not based on what individuals actually want for themselves.

3. Methodology:

To test the hypotheses, a survey was developed for distribution to post-secondary students at five institutions in Nova Scotia: Dalhousie University, the University of King's College (UKC), Mount St. Vincent University (MSVU), Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) and Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC). These institutions were chosen in order to ensure diversity of responses. Dalhousie University was selected to represent a conventional post-secondary institution; responses from the University of King's College should indicate the values of those pursuing a degree in the liberal arts; Mount St. Vincent University offers unique, alternate degree programs that may attract students with diverse interests. NSCC was selected to represent working class respondents pursuing a career in the trades, while NSCAD should indicate the preferences of those pursuing a career in the fine arts.

Data was collected primarily using the online survey program, Opinio, licensed for use by Dalhousie University and housed on its secure server. Individual professors and administrative assistants were contacted by email at Dalhousie, UKC and MSVU and asked if they would be willing to distribute the survey to their students. These email addresses were found using publicly available information on university websites; an effort was made to contact professors in a range of departments in order to get responses from a variety of students. Whenever possible, large classes were targeted in order to help protect participant anonymity.

To reach students at NSCAD, the student union was contacted and asked to email the Opinio survey link to all students on their contact list. At NSCC, the Dean of Access agreed to disseminate the link to students enrolled in post-secondary courses within the School of Access, and the Dean of Health and Human Services forwarded the survey to the department chair. In total, two hundred and forty-four students across the five post-secondary institutions identified for inclusion in this study completed the survey.

A supplementary survey was also created and distributed using simple random sampling to one hundred additional students at Dalhousie University and UKC. While the larger Opinio survey attempted to draw connections from the cultural background and childhood aspirations of respondents to their present perceptions of prestige, considering also their school, age, gender and parents' occupations, the supplementary survey addressed prestige more specifically. The supplement asked respondents to identify the occupations they thought were the most and least prestigious and to rank the attributes they thought contributed to that prestige level.

4. Results:

Despite the use of surveys which could be completed in under ten minutes, this study generated a surprising amount of data. To focus the discussion of results, analysis is restricted to those topics of direct relevance to the hypotheses.

Each hypothesis is subsequently addressed on the following pages with reference to the survey data in the form of a guiding research question.

4.1 hypothesis one: which attributes determine occupational prestige?

The first hypothesis was that occupational prestige is not determined solely by education and income, as suggested by the rewards hypothesis. Following the literature, the variables under consideration were income, the perception of the job, respect it is given and degree of importance it has to society, the type of work, whether or not the work is personally fulfilling, the number of people able to perform the job, required skill level, required level of education, and whether the job provides opportunities for promotion, benefits, security, fame or visibility, authority over others or occupational autonomy. The attributes were ranked by having respondents give a numerical value to those they thought contributed to the prestige of the occupation they identified as most prestigious. The number "1" represented the most important determinant of occupational prestige as perceived by respondents, with higher values denoting less relevant attributes. A variable given no value at all was considered to be irrelevant to formations of prestige.

It is important to note that the numbers themselves act as signifiers only; they do not correspond directly to qualitative scalar descriptions. Consequently, analysis of these values should treat them as ordinal rather than interval or ratio level since the difference between each unit did not mean the same thing for all respondents. For example, respondents were told only that a "1" signified the most important attribute; they were not told to consider a "3" as high importance, a "5" as somewhat important and a "7" as low importance.

