

## STATUS CONSCIOUSNESS OF WOMEN IN GERMANY\*

KARL-HEINZ REUBAND

University of Cologne  
West Germany

*The subjective social class ratings of married men and women are compared in a sample of West Germans. The hypothesis that women are more status conscious than men and hence that women put themselves into a higher social class than men was supported. Rather, in the professional occupational group, women tend to class themselves lower than their husbands do for themselves.*

### STATUS CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG MEN AND WOMEN

STUDIES from Middletown onwards have consistently pointed to the wife as the most status conscious marriage partner" (Mackenzie, 1967:39). This statement is widely acknowledged among sociologists, yet the *empirical* proof is far from being as strong as the quotation suggests. With rare exceptions status consciousness has not been the object of *systematic* investigations, and studies of men's and women's attitudes towards the pattern of social stratification hardly are found in the literature. Usually men and women are thrown together for tabulation, or men are interviewed only. As a consequence, only a few data have been published which allow a comparison of men and women with regard to status consciousness. Thus, neither status consciousness per se nor dimensions of status consciousness among women in contrast to men has been systematically studied on an *empirical* basis or on a *theoretical* basis. (For an exception cf. Veblen, 1964).

No clear definition of status consciousness usually is given by those who use the term. Available references suggest that status consciousness can be understood as the identification with the order of social ranking: those at the top are

held in esteem and those at the bottom in contempt. Whereas boundaries are drawn between oneself and those above; instead a close contact with them is desired. This kind of identification with the prestige order entails a striving upwards, an overestimation of one's position in the social hierarchy and an emphasis on those possessions which serve as symbols of high status.

### INDICATIONS OF STATUS CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG WOMEN

Results of some studies point to a great status consciousness of women. The Lynds found that "membership in an 'old family' carries some prestige—more so in the women's world than in the men's world" (Lynd and Lynd, 1937:461). Davies found that women have a "particular sharp eye for defaulters" (Davies, 1969:26). Both studies indicate that women discriminate more than men on the cognitive level. Similar conclusions have been drawn by Useem and Associates (1944:336) in their study of a small Prairie town: women were more alert to the standing of individuals than men. Yet sensitivity to the social hierarchy is only one condition needed for status consciousness. Positive evaluations of high positions and their inhabitants is prevalent as well. Some results are important in this connection. One study shows that women more often than men tell the interviewer that they have friends in a higher social class than themselves

\* The data used here have been kindly provided to the author by the Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung at the University of Cologne.

and less often in a lower one (Svalastoga, 1959:182). Another study dealing with professional soldiers and their wives reveals that the wives believe their husbands have a higher social standing than the husbands think they have (Warnke and Bierfelder, 1967:73). Finally, women more often than men aspire higher social positions for their sons (professional occupation vs. skilled occupation) (Hyman, 1953:434). Yet, other results do not show more status consciousness among women than among men (Blalock, 1959: Martin, 1963). These studies, however, have used students as sample; the deviant finding may be due to sampling this special group. Nevertheless even in the other studies indicating status consciousness, the differences between men and women are not specially great. A breakdown according to some specified variables might show different amounts of status consciousness among different groups of persons. Unfortunately, this has not been done because in most of these studies any interest in the status consciousness of women was lacking.

#### SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL CLASS RATINGS AMONG MEN AND WOMEN

If women are more status conscious than men, they probably have a tendency to give themselves a higher place in the social hierarchy than men do (Cf. Runciman, 1966:166). The subjective social class rating, i.e., the self placement by the respondent, can be used to indicate placement in the social hierarchy since the use of class labels does not denote class consciousness among most respondents. Rather than being associated with a class concept in the traditional sense (existence of class boundaries), it implies a continuum conception of social standing and vaguely summarizes one's own or others' social standing in the social hierarchy (Cf. Bott, 1957).

