

THE IMPACT OF OBJECTIVE CHARACTERISTICS ON SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL POSITION

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to find out what constitute the important objective basis of the subjectively identified social position. The article examines what kind of resources impact people's opinion of their social position in society. The main question is whether the subjective position of Estonian inhabitants in social hierarchy are influenced by age, income, level of education, status on the labour market, gender and ethnicity. The focus of this article is on the influence of age, and it presents a discussion on how and to which extent age impacts people's estimation of their position in society. The results indicate that the influence of age on the subjective social status is significant; nevertheless people generally estimate their social position according to income.

Keywords: reference-group theory, social stratification, subjective social position

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to find out what kind of resources affect people's opinion of their social position in society. Social position describes a person's place in social hierarchy. Researching this issue is essential as it could explain on which resources the functioning of the stratification system is based. The aim is to interpret how age, gender, ethnicity, education, status on the labour market and income influence the subjective social position of people. Particular attention is paid to the issue of how age impacts the opinion of people regarding their social status. It has often been mentioned that due to the transition to market economy in Estonia, different age groups have dissimilar opportunities in society. The influence of age on subjective social position is particularly relevant, because age is an ascribed characteristic and therefore utterly independent of the free will of people.

The subjective social position depends not only on the objective characteristics but also on how people experience society, the way they perceive their position in comparison with others, and what they imagine their position would be in future. In fact, an individual's subjective social status is formed by a large variety of

components and is affected by the institutional system and cultural values. Studying people's subjective social position is important as the social and political attitudes and behaviour of individuals originate from their subjective social position rather than from their objective status.

2. Reference-group theory and status maximizing

People estimate their social position based on more than just the objective characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, status on the labour market and income. Assessment of social status is also influenced by reference-group process and status maximizing. Status maximizing means that identifying oneself with a particular social position reflects not only the present objective situation of the person but also his or her prospects for future social position attainment (Yamaguchi and Wang 2002: 445).

Reference-group theory holds that people perceive the world as an enlarged version of their reference group. They assess their class location in the light of the people around them. Because family, friends and co-workers are usually similar, most people see themselves as average and unexceptional. Even very high-status people place many others above themselves and very low-status people see others even lower. Hence, most people locate themselves near the middle of class hierarchy. This tendency applies in many Western countries¹ (Evans and Kelley 1995:158–167). The evidence whether reference-group theory is relevant in Estonia, is rather inconsistent. According to Iris Pettai's research in 2001, many people tend to give their social position a low estimation in spite of reference group influence (Pettai 2002:119–121). Inversely, the survey "I. The World. The Media" in 2003 indicates that most frequently people perceive their social position as average in the social hierarchy, which refers to the influence of reference-group (Lauristin 2004:254–255). Although surveys have produced inconsistent results it can be presumed that Estonia has become closer to Western countries, and the reference-group phenomena more probably affects people's opinion about their social position. Hence hypothesis 1 claims that due to the reference-group process most people locate themselves near the middle of social hierarchy in Estonia.

3. The influence of objective characteristics on subjective social position

Objective characteristics can be divided into two groups – ascribed and achieved characteristics. When the subjective social position depends largely on ascribed characteristics such as gender, age and ethnicity, it reflects people's restricted opportunities to do something by themselves to improve their position in society.

¹ Kelley and Evans have researched the influence of reference-group in USA, Great Britain, Australia, Switzerland, Austria and Germany.

The influence of age, gender, ethnicity, education, occupational position and income on subjective social position varies to a considerable extent between countries. In Eastern Europe, there is no reason to expect a uniform pattern of people's assessment of their social position: all countries have developed in rather different ways after gaining independence from the Soviet Union (Groß 2003:219–221).

3.1. Individual or family objective characteristics?

The bases that people use to estimate their subjective social position are often questionable. Although researchers do not doubt that the subjective social position depends to some degree on objective characteristics, the question is whether people take their individual objective characteristics into consideration or whether they depend on their family features. There is no agreement on the issue whether the family or the individual is the most appropriate unit of analysis in stratification research.

