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Moshe Sherer
University of Haifa

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Dr. Moshe Sherer
University of Haifa
School of Social Work
Haifa, Israel

ABSTRACT

A random sample of 142 social workers in Israel, were asked to indicate the other professionals whom they meet in the course of their work, and the frequency of these contacts. They were also asked to assess the occupational prestige of social workers relative to that of the other professionals. The findings showed that social workers tended to downgrade their own prestige, the more frequently they met with representatives of occupations which have higher rankings on an objective occupational prestige scale.

Although social work has been described in the past as an "emerging" profession (Schwartz 1967), there are doubts today about its position and future within the social services (Bell 1983), a struggle is underway for acknowledgment of its vital role in social welfare (Bell 1983; Karger 1983(b); Meyer 1983; Pecora and Austin 1983; Sherer 1986; Tambor 1983). The prestige of a profession may influence its bargaining power on the path toward recognition and development.

Occupational prestige:

All complex societies are characterized by the division of labor, and by an occupational prestige hierarchy. Studies have revealed a

substantial consensus on the relative prestige of occupations (Balkwell, Bates & Garbin, 1982; Hodge, Kraus & Schild 1982; Kraus, Schild & Hodge 1978; Treiman 1977). Knowledge and skill are widely considered the principal basis of occupational prestige, but race, gender, income, training, intelligence, rewards of the job and the overall value of the occupation to society are potential contributing factors. Power, control, authority, and privilege are granted to members of more valued occupations (Balkwell, Bates & Garbin, 1982; Bielby & Kalleberg 1981; Bose & Rossi 1983; Hall 1983; Parcel & Mueller 1983; Ritzer 1972).

The Occupational Prestige of Social Work:

Social work prestige has long been a matter of concern. Kadushin (1958) argues that it affects social workers' self concept, their relationships with other professions, their feelings about their jobs, and to some extent, their professional effectiveness.

Social work is usually ranked low in prestige among the professions. Thus Treiman (1977) found that it has an international ranking of 52, on a scale from 1 to 100, while Kraus (1981) reported that in Israel social workers rank 74. Euster (1980a) asked social work educators to rank social work prestige relative to that of 22 other occupations; it emerged in fifteenth place. Similar results were obtained when those educators compared their own prestige with that of their colleagues in 22 other academic disciplines (Euster 1980b). It is possible that the low esteem of social work is partly perpetuated by the low prestige of social workers and social work educators.

Possible sources for the low prestige of social work:

Kadushin (1958) points out that social work is "concerned with problems at which everyone works" (p. 42). The social worker is not seen as a professional possessing superior knowledge and expertise. Kadushin notes, moreover, that women are generally accorded lower prestige than men, and social work is identified as a women's profession. Social workers do not always have the autonomy to make decisions about clients. Low income, articulation of unpopular points of view, and the profession's lack of clear control over an important area of society's life are additional factors which may further erode the profession's prestige. Pollak (1961) like Kadushin (1958), believe that the low status of its clients leads toward the downgrading of social work prestige, as does the term "worker", which has non-professional connotations. Celarfield (1977) suggests that the mass media have contributed to the poor image of social work, whereas Rapoport (1960) argues that the harshest criticism comes from within the profession itself.

In Clearfield's (1977) study, almost 85 percent of the sample of social workers endorsed the statement that "the general public does not properly appreciate the work social workers do, and the profession is not highly regarded by the general public" (p. 26). However, the social workers themselves did seem to believe in the value of the profession to society. Over 80 percent perceived their work as vital, useful, and significant, although they also thought of it as endless, frustrating, and sometimes aggravating. According to Clearfield (1977), "Clearly the overall professional self-image of the respondents was positive" (p. 28). The negative public image of social work did not appear to have much impact on the social workers' self-image.

Although some new directions in the study
of occupational prestige have recently ap-
peared (Bielby & Kalleberg, 1981; Parcel &
Mueller 1983), the effect of contact between
different professions and occupations has not
been studied. Our study examines how social
workers' perception of their occupational
prestige are affected by their professional
meetings with other professionals. Since
there is an accepted hierarchy of occupational
prestige, it seems reasonable to expect repre-
sentatives of occupations with different pres-
tige rankings to influence one another, prob-
ably in our case, by enhancing social workers'
rating of their own prestige when they meet
people from occupations with lower prestige,
and vice versa.