Available studies on subjective social class by men and women are sparse and

contradictory. Whereas Svalastoga (1959: 181) found a higher social class rating among women than men in his (Danish) survey, Centers, in his (American) survey did not. (When data were broken down according to the occupation of the main earner (*manual* class women showed this pattern (Centers, 1949: Fig. 1)). However, another (English) survey did not reveal this pattern in the manual class: the proportion of men and women describing themselves as middle class was exactly the same. Instead the expected pattern was prevalent in the *non-manual* class (Runciman, 1966:166). Perhaps differences in social stratification among the USA, Denmark and England account for the contradictory findings. An equally likely possibility is that the differences are due to other unknown reasons.

#### SAMPLE

We shall present some data from West Germany (F.R.G.) in order to permit cross-cultural comparison, and a more refined analysis. In the above mentioned studies, men and women were compared. However, simply comparing men and women without specifying marital status seems problematic since women have longer life spans than men. To avoid possible distortion of results we compared *married* men and women. Furthermore, data analysis according to occupations were planned to see whether status conscious women are more prevalent in certain occupational groups. Since for such an analysis the usual sample surveys are too limited in scope, we used a *cumulated* sample; two random samples, representative of the F.R.G., were combined to yield a total of 2400 married respondents (peasants excluded). Since a cumulation of samples implies a cumulation of sampling errors as well (cf. Klingemann and Pappi, 1969), no further cumulation was done. In fact the ratio of men and women differs from group to group, although it should be

equal in the population of married men and women. Usually more women than men are found, this reflects a common phenomenon in survey research: women are more reachable than men.

#### FINDINGS

The comparison of married men and women with regard to subjective social class rating (tables not presented here) shows that for the aggregate, the differences between men and women are negligible. When data are considered according to objective class membership (manual vs. non-manual class) women are slightly more inclined than men to upgrade themselves, although the differences are practically nonexistent. Thus in the

manual and non-manual class only 3% more women than men assign themselves the label "middle class." Women are slightly more prone than men to avoid the self rating of "Working class" (percentage differences for the manual are 4%, for the non-manuals, 2%), but they are more prone than men to avoid the label "upper middle" and "upper class" as well! Thus, our hypothesis must be rejected: women do not assign higher class labels to themselves than their husbands do. Yet, although the hypothesis does not hold in general, we investigated whether it might hold for some of the occupational groups by organizing data according to 15 different occupational groups. Results are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1—SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL CLASS AMONG MEN AND WOMEN

Subjective Social Class			Occupation of main earner							
			Professionals		Owners and Managers of large business firms		Owners of a medium sized business		Small Businessmen	
			Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
			%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Working Class	..	..	..	15	..	9	..	4	16	16
Middle Class	..	..	27	54	50	55	81	70	77	73
Upper Middle Class	..	..	33	23	50	27	17	21	5	5
Upper Class	..	..	20	4	..	9	..	..	2	1
Rating Refused	..	..	13	4	..	..	3	2	..	2
Don't Know	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	1
No Answer	..	..	7	..	..	..	..	2	..	1
N ..	..	..	15	26	6	11	36	47	67	93

  

Subjective Social Class			Civil servants low status		Civil servants Middle status		Civil servants Upper middle status		Civil servants high status	
			Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
			%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Working Class	..	..	36	27	20	19	2	..	8	..
Middle Class	..	..	64	69	76	77	59	72	25	54
Upper Middle Class	..	..	..	..	4	2	32	26	58	46
Upper Class	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	8	..
Rating Refused	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Don't Know	..	..	..	..	..	..	5	..	..	..
No Answer	..	..	..	4	..	2	2	2	..	..
N ..	..	..	28	26	45	43	41	43	12	13