Plutzer and Zipp (2001) discovered that spouses with a different objective class position do not have different subjective class affinities any more often than couples with similar class-related characteristics (education, income and occupational position) (Plutzer and Zipp 2001:444–446). At the same time, family is becoming more unstable and due to the instability, researching a family is quite complicated. An important transformation has been the individualization of life course and the trend toward 'no families': an increase both in the proportion of people who never marry and in the rate of divorce (Yamaguchi et al. 2002:440–442).

Yamaguchi and Wang (2002) indicated that when people estimate their subjective social status, they take into consideration both the individual and family characteristics. Family income influences more estimation of subjective social class than individual income, but education is a more individualized determinant of class. In addition, education is an important objective basis of the subjectively identified class and because of this, many researchers infer that the individual should be the unit of analysis in stratification research (Yamaguchi et al. 2002:456–461).

3.2. The influence of age

Various studies have showed that the influence of age on the subjective social status is significant. Being older increases the probability of identifying with the higher class in Western countries (Yamaguchi et al. 2002:456). Often superior age means better economical situation and higher contentment with life. On the contrary, young adults are one of the most vulnerable groups in modern welfare states. Young adults tend to have higher rates of unemployment and lower wages than the general workforce. Employment problems are most severe for those who lack good educational credentials. Poverty rates among young adults and households headed by those under thirty years of age have increased in the past decade (Handler 2004: 113–115). Thus one can suggest that younger people in comparison with other age groups do not have a high estimation of their social position in Western countries.

In Estonian society, a rather opposite tendency can be found: compared to the rest of the society, young people have a higher estimation of their subjective social position (Pettai 2002:122). The societal transformation led to an abundance of new opportunities in society, offering an advantage to the younger people who were more capable of adapting in the new circumstances and therefore obtained a better position in the labour market. Extensive changes at the end of the socialist period coincided with a global information technology revolution. All this had an impact on people's careers, especially on the way society valued the experience accumulated with age. The experience of the middle-aged and older people no longer had its previous value in the new circumstances. The generations who had acquired their experience of life and work in the Soviet Union found themselves in a new situation where previous experience was largely useless or even obstructive. The younger generation had obtained a more modern education, with many having studied abroad. For them it was easier to adjust to the relations and ways of behaviour associated with market economy. Furthermore, in 1992 Mart Laar's cabinet came to power with the slogan "Clear out the space", which led to the replacement of a number of older high-level officials by younger ones. In addition, younger people were more active and competitive in enterprise. Many surveys have shown that social positions acquired in the 1990s tend to correlate with age (Tallo and Terk 1998:14–15). Although the people who were young at the beginning of the transformation period are not so young any more, the above-mentioned changes explain why older people are those with fewer opportunities in the labour market. In consequence, it is presumptive that age influences people's estimation to their subjective social status and therefore hypothesis 2 claims that people's opinion about their social position descends with an increase in age.

3.3. The influence of gender and ethnicity

In addition to age, people's opinion about their subjective social position may depend on gender. In general, the class identification of men and women is not significantly different in Western countries (Yamagushi et al. 2002:456–457). Still circumstances probably are to some extent different in Estonia. Unequal objective situation of women appears most clearly on the labour market. Women are segregated to jobs with low prestige and moderate income. Compared to women, there are vastly more men in higher professional positions in Estonia. During the last fifteen years the average salary of women has been three quarters of the average salary of men (Vöörmann 2000:51). In short, these tendencies should influence people's opinion on their subjective social position and therefore hypothesis 3 states that men have higher estimation of their social position than women.

The impact of ethnicity on subjective social status is distinctly dissimilar in different countries because the influence of ethnicity is closely related to the extent ethnic minorities are accepted by a bigger society. The well-being of the minority largely depends on the legislation and historical experience. Hence the relationship between minorities and majority differs by countries. The collapse of socialism

changed the status of Estonians and non-Estonians in society. These new statuses are often approached as conditioned by the changes in the labour market. Non-Estonians in comparison with Estonians have a continuously higher rate of unemployment and the labour market has segmented according to ethnicity (Luuk and Pavelson 2002:90–99). Non-Estonians are often characterised by a lower occupational status as they are more likely to work in occupations that do not require many skills (Asari 2002:231). Competence in the Estonian language is a significant factor, which affects the success of non-Estonians in the labour market. There are also essential differences between Estonians and non-Estonians in the type of education they have obtained and this is expected to have implications for ethnicity-specific opportunities in the labour market. Due to different circumstances in society of Estonians and non-Estonians, hypothesis 4 presumes that Estonians have higher estimation of their social position than non-Estonians.

