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European Classification Project

An Assessment of National Variations in the Perception of Social Space

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Abstract

This article examines the categorization of social space in five European countries, Germany, Belgium, Spain, France and Poland. It draws on analysis of reactions to the European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC) prototype designed by social science researchers for Eurostat. Looking beyond the logic underpinning the prototype, our work investigates how “ordinary” people understand the structuring of social space in different national contexts. By studying how respondents react to ESeC categories, we were able to address how they develop their own categories that guide them in social space. Through an experimental survey based on a list of occupations, classified according to the ESeC categories, we tested the self-consistency of the prototype by submitting it to ordinary individuals. Our results demonstrate that the respondents found it difficult to understand the main organizational principles of ESeC. We conclude by questioning the ability of the European classification system in question to take into account the diverse national socio-economic realities that still characterize the European Union.

Keywords

classification – category – employment – Europe

Introduction

This article presents a comparative study carried out in five European countries on the forms of categorization of social space. A debate has been in progress since the early 1990s at Eurostat on the relevance of introducing a socio-economic classification common to all European countries. In 2006, after several years of dialogue, the European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC) project was submitted to Eurostat by a consortium headed by British researchers David Rose and Eric Harrison (Brousse 2008; Penissat & Rowell 2012). In parallel, the idea of adopting a single European socio-economic classification

system adequately taking into account contrasting realities led to research and debate in the community of statisticians and researchers in the social sciences. Several tests of the ESeC prototype have since been carried out to assess its ability to reflect the reality of social differentiation in different countries (Maloutas 2007; Tahlin 2007; Rose & Harrison 2010; Brousse et al. 2010; Brousse et al. 2011).

While drawing on these initiatives, our survey stands apart through its viewpoint, as we focused on reactions¹ to the project from ordinary individuals. Rather than verifying whether the prototype constituted a statistical tool adapted to the different national realities it is meant to describe, our concern was to investigate how clear it is to the people to whom it could eventually apply. Our aim, then, goes beyond an understanding of the logic having informed the conception of the ESeC classification project, an aspect addressed by Etienne Penissat and Jay Rowell in a survey at Eurostat investigating the origins of the project (Penissat & Powell 2012). Our research, carried out simultaneously in Germany, Belgium, Spain, France and Poland, was aimed more widely at looking at the ways that social space can be understood in different national contexts. Investigating how individuals in different countries interpret the categorization and classification principles of the same prototype sheds light on their own categorizations. By presenting the ESeC prototype to respondents with no special knowledge of the issues involved, our work meets a two-fold objective, gauging the layman's understanding of a socio-occupational classification system designed by researchers and investigating ordinary perceptions of social space, which can converge with or diverge from the scholarly perceptions of statisticians and sociologists (Chenu, in Chauvel et al. 2002:159–160). From our perspective, these two dimensions go hand in hand, and are even inseparable. Our objective here is not to make a critique of the European prototype but rather to examine the criteria that individuals use to understand social space and to what extent those criteria vary from one country to the next. More specifically, our efforts follow on from work having employed experimental approaches to understand how and by which logic individuals assess the closeness or distance between occupations or trades (Coxon 1978 and 1986; Boltanski & Thévenot 1983; Joye & Lorenzi-Cioldi 1988; Schultheis et al. 1996). Admittedly, our approach stands apart by being based on a specific classification prototype, one that we used to draw up the list of occupations

1 The word "reaction", which we use regularly in this article, should not be taken in its strictest sense. The people we surveyed, as described in the overview of our survey approach, were not informed that the occupational groups submitted to them were taken from a European classification project.

submitted to our respondents. But that said, our work involves the same type of methodological expertise, simultaneously analyzing the manner in which the respondents react to groups of occupations (classification approach) and the words they use to designate those occupations (naming approach). After taking a brief look at how the ESeC prototype was developed, to help familiarize readers with the debate that accompanied that process, we explain in detail the methodology used in our research (interview protocol, choice of countries and populations). We then analyze the indigenous perceptions of each socio-occupational stratum before concluding with an examination of the findings of our experimental research.

Towards a European Socio-Economic Classification?

The European Harmonization Project

The political desire to harmonize the socio-economic classifications used in European countries dates back to the mid-1990s and is part of a broader effort to harmonize the social statistics produced in the European Union (Brousse 2012; Penissat 2012). Eurostat commissioned a report from French statistician Bernard Grais in 1999 on existing socio-economic classifications. Of the 12 countries² reviewed in the survey, nine said they used a national socio-economic classification.³ The dimensions taken into account in the construction of these classifications varied greatly between countries, even though they were all based at the very least on occupations and employment status. In addition, an international occupational classification system – the International Standard Classification of Occupations introduced by the International Labour Organization in 1958 and revised in 1968, 1988 and 2008 – was also used alongside national classifications.