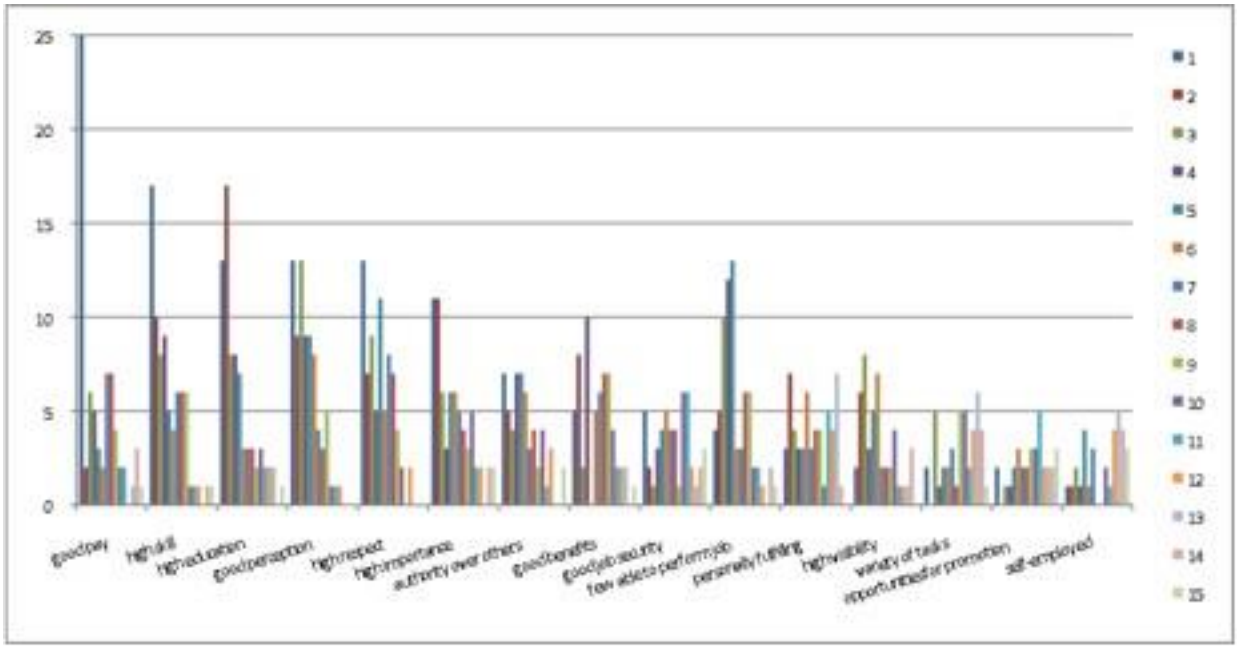

Figure 1: Aggregate frequency counts for high prestige variables, ordered by the number of 1's each attribute was given

After data analysis, some interesting trends emerge, supporting the first hypothesis. Although "good pay" received the highest number of "1's" (see Figure 1), the next highest prestige attribute was the need for technical skill, not a high level of education, contradicting the rewards hypothesis. Tied with the number of "1's" level of education received was the perception of the job and respect it is given by society, indicating that prestige is at least partially determined by social agreement, as suggested by the theory of symbolic interaction.

In addition to considering occupational attributes that indicate high prestige are those variables that contribute to low prestige standing. According to the rewards hypothesis, a low income and poor education should be the greatest indicators of low prestige occupations. The low prestige variables support this hypothesis: having a low education and low income were found to be the biggest determinants of low prestige (see Figure 2). Mirroring the high prestige attributes, those receiving the next highest number of "1's" were the negative perception and low respect a

job is given by society. Interestingly, while a low skill level was given a greater number of "2's" than the number of "1's" attributed to the perception and respect variables, the number of "1's" it received was considerably lower.

Unlike the high prestige attributes, which are almost all positively correlated with perceptions of prestige, the low prestige variables yield more ambiguous results. The occupational titles identified in the study reflect some of these irregularities. An occupation with low importance to society, for example, was not strongly associated with low prestige standing (see Figure 2). Similarly, many of the least prestigious occupations named by respondents, such as Garbage Man, provide some service to society, yet lack prestige. It is likely that the low prestige level of these occupations is therefore due to other factors. Notably, very few of the low prestige occupations identified require