Subjective Social Class	White Collar Employees Low Status		White Collar Employees Middle Status		White Collar Employees High Status	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Working Class .. ..	26	29	16	14	9	10
Middle Class .. ..	66	61	72	75	66	63
Upper Middle Class ..	4	7	5	6	21	21
Upper Class .. ..	..	..	2	..	3	3
Rating Refused .. ..	4	1	2	1	1	1
Don't Know .. ..	..	1	..	..	..	1
No Answer .. ..	..	1	4	5	..	1
N .. ..	93	98	111	130	101	103

Subjective Social Class	Unskilled Workers		Semi-skilled Workers		Skilled Workers		Highly skilled Workers	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Working Class .. ..	88	79	82	80	73	69	53	39
Middle Class .. ..	8	15	15	14	24	28	41	52
Upper Middle Class ..	..	..	..	..	..	1	2	2
Upper Class .. ..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Rating Refused .. ..	2	1	1	1	1	..	2	2
Don't Know .. ..	2	1	..	2	..	1	..	..
No Answer .. ..	..	3	1	2	1	2	2	5
N .. ..	51	72	156	178	288	372	51	44

Note: Cumulated random samples, June and July, 1968.

The table shows that in no occupational group except highly skilled workers group do women tend to give themselves a higher class rating than men. In certain groups, an unexpected relationship is evident: wives of professionals are more prone than their husbands to give themselves a low rating. The same trend can be discerned in Center's (1949) data. This pattern strongly contradicts the status consciousness hypothesis with regard to subjective social class. No explanation is offered about the deviant pattern.

#### CONCLUSIONS

A study of German married men and women has shown that women do not

give themselves a higher social class rating than men. If differences exist at all they are slight and contradictory. Thus the status consciousness hypothesis with regard to subjective social class must be rejected. However, since that status consciousness is multidimensional (Blalock, 1959) the status consciousness hypothesis *per se* cannot be rejected. Rather, a research design is needed which focuses on the various dimensions of status consciousness. The unit of analysis should be the married couple rather than the individual to determine whether differences are due to sampling errors. More attention should be paid to special occupational groups.

# 34 INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF THE FAMILY

## REFERENCES

- Blalock, H. M.  
1959 "Status Consciousness: A Dimensional Analysis." *Social Forces* 37:243-248.
- Bott, Elizabeth.  
1957 *Family and Social Network: Roles, Norms, and External Relationships in Ordinary Urban Families*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Buchanan, W. and H. Cantril.  
1953 *How Nations See Each Other. A Study in Public Opinion*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press.
- Centers, R.  
1949 "Class Consciousness of the American Women." *International Journal of Opinion and Attitude Research* 3: 399:408.
- Davies, K.  
1942 "A Conceptual Analysis of Stratification." *American Sociological Review* 7:308-321.
- Hamilton, R. F.  
1966 "Reply to Tucker." *American Sociological Review* 31:856.
- Klingemann, H. D. and F. U. Pappi.  
1969 "Möglichkeiten und Probleme bei der Kumulation von Umfragen." pp. 173-190 in Rudolf Wildenmann (ed.), *Sozialwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch für Politik*. Band 1. München and Wien: Gunter Olzog Verlag.
- Mackenzie, G.  
1967 "The Economic Dimension of Embourgeoisement." *British Journal of Sociology* 18:29-44.
- Martin, J. W.  
1963 "Social Distance and Social Stratification." *Sociology and Social Research* 47:179-186.
- Runciman, W. G.  
1966 *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Scheuch, E. K.  
1967 "Das Interview in der Sozialforschung." pp. 136-196 in Rene König (ed.), *Handbuch der empirischen Sozialforschung*. Band 1. 2nd edition. Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke Verlag.
- Svalastoga, Kaare.  
1959 *Prestige, Class and Mobility*. Copenhagen: Scandinavian University Press.
- Warnke, Rudolf and Wilhelm Bierfelder.  
1967 *Zur Wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Lage des Unteroffiziers auf Zeit*. Schriftenreihe Innere Führung. Wehrsoziologische Studien Band 2. Bonn: Bundesministerium der Verteidigung.