

The Relative Status of Women School Administrators:

Not a Unitary Group

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Abstract

This paper examines the relative status of women school administrators using data from a representative, national sample. Results indicate that the administrators varied significantly on prestige-related variables (salary, number of people supervised, and size of district) and that it was possible to differentiate distinct groups of women administrators using these variables. Very few (7.5%) held high status position, while a substantial minority (32%) were in relatively low status posts. Members of the status groups also differed from each other on a variety of career-related, demographic, and life-style related variables.

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Perhaps because of their relative scarcity, women school administrators have received a fair amount of attention in recent literature (e.g., Fishel and Pottker, 1974; Jones and Montenegro, 1982; Schmuck, 1980). It is known that, as a group, women administrators tend to work in smaller school districts and earn less money than men administrators (Paddock, 1977, 1981). Yet, there appears to be no systematic attempt in the literature to examine the relative status of women administrators. Are all women administrators in such low-level posts or can various status groups be distinguished? If such status groups can be distinguished, do they differ on characteristics other than those related to the prestige and power associated with their jobs? That is, are there criterion variables which can be meaningfully associated with different status groups? This article explores these issues.

### Theoretical Background

Most of the literature on status differentiation focuses on large social groups such as entire societies or communities (e.g., Bendix and Lipset, 1966). The theoretical work of Max Weber (Gerth and Mills, 1946) is no exception to this pattern, but does provide concepts which may be useful in exploring the presence of distinct status groups among women school administrators.

Weber distinguished between "social classes," which he believed developed from distinctions in economic resources; "parties," which reflect the acquisition of social power; and "status groups," which reflect variations in social honor or prestige and which may also embody varying life

styles. Because employment in a given occupation is generally associated with a certain level of social honor, Weber suggested that occupational groups are also status groups.

It is possible, however, that within an occupation such as school administration, which has practitioners in a wide range of settings, various status groups could be distinguished. That is, some administrators could occupy positions with greater prestige than others. It could be expected that people holding positions with different level of prestige would have different career experiences. Moreover, however, an extension of Weber's analysis of status groups in societies would suggest that these different groups of administrators would also differ in life style characteristics, those associated with their home and leisure activities.

#### Methodology

To examine these issues, data were used from a questionnaire developed by Susan Paddock (1977,1981) and mailed to all women in the United States identified through state school directories or lists from state departments of education as holding a position of school superintendent, assistant or associate superintendent, or secondary school principal. A return rate of 56% was obtained with no apparent biases apart from a tendency for superintendents and principals to return their schedules less often than assistant superintendents.<sup>1</sup> Comparisons of the demographic characteristics of the respondents in these groups with those obtained in other studies of the same population (e.g., Barron, 19717; Coatney, 1982; Costa, 1981; Frasher, Frasher, & Hardwick, 1982; Fansher & Buxton, 1984, McDade and Drake, 1982) indicated few differences. Thus the returns probably provide a good representation of the population of women line administrators in the United States.

Three specific measures were used to delineate the relative prestige of the respondents' positions: the number of people they supervised, the size of the district in which they worked, and their annual salary. It may be assumed that those who are higher on these indices have higher prestige than those who have lower scores and, if the respondents may be placed into discrete groups on the basis of these variables, that these groups reflect status groups.

Paddock also gathered information on the subjects' demographic characteristics, their careers and employment history, and their family and leisure activities. This information was used to describe other differences between respondents in the various status groups. While differences in career related experiences might be a logical extension of differences in prestige of the respondents' jobs, differences in life-style related characteristics would indicate further support for application of the Weberian notion of status groups to intra-occupational distinctions.

Cluster analysis is a multivariate technique which can be used to group individuals into discrete categories based on their similarity on selected variables (see Bailey, 1974). This technique was used to distinguish the various status groups, using the prestige related variables as the basis of the distinctions. Discriminant analysis, another multivariate technique, was used to describe how the groups differed on the three status related variables. Standard analysis of variance techniques were used to determine significant differences between the groups on the demographic, career, and life-style related variables. Details on these statistical results are not presented below, but are available from the author.

## Results

In the following paragraphs characteristics of all of the respondents are described followed by a discussion of the various status groups and their characteristics.

### Characteristics of the Sample

The respondents averaged 48 years of age, although this varied significantly by the title of their current position, with the principals being substantially younger than those in the other two groups. All of the superintendents were white, while 15% of the assistant superintendents and 19% of the principals were nonwhite. Only 61% of the total group were currently married and 64% had had children, somewhat fewer than in the total population.