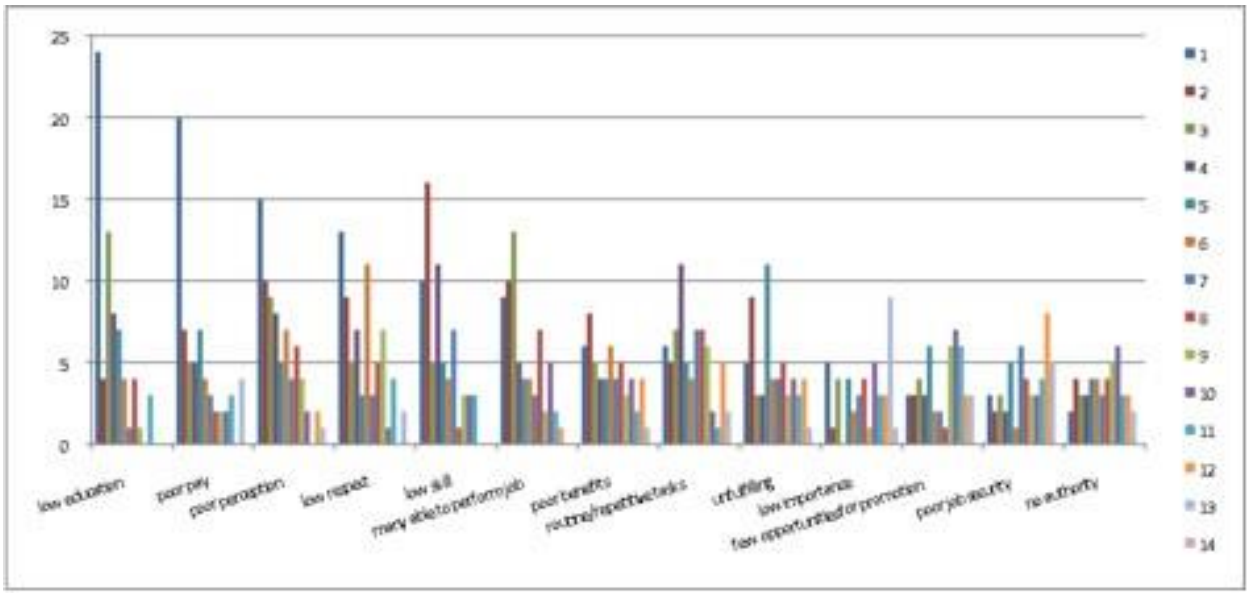

Figure 2: Aggregate frequency counts for low prestige variables, ordered by the number of 1's each attribute was given

any education or specialized skills. Income levels related to these occupations are therefore likely to be similarly low, due to the abundance of unskilled labourers available in society. In contrast, high prestige occupations generally require incredibly specialized skills and high levels of education, reflecting the survey results. Doctors and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) dominate the high prestige lists, followed by members of the government, surgeons and lawyers. The income of these highly educated and skilled workers is likely to be similarly high, due to the presumed scarcity of skilled laborers in society.

4.2 Hypothesis Two: Do Socioeconomic Standing And Culture Influence Variation In Occupational Prestige Perceptions?

Unfortunately, this hypothesis could not be verified. Originally, it was thought that students from NSCC would represent a lower socioeconomic bracket than those from the other post-secondary institutions, but this theory was not supported by the survey results. While it may be possible to identify class differences through the occupations of parents and typical income each receives, it is beyond the scope of this research to attempt such an analysis.

Cultural differences were also inconclusive. 88.52% of respondents identified as belonging to the "White" population group. The next highest frequency of respondents identified as Middle-Eastern, representing 2.87% of the study population. There was not enough difference in the cultural background of respondents to allow cross-cultural comparisons, without risking response bias and respondent anonymity.

4.3 Hypothesis Three: Does The Occupation Of One's Parents Affect One's Occupational Aspirations?

Of two hundred and forty-four respondents, only seven currently idealize the exact occupation as one of their parents. These occupations are Journalist, Doctor, Artist, Addiction Treatment Councillor and Nurse (both Journalist and Doctor were mentioned by two respondents). Of those seven, only two also idealized the occupation as children. In contrast, eight respondents idealized one of their parents' occupations as children but no longer hold the same occupational aspirations. These occupations are Artist, Firefighter, Teacher, Veterinarian and Graphic Designer (Artist, Firefighter and Teacher were each mentioned by two respondents).

Although a number of respondents desired a future career in the same occupational field as their parents (wanting to be a doctor, for example, when one parent is a nurse or hoping to own a business when one or both parents are entrepreneurs), the majority idealized a career that had nothing to do with their parents' occupation. It is therefore uncertain whether or not this hypothesis was proved or disproved by the survey data.

