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Top-Level Executives and Professionals: A Statistical Definition of Elite Occupations

Thomas Amossé* and Milan Bouchet-Valat**

Abstract

This article presents the theoretical framework, the construction method and the initial analyses of a new category associated with the official French socio-economic classification (*Professions et catégories socioprofessionnelles* [PCS 2020]), named 'top-level executives and professionals', which aims to identify the most top-ranking occupations in French society. This category identifies, among managers, professionals and higher-level intellectual occupations, the upper fraction of positions (salaried or otherwise) involving major responsibilities in work organizations and/or recognized high-level expertise. Identified on the basis of their title and occupational characteristics, these positions correspond to an 'occupational elite' (3% of the working population) that bridges the sociology of stratification and the sociology of elites. Through its inclusion in public statistical surveys, this category provides a new approach for analysing socio-economic inequalities, complementary to those based on educational level or income. As an initial illustration of its potential empirical utility, this article provides evidence of very strong intergenerational reproduction at the top of the social hierarchy.

Keywords

elite, social stratification, occupational categories, upper classes, inequalities, social mobility

In recent years, economic inequalities measured at the top of the social structure have attracted renewed scientific and media interest, especially in relation to the increasing share of income received by the richest 1% in many countries (Alvaredo et al., 2013). French sociologists have long focused their attention on the elites, and continue to do so, as evidenced by studies on the upper classes and their neighbourhoods (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot, 2016), on the educational institutions that produce the economic, administrative and political elites (Bourdieu, 1996 [1989]; Eymeri, 2001; Van Zanten, 2016; Pasquali, 2021), on high incomes in the finance sector (Godechot, 2012) and on the 'structure of the field of power' as a whole (Denord et al., 2011).

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Owing to their small size, however, these elites have almost never been captured in large quantitative national surveys. As noted by Mike Savage and Karel Williams (2008), they are practically invisible in such surveys due to the imprecision of the categories used. This methodological difficulty has created a division between two areas of study that have developed separately as a result. On the one hand, the sociology of elites and the economics of inequality focus on highly selective groups—the richest 0.1% or less—using specialized sources (such as the *Who's Who* or the *Bottin mondain* in France; see Arrondel and Grange, 1993; Denord et al., 2011) or exhaustive administrative datasets (to study very high incomes or wealth using tax data, for example; see Piketty, 2018 [2001]; Godechot, 2012; INSEE, 2021). The sociology of stratification and social classes, on the other hand, looks at broader groups, mainly via national surveys on representative samples (Bouchet-Valat and Jayet, 2019). A quantitative gulf separates graduates of the ultra-elite *Ecole nationale de l'administration* (ENA) and the business leaders studied by the first current, who represents a few tens of thousands of people at most, from the *cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures* (higher-level occupations) category analysed by the second and which includes several million people. This problem is not specific to France. Pointing up the internal 'divide' within the British 'upper service class' (equivalent to higher-level occupations in the official NS-SEC classification) Mike Savage (2015) calls upon sociologists to 'distinguish a somewhat wider grouping at the top layer of the social structure' (p. 236).

The *'dirigeants et professionnels de haut niveau'*⁽¹⁾ (top-level executives and professionals) category presented in this article aims to fill this gap and, in so doing, to respond to a need for a hierarchical distinction within the group of higher-level occupations for use in public statistics (Penissat et al., 2018). Comprising several hundred thousand people—around 3% of all jobs—this category can be used for analyses at the intersection between the sociology of stratification and the sociology of elites. This category distinguishes, among employers, executives, and higher-level intellectual occupations, the upper fraction of positions held in the social division of labour, involving major responsibilities in work organizations (as salaried employees or otherwise) or recognized high-level expertise. While high earnings and advanced qualifications are seen as indicators of a senior position in a given field,⁽²⁾ their levels vary from one field to another—given that dominant positions at societal level represent a variable proportion of the numbers of people in each field, depending on its position in the hierarchy of fields. Therefore, the proposed category

(1) This is the official title used by the French national statistics office (INSEE), in the masculine form. Like INSEE, however, inclusive masculine/feminine wording is used for the job titles and the headings of PCS (*Professions et catégories socioprofessionnelles*) 2020.