Information was obtained on the nature of the districts in which the respondents worked, their salaries, and their satisfaction with their jobs. Many of these variables differed significantly among the three types of administrators. Because of the restrictions placed on the sample, none of the principals had only students below the eighth grade in her building. However, over half of the superintendents and 16% of the assistant superintendents served elementary districts. Eighteen percent of the superintendents were actually superintendent-principals, and all of these women served elementary districts. Of the three groups, the superintendents were most likely to work in districts located in rural areas or small towns. The assistant superintendents were most likely to report that they worked in large districts, probably at least partly because only larger districts employ assistant superintendents. The assistant superintendents also reported receiving the highest salaries, while the superintendents had the lowest average salaries.

### Status Groups of Women Administrator

One hundred seventy-seven subjects had data on all of the status related variables and were included in the analysis of status groups. This study group differed only slightly from the total group: those without data on these measures tended to be older than the other respondents, to more often have only a bachelors degree, to work in state departments of education and to be employed as superintendents or assistant superintendents.

Table 1 summarizes the results obtained in the cluster and discriminant analyses, giving the number of respondents in each cluster or status group and the average scores of those in each cluster on each of the three prestige-related variables. The results indicated that the subjects could be categorized into four distinct groups, with only three respondents too dissimilar to the others on the status-related variables to fall into any cluster. The members of the four groups differed significantly on all of the defining variables, but results of the discriminant analysis indicated that district size and the number of people the respondents supervised were more important distinguishing variables than the respondents' salaries.

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Table 1 About Here

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It is clear that the 13 women in the fourth cluster had the highest status. Even though they were not in the largest districts, they supervised far more people on the average than those in the other groups and had much higher salaries. Those in the third cluster appeared to have the lowest status; they worked in the smallest districts, had the lowest salaries, and supervised the fewest people. Respondents in the first and second clusters appeared to fall between these two groups on the status-related variables, especially salary and the number of people supervised.

Although women administrators in the four groups did not differ in their age, marital status, number of children, social status of their parents, political affiliation, or number of years of teaching and administrative experience, they did differ in a number of other demographic, career, and life-style related variables.

As shown in Table 2, women in the highest status group were more often superintendents or assistant superintendents, but were represented in all three job categories. They had held the largest number of administrative positions, received their current title and current position at an older age than the others, had been in their current jobs a significantly shorter time than the other respondents, and reported the most dissatisfaction with their jobs. Almost all of the respondents in this highest status cluster were white. They also belonged to more organizations on the average, were more often married to professionals than to men in other occupational groups, and more often had help with household duties.

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Table 2 About Here

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Those in the lowest status group often worked in rural districts and were slightly more likely to be principals. The superintendents and assistant superintendents in this group often worked in districts which served only elementary students. All of the superintendent-principals were in this group. The members of this cluster had held relatively few administrative posts, attained their present jobs at the youngest age, had served the longest number of years in their current positions, and least often reported facing barriers to the progress of their careers. They were most likely to have grown up in



rural communities. As with the highest status group, there were few nonwhites in this lowest status group; but, in contrast to the high status group, their husbands were much less likely to be professionals, they often did their own housework, and they belonged to the fewest number of organizations.

Respondents in the two mid-ranking status groups were similar to each other on a number of career-related variables and some demographic and lifestyle related variables. Most of the respondents in these groups were assistant superintendents or principals. They worked in the most urban areas, were most satisfied with their jobs, and scored between those in the high and low status groups in the measures of number of administrative posts held, years in their current position, and age at which they received their current positions and titles. They belonged to approximately equal numbers of organizations, somewhat more than those in the lowest status group, but substantially fewer than those in the highest status group.

The members of the two mid-ranking status groups differed somewhat on the other variables. Those in the second group were somewhat more likely than those in the first group to be non-white and to have grown up in urban areas. They were more likely than those in any other group to report facing barriers to their careers, and had help with household duties almost as often as those in the high status group. In contrast, those in the first group were similar to those in the lowest status group on these variables, reporting career barriers much less often and less often having help with household duties. The respondents in the second group were least likely to be married to men holding professional-level jobs, while those in the first group much more often had husbands working in the professions.

### Discussion and Summary

It appears that women line administrators varied significantly on prestige-related variables and that it is possible to differentiate groups of women administrators using these variables. Very few (7.5%) held high status positions. A substantial minority (32%) were in relatively low status positions, mainly working in small, rural, often elementary districts. The remainder, mainly high school principals and assistant superintendents, were in moderate to large sized districts, but supervised only slightly more people than those in the lowest status group.

As expected, those in the four groups differed on some demographic variables and a number of career related variables. In a parallel to the Weberian notion of status groups with varying life-styles, respondents in the four groups also differed significantly on life-style related variables. For instance, in contrast to those in the lowest status group, those in the highest status group more often had husbands in professional level jobs, extensive contacts with others through organizational memberships, and fewer household responsibilities. Not only was it possible to distinguish women school administrators on the basis of the relative prestige of their jobs, but the resulting groups also appeared to differ in life-style characteristics, thus providing a parallel to the Weberian notion of status groups within societies.