3.4. The influence of achieved characteristics

Occupation has traditionally been regarded as a key element of how people assess their status in society (Jackman 1979:444). Significance of occupation is more emphasized in Anglo-American countries than in other Western countries (Evans et al. 1995:170). For instance in the United States considerable agreement exists on the basic issue of how occupations are associated with classes, which means that for Americans it is easy and familiar to associate occupations with social classes (Jackman 1979:448). Nevertheless, different studies have indicated that education and income are more important predictors of class identification than occupation (Evans et al. 1995:168, Yamaguchi et al. 2002:467). Still, it is presumed that a person's location on the labour market affects his or her self-estimation in social hierarchy and hypothesis 5 states that people's opinion about their social position is influenced by their status on the labour market.

All objective characteristics are closely linked. Occupation is related to the level of education and income. The effect of income on class identification in particular has increased during the last decades in Western countries (Yamaguchi et al. 2002: 467–471). The increased influence of income on the subjective social position can be explained by the rise of consumer society values. Income has a strong effect on the opportunities of consumption and thereby on individual lifestyle. For instance, Baudrillard argued that consumption gives people the possibility to distinguish between each other in the social structure. In a consumer society a person's social position is defined through things that he or she consumes. The meanings of goods generate a system, which determines the position of people in the social system (Kraavi 2005:84–87). At the beginning of the 1990s, the importance of material values emerged as a consequence of the transformation to market economy in Estonia. For the Estonian higher stratum it is substantial to pursue the consumer society standards (Lauristin 2004:283–284). It is suggested that Estonia resembles the Western countries in this respect and that income has a significant influence on the opinion of people determining their subjective social position.

The influence of education on the subjective social position depends upon the institutional arrangements of a given society. People's level of education is closely related to their subjective social status in Scandinavian countries and in Continental Europe (Knudsen 1988:69–79, Groß 2003:213–215). In Scandinavia, the level of education has a significant influence on a person's opportunities in the labour market; insufficient education may restrict access to higher positions and therefore education has a crucial effect on the shaping of people's professional career. Experience from the educational system significantly influences self-esteem, professional efforts and lifestyle (Knudsen 1988:69–79). In the same way, the impact of education on the subjective social position is very substantial in Continental Europe, because the labour market and educational system are closely related (Groß 2003:213–215). Although in the United States and Great Britain a good education is an important factor for achieving higher income and professional success, the influence of educational level on subjective social position is lower there than in Scandinavian and Continental European countries (Groß 2003:216). This is a consequence of the particularity of the educational system in the United States. Higher education is accessible for very many people and it is no longer a distinctive advantage. Still, the level of education influences people's opinion about their subjective social position in the United States and Great Britain to some extent (Evans et al. 1995:168–170).

The influence of education on people's subjective social position is not uniform in the former Soviet Union as these countries have different educational systems. In Russia the impact of educational level is quite similar to that in the United States and Great Britain. Educational level does not determine directly how people estimate their social position. On the contrary, the influence of education on subjective social status is very high in Hungary and has increased significantly after year 1991 (Groß 2003:212–215).

During the last decades the meaning of education in Estonia has changed. Higher education did not guarantee higher salary in the Soviet Union but higher education helped people to accumulate social capital and realize their social ambitions such as access to the elite. The transition to market economy altered the meaning of education – formerly education primarily had an intrinsic value but since the early 1990s, its instrumental significance has prevailed. Education is approached mainly as a resource for gaining success. Thus according to research, education has since the early 1990s been in correlation with salary: people with higher education receive higher salary. However, at the beginning of the transition period, there was an opportunity for people to reach financial success without higher education (Helemäe, Saar and Vöörmann 2000:270–273). To a certain extent an inconsistency between education and salary can be found today as well: not all the people with high income have a high educational level, and conversely, higher education does not assure a satisfying income.