4.4 Hypothesis Four: Are The Ideal Occupations Respondents Value As Children The Same As The Ideal And Most Prestigious Occupations They Value As Post-Secondary Students?

Following Baxter's hypothesis, perceptions of prestige do seem to shift with age. According to the data collected, only eighteen percent of respondents still idealize the exact job as when they were a child. Participants offered diverse reasons for why their ideal occupation had changed. The majority said that their interests shifted once they learned about the realities of the occupation they formerly idealized or the wider range of occupations available to them. Many others identified a lack of academic, artistic or physical talent that would prevent them from being successful at the job. Others stated that although the occupation itself may still interest them, the amount of schooling required for it did not. Still others attributed their shift in focus to medical issues, financial pressures or to the occupation being "unrealistic" for one reason or another.

A total of sixty occupational titles were identified by the two hundred and forty-four respondents as their childhood ideal, suggesting an enormous degree of similarly in the prestige perceptions of Western children. Notably, Veterinarian, Doctor and Teacher were mentioned most frequently. Although Doctor was also frequently mentioned as one of the most prestigious jobs, Teacher and Veterinarian were not. Relatedly, being a CEO or having a job in the government were identified as some of the most prestigious jobs by post-secondary students, yet neither was listed as the ideal for respondents as children.

It is equally noteworthy that, with the exception of Truck Driver, not one respondent listed their ideal job as a child as one of the lowest prestige occupations. However, although occupations at the lowest prestige level were avoided by respondents, a number listed non-professional occupations that the literature suggests are lower on the prestige hierarchy, such as Airline Stewardess, Florist and Park Ranger, as their childhood ideal.

4.5 Hypothesis Five: Are The Jobs Viewed As Prestigious By Society The Same Jobs Idealized By Members Of That Society?

Most of the variables for occupational prestige were also used to determine a respondent's occupational ideal. However, skill and education level, the scarcity variable, perception and respect of the occupation by society and personal fulfillment were omitted from the list given to respondents. In their place, having a friendly work environment, and performing, exciting, intellectually stimulating or easy work were included.

To measure a respondent's ideal occupation, he or she was asked: "If you could have any job in the world, which would you choose?" After naming an occupational title, the respondent was presented with the list of attributes and directed to rank as many of them as applicable in order of importance, with "1" being the most desirable aspect of a future occupation. Similar to the prestige analysis, it is important to note that these numbers represent ordinal values only. Further, while only one hundred respondents ranked prestige attributes, all three hundred and forty-four were asked about their personal occupational aspirations.