(2) While similar in some ways, the notion of field used in this article does not refer strictly to the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu. It corresponds to relatively independent domains within which the criteria and hierarchical rankings of specific occupations have been defined (see below). In practice, the fields correspond here to the two-digit socio-economic PCS 2020 categories within which the job titles are classed (e.g. corporate administrative and commercial managers, or professionals).

is not simply a measure, albeit indirect, of these dimensions. It aims to identify individuals wielding a high level of power, i.e. responsibility or expertise, via a formal position in the division of labour that can be objectified by a job title and job characteristics.

The top-level executives and professionals category is one of the innovations of the latest version of the official French socio-economic classification (*Professions et catégories socioprofessionnelles* [PCS]) introduced in 2020 (Amossé et al., 2019; Amossé, 2020).⁽³⁾ Conducted in parallel with a reworking of the PCS coding system to fine-tune the identification of occupations using a list of several thousand job titles standardized on the basis of survey responses, it is the fruit of a design project led by the authors of this article as part of a working group of the National council for statistical information (*Conseil national de l'information statistique* [CNIS]). In the context of general population surveys, the degree of statistical precision thus obtained is practically unrivalled in France or elsewhere. It provides a means to accurately identify regulated professions, civil service grades and positions in corporate organization charts.

The resulting variable has been available for use in national statistical surveys since 2021, first and foremost in the Labour Force survey (*enquête Emploi*) conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE).⁽⁴⁾ While this new category cannot compete with the detailed definitions and analyses obtained by sociologists of elites through prosopographic studies and monographic surveys, it encompasses a broader social spectrum. It provides a key tool to build cumulative knowledge in different areas of research via a definition that remains stable over time and homogeneous across different sources, making it possible, for example, to identify the selection mechanisms at play for access to the occupational elite, to analyse in more detail the 'glass ceiling' blocking women's career advancement, and to better understand social mobility and homogeneity.

These analyses will also extend the scope of elite studies based on general population surveys, in which these groups are identified primarily on the basis of the most prestigious educational qualifications or the highest incomes and levels of wealth.

This article begins by presenting the theoretical foundations of the category (Section I), its definition and the methodological challenges of deploying it in statistical surveys (Section II). It then describes a first example of its use (Section III) in the 2021 Labour Force survey which gathered detailed data on the sociodemographic characteristics of top-level executives and professionals, illustrating the utility of this new category for analysis of social mobility.

(3) The report of the CNIS working group responsible for updating the PCS and the associated overview article describe the preparatory work on the category conducted by the authors of this article between the autumn of 2018 and the autumn of 2019, in collaboration with Cédric Hugrée.

(4) Unfortunately, the category cannot be recreated in past surveys as it is defined using the job titles of PCS 2020.

I. Theoretical presentation

More than two decades ago, David Grusky and his co-authors (Jasper Sørensen in 1998; Kim Weeden in 2001) were already pointing up the need to rethink the framework of class analysis, purportedly in decline at that time because of its links to the Marxist philosophy of history. They suggested departing from the macrosociological ‘big-class’ level used by specialists of social stratification in favour of a mesosociological ‘micro-class’ approach closer to that of the sociology of labour. Under this approach, class analyses took as their research object occupations or groups of occupations, which appeared to be the only categories with enduring sociological consistency in that they corresponded to specific modes of access, types of organization and working conditions, shared career trajectories and occupational sociabilities, rules and values, sometimes even lifestyles or specific political affiliations. The creation of the top-level executives and professionals category is inspired by this current.

Its commonalities with micro-classes include the limited size of the proposed category, but also—and more fundamentally—the importance of grounding the analysis of social stratification in the reality of work environments, of their intrinsic segmentations and hierarchies. In fact, its components, defined as the upper segments of different socio-economic (occupational) categories (*Catégories socioprofessionnelles* [CS]), are akin to micro-classes. While not directly forming spheres of shared acquaintance and exclusivity that only narrow definitions of the elite can capture, they represent shared job opportunities for the graduates of prestigious schools, shared spaces of professional socialization and shared domains of career mobility. Reflecting combinations of social characteristics (economic, cultural, etc.) linked to work situations and environments, their definition is multidimensional, like the French socio-economic classification as a whole (Desrosières and Thévenot, 2002 [1988]). As a statistical combination of these various components, the category created should enable social scientists to examine, as a hypothesis at least, the unity and coherence of an ‘occupational elite’—thereby broadening the scope of a classical research question in the study of elites.

