

Prestige

Prestige is an intangible good (such as esteem or honor) accorded to high-status social positions and enjoyed by persons who occupy those positions. As such, prestige may be intertwined with other dimensions of social stratification.

Occupational prestige is a core dimension of socioeconomic status. Most research on occupational prestige uses public opinion surveys – such as the General Social Survey of the National Opinion Research Center – to measure respondents' evaluations of occupations and to construct prestige scales across occupational categories. Methodological issues at stake include the dimensionality, reliability, temporal stability, and cross-cultural validity of occupational prestige rankings. Research also suggests that prestige may be accorded differently for sex-typical and sex-atypical pairings of individuals and occupations.

Like related concepts of power and status, prestige is inherently comparative. Prestige benefits recipients only at the expense of others. At the macro-level, this competitive quality of prestige is implicit in the ranking of social categories. At the micro-level, researchers in group dynamics regard prestige as one of the primary modes of differentiation in groups. Prestige may accompany high-status roles within a local hierarchy, such as the captain of an athletic team or elder member of a clan. It may also emanate from asymmetries in everyday social exchange, such as the exchange of deference for advice.

Research in social networks offers operational definitions of prestige for individuals or groups by applying methods of centrality analysis to patterns of social relations. Such methods may identify prestigious persons or roles within a group or reveal hierarchies of prestige among organizations that are embodied in historical structures of exchange. For example, several researchers have modeled prestige rankings of graduate departments by analyzing patterns of hiring across departments.

Collective action theorists posit that prestige may serve as an incentive for members to contribute to collective goods. For example, a group may give prestige to members who make important contributions to the group's welfare, rewarding such efforts at little cost to the group. On the other hand, because prestige is inherently comparative, such rewards may impose costs on members who do not receive the rewards. This may lead to unintended side effects, such as where competitiveness undermines cooperation and informal norms emerge that punish the individuals who receive the most prestige.

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Further Readings

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