A path analysis is used in this study to
explore the relationship between social wor-
kers' assessment of their prestige relative to
that of other occupations, and a number of
independent variables: Age, Sex, Educational
level, Seniority in the agency, Frequency of
meetings with other professionals, and Incli-
nation to leave the profession, were included
in our model. We assumed that the age of the
subject will influence prestige levels, older
subjects should have higher occupational pres-
tige levels since they should have "come to
terms" with their profession. We included sex
as one of the variables since sex has been
found to be a related variable to occupational
prestige levels (Bose and Rossi 1983; Kadushin
1958, 1976). Women were not given the same
occupational prestige as men, the social work
profession has therefore been affected; being
in general a "women's profession".

The educational level of the subject was
included in our study as a control since edu-
cational levels were found to be a principal
basis of occupational prestige (Trieman 1979).
Seniority in the agency was taken as an indi-

cator of ones acceptance of his/her role.
Thus we expect that higher levels of seniority
in ones' work place will be related to higher
occupational prestige scores. On the other
hand, we included the variable "inclination to
leave the profession" as a check on the accu-
racy of the preceding variable. Thus one can
have high seniority levels and still be unsa-
tisfied and look for another opportunity.
Kadushin (1976) suggested that this variable
may be heightened by the low occupational
prestige of social work. Herrick, Takagi,
Coleman and Morgan (1983) indicate that criti-
cisim of some aspects of social work employ-
ment, personal life circumstances and attrac-
tion of non-social work employment were the
main reasons for leaving social work. The
frequency of meeting with other professionals
was one of our independent variables. We
expected to find a direct relationship between
meeting with representatives of other profes-
sions and occupational prestige levels.

We expected higher seniority levels to be
related to higher prestige levels. At the
same time we assumed that the seniority in the
agency should be related to the frequency of
meeting other professionals, thus one should
have to develop professional ties over time
and it should influence perceived occupational
prestige levels. We assumed that ones' incli-
nation to leave the profession would lead to
lower professional rates of meeting with rep-
resentatives of other occupational groups and
at the same time to lower seniority levels in
the agency - these people should be "on the
move". Sex should have a negative effect on
the inclination to leave the profession -
since social work is a "female profession", we
assumed that females will have low rates of
inclination to leave the profession, while
males will have higher inclinations. Educa-
tion should have a negative effect on the
inclination to leave the profession - the
higher the investment in the profession the

lower should be the inclination to leave it.

We expected age to be negatively related to the inclination to leave the profession, and positively to seniority in the agency and prestige levels. Older people should have a positive prestige level of their profession - otherwise they should have found a way to leave it, they should be less willing to change work places and thus have more seniority in the agency.

METHOD

Sample:

The sample was gathered in two stages. First, a random sample of 52 agencies was selected from the 156 social work agencies operating in the northern part of Israel. Each of these agencies was invited to participate in the study, and asked to submit a list of all its social workers. Questionnaires were sent to 225 social workers chosen at random from these lists. The final sample was made up of the 142 respondents (about 63 percent) who returned properly completed questionnaires.

The sample consisted of 112 females and 30 males. Ten of the social workers were Arab, and the remainder Jewish. Ages ranged from 22 to 60 years ($x = 32.86$, s.d. $= 9.13$). Respondents had been engaged in social work for up to 35 years; they had been employed by their present agency between one and 24 years. As regards their educational level, 31 held a Diploma in Social Work, 104 held a BSW or MSW, and 7 held a BA or MA.

Instrument:

The questionnaire began with demographic

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items. Respondents' age was coded in years; sex was coded 1 for females and 0 for males.