The category is not limited to the higher echelons of income and wealth. Following on from the pioneering work of Thomas Piketty (2018 [2001]), the development of an earnings-based approach has played a key role in demonstrating the widening of economic inequalities to the benefit of the richest sections of French society, but it focuses exclusively on the economic component of inequality. Extending the analysis to encompass the occupational domain provides a broader understanding, not limited to income or qualifications (Mood, 2017). This limitation also applies to research on the formation of elites based solely on academic qualifications (see, for example, Van Zanten and Maxwell, 2015). Moreover, measures of income are beset by classic pitfalls

(under-reporting, including in fiscal sources; variability over time in response to economic cycles or over the life course) and academic qualifications say nothing in themselves about the positions occupied during a working career. All these factors explain why occupational status, an item of information easily collected in a variety of surveys, remains the key analysis tool for the quantitative sociology of social stratification (Connelly et al., 2016; Bouchet-Valat and Jayet, 2019).

1. Identifying positions and describing occupations

The purpose of the top-level executives and professionals category is to identify the highest positions in each field defined by one of the categories belonging to the higher-level occupations or employers, based on the assumption that these positions can reasonably be captured via the job titles that reflect their ranking in work organizations and in society more generally. In the vocabulary of the sociology of elites, the approach adopted here is positional, i.e. based on the formal positions occupied by individuals, in contrast to a reputational approach (based on the mutual recognition of members of the elite) or a decisional approach (based on the observation of concrete actions; see Coenen-Huther, 2004, for a summary presentation).⁽⁵⁾ This approach is consistent with that defended by Charles Wright Mills, for whom ‘the elite are not simply those who have the most, for they could not ‘have the most’ were it not for their positions in the great institutions. For such institutions are the necessary bases of power, of wealth, and of prestige’ (Mills, 1956, p. 14).

In line with the Bourdieusian approach in terms of fields (Bourdieu, 2011; Lahire, 2001) or that of Mills in terms of institutional orders (Mills, 1956), we do not assume that senior positions can be identified on the basis of a single criterion, uniformly valid for all fields, be it, for example, income, academic qualification or a combination of both. On the contrary, as each field is relatively independent and follows its own logic, the classification criteria cannot, a priori, be reduced to a single dimension: it is important to identify the occupational hierarchies specific to each field in order to identify the highest positions within it, and hence to accept that those of a given field may, on one or other criterion, be less favourably positioned than those of another. If this rule is not followed, the category obtained will simply be a proxy of income or qualification, with limited sociological value. This construction principle is similar in spirit to that used by Nicole Delruelle-Vosswinkel (1972) to study the ‘notables of Belgium’ (which was far narrower in scope, however).

Using job titles to identify the highest positions is an implicit acknowledgement of the results of ranking battles within each field, as crystallized in

(5) As such, and consistent with the framework defined by the classification of occupations, the category refers neither to the degree of media or political influence nor to the reputation or prestige of the occupations, these notions being difficult to objectify and liable to vary over time.

position titles, corporate organization charts, collective bargaining agreements, civil servant rankings or the laws governing the regulation of certain professions. In this respect, the proposal presented here follows the spirit of the French socio-economic classification, whose categories are defined on the basis of social rules or conventions in classifying occupations (Desrosières and Thévenot, 2002 [1988]). Rather than applying theoretical criteria established in advance—using separate or combined variables such as self-employed/salaried status, firm size or level of income (etic approach)—it uses the ordinary classifications as a basis, so as to make sense for the actors involved (emic approach).⁽⁶⁾ In practice, our approach draws upon studies of job titles reported in statistical sources (e.g. Thévenot, 1983; Kramarz, 1991). Associated with the premises of the economics of convention, these studies have highlighted the multiple ways in which individuals report their occupation, and hence the many practical and normative tenets that organize work activities. This evidence of plurality, which can be linked to the ‘orders of worth’ of pragmatic sociology (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]), guided the creation of specific delineations of hierarchies within the corpora of titles corresponding to the different fields.

2. Between the sociology of elites and the sociology of social classes

The top-level executives and professionals category is based on criteria found in different theoretical currents. In its reference to positions of power in the division of labour, it ties in closely with the categories studied by the sociology of elites, which are however far from unified, as pointed out by William Genieys (2011, p. 9). It is similar in principle, for example, to a part of the definition given by John Scott (2008), for whom the elites can be identified through their exercise of domination, i.e. a power that takes the form of stable and enduring positions of control, either through constraint (coercion or inducement) or authority (expertise or command). Responsibility and expertise, the two criteria used to define the category, correspond to the two dimensions of authority he identifies (Scott, 2002), and are central to contemporary theories of social class. According to the neo-Marxist theory of Erik Olin Wright (1997), it is these two dimensions that enable the most privileged employees to claim a share of the surplus produced through the exploitation of other employees by the owners of the means of production; they also explain, in the neo-Weberian theory of Robert Erikson and John Goldthorpe (1992, p. 42), the advantageous working conditions of service class employees.