Following on from this first review, a consortium was set up and Eurostat mandated the British National Statistics Office to carry out a European classification project. The team, coordinated by sociologists from the University of Essex, produced a prototype in 2006 called “European Socio-economic Classification” (or ESeC for short), the aim of which was to propose a common European language: “ESeC should serve as a general background variable

2 The 12 countries reviewed by Bernard Grais were Denmark, Germany, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

3 Only Germany, Italy and Luxembourg said they did not have a national classification at that time.

in social statistics as well as an explanatory tool in basic and applied social research” (Rose & Harrison 2010:8).⁴

The Bases of the ESeC Prototype

The task of leading an initiative on a European classification was placed in the hands of researchers from the UK, a country with a long tradition in socio-occupational classifications. The first of these was drawn up with the census of 1911 (Kieffer 2009), after which two distinct socio-occupational classifications, Social Classes (SC) and Socio-economic Groups (SEG), co-existed for some time in the country (Duriez et al. 1991). The classification system was considerably revamped in 2001, leading to a single classification, NS-SEC, based on Goldthorpe’s class schema (Goldthorpe 2000; Rose & Pevalin 2005).

Under the influence of the British members of the consortium, the ESeC European prototype closely resembles the NS-SEC system and the uniqueness of the classification-building criterion is clearly stressed: “ESeC is not contaminated by education or income measures. That is a pure class measure: ‘one concept, one measure’ is the rule that ESeC follows” (Rose & Harisson 2010:7). According to the supporters of ESeC, social behaviour is explained first and foremost by an individual’s position in the labour market, and more specifically, for employees, by the type of subordinate relationship they have with their employer. Formalized by Goldthorpe, the employment relationship opposes employers and the self-employed with employees. For employees, the relationship ranges from strict subordination to more flexible and informal arrangements (Brousse 2008).

Technically speaking, the ESeC prototype simply cross-references the occupation as identified by the standard international classification of occupations (CITP/ISCO) with a low number of additional variables so as to gauge employment relations. The variables were as follows: self-employed or employed status, company workforce size (less than ten/ten and more), and the exercise of supervisory activities, i.e. the supervision of employees, and, where applicable, the number of subordinate employees. As such, occupational affiliation, activity sector and employer status (public or private) are not taken into account. The nine resulting groups (Table 1) clearly reflect a social ordering but are not completely hierarchical.

4 It should be noted that ESeC has not been accepted as is. Work on establishing a European socio-economic classification continues today.

TABLE 1 *The European Socio-economic Classification project (ESeC) [*].*

Class	Name of class	Shortened form
A	<i>Large employers, higher grade professional, administrative & managerial occupations</i>	<i>Higher salariat</i>
B	<i>Lower grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations and higher grade technician and supervisory occupations</i>	<i>Lower salariat</i>
C	<i>Intermediate occupations</i>	<i>Higher grade white collar workers</i>
D	<i>Small employer and self-employed occupations (excl. agriculture, etc.)</i>	<i>Petit bourgeoisie or independents</i>
E	<i>Small employer and self-employed occupations (agriculture, etc.)</i>	<i>Petit bourgeoisie or independents</i>
F	<i>Lower supervisory and lower technician occupations</i>	<i>Higher grade blue collar workers</i>
G	<i>Lower services, sales & clerical occupations</i>	<i>Lower grade white collar workers</i>
H	<i>Lower technical occupations</i>	<i>Skilled workers</i>
I	<i>Routine occupations</i>	<i>Semi- and non-skilled workers</i>
J	<i>Never worked and long-term unemployed</i>	<i>Unemployed</i>

[*] The project authors routinely use the term “classes” to denote ESeC level-1 groups. Borrowing from Goldthorpe, the project’s overall architecture is described as a “class schema”.

SOURCE: ERIC HARRISON AND DAVID ROSE, *THE EUROPEAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASSIFICATION (ESEC), DRAFT USER GUIDE* (UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX, FEBRUARY 2006).

The European classification project is, then, clearly based on the Goldthorpean model posited as a universal classification system that can be transposed in all national contexts. This point of view stirred substantial debate at the meetings organized by Eurostat to create the prototype. First of all, the design of ESeC uses a voluntarily top-down approach (Amossé 2012). The structuring approach used for ESeC also generated controversy through its central focus on employment relations. More specifically, three main aspects of the classification came under scrutiny: supervision, the non-distinction between public and private (a distinction made notably in the French and Spanish classifications) and the fact that the structure of hierarchical relationships implies a prevalence of wage-employment/salariat and large companies that is not necessarily the case in some countries, especially those in southern Europe, where the self-employed account for a large share of the economically active

population and where relatively non-hierarchical family businesses are still very present (Maloutas 2007).