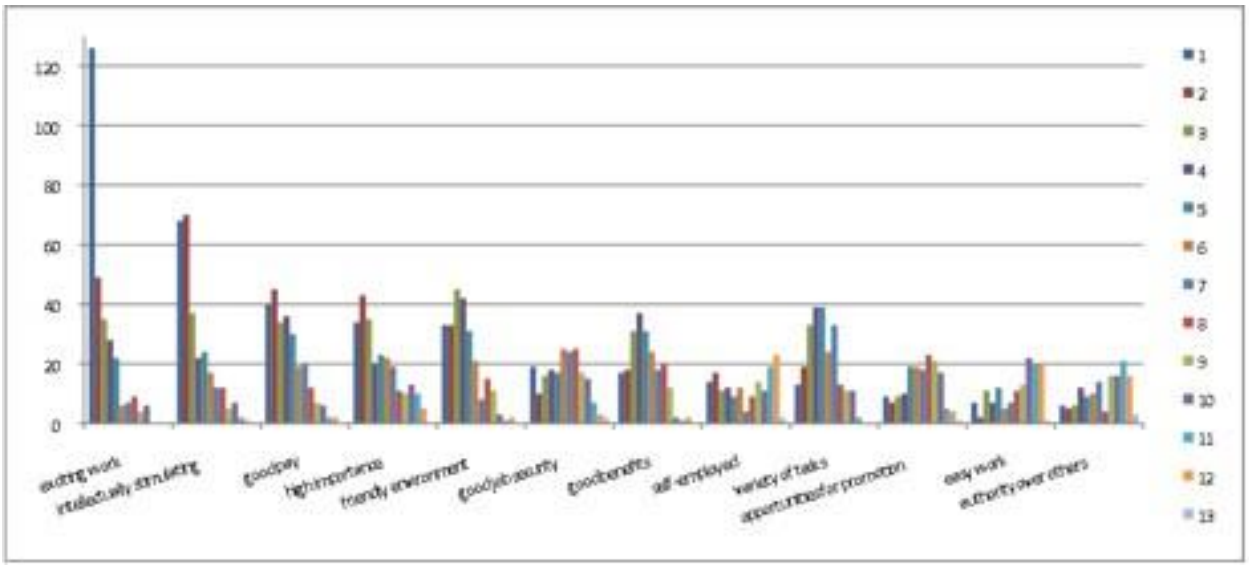

Figure 3: Aggregate frequency counts for ideal occupation variables, ordered by the number of 1's each attribute was given

Interestingly, while the most frequently mentioned prestige variables were closely-related to the second and third most frequently mentioned variables, one ideal attribute stood out overwhelmingly as the most important element of a future occupation. Exciting work received almost double the number of "1's" than the next highest ranking category of intellectually stimulating work, and received more than triple the number of "1's" in the next three highest ranking categories (see Figure 3). These results mean that exciting work alone was given almost as many 1's as the next four highest ranking attributes put together.

Similar to the prestige variables, most of the ideal attributes have a negative slope, indicating that they are positively correlated with perceived occupational ideals. However, easy work and authority over others have a positive slope, suggesting that are not of significant interest to respondents in a future occupation. Moreover, the slopes of the self-employment and job security variables are highly ambiguous, indicating an unclear relationship between these attributes and idealized occupations.

Comparing ideal and high prestige attributes reflect some of these ambiguities (see Figures 1 and 3). Slope comparisons of the income, self-employment and type of work variables were unclear, suggesting a need for more response data or multivariate analysis. Furthermore, while having authority over others had a positive slope for ideal occupations it had a negative slope for prestigious occupations. These results seem to support the hypothesis that the attributes which factor into job desirability and those that contribute to perceptions of prestige differ since prestige is not based on what individuals actually want for themselves.

Examining the actual occupations identified by respondents further emphasizes the dissimilarity between perceptions of prestige and personal desire. The most prestigious occupations are CEO, Doctor, Politician, President and Surgeon. However, only Doctor appears on the list of ideal occupations for respondents at present. Other ideal occupations are Actor, Artist, Author, Lawyer, Professor, Teacher, Nurse, Veterinarian and professions in the film industry. Further, while many respondents idealize careers in professional fields, others would prefer to be car designers, professional surfers or adventurers. The variety of occupations identified also serves to complicate the notion of "exciting" work. Although this attribute was originally included in the survey to capture those whose ideal profession includes thrill-seeking activities, exciting work was given "1's" by respondents idealizing the entire range of occupations.

5. Discussion:

Taken together, the results indicate that prestige is a learned social concept that develops in children concomitantly with their cognition. As children age and become more cognizant of the thoughts and expectations of others,

perceptions of prestige gradually alter, simultaneously influencing the type of occupations youth idealize. The data also suggest that these perceptions change with an increasing awareness of skill limitations and alternative occupational options available that may better complement a respondent's unique skills.

Albert Bandura's theory of social learning helps to explain this process. Similar to symbolic interaction theory, Bandura argued that "[m]ost of the behaviors that people display are learned, either deliberately or inadvertently, through the influence of example."[34] In brief, the norms governing the way people act in society do not come from the individual, but through social interpretation. Bandura discussed a number of regulating factors that control social interaction, including self-reinforcing mechanisms. He wrote:

> Parents and other socialization agents subscribe to certain norms of what constitute worthy performances. They are generally delighted and respond approvingly when children achieve or exceed desired standards and displeased when their performances fall short of the valued level. As a result of such differential treatment children eventually come to respond to their own behavior in self-approving and self-critical ways, depending on how it departs from evaluative standards set by others.[35]

It is very likely that such social processes affect perceptions of occupational prestige in children. Baxter intimated that the familiarity a child has with an occupation may increase his or her estimation of it.[36] This familiarity may be due to the occupations of the child's parents, media influences or personal interaction. As children age, however, prestige is no longer determined solely by familiarity, but through external influences and an increasing awareness of one's own limitations that, through the process of legitimation, become enshrined as facts of society. Accordingly, while prestigious and idealized occupations may be highly correlated initially, perceptions of prestige eventually become less about what people want and more about what they think society values.