The approach applied here, however, calls for a broad, structural interpretation of power and dominance, in contrast to John Scott’s strict definition,

(6) For a presentation and discussion of the contrast between etic and emic approaches, see, for example, Olivier de Sardan (1998) for a general overview; Rose and Harrison (2009, pp. 31–32), and Fihlon et al. (2013), with more specific reference to socio-economic classifications.

limited to cases where these notions can be individually objectified. In attempting to build a bridge between the sociology of elites and the sociology of social classes, the top-level executives and professionals category differs in practice from Scott's definition of elites because much broader in scope. The objective of the proposed category is closer to that pursued over the last 15 years by Mike Savage and Karel Williams (2008) who, observing the marginalization of elite studies in response to the fragmentation of their objects and methodological choices, have sought to reincorporate them into the quantitative analysis of social classes. Indeed, since the turn of the 1970s in France and in the United Kingdom,⁽⁷⁾ most elite studies have focused on limited sections of the social space, analysed via monographs based on local or prosopographic data. While empirically detailed and highly informative within their own field of investigation, these studies, including those claiming to adopt a structural approach (Denord et al., 2011) are of limited utility for analysis at societal level of different segments of the elite defined in a broad sense (notably, its comparison with other groups).

The scope of the category proposed here is much broader than that usually applied in the sociology of elites, so we cannot expect the individuals within it to closely resemble each other and, even less so, to recognize each other as members. This is neither the 'power elite' described by Charles Wright Mills (1956)—defined by the fact that its position at the summit gives its members domination over all fields and the ability to transfer their power from one field to another—nor the group of 'contemporary personalities' studied by Alain Girard (1961) in his analysis of 'social success in France'. The scope applied here corresponds to an extension to national level of what Charles Wright Mills calls the 'local upper class' (Mills, 1956, Ch. II), what Anthony Giddens (1972) refers to as the 'secondary structure' of the elite, or what Mattei Dogan (2003) calls the 'third circumference'.

The creation of the top-level executives and professionals category can be likened to the programme proposed recently by Erzsebet Bukodi and John Goldthorpe (2021) to revive elite studies. As they point out (p. 10) 'it is not apparent why it should be so exclusively important to treat as elites only those groups that can be directly associated with the exercise of power [like John Scott] or to consider elites only within the context of class analysis [like Mike Savage]'. This observation points up the need to find a middle way between the two approaches. Yet Erzsebet Bukodi and John Goldthorpe's proposal still differs from the approach applied here. While the authors fix a much smaller order of magnitude for the components of the elite they define, each of which must count 'in tens, hundreds or, at very most, the low thousands' (p. 11), the category proposed here includes almost a million people (see below). Were we to adopt their terminology, top-level executives and professionals would rather represent the recruitment pool for the elites, whose social composition, these

(7) See, for example, Birnbaum et al. (1978) and Stanworth and Giddens (1974).

authors suggest, should be studied, notably in relation to that of the elites per se. It is also in this sense that the category establishes a link between the sociology of elites and the sociology of social stratification: it is a statistical tool to examine social selection processes that lead—in both intergenerational and intragenerational terms—from the ‘occupational elite’ in the broad sense to the elite in the narrow sense, identified by monograph.

The difference in order of magnitude with respect to elite studies is reflected in the lesser precision of the category obtained and a reduction of the potential depth of analysis. But these drawbacks are offset by the wide availability of the variable in national surveys, making it possible to accumulate knowledge on a vast array of questions relative to the comparison, both internal and external, of the different components of the ‘occupational elite’ thus defined. While the approach proposed here is not suited to analysing individual or local mechanisms of domination—a question central to the sociology of elites—it provides a tool for detailed study of inequalities at the summit of the social structure, differentiated across occupational domains and comparative over time.

3. Identifying the top of the social hierarchy in statistical terms

Similar in its construction to certain notions developed by sociologists of the elite, the top-level executives and professionals category, in terms of size, lies at the margins of quantitative sociology of social stratification, where it has no equivalent, excepting in the Norwegian classification proposed by Marianne Hansen and her co-authors (2009).