Empirical Approach: An Experimental Survey

Our European survey was carried out from 2008 to 2010 as part of a response to a call for projects from INSEE (Deauvieu et al. 2011). The respondents were shown a list of occupations, organized into groups corresponding to the nine ESeC categories, without being told that this was a European classification project. The respondents were asked a series of questions on these data to elicit their reactions.

The list of occupations, translated into each of the national languages and presented in Table 2, grouped the most common occupations for the ESeC classes at European level. We started by asking the respondents to pick the “wrong occupation out” in each group, aware in reality that, according to ESeC, all the occupations were correctly classified (question 1). The respondents were then asked to freely create names to designate each of the nine groups (question 2). They then had to reclassify within the nine groups “borderline” occupations chosen for the problems they pose in terms of their identification with a given group (question 3). Lastly, the respondents were shown a set of criteria and asked if these criteria had, in their opinion, been used to differentiate the groups of occupations in the main list (question 4).

The countries were chosen for the diversity of their locations, in northern, southern and central Europe. We looked at the diverse national histories from the standpoint of how long they had been in the European Union (EU), their labour markets and geography, as well as the socio-occupational classifications used by public statistics offices. Three of the countries – France, Belgium and Germany – were founding members of the EEC in 1957, while one of them – Spain – joined the EEC following the second wave of enlargement in the 1980s, and the other – Poland – joined the European Union more recently, in 2004. While offering contrasting profiles, these countries are all considered as large EU countries by surface area, population or economy.

The questionnaire was administered to 495 people, most of them students and some of them employees currently attending vocational training courses (Table 3). We chose a “captive” population on purpose, with the idea that these individuals formed a relatively harmonious and easily accessible population that in theory had more time than the economically active to respond to a comprehensive questionnaire taking at least 90 minutes to complete. The

TABLE 2 *List shown to respondents.*

Group letter	List of occupations shown to respondents
A	Engineer; doctor; pharmacist; self-employed architect; financial manager; company director, 15 employees; computer technician, supervising 2 people
B	Nurse; teacher; tax inspector; industrial designer; maintenance technician; school teacher; pharmaceutical assistant
C	Secretary; administrative assistant; social worker; office worker; accounting assistant; sales representative (VRP); technical salesperson
D	Shopkeeper; restaurant owner/manager; builder, self-employed; company head, 8 employees; butcher, 2 apprentices; company manager, 3 employees
E	Farmer, 1 employee; winegrower, 9 employees; farm worker; fish farmer, 3 employees; self-employed lumberjack; self-employed landscaper
F	Overseer; workshop supervisor; construction-site supervisor; mechanic, responsible for 3 employees; police officer, 4 subordinates; store manager
G	Kindergarten assistant; caregiver; police officer; warehouseman; sales attendant; ambulance driver; salesperson
H	Housepainter; car mechanic; plumber/heating contractor; welder; pastry cook; presser; milling machine operator
I	Cleaner; cargo handler; maintenance technician; production worker; delivery-truck driver; forklift-truck driver; security agent; overseer, 2 subordinates

respondents in each of the countries could not be considered as representative of the socio-occupational structure in those countries. With a view to working on a potential “country effect”, we simply sought to ensure that the situation of the respondents was as comparable as possible in the different fields addressed by the survey.⁵ From that viewpoint, choosing a majority of students

⁵ The number of employees in vocational training we had access to varied considerably from one country to the next. Survey realities made it difficult to interview this respondent category in Germany and Belgium. This also explains why the total number of questionnaires

TABLE 3 *Sample structure.*

Country	Respondents
Germany	66
Belgium	82
Spain	142
France	120
Poland	85
Total	495

made the survey easier to carry out while providing a certain degree of social homogeneity from one country to the next.

The material compiled is of a diverse nature. Each respondent answered a set of closed questions on their understanding of the prototype and freely attributed a name to each group, which generated an extensive set of lexical data. The analysis presented in this article draws on a comparison of all the material gathered. Consistent with our experimental approach, when processing the data we built indices by cross-referencing statistical analyses with a more qualitative examination of the titles proposed for the groups in the classification system. This approach raised a number of key issues in translation, since the titles were given in the language of the respondents and, hence, in contrasted socio-linguistic contexts. We should also mention that our remarks here exclusively concern the comparison of the countries. The limited number of questionnaires on which our analysis is based is insufficient to be used to study internal differences within the countries under review.