A further eight questions dealt with agency and work characteristics. In one of the items, respondents were asked to indicate ten professions/occupations with which they regularly come into professional contacts in the course of their work, and the frequency of these meetings. A list of 20 such occupations was provided and respondents were asked to specify others where appropriate. Each of these occupations was weighted by the prestige ranking reported by Kraus (1976), minus the prestige ranking of social work (73.67). Thus, sociologist was weighted 17.93 (92.6 − 73.67); lawyer 25.08 (98.75 − 73.67); police officer −45.53 (28.34 − 73.67); etc. This produced a scale which reflects the difference in prestige between social work and the other occupations mentioned. The frequency of meetings was weighted according to the following scale: meeting daily = 8; every 2 to 3 days = 7; 4 through 7 days = 6; 8 through 14 days = 5; 15 through 21 days = 4; 22 through 29 days = 3; 30 through 59 days = 2; and over 60 days = 1. Finally, a new variable (Frequency of meetings − Freqmeet) was created by multiplying the prestige difference score for each occupation by the score for the frequency of meetings, thus giving higher scores when meeting representatives of occupations of higher prestige scores over lower ones.

Another question concerned social workers' tendency to leave the profession (Tleave). Respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 5 − 1, whether they are currently thinking about leaving the profession; often think about it; sometimes think about it; have thought about it in the past; or have never thought about it.

In the final section of the questionnaire,

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respondents were requested to compare the prestige of social workers with that of 29 different occupations. This list was taken from the prestige hierarchy of 220 occupations in Israel studied and validated by Kraus (1977, 1981). The 29 occupations were chosen to represent most of the occupations with which social workers have professional contact. For each of these occupations respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 5 - 1, whether the prestige of social workers is much higher; higher; the same; lower; or much lower. This form of question was taken from Euster (1980a, 1980b). the sum of these 29 scores served as a total prestige score (Tprstige), which became the dependent variable.

Procedure:

The questionnaires were mailed to the social workers through their agencies. Those who did not reply received a reminder four weeks later.

The results were analyzed using the SPSSX program.

Analysis:

We begin our analysis with a presentation of the correlations among the variables in Table 1, followed by the path analysis results in Figure 1 and the regression equations in Table 2.

Tendency to leave the profession (Tleave) is negatively correlated with Age, Education and Sex (see Table 1). Thus, older people and women are less inclined to leave the profession, as are people with a higher level of education. Figure 1 indicates that Sex has the highest impact on Tendency to leave (B = -.256), Age has slightly less (B = -.237), and

Education has the lowest impact (B = -.079).

Table 2 indicates that age has a positive impact on seniority in the agency (Seniag) (B = .188), as does sex (B = 1.147). Educational level and inclination to leave social work have a negative influence (B = -.1473 and B = -.325, respectively).

Figure 1 shows that Age has the highest impact on Seniority in the Agency (B = .386); this result is supported by the indirect path through Tendency to leave (compound path = (-.237) (-.076) = .018). Education has the second highest impact on Seniority in the agency, directly (B = -.184) and indirectly through Age and Tendency to leave (compound path = ((.152) (.379) + (-.079) (-.076) = (-.057) + (.006) = .063). Thus, a higher Educational level alone does not lead to higher seniority in the agency: Older social workers with higher academic qualifications tend to have higher seniority. However, a higher level of education somewhat reduces the tendency to leave the profession, thereby leading to higher seniority. Sex has the next highest impact on Seniority in the agency (B = .104). Figure 1 indicates that females tend to think less about leaving the profession and have higher seniority in their agencies (Compound path = (-.256)(-.076) = (.019). Tendency to leave the profession is directly related to Seniority in the agency (B = -.076) suggesting that those who are more inclined to leave the profession have lower Seniority.

As table 1 reveals, Sex and Tendency to leave are negatively correlated with Frequency of meeting (r = -.063 and r = -.096, respectively), while Seniority in agency is positively correlated with Frequency of meeting (r = .128). Figure 1 indicates that Seniority in agency has the highest impact on Frequency of meeting (B = .123), Sex has a relatively high impact (B = -.105) and Tendency to leave the