None of the major classifications of socio-economic status or social class identifies an upper group corresponding roughly to the 3% of jobs contained in the category proposed here. In France, the categories of the PCS classification corresponding to the top of the socio-economic structure are those of *cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures* (3) (higher-level occupations) and *chefs d'entreprise de plus de 10 personnes* (23) (employers with more than 10 employees), but their scope is much broader than for the category proposed here (19% of the working population in 2020).⁽⁸⁾ In international classifications likewise, the categories covering the highest positions are broad (Leiulfstrud et al., 2010), accounting for between 13% and 25% of the working population, be it in the EGP class schema (Erikson et al., 1979), the ESeG (Meron et al., 2016) or ESeC (Rose and Harrison, 2009) European socio-economic classifications, or the class schemas of Erik Olin Wright (1997) or Daniel Oesch (2006).

Conversely, arguing the need to focus on the summit of the social structure in order to study its role in the widening of economic inequalities and the transformations of capitalism (Savage and Williams, 2008; Savage, 2015), Mike Savage and colleagues (2013) define the ‘elite’ (sometimes qualified as

(8) As we will see below, the highest positions are mixed with lower positions, even at the most detailed level (four-digit occupation codes).

‘ordinary’) as a class comprising 6% of the population identified inductively via an automatic classification procedure. Within this category, ‘chief executive officers, IT directors, marketing and sales directors, financial managers and management consultants, along with elite professions of dentists and barristers.’ (p. 234)—a portion of the occupations included in the present proposal—are largely over-represented. But this approach nonetheless differs from the one presented here. First, it covers a population that is twice as large, and second, its use is limited to certain specific surveys as its implementation is based on ad hoc variables concerning economic and cultural resources, and not occupation alone.

To our knowledge, the Oslo Register Data Class Scheme (Hansen et al., 2009) is the only classification that includes a category similar to the one defined here. Developed to analyse administrative register data which makes it possible to study small groups, it has been in use for around a decade and has spawned numerous publications (Hansen and Toft, 2021, for a recent example). Inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, it is based on the Norwegian classification for salaried occupations⁽⁹⁾ (STYRK), and on income for self-employed and artistic occupations. It comprises 13 classes distinguished both by their overall amount of capital, and by composition of this capital. The top ‘elite’ or ‘upper class’ level includes 4% of the classified Norwegian population. It is divided into three subgroups: cultural, economic, and with a balanced composition of capital (which includes the professionals). While the top level of the class scheme is very similar to the category proposed here, its definition is slightly more general and its scope slightly broader.⁽¹⁰⁾

II. Constructing the category

The new system used since 2020 to code the French socio-economic classification of occupations is based on a computerized list of thousands of standardized job titles and a limited number of additional variables required for coding.⁽¹¹⁾ The classification is thus simpler to produce and can be used in a broader range of statistical sources. Following on from research in the sociology of occupations (Bernard, 2021, for a recent example), this system also provides a means to identify certain specific occupational fields or segments that straddle

(9) Detailed occupation titles are given on the project website at: <https://www.sv.uio.no/iss/english/research/projects/ordc>

(10) It includes physicians, veterinarians, dentists, pharmacists, psychologists, architects, lawyers, researchers and professors, engineers, mayors and town/city councillors, as well as ‘chiefs’ (*sjef*) in addition to ‘directors’. When income is used as a classification variable, more artists can be included than in the category presented here, but this rules out its use in surveys where the income variable is unknown.

(11) An automated search function can be used to progressively filter the list of proposed job titles according to the terms entered. If an appropriate title cannot be found, a description can be entered in free text form, in which case the occupation code and its inclusion, or otherwise, in the category can be determined manually.

more than one category, such as ‘digital occupations’, ‘green occupations’ or the ‘occupational elite’ presented here (Amossé et al. 2019). It is the very existence of this new process that made it possible to empirically implement a category in accordance with the theoretical objectives and principles laid out in the first section.

1. A detailed list of occupations as a basis

The list of job titles established for computerized data collection of PCS 2020 corresponded to a dual objective: first, to enable respondents to find their occupation easily and without error; and second, to acquire sufficiently detailed information (with the additional variables) to obtain a unique occupation code, along with additional domains or segments, like the category presented here. To this end, the list was based on the job titles spontaneously reported in the main INSEE sources (Census and Labour Force surveys), which should therefore be easily recognizable by respondents. The range of social and cognitive registers used by respondents to report their occupation (type of activity, position, title, grade, etc.), and the variety of details indicated (sector, function, etc.) were included when they were necessary for occupation and category coding and when they were not overlong or were not associated with too many job titles (which may hamper legibility and selection from the list during data collection).