Indigenous Perceptions of Socio-Occupational Divisions: Divergences and Similarities between the Countries

The ESeC prototype gives us the possibility to examine how ordinary individuals perceive groups of occupations, which criteria they use to explain the classifications, and what kind of (more or less hierarchical) logic they use to sort the groups one from the other.

per country ranges from 66 in Germany to 142 in Spain. But data processing did not point to any real difference in the responses of students and employees.

TABLE 4 *Internal coherence of ESeC classes.*

Group letter	List of occupations presented to respondents
A	Engineer; doctor; pharmacist; self-employed architect; financial manager; company director, 15 employees; computer technician, supervising 2 people
B	Nurse ; teacher; tax inspector; industrial designer; maintenance technician; school teacher; pharmaceutical assistant
C	Secretary; administrative assistant; social worker; office worker; accounting assistant; sales representative (VRP); technical salesperson
D	Shopkeeper; restaurant owner/manager; builder, self-employed; company head, 8 employees ; butcher, 2 apprentices; company manager, 3 employees
E	Farmer, 1 employee; winegrower, 9 employees; farm worker; fish farmer, 3 employees; self-employed lumberjack; self-employed landscaper
F	Overseer; workshop supervisor; construction-site supervisor; mechanic, responsible for 3 employees; police officer, 4 subordinates ; store manager
G	Kindergarten assistant; caregiver; police officer; warehouseman ; sales attendant; ambulance driver; salesperson
H	Housepainter; car mechanic; plumber/heating contractor; welder; pastry cook ; presser; milling machine operator
I	Cleaner; cargo handler; maintenance technician; production worker; delivery-truck driver; forklift-truck driver; security agent; overseer, 2 subordinates

Coverage: 495 respondents.

Key: The occupation marked in bold in each group was the one circled the most by the respondents. For example, in group A, computer technician supervising 2 employees was the occupation most often considered as the wrong one out. In this group, 20% of respondents selected at least two occupations.

Different Perceptions of Coherence

To test the internal relevance of the prototype's nine groups, in the first question respondents were asked to pick the wrong one out in a list of occupations. On the basis of nine groups corresponding to the ESeC categories, the

At least two occupations circled (%)					
All	Germany	Belgium	Spain	France	Poland
20	14	33	15	21	20
43	36	49	37	47	45
19	15	14	11	23	31
30	29	19	38	25	33
14	3	13	10	11	30
10	13	9	6	13	13
33	31	45	29	24	44
13	9	21	15	10	10
16	13	16	16	14	13

respondents circled occupations they considered as not belonging to the group in which they were classified.⁶ It was quite clear at this point that the respondents found some ESeC groups easier to grasp than others. The answers were much the same from one country to the next.

⁶ It should be pointed out here that, from the point of view of the designers of the classification, all these occupations are correctly grouped. As such, there is no real “wrong one out”.

The groups seen as the most coherent on the whole, that is, the ones in which few occupations were circled, were F, H and I (Table 4). These categories are situated on the lower rungs of the social ladder, consisting of higher grade blue collar workers (F), skilled workers (H) and semi- and non-skilled workers (I). Group E, consisting of self-employed farmers, also had clear significance for the respondents. The results were similar to those obtained in the preliminary survey carried out in France (Jayet & Penissat 2009:38).

The respondents also had to propose a name describing each group. This exercise provided additional information on how the coherence of the groups is perceived. Groups F and I, perceived as coherent in the wrong-one-out question, were also attributed fairly “unanimous” names. More specifically, analysis of the names given clearly demonstrated that supervisory activity was the common point between the occupations in group F (higher grade blue collar workers). With group I (semi- and non-skilled workers) and group H (skilled workers), the respondents as a whole highlighted the lack of skills, with a low level (or lack) of training and subordinate activities requiring no specific skills, though this was less emphatically the case with group H. In all the countries, group I was initially described on the basis of what its members “don’t have”. In symmetrical fashion, group A (higher salariat), although not seen as the most coherent in the wrong-one-out question,⁷ was described using similar terms by the respondents, who emphasized the high level of qualifications and training of the occupations concerned.

Three ESeC categories posed problems for the respondents, group B (lower salariat), D (independents) and G (lower grade white collar workers). In the wrong-one-out question, 43% of the respondents circled at least two occupations in Group B, the confusion being the same in each country. Group B also elicited the most non-answers in terms of attributing a name to the category. The diversity of occupational status (the list includes a self-employed nurse, often seen as out of place among salaried employees) and the mix of manual and intellectual activities (carried out by some and in several countries under civil servant status) led to confusion on the part of the respondents.