Nevertheless, the above discussion raises a question of whether the influence of education on the subjective stratification in Estonia is similar to Scandinavian countries and Continental Europe or to the Anglo-American countries. As in the

Scandinavian countries, participation in the educational system helps people to accumulate their social capital. However, relations between the labour market and educational system are not as tight in Estonia as in Continental Europe. Higher education is easily accessible for very many people and for that reason it is doubtful that education is the most significant factor in determining people's subjective position in social hierarchy in Estonia, but it still probably influences how people locate themselves in society.

From the preceding hypothesis 6 is derived, according to which people's opinion about their social position ascends when the level of education and income increases.

4. Method, variables and data

4.1. Data

The empirical analyses of this paper are based on the Social Justice Survey carried out in Estonia in 2004 by the Institute of International and Social Studies of the Tallinn University. 1000 people aged 15–74 living in Estonia were surveyed.

4.2. Variables

The dependent variable is the subjective position in social hierarchy. People were asked the following question: "In present-day Estonia there are people with a higher and people with a lower social position. Where would you locate yourself on a scale where the upper box marks a high social position and the lower box marks a low social position in Estonian conditions?" People gave their opinion on a ten-point scale, where 1 meant a low social position and 10 meant a high social position.

The ten-point scale was recoded to five social strata for the cross tabs analysis:

- 1, 2 – lower stratum
- 3, 4 – lower middle stratum
- 5, 6 – middle stratum
- 7, 8 – higher middle stratum
- 9, 10 – higher stratum

Independent variables are age, gender, education, status on the labour market, income, and ethnicity.

Age is a continuous variable but for cross tabs analysis five age groups are formed: 1 – "up to 30 years old", 2 – "31–40 years old", 3 – "41–50 years old", 4 – "51–60 years old" and 5 – "over 60 years old".

Education is a nominal variable. Education is recoded subsequently: 1 – "basic education", 2 – "vocational education", 3 – "secondary education", 4 – "secondary specialised education" and 5 – "higher education".

Status on the labour market is a nominal variable, which describes the respondent's relation with the labour market. This variable is recoded subsequently:

1 – “managers and professionals”, 2 – “mid-level specialists”, 3 – “service workers or clerks”, 4 – “skilled workers”, 5 – “unskilled workers”, 6 – “househusbands/housewives”, 7 – “unemployed”, 8 – “retired persons”, 9 – “students”.

Income is a continuous variable. Monthly family income per person is used in the analysis of results. For cross tabs analysis five income groups are formed: 1 – “fewer than 1, 500 EEK” 2 – “1,501–2,500 EEK”, 3 – “2,501–4,000 EEK”, 4 – “4,001–6,000 EEK” and 5 – “over 6,000 EEK”.

Ethnicity is a nominal variable. Three ethnicity categories are represented in the questionnaire: Estonian, Russian, and other. Because very few people were of another ethnicity than Estonian or Russian, the variable is recoded thus: 1 – “Estonians” and 2 – “non-Estonians”.

Gender is a nominal variable, which is coded thus: 1 – “Men” and 2 – “Women”.

4.3. Method

A linear regression model is used to estimate the impact of objective characteristics on the perceived social status. Variables are added to the regression model by blocks – first the ascribed characteristics and after that the achieved characteristics. Standardized coefficient Beta is used to analyse the results.

5. Results

5.1. How different groups estimate their social position

People estimate their social position rather as middle or low in Estonia (Figure 1). Almost a quarter of people have low estimation of their social position. Especially few people believe they belong to highest positions in social hierarchy. Consequently, the reference group process applies only partially in Estonia, because quite many people assess their social position as low.