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lowest (B = -.101). Tendency to leave has a
negative direct effect on Frequency of meeting
(B = -.101), and a very low negative influ-
ence through Seniority in agency (compound
path = (-.076) (.123) =   -.009). It seems
that social workers who are considering leav-
ing the profession tend to meet less with
other professionals. This tendency is
stronger when the inclination to leave the
profession is coupled with low seniority. The
influence of Age and gender on Frequency of
meeting is interesting; Table 1 shows that
both have a negative correlation with Frequen-
cy of meeting. Figure 1 indicates that Sex
has a direct impact on Frequency of meeting (B
= -.105) and an indirect one through Tendency
to leave (compound path = (-.256)(-.101) =
.025). It appears that females tend to less
Frequency of meeting, except those who are
less inclined to leave social work. Age af-
fects Frequency of meeting through the com-
pound paths. Older social workers tend to
lower Tendency to leave (B = -.237), but usu-
ally have higher Seniority in agency (B =
.379). We can see that when older people have
higher seniority in their agency they tend to
higher Frequency of meeting, without reference
to seniority, older people think less about
leaving social work and meet more frequently
with other professionals (compound path =
(.379)(.123) + (-.237)(-.101) = .046 + .023 =
.069).

      Total prestige score is directly influen-
ced by three variables - Age, Seniority in
agency and Frequency of meeting. As indicated
in Table 2, older people have a lower Total
prestige score, as do those who tend to meet
more frequently with representatives of other
occupations. Those with higher Seniority in
agency have higher total prestige score. Fi-
gure 1 shows that Age has a high negative
direct influence on Total prestige score (B =
-.254), as it does through Tendency to leave
and Frequency of meeting, but the opposite

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effect through Seniority in agency and Tenden-
cy to leave (compound path = ((-.237) (-.101)
(-.154) + (.379) (.291)) = ((-.003) + (.110))
= .107). The higher the social worker's age,
the lower his/her prestige score; but those
who have higher seniority in their agencies
have higher prestige scores as well.

The direct influence of Frequency of meet-
ing confirms our hypothesis that meeting rep-
resentatives of other occupations affects
social workers' perception of their prestige.
Figure 1 reveals that this effect is negative
(B = -.154): higher rates of meeting other
professionals with higher prestige leads so-
cial workers to downgrade their own prestige.

Summary and Conclusions:

The results of our analysis support the
hypothesis that prestige ratings are affected,
to some extent, by professional ties. On the
basis of the literature, prestige theory and
research, it seemed reasonable to assume that
the effect of meeting people with higher occu-
pational prestige would be to lower social
workers' assessement of their own prestige.
The findings support the influence and its
direction.

The tendency of social workers to down-
grade their prestige in relation to colleagues
with higher occupational prestige is in line
with the literature on the poor image of so-
cial work, both inside and outside the profes-
sion (Clearfield, 1977; Kadushin, 1958; Pollak
1961; Rapoport, 1960).

Seniority in the agency was found to en-
hance the social workers' perception of their
prestige, but as we showed, higher seniority
coupled with higher rates of contact with
representatives of other occupations tend to

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reduce prestige scores. A related finding concerns the impact of age on prestige - younger social workers have higher prestige scores, but older social workers with higher seniority in their agency have higher scores too. Both, however, have lower prestige ratings as a result of contacts with representatives from other occupations. Another point worth mentioning relates to social work educators' low ranking of social work prestige (Euster, 1980a). It is conceivable that social work students may be influenced by this perception. Our findings suggest either that social work educators in Israel hold positive views of the profession, or that if they do not, fortunately they are not able to influence their students' views. Since we believe that social work students are influenced to some extent by their teachers, it is a tribute to the social work educators in Israel that despite the attitudes within and outside of the profession, they are able to produce young social workers with relatively high occupational prestige levels.

The main conclusion of our study is that social workers should prepare themselves for their professional meetings with representatives of other occupations. The mere knowledge of the tendency to downgrade social work prestige may have a beneficial effect. An effective countermeasure to the low occupational prestige of social work should be to demonstrate social workers' activities and achievements - for example, through publications.

Further research should examine how other professionals' views on social work prestige are affected by their contact with social workers, and whether a change in perception on one side is followed by a change on the other. A more urgent task should be to inquire into the process whereby young social workers lose their initially favorable perception of the

profession.

