



Berufsbildungsforschung Valorisierungsbericht

(Bitte elektronisch ausfüllen)

Forschungsprojekt

A question of perspective: A study of occupational social prestige ranking by type of education required and individuals' educational experience and political orientation in Switzerland

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1 Einleitung des Forschungsprojekts

Vocational education, in particular apprenticeship training has gained a lot of political attention in the aftermath of the economic and following fiscal crises a decade ago. International organizations are promoting it (e.g. OECD, 2010) as a powerful educational alternative to general education that would help overcoming youth unemployment and skill mismatches on the labor market. However, adolescents are reluctant in enrolling into vocational education and training (VET) programs in most countries. One explanation being that in most countries, VET suffers from a lack of social standing in comparison with academic education among students and their families (e.g. Billett 2014; Koulaidis et al. 2006; Wolf 2011). Even in Switzerland, where the lifetime earnings of individuals with vocational training exceed those with an academic education (Hanushek et al. 2017), and despite most native adults in Switzerland indicating a preference for vocational education and valuing the labor market benefits associated with it, the social prestige assigned to vocational education remains lower than that assigned to academic education, especially among immigrants (Cattaneo and Wolter 2013, 2016; Abrassart et al. 2018). According to the literature (Di Stasio 2017; Stocké 2007), educational preferences and decisions for academic vs. vocational education are partly driven by the parents' motive to maintain the family's social status. The social prestige of occupations accessed through vocational education might therefore be the main driver of the image deficit of the VET system.

Additionally, the perception of the social order might influence the political support for educational and social policy, depending on the level of social prestige assigned to occupations. This perception also defines those groups whose work we value and deem as beneficial for the functioning and advancement of society, independently of its associated monetary reward. This social recognition, in turn, is expected to confer them a particular status at the political level as a result because of the symbolic power or deference they produced (Weber 1946; Bourdieu 1985). Or as Weber (1946) suggested, social prestige may be "the basis of political or economic power, and very frequently has been" (p. 180).

Recent attempts to uncover the logic behind the cognitive mapping of occupations depending on their social prestige have paved the way for further investigations,

notably, by demonstrating the importance of the formal knowledge and science component or training intensiveness of occupations for their prestige ranking (e.g. Lynn and Ellerbach 2017; Zhou 2005). These studies, however, fail to account for the variety of the skill content that can be found in modern occupations. More particularly, they tend to ignore the often disputed¹ but important distinction between academic vs. vocational education, theoretical vs. practical knowledge, that is artificially created by the education system before being reproduced through differences in the skill content at the workplace, such as manual vs. intellectual tasks or the salience in cognitive skills.

In addition, because of an important consistency in prestige ratings from respondents across various social groups, countries and over time, “deviant” perceptions of the social order have attracted little attention. Yet structural changes in modern economies, brought by rapid globalization and technological change, might have significantly affected the view of the social world in the last decades. Recent developments indeed indicate some notable individual differences in occupational prestige ranking. More particularly, respondents who are the furthest from the centres of power because of their education, ethnicity or gender, are less consistent in their ratings and less likely to acknowledge the rational bases of the social order that are the knowledge and authority components or training intensiveness of occupations (Guppy and Goyder 1984; Lynn and Ellerbach 2017; Zhou 2005). While the criteria used by these respondents have been to some extent discussed in the literature, the causal mechanism linking the distance to the centres of power and the cognitive mapping of occupations according to their social prestige remains vague.

In this study, we contribute to the previous body of knowledge by investigating the role of educational requirements and the skill content of occupations, as well as individual variation in their perception, for the assignment of social prestige to occupations. The Swiss case is, in that regard, a fitting test case because of its well-established VET system. Authoritatively certifying the acquisition of students’ skills during their educational cursus legitimizes the transfer of practical knowledge achieved, which then becomes recognized both in the labor market and society. Compared with countries without a well-established VET system, who are, therefore, incapable of legitimizing a type of knowledge other than academic through their education systems, the Swiss case is well adapted to our research question.

Against this background, the following research questions can be put forward:

- Do the type of education required and associated skill content of occupations influence the perception of the prestige of occupations in addition to the level of education required?
- Do individual educational experiences influence occupational prestige ranking depending on educational requirements and the skill content of occupations?

2 Zusammenfassung der Resultate des Forschungsprojekts

To summarize, the present study led to five main findings:

¹ See, for instance, Stevenson (2001) for a criticism of the various differentiations of knowledge.

1) Occupations requiring vocational education, in average, only suffer from a small, but statistically significant, lower social prestige than occupations requiring academic education, all other things being equal.

2) As already shown in the literature, the average gross income of occupations and especially the duration of education required matter both greatly for the ranking of occupations according to their social prestige. Because the average gross income of occupations and the duration of education required are strongly correlated, we were unable to disentangle these effects using the available data. However, implications with regards to the educational requirements can be derived (see in the next section).

3) More precisely, the level of finesse or sophistication of skills, whether manual or intellectual, appears to be determinant for the perception of the prestige of occupations. While this argument is not completely new (Parcel and Mueller 1983; Sandefur 2001), the term “complexity” in the previous literature refers to distinct concepts and is defined as the extent of specialization of a job with regards to the tasks assigned or professional purity. Here, our understanding of complexity refers more to the sophistication of the manual or cognitive skills needed to perform the tasks required by the occupation than the composition of the tasks that need to be performed. Moreover, we have shown in this study that this aspect is also valid for the physical aspect of occupations. As such, fine manual skills might have the same positive impact on the perceived social prestige of occupations as complex problem-solving skills, whereas tasks involving brute strength and basic cognitive skills are less likely to be perceived as prestigious.