This trend is consistent with the survey data. As mentioned previously, a total of only sixty occupational titles were identified by the two hundred and forty-four respondents as their childhood ideal. Similarly, thirty-three and thirty-eight occupations were identified by one hundred respondents as the most and least prestigious, respectively, again indicating the legitimation of prestige values. However, over one hundred and sixty occupations were identified by respondents as their present ideal. The fact that there was almost three times as much variation in respondents' ideal occupations at present compared to those in childhood, and approximately five times as much variation than appeared in the prestige titles illustrates that what people personally desire and what they think society values are not the same.

While the socialization process, through which personal preferences are gradually supplemented with those of society, is not compelling until after age twelve, the data also suggest that the process *begins* at a very young age. Although many respondents identified a youthful desire for lower prestige occupations, only one person idealized an occupation with very low prestige values, indicating that while the socialization process gains strength after age twelve, children are discouraged from valuing "bad" jobs even before then.

By the time respondents reach the post-secondary level, they have increasingly refined impression management techniques, particularly regarding non-professional occupations. When describing potentially questionable occupational ideals, respondents included "high-ranking" or "high-end" adjectives in a presumed attempt to supplement their low prestige. Furthermore, when listing the occupations of their parents, respondents whose parents had a low prestige occupation would positively qualify them. For example, instead of saying Janitor they would write "Custodian". Similarly, Maid became "Residential Cleaner." Respondents would even include extra adjectives or justifications based on past employment, such as describing parents as *successful* entrepreneurs, or writing that while they may now be in customer service (low prestige), they used to be accountants (high prestige).

The hesitancy to label occupations as non-prestigious was physically observed in respondents as they completed the supplementary survey. A number of respondents expressed consternation when asked to identify the occupation they thought was least prestigious, although very few had difficulty naming the occupations they thought were most prestigious or ideal. Moreover, not only did some respondents leave this question unanswered, but they would justify this omission. One wrote that "every job requires certain skills" while others wrote simply that having "no job" was the least prestigious occupation one could have.

Notably, of the eighteen percent of respondents who still idealize the same job as when they were a child, nearly half did not report that they were currently studying to attain that job, suggesting that although the occupation may be what they have always idealized, other pressures prevent them from fulfilling their childhood goals. It is also worth noting that 91.8% of respondents reported that what they were currently studying was their own choice rather than the result of external influences, implying that the effect of social learning on their occupational aspirations may be so subtle that it goes unnoticed by respondents themselves.

6. Study Limitations:

The primary limitation of this study concerns the fact that only post-secondary students were surveyed. Although it was initially hypothesized that different post-secondary institutions in Nova Scotia would yield different results, no significant variation was noted in the data. This hypothesis was further complicated by the fact that almost sixty percent of respondents were from Dalhousie University, with the other forty percent divided between the other four post-secondary institutions. To gain a comprehensive understanding of occupational prestige, one should ideally survey people from a range of occupational and educational backgrounds, including those who entered the work force directly from high school and those who are well-established in professional fields. It is likely of particular importance to survey those who are the same age as most undergraduate students yet who are not enrolled in post-secondary institutions in order to gauge their perceptions of post-secondary students and the diplomas or certificates they value. Specifically, are those who are not enrolled in post-secondary institutions from a different socioeconomic background than those who are? Do they value different occupational attributes? Do they view post-secondary graduates negatively as "perpetual students"[37] or do they harbour personal ambitions to return to school one day themselves? The results of this study provide a biased picture of occupational prestige since all the respondents have in common a desire, or at least respect, for post-secondary education.

A second limitation in the generalizability of this study concerns the relative homogeneity of respondents on other demographic fields. Over eighty percent of respondents were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, which likely influenced the study results. Further, although the variable was not considered in this study, over seventy-five percent of survey respondents were female. Last, almost ninety percent of students identified as White, which, as previously mentioned, made it impossible to evaluate the collectivist or individualist tendencies of respondents.