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TABLE 1

Pearson Product Moment Correlations, Means
and Standard Deviation of the Variables
(n = 137)

	Sex	Age	Educ	Seniag	Tleave	Freqmeet	Tprstige
Age	-.001						
Education	-.022	.152*					
Seniag	.127	.370**	-.121				
Tleave	-.254**	-.240*	-.110	-.177*			
Freqmeet	-.063	-.007	-.001	.128	-.096		
Tprstige	.095	-.145*	-.052	.176*	.029	-.114	1.000
Mean	.78	32.83	2.876	5.39	2.21	-100.784	98.745
S.D.	.03	.78	.575	4.57	1.07	591.468	10.137

* p < .05   ** p < .01

TABLE 2

Regression Equations for the Path Model

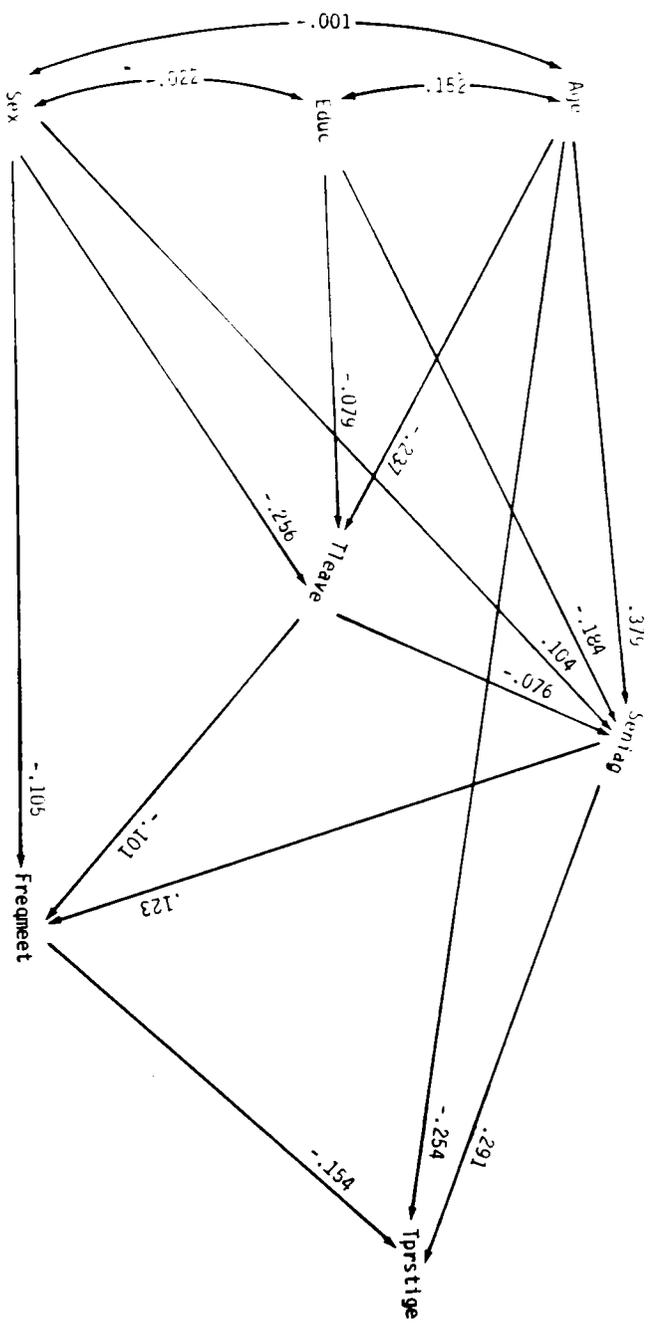| Independent Variable:	Tleave	Seniag	Freqmeet	Tprstige
Age	-.278* (.009)**	.188 (.040)	-147.58 (124.18)	-.220 (.097)
Education	-.149 (.152)	-1.473 (.634)		
Sex	-.664 (.209)	1.147 (.896)	-54.882 (48.28)	
Tleave		-.325 (.358)	15.766 (11.06)	
Seniag				.644 (.197)
Freqmeet				-.268 (.001)
Tprstige				
Intercept	1.968	1.122	2515.676	5821.903
R	.133	.184	.071	.098

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Figure 1
Path Model (Standardized Coefficients)

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