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Title:

The (not so) powerful image: erosion of the elite status of the legal professionals.

Abstract:

Based on data gathered in the course of 28 interviews, part of a larger original research project examining the professional experiences of Portuguese judges, prosecutors and lawyers, we explored the respondents' views and representations about legal professions. The entry women and the increasing competition feature among the new patterns in lawyer demography, while the poor working conditions that judges and prosecutors face in many countries have been contributing to the diminishing appeal of a career in the judiciary.

The theme 'image' that emerged from the thematic analysis made to the set of interviews proved to be a compelling tool to analyse the challenges posed by the shattering of the legitimacy and diminishing prestige of the professionals. Conveying references pertaining the ways of dressing, behaving and speaking in court, the images drawn from the interviews are illustrative of more profound tensions and of these new patterns in these professions. Results show that magistrates strive for a performance that leaves no personal imprint in an attempt to embody impartiality, whereas women are faced with specific appearance standards. Reflecting the impact of macro factors such as social change, exposure to the market dynamics and to the pressures of the mass media, the images portrayed offer a view on the perceived loss of power and signal the erosion of the traditional elite status dispensed to these professions.