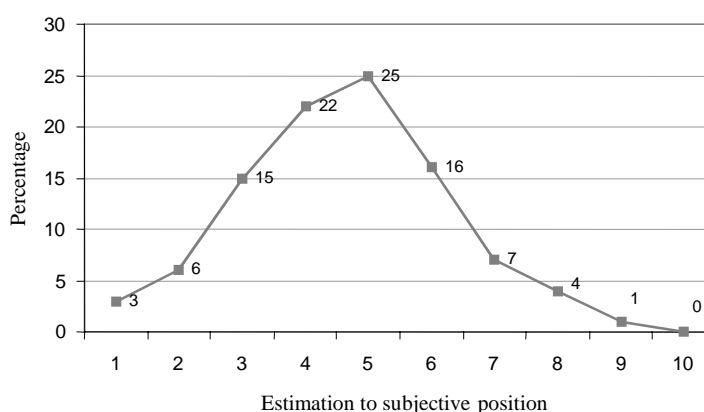


Figure 1. Estimation of social position on 10-point scale.

The subjective social position of different age groups is rather dissimilar (Table 1). As supposed, younger people have a high estimation of their social position more often than older people. Conversely, people over 60 have a much lower estimation of their social position and many of them identify themselves with the lower or lower middle stratum. Of other ascribed characteristics, ethnicity has an impact on subjective social position. Estonians tend to identify themselves more often with higher positions in social hierarchy compared to non-Estonians. There is no significant difference between the self-estimation of men and women.

Table 1. Different groups' estimation of their social position (%)

	Lower stratum	Lower middle stratum	Middle stratum	Higher middle stratum	Higher stratum
<i>Total</i>	9	37	42	12	1
<i>Age</i>					
Up to 30 years old	4	27	46	21	2
31–40 years old	6	32	47	14	2
41–50 years old	11	38	39	13	0
51–60 years old	10	44	39	7	0
Over 60 years old	14	45	38	3	0
<i>Ethnicity</i>					
Estonian	8	37	42	13	1
Non-Estonian	11	39	42	7	0
<i>Gender*</i>					
Men	10	35	42	13	1
Women	9	39	42	10	1
<i>Education</i>					
Higher education	4	23	49	21	3
Secondary specialised education	9	36	44	11	0
Secondary education	8	41	42	10	1
Vocational education	8	50	37	6	0
Basic education or less	15	42	35	8	0
<i>Status on the labour market</i>					
Unemployed	29	46	20	6	0
Retired persons	17	48	33	2	0
Househusbands/housewives	8	48	25	18	3
Students	5	19	49	26	1
Unskilled workers	15	45	35	6	0
Skilled workers	4	40	46	9	1
Service workers or clerks	3	37	43	16	1
Mid-level specialists	1	24	62	13	0
Managers and professionals	0	15	54	27	3
<i>Income</i>					
Over 6,000 EEK	1	11	50	34	4
4,001–6,000 EEK	2	19	55	22	2
2,501–4,000 EEK	5	40	41	14	0
1,501–2,500 EEK	13	46	37	4	0
Less than 1,500 EEK	19	43	35	2	1

* Differences between variables are statistically not significant.

People's opinion regarding their social status differs significantly in relation to the achieved characteristics in relation to what they have achieved. Different income groups have a very dissimilar estimation of their social position. People whose family earns monthly less than 1,500 EEK per person often see their social position as low and rarely identify themselves as belonging to the higher middle or higher stratum. The group with the highest income has also the highest self-estimation and they almost never identify themselves with the lower stratum. Hence, income shapes people's opinion about their subjective social position quite clearly.

People with diverse statuses on the labour market offer significantly different estimations regarding their social position. As expected, managers and professionals identify themselves most frequently as belonging to the middle or higher strata, while unskilled workers often find that they belong to the lower positions in social hierarchy.

People with a vocational or basic education or less often do not have a high estimation of their social position. Conversely, people with a higher education believe frequently that their position in society is middle or higher than middle.

5.2. The influence of objective characteristics on subjective social position

The linear regression model is used to find the influence of the dependent variables on subjective social position. To estimate the contribution of variables to the model that explains the influence of objective characteristics on perception of social position, variables are added gradually to the model.

Table 2 shows that age is the most significant of ascribed characteristics influencing people's opinion about their social position. The influence of age is surprisingly strong and constantly significant in all models. The first regression model indicates that in comparison with gender and ethnicity, age has the most substantial impact on people's estimation of their position in social hierarchy. Nevertheless, Estonians tend to give their social position a somewhat higher assessment than non-Estonians. According to analysis, gender does not have significant influence on the subjective social position.

To the second regression model, the level of education is added; this contributes to the increase of the descriptive power of the model. As expected, it becomes apparent that in comparison with other levels of education, people who have higher education tend to have a higher estimation of their social position. Nevertheless, adding education does not reduce the significance of age. The perceived position status of people with similar educational level is significantly differentiated according to their age. Younger people have a higher estimation of their social position despite their level of education. In the second regression model ethnicity is still a significant predictor of subjective social position. The higher subjective social position of Estonians cannot be explained by their higher (compared to non-Estonians) level of education. Probably Estonians and non-Estonians differ not in terms of the level but of speciality of their education. This tendency was particularly conspicuous during the period of the Soviet Union (Luuk et al. 2002:113–114).

Table 2. The impact of dependent variables on people's subjective social position, standardized coefficients (Beta).

	I model	II model	III model	IV model
Gender^a				
Men	0.01	0.04	0.05*	0.05
Ethnicity^b				
Estonian	0.07**	0.07**	0.05	0.03
Age	-0.30***	-0.30***	-0.17***	-0.20***
Level of education^c				
Basic education or less		-0.36***	-0.23***	-0.17***
Vocational education		-0.23***	-0.14***	-0.08**
Secondary education		-0.22***	-0.13***	-0.08**
Secondary specialised education		-0.20***	-0.10**	-0.06
Status on the labour market^d				
Mid-level specialists			-0.10**	-0.10**
Service workers and clerks			-0.14***	-0.11***
Skilled workers			-0.20***	-0.17***
Unskilled workers			-0.21***	-0.14***
Househusbands/housewives			-0.10***	-0.06*
Retired persons			-0.37***	-0.26***
Unemployed			-0.20***	-0.12***
Students			-0.06	-0.03
Income				0.30***
R ²	0.10***	0.18***	0.23***	0.30***

Significance: * $0.05 \leq p < 0.1$; ** $0.01 \leq p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Reference groups: ^a women, ^b non-Estonians, ^c higher education, ^d managers and professionals

To the third regression model, the status on the labour market is added. Therefore, the influence of age decreases to an extent but it is still significant. Young people's higher opinion about their social position is partly explained by students' high self-estimation in social hierarchy: it is just as high as that of managers and professionals. On the other hand, retired persons who are usually older people, have in comparison with managers and professionals the lowest estimation of their subjective social position.

The fourth regression model additionally includes income, which has a significant influence on people's opinion regarding their social position. Adding income alters the model and makes it much more descriptive. The influence of education decreases to some extent, which partly indicates that people with higher education have a higher estimation of their social position due to their higher income. However, education is still an important factor that influences people's opinion about their social position. Hence, higher education, whether it directly ensures higher position in social hierarchy or not, could still be an important precondition for perceived success in society.

The influence of ethnicity on subjective social position diminishes after adding status on the labour market and income to the regression model. Consequently, the social position of Estonians and non-Estonians is dissimilar because different ethnicities have a different status on the labour market and as a result of this their income differs.

Age, on the contrary, is quite an exceptional characteristic, as including income in the regression model does not decrease the influence of age on subjective social position. When people's income is equal, younger people continually have a higher estimation of their social position and older people find that their social position is lower. Age affects the subjective social position of people in spite of their income.

It can be inferred from this analysis that age influences how people perceive their social position regardless of gender, ethnicity, level of education, status on the labour market and income.

6. Discussion

The reference-group theory implies that most people estimate their position as near the middle in social hierarchy, and this tendency has been affirmed in many Western countries. In Estonia, the reference-group process applies only partially – people do not hold their social position in high esteem, and quite often find that their social status is low. Thus hypothesis 1 is only partly confirmed. The reason for such modest self-estimation may be the objective situation, which does not let people overvalue their status in society and indicates that research into the influence of objective characteristics on subjective social position is important.