These results lead to a number of suggestions for those doing research on women administrators. First, in the future, researchers should perhaps exercise caution in making generalizations about women administrators as a unitary group. It appears that distinct status groups, based on the relative prestige of their positions, may be distinguished and that these status groupings have at least some correspondence to variations in both career and

life-style related variables. Other research has indicated some variations in career patterns of women school administrators in different status groups (\*\*\*, 1984). The extent to which other characteristics vary among women administrators in positions of varying prestige is probably one worth investigating. For instance, research on other occupational groups has noted intra-occupational differences in personality traits, (e.g., Erez and Shneorson, 1980, Mossholder, Bedeian, Taulinatos, and Barkman, 1985) and this question could be pursued with women school administrators. Finally, comparisons of status groupings among men administrators to those found with women administrators could be informative.

## Footnotes

1       The 56% figure assumes that every person who did not return a questionnaire was a woman in one of the identified occupations. If not, Paddock notes that the sample may actually represent a larger percentage of women administrators. The sample used here is slightly larger than Paddock's because it includes respondents who returned schedules after her cut-off date for analysis. This does not appear to bias the sample in any way, except to include a slightly higher proportion of principals than does her analysis.

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TABLE ONE

AVERAGE SCORES OF WOMEN ADMINISTRATORS  
IN EACH STATUS GROUP ON THE DEFINING VARIABLES

Status Group	<u>Defining Variables</u>			
	<u>Salary</u>	<u>Number Supervise</u>	<u>District Size*</u>	<u>n</u>
1	\$24,405	68.5	2.62	79
2	25,407	68.9	3.67	27
3	17,436	60.1	1.16	55
4	30,769	300.4	2.62	13
F**	29.7	55.4	134.2	

\* District size was a 4 category, ordinaly measured variable with 1 equal to a district smaller than the others in the state and 4 equal to a district which is the largest in the state.

\*\* All F-ratios have 3 and 170 degrees of freedom and are sufficiently large to reject the null hypothesis that there are no differences between the mean scores of the groups at less than the .0001 level.

TABLE 2

SCORES OF MEMBERS OF EACH STATUS GROUP ON  
DEMOGRAPHIC, CAREER, AND LIFE-STYLE RELATED VARIABLES

Career Related Variables	Status Group				Tests of Significance
	1	2	3	4	
Title of Current Position					
Superintendent	3%	0%	29%	38%	$\chi^2=32.76$
Asst. Superintendent	44%	37%	31%	38%	df=6
Principal	53%	63%	40%	24%	p<.001
Number of Administrative Posts Held					
mean	3.4	3.1	2.6	3.9	F=9.2; df=3,169;
standard deviation	1.6	1.7	1.6	1.6	p=.01
Age Got Current Post					
mean	43.4	44.0	40.9	47.9	F=3.28; df=2,119,
standard deviation	7.6	9.1	7.8	4.9	p=.02
Age Got Current Title					
mean	42.8	43.7	39.7	47.8	F=4.38; df=3,170;
standard deviation	7.3	8.9	8.9	5.0	p=.005
Number of Years in Current Position					
mean	3.4	3.4	5.6	2.5	F=5.18; df=3,169;
standard deviation	2.7	2.0	5.3	1.4	p=.002
Location of District (1= rural, 5=large city)					
mean	1.86	1.89	1.20	1.77	F=5.46; df=3,170;
standard deviation	0.92	0.32	0.40	0.44	p<.001



TABLE 2 (page 2)

<u>Career Related Variables (cont.)</u>	<u>Status Groups</u>				<u>Test of Significance</u>
	1	2	3	4	
<u>Dissatisfaction with Job</u>					
mean	1.3	1.3	1.5	1.9	F=3.41; df=3,167;p=.02
Standard deviation	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.8	
<u>Reported Facing Barriers in progress of Career (%)</u>					
	30%	75%	28%	46%	$\chi^2=18.8$ ;df=3; p=.003
<u>Demographic Variables</u>					
<u>Percent Nonwhite</u>					
	16%	33%	7%	8%	$\chi^2=0.90$ ,df=3; .01<p<.02
<u>Community Grew Up In (1=most rural,5=most urban)</u>					
mean	3.7	4.7	2.1	3.5	F=7.07;df=3,169; p=.002
standard deviation	2.7	3.6	2.3	3.2	
<u>Life-Style Related Variables</u>					
<u>Number of Organizations Belong to</u>					
mean	1.04	1.11	0.75	2.23	F=4.08;df=3,170 p=.008
standard deviation	1.31	1.09	1.25	2.52	
<u>Husbands Work in Professional Jobs (%)</u>					
	61%	28%	40%	75%	$\chi^2=10.5$ ,df=3 .01<p<.02
<u>Have Help With Household Duties(%)</u>					
	53%	92%	59%	96%	$\chi^2=10.33$ ,df=3 .01<p<.0279