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Prestige

Thirst for prestige is one of the great human driving forces. We of the Occident sometimes smile at Oriental preoccupation with "face," but in our own way we are just as concerned as they. To the very ambitious, prestige can be almost as important as life itself.

Recently the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center issued a draft of a report entitled "Occupational Prestige in the United States: 1925–1963." This article, which ranks the relative status of 90 occupations, indicates an astonishingly high standing for scientists. The first nine occupations in the list are *supreme court justice* (1), *physician* (2), *nuclear physicist* (3.5), *scientist* (3.5), *government scientist* (5.5), *state governor* (5.5), *cabinet member in the federal government* (8), *college professor* (8), *and U.S. representative in Congress* (8). Scientists should feel pleased and honored by these ratings. Even possessors of substantial political power do not enjoy so much prestige. Nor does financial power seem to yield so much status. Three occupations in this area included *member of the board of a large corporation* (17.5), *banker* (24.5), *and owner of a factory that employs about 100 people* (31.5).

Professions among the creative arts did not fare very well. Three categories—*artist who paints pictures that are exhibited in galleries, musician in a symphony orchestra,* and *author of novels*—were tied at 34.5. Two occupations in the entertainment world—*radio announcer* (49.5) and *singer in a night club* (74)—were given limited status.

Occupational ratings were elicited from a national sample of adults by asking respondents to judge an occupation as having "excellent, good, average, somewhat below average, or poor standing [along with a 'don't know' option] in response to the item: 'For each job mentioned, please pick out the statement that best gives your own personal opinion of the general standing that such a job has.'" The method employed was identical with that used in a similar survey in 1947. To a first approximation the surveys yielded quite similar results. About half of the occupations had a rank in 1963 three or less numbers removed from their 1947 rating. A major difference in the two distributions was a rise in the prestige of scientists. The most spectacular change was in the status accorded nuclear physicists. In 1947 this occupation ranked 18, while in 1963 it ranked 3.5.

The high position enjoyed by scientists is pleasant to contemplate. However, those who wish to bite the coin of prestige may find their skepticism justified. The public at large seems to have limited knowledge of the activities of scientists. In 1947 only 3 percent of all respondents could describe the activities of a nuclear physicist; in 1963, the corresponding number was 2 percent.

In addition there were some inconsistencies in the prestige ratings. Although *scientist* in 1963 ranked 3.5, and *nuclear physicist* 3.5, *chemist* rated 11 and *biologist* 24.5. But perhaps we should not ask too much of those who admire us. Their ratings indicate a high degree of respect for scholarship and for science. We should be grateful for their good opinion. We should remember that the long-term prognosis is good—that prestige ratings usually change slowly. The continued esteem of the public is to be treasured, and scientists will do well to respond with imaginative scholarship and probity.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON