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AN EXPLORATORY INQUIRY ON THE ANTECEDENTS OF PRESTIGE JUDGMENTS

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ABSTRACT

How do consumers evaluate the prestige of a person or an object? This paper proposes an empirical exploration of this question from a symbolic interactionist point of view. On the basis of in-depth interviews with consumers, a conceptual model is proposed. The findings highlight the key role of (1) the perception of unique human achievement; (2) the interpretation of socially shared symbols and (3) reference group influence in the formation of subjective prestige judgments. The informant's expertise, self-monitoring style and socio-cultural factors moderate the relationships between these constructs. The results point to similar mechanisms for the perceived prestige of people and inanimate objects. The paper ends with a discussion of the limits of the study and future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of prestige has intensely been investigated in sociology, referring to the social position conferred to an individual by other members of a group (Shils, 1968; Coleman, 1990; Wegener, 1992). Although theories tend to differ in the explanation of social positions, there seems to be an empirical consensus that: (1) prestige is a cornerstone of social stratification; (2) it is a product of both subjective and objective social reality; and (3) there is considerable heterogeneity in the subjective perception of prestige across members of a society (Wegener, 1992).

In consumer research, there is a long-standing tradition of research on conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899; Leibenstein, 1950; Mason, 1981). Conspicuous consumption is the ostentatious use of goods to signal status to other members of society. In recent years, several empirical studies have investigated conspicuous consumer behavior and its antecedents. Eastman, Goldsmith and Flynn (1999) developed a five-item scale to measure the tendency of consumers to purchase status goods and validated it empirically. Braun and Wicklund (1989) examined the psychological motives of conspicuous consumption and pointed to the role of consumer expertise as its key antecedent variable. They showed that material symbols may act as a means of self-completion for people who are novices in a profession or leisure activity. Chao and Schor (1998) found strong evidence of status consumption in cosmetics and showed a strong correlation between personal income and the propensity to purchase brands conveying status.

These studies suffer, however, from two shortcomings. First, none of them offers an explanation of the effectiveness of conspicuous consumption: it is still relatively unclear how conspicuous consumption practices increase a person's perceived prestige in the eyes of others. Second, empirical research has not yet compared the relative role of conspicuous consumption with other possible means to gain prestige such as personal achievement. In this paper, we address these issues in light of the symbolic interactionism paradigm of social psychology. It is argued that the subjective evaluation of the prestige level of a person is a complex process of symbolic social interaction, which is not limited solely to the interpretation of conspicuous

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consumption. To explore this process, in-depth interviews are conducted with consumers. As a result, a preliminary conceptual model of the sources of prestige judgment is proposed. This model puts in perspective the relative role of conspicuous consumption compared to other possible antecedents of personal prestige. The paper ends with a discussion of the limits of our study and an agenda for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The theory of symbolic interactionism takes its origin in the works of social psychologist George Herbert Mead between the 1910's and 1930's (Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds, 1980). Its basic tenets are that: (1) the sense of identity is socially embedded since it is gained through the eyes of the others; and (2) this is only possible in socially-shared symbol contexts (Meltzer, 1978; Dittmar, 1992). Representations of individual identity have therefore two sources: perceptions of objective reality, that is, the representation of the world outside individuals and symbolic reality, meaning the use of socially shared symbols to express or interpret an identity (Dittmar, 1992). In consumer research, the direct application of symbolic interactionist theory means that material possessions have symbolic value and people acquire and use them for self-expressive purposes in social contexts (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Solomon, 1983). The purchase, use and consumption of consumer goods such as brands often serve to enhance one's self-concept as people surround themselves with objects that symbolize a real or an aspired-to self (Belk 1988). Seeking the esteem and deference of other people, that is prestige, may often be the motivation of such consumer behavior. In this case, conspicuous consumption patterns emerge: people buy and use products that constitute socially shared prestige symbols (Mason, 1981; Dittmar, 1992).

According to Eastman, Goldsmith and Flynn (1999), prestige to a person may be accorded by other members of a social group on the basis of assignment (e.g. hereditary nobility), achievement (e.g. professional success) or status consumption (e.g. use of luxury brands to signal wealth). To situate this argument within the symbolic interactionist framework, a person's perceived prestige may depend upon either real, objective achievements or socially shared prestige symbols (such as the conspicuous consumption of goods or the use of prestige titles). We propose an empirical investigation of this proposition. Specifically, answers are sought to the following questions: (1) What is the meaning of prestige from a subjective standpoint? (2) What are the antecedents of the prestige judgment toward other people? (3) What are the key psychological and social moderators of the process? (4) Is the process different for people and objects like products and brands?

We adopted a discovery-oriented methodology to explore the process by which people evaluate the prestige of a person or an object. The qualitative method of in-depth interviewing was used to uncover the nature of prestige judgments. Such an approach is often used to define emerging concepts and models of consumer behavior (e. g. Fournier, 1998; Otnes, Lowrey and Shrum, 1997). The interview guide was loosely structured aiming at the elicitation of either direct or indirect consumer experiences with prestigious people, places or objects in the form of a "conversation with a purpose" (Burgess, 1984). Informants were purposively selected with important variations on socio-demographic characteristics to gain a broad range of perspectives on the concept under scrutiny (McC racken, 1988; Mason, 1997). A total of fifteen people aged from 24 to 82 were interviewed either at their home or workplace in June-July 2001 in France and Switzerland (see Appendix for brief informant vignettes). Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed into about 200 single-spaced pages of text in French. Following usual content analysis, data were interpreted in two ways: (1) case by case by identifying the major themes related to prestige; (2) across cases, by analyzing the critical experiences of our informants.
RESULTS

Our findings reveal a great deal of complexity surrounding the subjective process of prestige evaluation. They can be summarized in three points:

(1) Prestige is a positive evaluative judgment about the high status of people or inanimate entities, accompanied by feelings of esteem and admiration. It is the product of the internalization of objective and symbolic reality in social interactions.

(2) The process of subjective prestige formation takes its origin in three antecedent concepts: unique human achievement, prestige symbols and reference group influence (Figure 1). Prestige judgments towards a person may arise directly from the perception of an outstanding, positive human achievement (perception of objective reality) or indirectly through the interpretation of socially shared symbols used by the person. Reference group influence (the aggregate of the prestige judgements by significant others) may also influence the individual's subjectively felt prestige towards a person. Individual factors such as the self-monitoring level of the subject, expertise in the field as well as cultural factors moderate the strength of the relationships between the elements of this conceptual model.

(3) This process is similar for the formation of prestige judgments about a person or inanimate entities (like products and brands).

A detailed discussion of these findings follows, illustrated by examples from the interviews.

Prestige and the perception of objective reality

Throughout the interviews, informants expressed prestige as an evaluative judgment about the high status of a person. This evaluative judgment was coupled with feelings of admiration, awe and respect arising from the perception of an outstanding, morally positive accomplishment of a human being, organization or human being(s) associated with objects. In one of our informant's words:

Prestige – it's to do with admiration ... It depends, it can be, if it's the prestige of an object – it's admiration toward the object, if it's the prestige of a person, it's admiration toward the person for what they've done, their success, for what they are (Pascal 28)

Accomplishment may be of many kinds. Examples from the study include professional success, excellence in craftsmanship and art or sporting performance. Our informants talk about the "real value" of, the "aura" surrounding prestigious people. In any profession or field of activity, this positive effect emerges solely from human achievement. Some informants call it "self-accomplishment", the fruit of hard but natural work without seemingly any magic or superhuman effort. Take these examples from the narratives of two young professionals, Pascal (28) and Patrick (31):

[in the Letterman Show] he invited Sean Connery. It's true that he's a person who has a certain prestige because he has … it's somebody who has a kind of aura around him and who has accomplished many things, there's a certain

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2 A selection of excerpts from the verbatim illustrates our interpretive analysis, which were translated from French into English by an English mother-tongue linguist.
respect towards this person … And precisely because he doesn't have to force his talent, he can be very natural and at the same time he has, yes, exactly this respect due to all the accomplishments … (Pascal 28).

He was recruited [a friend of his father] I think when he was 17 in a bank in the mail delivery service so every morning he had his little trolley and he distributed the mail, and now, he is the director of a big company […] So he wanted a house, a car and children so he could give them this and that etc. So he set goals and he has reached them and for this reason, for me, it's prestigious. The self-accomplishment that people may have in respect to what they have set for themselves (Patrick 31)

In the same way as people, organizations may be judged prestigious because of a long history attesting human achievement. Examples from our interviews include private companies, schools, universities and churches. Consider how Pascal (28) views Swiss watchmaker Rolex:

It's a company that does not force itself, that controls all the communication and production processes, really, it, it manages well its resources, brand equity, know-how, this firm masters, masters indeed everything. I think that this, this gives it its prestigious character (Pascal 28).

The notion of prestige, however, is not only limited to people or human organizations. Objects, products and brands may be deferred to in the same way as people, as long as they are the result of excellence in human labor. Erwin (60), who is fond of classical music, values much the unique craftsmanship that can be reflected in a violin:

It also depends on what you do and how you do it. For me, a musical instrument can also be prestigious. A Stradivari, if I had one at home…

The analysis of the critical experiences of our informants reveals that two points characterize the human achievement that is deferred to. First, according to our informants it must be morally positive - "prestige must be merited" in the words of Edith (60). The perception of any negative trait or behavior will hinder prestige judgments. For instance, Martin (42) referred to statesmen in history several times during the interview. Consider his opinion about Napoleon:

The famous French emperor but I don't dare use the word "prestigious" for him because for me he was one of the biggest butchers of history. For me, prestige must be without a stain.

Second, whoever or whatever the object of admiration, this admiration seems to arise from not only a morally positive but also an outstanding, unique human accomplishment. A task that anyone can do or a heavily mass-produced item, however notorious or luxurious, cannot be prestigious. This can be exemplified by Erwin's (60) statement about cars:

I think that size, quantity, something recurring all the time, that exists 200 000 times, loses its … cannot be prestigious by any means […] Prestige calls for the unique, the isolated thing. I come back to cars. A Mercedes or a BMW will not be prestigious, it will be luxurious. Now, Rolls Royce, it would be more prestigious, really.

Apart from human achievement, the other two bases of prestige judgments are prestige symbolism and reference group influence (see Figure 1). Let us analyze each of them in turn.

**Interpretation of prestige symbols**

As pointed out by Shenkar and Yuchtman-Yaar (1997), an important source of perceived prestige is prestige by association, that is, the use of symbols that represent a socially shared meaning of prestige. For instance, a painter may attain prestige either directly because people have really seen and appreciate his achievements (original artistic paintings) or more indirectly, by taking part in activities symbolizing prestige (high price tags, well-known sponsors, exhibits in famous museums etc). In the critical incidents of our interviews, one of the types of prestige
symbolism was conspicuous consumption. The use of symbols such as luxurious dress may be found in all our informants' narratives in diverse settings. Take as an example David (82) who has worked over fifty years as a Catholic priest and recalls the way he and his friends dressed in the 40's while they studied theology:

[We had] standard cassocks when we started the seminary, and others went to the tailor's for a custom-made one, it was already like luxury cassocks to put it plainly, you see […] Well, the parents who came to see them, they matched, you see, they already had on them signs of a nice, nice fortune that allowed them to take care of their way of life and dressing, indeed.

Nevertheless, the sole display of prestige symbols rarely suffices to gain prestige. David deplores the excessive use of status symbols and insists that if there is no real human accomplishment, ostentation has little real value:

But it's true that prestige tends to mean a priority in the presentation, the appearance … that you give way to concern with looks and appearances. Try as you can, you can cover incompetence with diamonds, products and clothes etc, people who don't have anything in their head, don't have anything in their heart, this is the real tragedy.

But even people who tend to value prestige symbols such as the ostentatious display of wealth do not completely detach them from real positive human achievements. For Clara (55), prestige is very much associated with the show-off of money but even for her, the perception of a person "doing good things" enhances her prestige judgment about the person:

I'd say it's in relation to money, much more than anything. Because, well, maybe character too, let's say, maybe that there are people who have money and can do good things beside it, there are people who have little and do good, there are, there are people who have a lot and don't do anything, too. (Clara 55)

In the same way as people, objects may be adorned with status symbols to enhance their prestigious image. Consider Erwin, 60 a real estate manager who views the luxurious decor and facilities of an apartment house as prestige symbols:

For me, it's objects, it's the surroundings, a villa can be prestigious, a whole house too, yes, because it shows … For example, I'm currently building an apartment house […] with a swimming pool on the roof, with the entrance hall that reflects a certain prestige – because afterwards people will live in a prestigious building.

Note also that prestige is long and difficult to acquire. However, it is easy to lose if symbols are not sustained by real human achievement. If this achievement is lacking, one negative experience is enough, no matter how many symbols are used to hide it. Pascal (28) had had a big esteem for a downtown posh restaurant because everybody around him was talking about it but once he had been there, he recognized it was not up to the high expectations. The venue remained still a luxurious, posh one but had completely lost its prestige:

Yes, for me this is a luxury restaurant that's not at all prestigious. For the good reason that when I went there I found it really bad. I found that it was very expensive, service was disastrous, and then the menu, well it was medium, in any case it wasn't worth the price, neither the settings, nor the food, nor the, it's a thing, I'd not go there at all.

Reference group influence

One of the frequent themes in the interviews is the influence of other's perceptions on one's own judgement about a person or object (see Figure 1). Unique and positive human accomplishment lies at the core of the prestige judgment about people and objects. Nevertheless, these perceptions can be strongly reinforced by what we call here "reference
group influence" that is, the deference of significant others towards a person or object. Consider the following excerpt, in which Jacqueline (72), an enthusiastic amateur painter, tells us about her painting teacher:

It seems that being able to create beautiful paintings means already a sort of prestige [...] My painting teacher is a boy aged 42-43, he is still young, he invents many things, many, many things. He is handsome, he has no car, he earns his life by giving lessons and not by selling paintings [...] My teacher, he has no prestige. He is not known. You must be well known. One day, someone who has the money must say him "Well, now, don't do anything else, you paint, you paint and you paint". And then, maybe he'd acquire some prestige.

We see through the citation that prestige is an inherently socially embedded construct. Individual prestige judgements are strongly influenced by others' view on the matter. For Jacqueline, the painting teacher is imaginative and knows everything about the technical aspects of art. He could be prestigious if he was a bit more professional and was known by people in the milieu of art. His qualities must be recognized and deferred to by significant others. "You must be well known", as Jacqueline puts it, since it is difficult to be prestigious alone on a desert island.

Thus, social prestige acts as a mediator between the subjective judgment of prestige and its antecedents. Since it is the aggregate of the subjective prestige rankings of the people the informant is in contact with, it also originates in human accomplishment and status symbolism. In this respect, another interesting finding emerged from the narratives: some interviewees explicitly acknowledged that they actively contributed to the collective social prestige held towards a person or object. Frank (35), for instance, had dreamed for years about visiting the historic Danielli hotel in Venice. After having been there, he told his friends about the impressive venue in very positive terms. Later on in the interview, he went on saying that the prestige of a place could be increased if "I can tell about it to others".

**Moderators**

In the preceding paragraphs, we highlighted the antecedents of prestige judgments as they emerged from the interpretive analysis of our interviews. However, the interviews strongly suggest that prestige is a relative notion and that the process of prestige judgment varies from one informant to another. For example, some people associate prestige with surgeons while others - more with sportsmen. At the same time, Mercedes is a prestigious car for some informants and not for others. This means that, at a conceptual level, a series of individual parameters are likely to moderate the relative role of the antecedents of prestige judgments (see Figure 1). These individual moderators are investigated below.

**Personal expertise.** Braun and Wicklund (1989) pointed to the role of consumer expertise in the use of prestige symbols. Their studies showed that inexperienced subjects in a particular field (e.g. tennis) gave more importance to prestige symbols (e.g. use of professional-looking rackets) than their more experienced counterparts. Similarly, our interviews suggest that expertise in the field may be an important moderator between achievement, use of symbols and the perceived prestige level of the person or object. Inexperienced people may simply lack the knowledge needed to judge the human accomplishment reflected in somebody or something. In David's (82) words "not everybody can evaluate it". To illustrate this point, consider Pascal (28) talking with his girlfriend about receiving guests for tea:

An object is prestigious for me, for others it probably isn't because they don't know anything about it. I mean, if we take out, if we use a teacup we bought, for me, it's prestigious, it impresses me. The person I invite doesn't know anything about teacups, I can perhaps explain and he'll find out a bit about the prestige of the object.
At the same time, while the value of accomplishment fades, the relative importance of widely shared prestige symbols grows with consumer inexperience. Edith (60), for instance, recognizes that for her husband, a brand logo is an important prestige symbol of a shirt:

Anyway, my husband is very proud when he wears a Lacoste shirt. It pleases him, I reckon, it's pleasant to wear, and you see he's feeling fine [laughter]. I find that it also gives some prestige, you check nonetheless if the little crocodile is there.

At the same time, she says he would not be able to tell the difference between two shirts if there wasn't the logo on one of them!

**Socio-demographic and cultural factors.** Among the many possible personal characteristics of the informant, two factors clearly emerged as possible moderators of the antecedents of perceived prestige: age and culture. Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) showed that people over 65 are relatively little attached to material possessions. Similar phenomena can also be found in this study: informants explicitly referred to their age that decreased the importance of material symbols in their eyes, and, simultaneously, increased the importance of inner values. When asked about the role played by luxury products in her life, Jacqueline (72), replied simply "you see, you take me at an age when I don't feel like having luxury anymore". The possibility of a moderator age effect may also be observed, though more indirectly, at younger stages in life. For example, consider this excerpt from the interview with the 42-year-old teacher, Martin:

Martin: And I'd like to learn more certain philosophies, certain ideas that recommend frugality. It's good, it's good, but it's age, only age makes me come to this.
Interviewer: You weren't like that before?
Martin: No, I was a good consumer.

Thus, our data suggest that the importance of material symbols seems to decline with age. Other individual moderators such as religion and national culture also intervene in prestige perceptions. Consider this excerpt from Frank's narrative, who as a Frenchman, spent years in Asia:

I can be in a place, I can visit an extremely famous Japanese temple where kings lived, but I would not have this feeling of prestige because, anyway, I don't know if you can really feel it as a tourist.

Thus, the real achievement and symbolism of prestigious objects cannot be understood fully by people from abroad with a different cultural background. At the same time, the use of certain prestige symbols may be disapproved altogether for cultural, most obviously religious reasons. Take this example. David (82) had received as a gift a luxury watch from one of his affluent parishioners, which, being a priest, he judged too ostentatious to wear:

They offered me this watch [takes off and shows his watch]. It was in gold. Then I said "I can't have a watch on in the church worth 4000 $, I take a collection on Sunday and it's not possible" […] They changed it, nobody can see now that it's a prestigious watch.

Our interviews do not clearly evidence the effect of such variables as sex, education, occupation, and income. Their study warrants future empirical inquiry that we deal with in the last part of the paper.

**Self-monitoring.** According to self-monitoring theory, people differ substantially in the way they regulate their self in public situations (Gangestad and Snyder, 2000; Snyder, 1974). Low self-monitors tend to project a stable self in diverse settings of social interaction. Their
behavior is guided more by inner psychological factors than social influences. High self-monitors, on the other hand, exert more expressive control over their social behavior and tend to adapt their appearance to specific situations. Empirical research has shown that high self-monitors tend to respond more favorably to status-oriented product claims (DeBono 1987, DeBono and Harnish 1988), choose brands in congruence with social situations (Aaker 1999) and rely more on physical appearance to judge people (Snyder, Berscheid and Glick, 1985). It could therefore be expected that high self-monitors would consider more reference group influence and prestige symbols in their prestige judgments than low self-monitors. Throughout the interviews, although precise self-monitoring levels could not be explicitly assessed, several references were made to the expressive control of the protagonists in the narrative. For instance, Pascal (28) and Helen (29) are both keen wine connoisseurs. They told us about their different product preferences in private and public consumption situations:

[a Spanish wine they consumed without guests] so it's 7 $ a bottle, I find that, well between 7 and 8 $ or around, compared to a Bordeaux wine which would have been much less tasty and which would have cost twice as much, I think I prefer consuming this one … If I want, well, if it's someone kind of traditional etc and I want to do it well all the same because … I'd rather be inclined to open a Bordeaux because first of all it sells my stock and then it looks more correct, more in order (Pascal 28).

Given the sensitive nature of the subject, most of the time, our informants did not reveal explicitly whether they would use social or symbolic cues when judging about someone's prestige. Rather, they alluded to people they knew. These acquaintances valued much the symbolic use of some well-known items and accorded prestige to their users. Our informants qualified them as people who do not have a clear personality, who care about appearing rather than being and who are not self-confident. On the other hand, informants who engage less in expressive control tend to give more importance to the real achievement of the person than to prestige symbols or social prestige. Patrick (31), despite his familiarity with affluent social circles, does not seem to be influenced by social pressures and values much success as the only real indicator of personal prestige. He is not impressed by the conspicuous display of luxury goods by certain people. He rather qualifies them as people who throw away their money. For him, luxury is only a matter of private comfort:

So as I said, for me prestige is the goals that you set for yourself. That you set for yourself and then you reach them, I think that's prestigious […] For me, luxury is different, I have a certain … for me, I assimilate it to comfort. It doesn't mean that I have the most expensive car, the most expensive house etc. For me, what other people think I have or don't have, it's basically all the same, I have standards for myself and my family.

LIMITS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper constitutes a first attempt to inventory the antecedents of subjective prestige judgments. Through the interpretation of in-depth interviews, we proposed a symbolic interactionist model of the formation of prestige evaluations. We argued that people perceive the prestige of a person or an object in very similar ways. The source of prestige is some unique positive human accomplishment inherent to the person or object that can be reinforced by the use of socially shared prestige symbols. The opinion of significant others, that is, the social prestige held towards the person or object may also influence subjective prestige judgments. These effects, however, are dependent on individual moderators such as respondent expertise, age, self-monitoring style and cultural factors. We now discuss the limitations of our study and the directions for future research.

A major limit of the study lies in its methodology. Since qualitative inquiry is based on the interpretation of informant verbatim, the problem of internal validity is certainly not absent
from our study. People do not always do what they say. This is especially problematic in
matters like the ostentatious use of products. Oftentimes our informants used the generalized
other or referred to "friends of theirs" who engaged in the show-off of wealth. We thus only
identified the presence of the phenomenon but could not really identify the characteristics of
the people involved. Specifically designed projective techniques might be used in future
studies to show the extent to which informants really value prestige symbols.

The interviews were carried out with a limited sample that could not account for several
individual differences, such as differences in cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998).
Indeed, Holt's (1998) interview-based interpretive study suggests that economically well off,
highly educated consumers would value less the material aspects of life than people whose
cultural capital resources are low. Do high levels of cultural capital resources lead to more
reliance on material symbols in the formation of prestige judgments? Future qualitative
inquiries are needed to answer this question.

The study presented here investigated the concept of prestige in a Western cultural context.
Mental processes, the extent of social conformism as well as the importance and nature of
symbolism are likely to be culture-bound. It would therefore be useful to replicate our
qualitative inquiry in other, very different cultural contexts such as Asian countries.

After these exploratory-type qualitative inquiries, the next step could be the development and
test of concrete research hypotheses on the basis of the conceptual model put forth in this
paper. This is especially interesting for the determination of the influence of moderators. One
of the fundamental issues raised here is the relative importance of symbols in the subjective
perception of a person or object's prestige. We argue that it depends on, among other individual
moderators, respondent expertise and self-monitoring level. Hypotheses developed on the basis
of this proposition could be tested systematically in experimental settings by manipulating the
self-monitoring level of the respondent and her/his expertise in the field of inquiry. Direct and
interaction effects between the other individual moderators could also be tested in the same
spirit.

Future research might also address another intriguing question: Why would there be a similar
mechanism for object- or person prestige perception? It is plausible to theorize that, when
people judge the prestige of an object, anthropomorphizing of this inanimate object occurs.
Indeed, the phenomenon of personification of brands has been attested by several researchers
(e. g. Fournier, 1998; Aaker, 1997). It might also be that people accord prestige not to the
object but rather to human beings that are very closely associated with it. Further theoretical
and empirical studies are needed to investigate these alternative explanations.

APPENDIX - VIGNETTES OF RESPONDENTS

For matters of privacy, the names of the respondents have been changed and no references are
included that might reveal their identity.

(1) Peter is a 24-year-old young mathematician in a mid-sized city. His parents are economists
and he has two young brothers. He is very much involved in science and plans a research
career in pure mathematics. His favorite hobbies are cooking and motor-sport.
(2) Jacqueline, 72 is a retired lady living in a village. She spent the first thirty years of her life
in Paris, married early, divorced and remarried several years later. She has no children. Her
husband is a diplomat and they have traveled a lot around the world for professional
reasons. She has a college degree in French language but has not worked in the field. Her
main interest is painting that she started thirty years ago and that she practices on a daily basis.

(3) Edith, 60 is a housewife living with her husband in a house in a small town. They have two adult children (a 35-year old married daughter and a 28-year old unmarried son). They are very proud of the achievements of their children and spend a lot of time with them. She likes music, concerts, dining out and travelling.

(4) Erwin, 60 is Edith's husband. He is the owner and manager of a small real estate company that he founded several years ago. Before, he worked as a manager in a big real estate management firm. As his wife, he is very fond of music and concerts.

(5) Pascal, 28 and Helen, 29, are fiancées living in a small town. Pascal is a lecturer in management at the local university. Helen is a graduate student in international relations. They like traveling and dining out.

(6) David, 82 is a Catholic priest in a major city. He has been involved for the last fifty years in diverse activities of the Church, the major one being mass media programs. During his long career as a minister and TV producer, he gained a deep understanding of the lifestyles of all social and cultural levels of society. Practiced for a decade competition cycling and still enjoys sports like hiking and skiing.

(7) Clara, 55 has been unemployed for a year. For the last 30 years, she has been employed in many fields as a blue-collar worker, including food retailing and the catering business. Her husband is a long-distance truck driver. They spent many years on long-haul journeys moving merchandise around the world. Since they have no children, they are planning to move abroad for their retirement days in a year's time.

(8) Esther, 77, is a retired librarian living with her husband in a house in the residential area of a mid-sized city. Before, she was a librarian in a non-profit international organization. They have two adult children. She is a practicing Catholic and religion plays a central role in her life. She is involved in many social and charity actions.

(9) Carmen, 47, is unmarried and works as a secretary in a local public service. She has worked in both the public and private sector as a secretary. Her main hobbies are theater, cinema and reading.

(10) Paul, 67 is a retired electrician in a mid-sized city. He is divorced and has three adult children. He stopped working two years ago and has since been active in many types of activities: spending time with the grandchildren, new building projects around his house, traveling abroad. His main leisure activity is folklore dancing of diverse origins.

(11) Alice, 31 has recently joined a media company as a data analyst. She has been married for several years and has two young children. Drawing and jewelry design are her favorite pastimes.

(12) Frank, 35, unmarried is a doctoral student in business strategy. He has worked for several years in Asia with an international company marketing fast-moving goods. He currently lives in a major city. He enjoys good things in life such as fine cuisine and theater. He is also a professional wine connoisseur.

(13) Martin, 42, is the owner and manager of a French language school in a major city. Married with two children, he spent his childhood in a small village deeply marked by Catholic traditions. Inter-cultural issues have always fascinated him, the reason why he started the school ten years ago.

(14) Patrick, 31 is a purchasing manager in his father's import-export company. He married two years ago, his wife works as a financial analyst in the banking business. They have a one-year old daughter and spend much of their time with the baby. They recently built a new house in the residential area of a mid-sized city they are furnishing now. Professional achievement and family are central to their lifestyle.
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Figure 1
The antecedents of subjective prestige judgments

Perception of objective reality (unique achievement of the person/object)

Reference group influence (social prestige of the person/object)

Subjective prestige judgment about the person/object

Interpretation of symbolic reality (prestige symbols associated with the person/object)

Moderators (informant's personal characteristics)