7. Summary and Concluding Thoughts:

This study was an attempt to challenge the occupational prestige hierarchy and to better understand how and why it is formed. Following symbolic interaction theory, it was hypothesized that prestige develops through interaction with society members; the meaning of occupational prestige is not the same universally since different social groups value different occupational attributes. Within societies, prestige is legitimated over time through repeated interactions and socialization institutions.

It was found that occupational prestige is a social variable, often at odds with what individuals would idealize for themselves. The most important indicators of high prestige occupations were found to be income and required levels of skill and education. In contradiction, the most important indicators of an ideal job were whether it involves exciting or intellectually stimulating work.

Although the influence of parents' occupations on children's occupational aspirations and perceptions of prestige was ambiguous, it is clear that childhood perceptions of prestige shift with age due to a number of inter- and intra-personal factors. Chief among these are self-regulating mechanisms that help members of society internalize its norms. Through such processes, children are taught about "good" and "bad" jobs and learn to gradually evaluate variables such as income and realism over basic personal fulfillment in their prestige estimations. These processes help to explain why the top ideal occupations for children were Veterinarian, Doctor, Teacher, Artist and Marine Biologist, while the top ideal occupations for post-secondary students were Doctor, Actor, Artist, Lawyer and Author, and the most prestigious occupations were Doctor, CEO, President and Surgeon.

If prestige is not based on what people actually want, what purpose does it serve in society? In many ways, occupational prestige acts as a stratification mechanism enabling those with "good" jobs to feel superior to those with "bad" jobs, and accordingly forcing those on the low end of the occupational hierarchy to develop mechanisms to cope with occupational inferiority. If no one wants to be a garbage man, what does it say about those who are? Does it mean that they are undereducated and have a low income? Can one assume that they are poor providers, unskilled workers and associated with a slew of unflattering adjectives? Prestige is a social variable, developed by society, yet it is measured through attributes that are inherently personal. How can one objectively determine what makes an occupation better or worse than any other if personal attributes become part of the equation?

While it was beyond the capabilities of this study to answer such questions, it is hoped that future research may address them and continue to ask not only how prestige is formed but how it can be unformed. If prestige is outdated then it should no longer determine whether an occupation is "good" or not; other variables focused more on individual idiosyncrasies should replace it. Through future studies, social scientists may learn how to help society

members decide what they truly want to do with their lives and how to attain those goals, without being waylaid by the expectations of others.

8. Acknowledgements:

The author wishes to express her gratitude to Dr. Liesl Gambold for her guidance throughout this project and to Richard Shoichet and Fern Lindzon for their constant love and support.

9. References:

1 Robert W. Hodge, "The Measurement of Occupational Status," *Social Science Research* 10 (1981): 397.

2 Nilgun Aksan et al., "Symbolic Interaction Theory," *Procedia Social and Behavioural Sciences 1* (2009): 902.

3 Ibid., 903.

4 Kenneth Allan, *Contemporary Social and Sociological Theory: Visualizing Social Worlds* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2006), 36.

5 Charles E. Ramsey and Robert J. Smith, "Japanese and American Perceptions of Occupations," *American Journal of Sociology* 65.5 (1960): 475-482.

6 Albeno P. Garbin and Frederick L. Bates, "Occupational Prestige: An Empirical Study of its Correlates" *Social Forces* 40.2 (1961): 136.

7 Reeve Vanneman and Fred C. Pampel, "The American Perception of Class and Status," *American Sociological Review* 42.3 (1977): 423.

8 Eunice H. Baxter, *Perceptions of Occupational Rewards and Prestige and the Relationship Between Them: A Study of Children and Adolescents* (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia, 1967), 2; Eunice H. Baxter, "Children's and Adolescents' Perceptions of Occupational Prestige," *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie* 13 (1976): 230; See also Neil J. MacKinnon and Tom Langford, "The Meaning of Occupational Prestige Scores: A Social Psychological Analysis and Interpretation," *The Sociological Quarterly* 35.2 (1994): 215-245; Ramsey and Smith, 475-482; Vanneman and Pampel, 422-437.