7 An initial explanation for this difference could be that the process of naming the groups came after the process of excluding occupations from each group. Group A became more coherent once the “wrong-one-out” occupations were excluded. But the relationship between the perceived coherence of the group and the more or less “obvious” nature of its name should not be exaggerated. It could thus be assumed that naming a group is sometimes difficult even if that group is perceived as coherent, for example because it has no real consistency as a social or occupational group.

While perceptions of the coherence of the groups mentioned thus far tend to converge, group D (independents) and G (lower grade white collar workers) gave rise in all of the survey countries to the most divergent responses according to national context. The coherence of group D proved problematic in Poland, and even more so in Spain. It may be assumed that the respondents in these two countries, where independent activity is more developed and where more self-employed professionals work within microstructures, were more alert to the diversity of the occupations grouped in the list presented to them. It should also be noted that a company head responsible for eight employees seemingly has no place in the world of self-employed tradespeople and shopkeepers. Even in France, where group D was seen as reasonable coherent, and where the national classification includes a group of independents, the respondents made a clear distinction between owning a shop and managing a company with employees, likely related to a firm and long-standing socio-historical distinction between shopkeepers and self-employed tradespeople on one hand and the world of business and its owners and directors on the other (Zarca 1986).

The ESeC class for lower-rated employees, group G (lower grade white collar workers), was the category generating the most divergent answers from one country to the next, with 24% of the French respondents circling more than two occupations compared with 45% of the Belgian respondents. These last, as clearly demonstrated in the name they gave to the group, placed the emphasis on the healthcare sector, represented by several occupations in the group, which led them to exclude occupations from other sectors fairly systematically.

To supplement this exercise, the respondents were asked a further question concerning a list of ten other occupations (Table 5), which they had to sort into the nine groups corresponding to the ESeC classes.⁸

In all the countries, the occupation the most often sorted into its actual ESeC class was that of university professor, classified as a majority in group A (higher salariat), much more often than company head (Table 6). While not holding a supervisory position, the qualifications and social prestige of the professor led the respondents to include this occupation in the group identified as being at the top of the social ladder. In contrast, and in the presence of another category clearly identified as grouping the self-employed (group D), the company head, who should also be classified in group A, was less uniformly perceived as belonging to a group in which the ESeC designers had sorted employees and the self-employed.

8 The question was worded as follows: "Here is a new list of occupations. Try to reclassify each occupation into the group to which it best corresponds".

TABLE 5 *List of 10 occupations to be sorted by the respondents into the 9 groups.*

Train driver
Executive assistant responsible for a team of 4 people
Farmer responsible for a holding with 15 employees
Café waiter
University professor
Employed chef with an assistant chef
Machine tool setter-operator
Cashier
Company head with 30 employees
Supervisor in electrical goods production

For the nine other occupations that were not sorted as a majority into the expected ESeC category, three scenarios can be identified. One, the respondents in the five countries were unanimous in their choice of another category, which suggests a lack of understanding of the criterion used by the ESeC designers to build the group. Two, the choices varied from one country to the next, which probably relates to different national histories. And three, respondents from the same country gave different answers, which could denote a lack of familiarity with the occupation itself, as well as intra-national divergences that we are unable to address here. For example, while employing 15 people, the farmer was hard to assimilate in group A, because a self-employed group already exists (group E) and because this occupation lacks the social prestige and qualifications of many others classified in group A. But differences can be noted between countries. In Spain, where the farming sector still has considerable importance, 75% of the respondents put the occupation in group E, compared with 47% in Germany, where the specific nature of the farming world is less marked.

The two occupations the least often sorted into the ESeC category provided by its designers were “employed chef with an assistant chef”, classified in ESeC group I (semi- and non-skilled workers) and “executive assistant responsible for a team of 4 people”, classified in ESeC Group B (lower salariat). Both occupations clearly entail managerial tasks and responsibilities. But the respondents saw the executive assistant more as an administrative employee than as a professional with supervisory responsibilities. As such, this occupation was sorted by roughly half of the respondents into the higher-level group C. In