4) Only with regards to the salience in cognitive skills, especially complex ones, does the perception of the prestige of occupations differ across both education levels and gender groups. Thus, our study has revealed the pervasiveness of the dominant view to almost all social strata. As made clear by our findings, regardless of their education level, individuals are affected uniformly by vocational education requirements and most of the dimensions of the skill content of occupations in their view of the social world; hence, confirming the overwhelming institutionalization of these dimensions for the perception of the social order.

5) Finally, radicalized individuals at either extreme of the political spectrum are less likely to accept educational requirements as the foundations of the social order, whereas their party preference does not alter the effect of occupational attributes for the social prestige of occupations. More precisely, we tested whether the presence of a major PRWP can affect the way individuals perceive the social order or whether divergent perceptions are the result of radicalized political belief systems. As our results indicate, choosing or expressing a preference for a PRWP for the next election does not moderate the role of the educational requirements of occupations for their ranking according to the social prestige they generate, all other things being equal. Rather, and not surprisingly, minor parties that are not necessarily represented in national political institutions appear to be the source of the contestation of the social order, which remains relatively marginal. In addition, expressing views that correspond to either extreme of the political spectrum leads to a lower importance of educational requirements and autonomy at the workplace for the perception of the social prestige of occupations.

3 Empfehlungen für Policy-Makers

As these study results relate more to policy making than to practitioners in the field of education, we provide in the following section some thoughts about the consequences for political decision making in regard of the social status of occupations that can be learned through vocational education.

1) The previous findings at the occupational level have several practical implications for the future of VET. First, we confirm that occupations requiring vocational education are in average ranked lower in terms of social prestige than occupations requiring academic education, all other things being equal. Since the social prestige of occupations informs about their desirability, this is problematic for the attractiveness of VET for students and parents. Moreover, if educational decisions are indeed driven by social status concerns, parents who wish their children to attain a higher social status will also be more likely to push for academic education, regardless of students' scholastic performance. This bias, which has already been documented in the case of immigrant families (see, e.g., Abrassart et al. 2018), could lead to an overestimation of children's chances to succeed in academic education and be more detrimental than beneficial for their educational career in the end. Whether the social prestige of occupations is more important than other intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics for actual educational choices remain however uncertain. This will be the subject of a future study.

2) Probably one of the most consistent and strongest effect in this study but also in the literature pertains to the positive impact of the average years of education required by an occupation on its perceived social prestige. More importantly, in our case, this effect holds once we include the variable indicating if the occupation requires academic vs. vocational education. As a result, encouraging the continuation of education at the tertiary level for individuals with vocational education and training could improve the social prestige of occupations requiring vocational education.

3) The skill content of the tasks performed within occupations appears to be key in the perception of the social prestige assigned by respondents. Countries wishing to improve the standing of VET could, accordingly, focus on the content of occupations to improve the prestige of vocational education among students and their families. Insisting, for instance, on the dignity of fine manual skills, or teaching students complex problem-solving skills to prepare them for the new challenges of the knowledge economy could contribute to the improvement of the perceived social prestige of occupations accessed through vocational education. This could, in turn, increase political support for this type of education and guarantee the sustainability of the VET system. However, because some occupations requiring vocational education are inherently limited in their demand for complex cognitive skills and are probably not likely to change soon, for instance hairdresser, improving their perceived social prestige could prove more difficult than it seems. In this particular case, one solution could be to focus more on specific fine skills or self-employment to improve the attractiveness of this occupation.

4) All social strata appear to agree with regards to the lower social prestige of occupations requiring vocational education. Yet some differences exist in the perception of the importance of information-processing and problem-solving skills.

First, women are more likely to see basic cognitive skills as detrimental for the social prestige of occupations. Second, both women and tertiary graduates are more likely to value complex cognitive skills in the cognitive mapping of occupations according to their social prestige. Again, in analogy with immigrants, women could try to compensate a future disadvantage through an alignment with the option that will provide them the best opportunities to succeed in the labor market. Or they simply prefer the option that affords them more flexibility in their career, especially if they expect career interruptions following pregnancy and giving birth. Investigating further this aspect could prove very much valuable, especially since this runs counter to previous findings in the relevant literature. In the case of tertiary graduates, the implications are straightforward. Parents with a tertiary education are less likely to favor vocational education for their children. Working on this aspect could therefore be essential to improve the social mixity in VET tracks.

5) The same argument can be said in the case of individuals at either extreme of the political spectrum. If the importance of the level of education required for the prestige of occupations diminishes the closer one is to either extreme of the political spectrum, then VET will lack prestige and political support from groups situated in the middle, who are more likely to favor higher academic education. Expanding VET at the tertiary level could however remedy this issue.

The higher positive impact of autonomy for the prestige of occupations among respondents that are away from the far left of the political spectrum is also interesting. Occupations that are less salient in autonomy, such as those requiring vocational education are less likely to receive support from the middle and the right of the political spectrum.

Finally, populist parties, while undoubtedly constituting a serious threat to specific groups of individuals, do not appear to trigger a contestation of the bases of the social order from their electorate despite their explicit anti-elitism. More generally, variation in the preferences for major parties in parliament do not lead to changes in the perception of the weight of educational requirements for the social prestige of occupations. This could be detrimental to VET as major parties in parliament do not manage to alter the perception of the social order according to educational requirements among their potential constituency. Therefore, political struggles at the representational level are of little use to the perception of the social standing of VET.



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