The influence of the ascribed characteristics on people's subjective position in society is quite significant. This indicates that people do not have sufficient opportunities to improve their position in the stratification system, because generally they are not able to change their ascribed characteristics. Age is an especially significant and highly valued resource in the Estonian stratification system. Compared to older people, younger people feel that they have a higher position in social hierarchy. Age affects people's opinion about their position in society irrespective of education, status on the labour market or income. Older people's tendency to have a lower estimation of their social position can be explained as a consequence of societal transformation that took place in the early nineties. People who had acquired their experience of life and work in the Soviet Union have undergone many difficulties in adapting to the new circumstances. At the same time, the knowledge and skills of youth were highly valued. Thus youth gained success while older people had problems with asserting themselves in the capitalist economy. The situation in Estonia is quite different to Western countries, where people's opinion about their social position increases with age, and gaining success is complicated for many of the younger people. This confirms hypothesis 2.

The analysis indicates that in addition to age also other features affect people's perception of their position in society. Generally Estonians have a somewhat higher self-estimation in social hierarchy than non-Estonians. Once status on the labour market and income have been included in the regression model, the influence of ethnicity becomes irrelevant. Thus the impact of ethnicity is indirect and emerges through other characteristics. The subjective social position of Estonians and non-Estonians is different because they have a dissimilar income and status on the labour market. Nevertheless, hypothesis 4, the claim that Estonians have a higher estimation of their social position than non-Estonians, is partially supported by the analysis.

According to the results, the influence of gender is not significant. However, this does not indicate that there are no differences between the opportunities for men and women to be successful in society. It may show that women, when assessing their social position, take into consideration not only their own features but also their partner's objective circumstances. Still hypothesis 3, the claim that men have a higher estimation of their social position than women, is not confirmed.

The achieved factors such as education, the status on the labour market and income have a significant influence on the perceived social position. People's estimation of their social position depends substantially upon their level of education. To some extent, higher education constitutes an assurance against the low subjective status in social hierarchy. However, in addition to the level of education people usually take into consideration also their income, status on the labour market and age. This means that in the case where two persons have a similar level of education, it is more likely that the younger person gives a higher estimation to his or her social position. In Estonia, contrary to the Scandinavian countries and continental Europe, education as an autonomous factor is not the most important resource for gaining success in society, because the influence of education decreases when status on the labour market and income are included in the analysis. This means that people who are not doing well in other spheres probably assess their social status as low, despite having a higher education. However, in Estonia as in the Anglo-American countries, education is an important base for attaining a higher social position, because people with higher education are more likely to have a higher estimation of their social position than others.

Status on the labour market influences people's opinion about their social position in Estonia in a way comparable to the Western countries. Not surprisingly, managers and professionals have the highest estimation of their social position. In comparison, unskilled workers have a rather low subjective position in social hierarchy. Interestingly, the students' perceived social position resembles that of managers and professionals, which implies a status maximizing process as students have a high estimation of their social position despite their level of education and income. This tendency indicates that when students estimate their subjective social position they apparently take into consideration not only their present situation but also their pursuits and hopes for the future. Hence, students –

who are usually younger people – have a rather positive outlook regarding their future. On the other hand, the retired persons' subjective social status in comparison with managers and professionals is the lowest, which probably to some extent is associated with the influence of age. According to analysis the lower subjective position of retired persons in society is not caused by low income as is often presumed: being a retired person by itself means that the person feels that he or she is lower in social hierarchy. Therefore the status on the labour market is a significant factor that influences how people perceive their position in society. Thus hypothesis 5 is supported by the analysis.

Income is the most important basis for the stratification system in Estonia to function. A similar tendency has emerged in Western countries, which indicates that the values in Estonia resemble those in other developed countries more and more. The importance of material resources has increased as the values of the consumer society have become more substantial for people and it is the opportunity to consume that designates people's status in society. Still, the importance of income does not reduce the influence of age, which confirms that the impact of age on a person's subjective location in social hierarchy is significant. Hence hypothesis 6, which presumes that people's opinion about their social position ascends when the level of education and income increases, is supported by the analysis.

Consequently, the important factors for being successful in Estonian society are income, age, status on the labour market, education and to some extent ethnicity. A feature that seems characteristically Estonian is the very strong influence of age on the way people perceive their position in society, which seems quite irrational, as older people have a lower estimation of their social position in spite of comparable income, level of education and status on the labour market. Hence, age has a great significance in Estonian society and influences how successful and prosperous people think they really are.

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