TABLE 6 *Reclassification rate of the 10 occupations in the ESeC group.*

Occupation	Country	“Correct” reclassification rate (%)	“Correct” group classification ranking	Ranking of 1st (or 2nd) ESeC class
Train driver	Spain	8	4th	G (27%)
	France	8	7th	I (23%)
	Poland	38	1st	G (18%) and I (18%)
	Belgium	30	1st	I (20%)
	Germany	18	1st	F (17%) and G (15%)
Executive assistant	Spain	6	4th	C (58%)
	France	9	3rd	C (43%) and F (35%)
	Poland	2	7th	F (37%) and C (28%)
	Belgium	12	3rd	C (39%) and F (32%)
	Germany	5	4th	C (64%)
Farmer, 15 employees	Spain	3	5th	E (75%)
	France	8	3rd	E (67%)
	Poland	1	8th	E (65%)
	Belgium	2	6th	E (65%)
	Germany	5	6th	E (47%) and D (23%)
Café waiter	Spain	36	1st	H (27%)
	France	37	1st	G (33%)
	Poland	22	2nd	G (44%)
	Belgium	45	1st	G (20%)
	Germany	50	1st	G (21%)
University professor	Spain	63	1st	B (31%)
	France	50	1st	B (45%)
	Poland	58	1st	B (34%)
	Belgium	68	1st	B (23%)
	Germany	92	1st	B (8%)
Chef with an assistant chef	Spain	7	5th	H (23%) and D (18%)
	France	3	6th	H (26%) and F (25%)
	Poland	1	9th	H (26%) and F (18%)
	Belgium	5	6th	D (34%) H (30%)
	Germany	8	6th	D (27%) and F (15%)

TABLE 6 *Reclassification rate of the 10 professions in the ESeC group. (cont.)*

Occupation	Country	“Correct” reclassification rate (%)	“Correct” group classification ranking	Ranking of 1st (or 2nd) ESeC class
Setter-operator	Spain	53	1st	I (22%)
	France	65	1st	I (18%)
	Poland	29	2nd	I (31%)
	Belgium	49	1st	I (11%) and NR (11%)
	Germany	39	1st	I (32%)
Cashier	Spain	19	2nd	I (50%)
	France	33	2nd	I (44%)
	Poland	24	2nd	I (40%)
	Belgium	27	2nd	I (49%)
	Germany	24	2nd	I (53%)
Company head, 30 employees	Spain	29	2nd	D (34%)
	France	59	1st	D (19%)
	Poland	28	2nd	D (41%)
	Belgium	27	3rd	F (33%) and D (30%)
	Germany	48	1st	D (29%)
Supervisor	Spain	31	1st	H (15%)
	France	30	1st	H (21%)
	Poland	13	4th	B (22%) scattered results, NR (14%)
	Belgium	12	4th	H (29%) and B (18%) NR (12%)
	Germany	52	1st	H (14%)

Key: According to the ESeC, the train driver belongs to group H (skilled workers). 38% of Polish respondents chose this category compared with just 8% of Spanish and French respondents. Where the ESeC group is chosen most by the respondents, as is the case with the train driver in Poland, Belgium and Germany, the last column shows the group ranking in second (or third) position, namely groups G and I for Poland. For Spain and France, where the train driver profession is not classified the most in the given ESeC group, H, the occupation is sorted the most into groups G and I, respectively.

contrast, the chef, no doubt because he or she has an assistant chef, was ranked in a higher category than in the ESeC classification, either group H (skilled workers) or group D (independents), even though having an assistant does not in this case qualify as a supervisory position.

Lastly, the cashier, sorted in the European classification into group G (lower grade white collar workers), was reclassified across the board in group I (semi- and non-skilled workers). Given the arduous and repetitive nature of their work and their lack of social prestige, cashiers in all countries are ranked alongside cleaners and maintenance technicians rather than with kindergarten assistants and caregivers.

Other reclassifications varied significantly from one country to the next. The answers from the Polish respondents stood out most frequently from those of the other four countries. The classifications of the German respondents were very close to those of the ESeC, notably with the groups designated for the university professor, café waiter and supervisor. While 44% of German respondents chose the same classification as the ESeC, only 14% of the Polish respondents did the same. A full 59% of the Polish respondents had less than three “correct”⁹ classifications, followed by the Spanish, at 47%. The differences observed between the respondents’ answers and the ESeC prototype would appear to confirm that respondents in Southern and Eastern Europe on the whole diverge more from the approach informing the ESeC, backing up Maloutas’ hypothesis (2007) whereby the employment relations schema may be relevant for Northern European countries but fails to adequately correspond to the production structures of Southern European countries, home to a large number of small companies.

Group Identification Criteria

These initial results call for an examination of the criteria underpinning the uneven perception of the coherence of the groups. At first glance, the groups that were the best identified by the respondents were not necessarily identified using the same criteria, and national dynamics appear to come into play alongside the convergence in opinions. For example, group A (higher salariat) is above all identified by the qualification level, while group E (petits bourgeois or independents) is perceived more on the basis of sector coherence and group F (higher grade blue collar workers) on the basis of the supervisory and managerial activities of the occupations included.

9 “Correct” here meaning in line with the classifications developed by the ESeC designers.

We therefore asked a further set of questions aimed at establishing a firmer grasp on how respondents understand the classification system and analyzing the criteria behind the classifications provided. Using the list supplied, the respondents were asked to identify the classification criteria (three maximum) they saw as being used to establish the nine groups presented to them. The criteria expressly combined aspects used explicitly by the ESeC designers and other aspects that were not taken into account in the design of the prototype. For the majority of respondents, qualifications were identified as the key criteria for classifying the nine groups (Table 7), apart from the Spanish, for whom the activity sector was the most important. This result is decisive since the designers of the prototype clearly did not use qualifications as a central criterion in their classification choices.

TABLE 7 *Perception of classification criteria for the 9 ESeC classes (%)*.

<i>In your opinion, the occupations in these 9 groups are classified according to ... (several answers possible)</i>	Germany	Belgium	Spain	France	Poland	All
Qualifications	64	60	30	66	67	55
Activity sector	47	33	58	46	24	43
Prestige	56	37	49	32	47	43
Revenues	44	38	43	40	25	38
The manual or non-manual nature of the work	12	16	11	22	36	19
Status (self-employed/employed)	20	18	6	23	24	17
The number of people supervised	12	10	22	14	12	15
Occupational independence	17	9	15	13	13	13
Arduousness	12	17	11	14	4	12
Employment security	12	12	6	4	6	7
Other criteria	2	2	17	2	4	6
Repetitiveness	8	7	4	4	5	5
Wealth	5	1	1		1	1

Key: Overall, 55% of respondents said that qualifications was a criteria used to classify the occupations in the nine groups. This percentage reached 64% in Germany, compared with just 30% in Spain.

On average, the four criteria given by more than one respondent in three were (in order of importance) qualifications, activity sector, prestige, and revenues. But often considerable differences were observed between countries. The manual or non-manual nature of the occupation was the fourth most important criterion for the Polish respondents, but came up very little for the other countries. While it is obviously difficult here to verify the assumption, this may reflect the heritage of the socialist era, in which work activities are considered from the standpoint of their place in the production process.

Supervision and occupational independence, which are vital to employment relations in the Goldthorpe schema and to the design of ESeC, were not perceived by the respondents as decisive criteria.

An interesting point was the manner in which the respondents named the nine groups. The respondents rarely took a one-track approach to categorization when asked to name the groups. In all the countries, the names given by the respondents drew on a number of aspects, these last varying frequently for the same individual from one group to the next. Most of the respondents did not choose the same “criteria window” through which to interpret the classification presented to them, instead preferring to “knock together” composite and multi-criteria names. Analysis of the names does however reveal two dominant criteria, which we can suppose are used by the respondents in their own categorizations of social space: qualifications and activity sector. Convergence on these two criteria is remarkably strong given the supposed heterogeneity of the relationship to work and employment situations in the different countries of Europe.

The supervision and responsibility criterion, a guiding principle in ESeC design, was highlighted very little – or at least unevenly – by the respondents when giving names to the groups. It is useful here to note that the ESeC prototype is heir to the EGP schema¹⁰ designed in the 1970s in “empirical” fashion for international comparisons and based, according to its designers, on occupational qualifications (Erikson and al. 1979). Taking that observation as a starting point, Michael Tahlin tested, on the basis of the Swedish model, the relations between the ESeC categories and “theoretical” criteria on employment relations. His conclusions were incontrovertible: the ESeC categories are not correlated to aspects of the employment relations theory but to occupational qualifications (Tahlin 2007). Despite the obvious limits of an experimental survey, our own results clearly show that the indigenous perception of ESeC categories is closer to the empirical foundations demonstrated by Tahlin than the theoretical foundations advanced by the designers of the prototype.

10 EGP: named after the authors, Erikson, Goldthorpe, Portocarrero.

A Hierarchical Perception of Social Space?

For all the questions asked, the most clearly identified groups were situated at the top and bottom of the social ladder (groups A, H and I), followed by group E (*petits bourgeois* or independents) and group F (higher grade blue collar workers). We also analyzed the approach used by respondents when positioning the groups against each other and ranking them in the social hierarchy. To that end, we systematically noted the occurrence of lexical suggestions of “high”, “middle” and “low”. While some groups were indeed identified in terms of their hierarchical position, others were considered from contrasted and often ambivalent standpoints. Interestingly, the attention paid here to the hierarchy of social space subtly colours the results obtained previously, notably by showing that the coherence of a group, which can be seen from the point of view of declassification and reclassification, as well as from the angle of identification criteria, does not prevent respondents from struggling to position it on the social ladder.

Unsurprisingly, the respondents clearly considered group A (higher salariat) as situated at the top of the social ladder and group I at the bottom. However, for group B (lower salariat), in its official classification including lower grade professionals, administrative and managerial occupations and higher grade technician and supervisory occupations, the answers reflected a certain amount of uncertainty in all the countries. In Poland, for example, respondents sometimes used the word “specjalisci”, which they also used for group A, as well as other expressions denoting much less positive registers of language and social standing, such as “klasa średnia” (middle class) and “ciężko pracujący” and “podwładni”, the first referring to the arduousness of the occupation and the second to its subordinate nature. In all the countries, this group was described using terms from the “middle” lexical category, sometimes by “upper middle class”, along with fairly negative appraisals (for example, “simple manual labour”). Group F (higher grade blue collar workers), which in theory appeared coherent and easily identifiable by the respondents, appears, in the light of the names given to it here, as a group whose position in the social pyramid is far from clear. While respondents saw the group as clearly designating “employees”, “salary earners” and “workers” with supervisory responsibilities, they found it difficult to position the group in the social hierarchy and the company hierarchy. Some respondents attributed “numerous responsibilities” to the members in this group, while others called them “little bosses”. There was also little consensus on the position of Group D (independents) in the social hierarchy. The German respondents placed it in the “middle”, the French situated it lower down the ladder (no doubt by assimilating it with the world

of small companies and family business), while the Belgians very often failed to position it in hierarchical terms.

Overall, while the respondents named the groups in a variety of ways, an approximate hierarchical positioning was established between the categories, as denoted by the “high”, “low” and “middle” of the social hierarchy. But the respondents were far from unanimous on some categories, which they found more difficult to situate. The logic used for the ESeC prototype, aimed at distinguishing occupations on the basis of employment relations, did not strike the respondents as aberrant, but the underlying hierarchies are less well understood, as shown by the fairly representative case of group F (higher grade blue collar workers), which includes occupations whose managerial activities are clearly identified but where the degree of responsibility is very unevenly identified. The hierarchical positions established by the respondents are based above all on qualifications, but also go far beyond them. The classifications, criteria and names attributed to the groups by the respondents show that these last do not have a single approach to categorizing socio-occupational space. Their approach instead is multi-dimensional, no doubt because the criteria themselves are not disjointed.

Conclusion

By questioning the coherence of the ESeC classes from a dual point of view – the criteria of the ESeC designers and the perception of the classes by ordinary individuals – our survey led to two main findings. First, there is a clear difference between the criteria perceived and used by the respondents and those selected by the designers of the ESeC prototype. Second, the survey brought to light national specifics and, above all, convergence points between countries.

The prototype makes sense in part for the respondents, particularly those from the founding countries of the European Union. But employment relations are not perceived as central to the classification of occupations. Instead, qualifications and activity sector are the most structuring criteria for the respondents in their categorization of social space as well as in their understanding of the design of the ESeC project. The empirical material in our possession clearly shows that this stems from a number of issues, including the understanding of the criteria used to build the classes and the ability of the respondents to position them as part of a hierarchical perception of social space. The respondents had a relatively homogenous perception of the social position of group A (higher salariat), which they placed at the top of the social ladder, and group I

(semi- and non-skilled workers), which they almost unanimously placed at the bottom of the social ladder. However, their appraisals of other groups differed in terms of hierarchical position. The respondents also had problems identifying the more structural aspects involved in employment relations, namely supervision and occupational independence, leading to uncertainties in their understanding of ESeC. Furthermore, there were considerable divergences between the countries on these points. The more qualitative study of the names given to the classes was instructive in this regard, and it can be assumed that the divergences in question reflect the different structures of the national labour markets. To gain a deeper understanding of these national differences, we would need to extend our research to encompass different or complementary methodologies, including more qualitative surveys, comparative monographs of occupations and activity sectors in several European countries, and more targeted questionnaires covering a narrower spectrum of occupations and focused on specific segments of social space.

In our analysis of individual perceptions, we adopted an inductive, bottom-up strategy, aware that the Goldthorpean approach does the opposite. The ESeC prototype is based on a strongly theoretical approach, one that informed the class-building process. The ESeC design team also distinguished between the classifications built using an empirical approach from those that, like ESeC, are based on a precise conceptual schema eschewing national classifications formed through country-specific histories and environments. However, Tahlin has shown empirically that this conceptual schema was not a principle used in the design of the ESeC categories, which in reality are based on occupational qualifications. The unprompted reactions of the individuals we surveyed largely concur with that reading. Ultimately, doesn't this result call into question the idea that an extra-national theoretical perspective based on employment relations is the only way to build a European classification? Wouldn't it be more appropriate to design the classification pragmatically on the basis of existing convergences on occupational qualifications and the categorization of social groups in different European countries? And wouldn't it be advisable to take on board the way European classification projects are perceived by ordinary individuals? The analyses described here advocate such an approach.

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