9 Thomas J. Gorman, "Cross-Class Perceptions of Social Class," *Sociological Spectrum: Mid-South Sociological Association* 20.1 (2000): 96

10 Vanneman and Pampel, 430

11 Garbin and Bates, 133-135; Christopher Jencks, Lauri Perman and Lee Rainwater, "What is a Good Job? A New Measure of Labor-Market Success," *American Journal of Sociology*, 93.6 (1988): 1322-1357; Paul Matthew Siegel, *Prestige in the American Occupational Structure*. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. (T22336) (1971), 10-12, 40-41; Gerald Thielbar and Saul D. Feldman, "Occupational Stereotypes and Prestige," *Social Forces*, 48.1 (1969): 64-72; Nathan Wall, Juanita Firestone and Richard Harris, "Comparing the Impact of Individualism and Collectivism on Job Satisfaction: A Cross Cultural Comparison," *Conference Papers – American Sociological Association* (2003): 1-20.

12 Lionel S. Lewis and Joseph Lopreato, "Functional Importance and Prestige of Occupations," *The Pacific Sociological Review*, 6.2 (1963): 55-59.

13 Ibid., 55

14 Ronald H. Bohr and Arnold B. Swertloff, "Work Shift, Occupational Status, and the Perception of Job Prestige," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 53.3 (1969): 227-229; Leo Depres, Salomon Rettig and Benjamin Pasamanick, "The Effect of Occupational Setting upon the Perception of Status," *The American Catholic Sociological Review, 20*(4) (1959): 308-317; Yitzhak Samuel and Noah Lewin-Epstein, "The Occupational Situs as a Predictor of Work Values," *American Journal of Sociology*, 85.3 (1979): 625-639.

15 Megan Fulcher, "Individual Differences in Children's Occupational Aspirations as a Function of Parental Traditionality," *Sex Roles* 64 (2011): 117-131; Steven Hitlin, "Parental Influences on Children's Values and Aspirations: Bridging Two Theories of Social Class and Socialization," *Sociological Perspectives* 49.1 (2006): 25-46; John E. Hughes, "The Perception of the Influence of Parental Occupational Prestige," *The American Catholic Sociological Review* 22.1 (1961): 39-49; Gary Neil Marks, "Are Father's or Mother's Socioeconomic Characteristics More Important Influences on Student Performance? Recent International Evidence," *Social Indicators Research* 85.2 (2008): 293-309; Catherine S. Tamis-LeMonda et al., "Parents' Goals for Children: The Dynamic Coexistence of Collectivism and Individualism in Cultures and Individuals," *Social Development* 17 (2007): 183-209.

16 Baxter "Children's and Adolescents' Perceptions of Occupational Prestige"; Jencks, Perman and Rainwater.
17 Hitlin; Mackinnon and Langford; Ramsey and Smith; Wall et al.
18 Baxter, *Perceptions of Occupational Rewards*, 24-25.
19 Ibid., 27-29.
20 Vanneman and Pampel, 435.
21 Gorman, 102-103.
22 Elliot Aronson et al., *Social Psychology*, 4th Canadian ed. (Toronto: Pearson, 2010), 111.
23 Ibid., 130.
24 Ibid., 130.
25 Tamis Le-Monda et al.; Boaz Shulruf et al., "Measuring Collectivism and Individualism in the Third Millennium," *Social Behavior and Personality*, 39.2 (2011): 173-188.
26 Tamis Le-Monda et al., 183.
27 Ibid., 185.
28 Ibid., 187.
29 Hughes, 45.
30 Hitlin, 37.
31 Baxter "Children's and Adolescents' Perceptions of Occupational Prestige", 236.
32 See Michael W. Passer et al., *Psychology: Frontiers and Applications* (3rd Canadian Edition). USA: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 2008: 470-473.
33 Ibid., 472.
34 Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*. New York: General Learning Corporation, 1971: 5.
35 Bandura, 28.
36 Baxter, "Children's and Adolescents' Perceptions of Occupational Prestige," 231, 232, 235-236.
37 Gorman, 103.