In parallel, specific information was added to the job titles of the list when it was needed for coding and did not make the list more difficult to use.⁽¹²⁾ For the top-level executives and professionals category, the information given in the job titles includes the size threshold of the firms or departments where the jobs are occupied by salaried directors, indicators of level of responsibility or expertise in certain occupations (in the civil service especially) and the status under which certain professions are practiced.

The boundaries of the top-level executives and professionals category within the various socio-economic categories, or the more limited occupational domains contained within them, were established via the distinctions brought to light by the spontaneously reported job titles and via the knowledge of occupations acquired collectively during the reworking of the PCS classification. This information was complemented by legal documents delimiting occupational hierarchies such as collective bargaining agreements and civil service rankings (and salary grids), statistics from public sources or social media (LinkedIn or Glassdoor⁽¹³⁾) and scientific publications (from the sociology of occupations especially) or labour organizations (APEC employment

(12) Details were only added to job titles when they concerned a large enough number of people. The empirically defined threshold that gradually emerged was in the order of several hundred cases among the total working population.

(13) Data from these sites must, of course, be treated with caution as information on employer, job title and salary are posted by individuals themselves. They nonetheless provide pointers about occupational hierarchies that were taken into account if found to be consistent with other sources.

agency, consulting firms, employers' organizations and trade unions, etc.) to objectify the income levels—and sometimes qualifications—of the various occupations in a given field. Data collection was preceded by a highly meticulous preparatory phase. Drawing on sparse and sometimes incomplete information—in the absence of general data to characterize and rank the job titles often corresponding to small numbers of individuals—this work included two successive validation phases using data collected in the 2020 pilot Labour Force survey, and then in its 2021 reworked version. The results of this second analysis are given in Section III of this article.

2. Detailed description by socio-economic category (CS)

The last part of this section provides a summary of the job titles selected to define the category (more than 1,500 titles are concerned out of the approximately 5,400 contained in the list used to code all socio-economic categories⁽¹⁴⁾), then examines the general construction criteria. A detailed description of the category construction is beyond the scope of this article. It can be found online on the INSEE website in the form of a grid of job titles (<https://www.insee.fr/fr/information/6050075>) and on the dedicated socio-economic classification website (<https://www.nomenclature-pcs.fr>).

Among employers with at least 10 employees (*chef:fes d'entreprise d'au moins 10 personnes*, CS 23), the category includes those who run firms with 50 employees or more (corresponding to occupation 23A1). However, on a more exceptional basis, certain employers running a firm with between 11 and 49 employees are also included when it belongs to a highly qualified service sector such as banking, insurance, property development, culture or health.

The following professions (*professions libérales*, CS 31) are included: all health professions requiring a PhD when the practitioner is self-employed (specialist and general practitioners, dental surgeons, veterinarians and pharmacists); notaries; certain legal and accountancy professions when the practitioner is either self-employed in a firm with at least one other person, or is a partner (lawyers, chartered accountants). Generally speaking, all the professions in this category are included when their firm has at least 10 employees (architects, surveyors, etc.).

Among senior administrative and technical civil servants (*cadres administratives et techniques de la fonction publique*, CS 33), the category is based primarily on the A+ category defined by the Direction générale de l'administration de la fonction publique (DGAFP; Baradji and Peyrin, 2012), but with a more restrictive definition. We include: senior management, inspection, auditing and expert grades of the state civil service, among which '*grands corps*' and chief engineers; equivalent positions in the local government and hospital civil service, with a

(14) The large number of titles included in the category reflects the detail of its definition: many top-ranking positions concern only a small number of people; many specific titles had to be included to delimit the inclusion thresholds.

threshold based on population size, in line with those used by the DGAFP (Baradji et al., 2015); magistrates; senior military officers above colonel grade, as well as military physicians, dentists, pharmacists and veterinarians; members of parliament and elected officials in large local government bodies and representatives of trade unions and employers' organizations at national level.

Among senior teaching and scientific occupations (*professeur-es et professions scientifiques supérieures*, CS 34), the category includes: senior management occupations in primary and secondary education (inspectors, head teachers, etc.) and in higher education (directors of higher education institutions); full university professors, senior researchers, and teachers in elite post-secondary *classes préparatoires*; salaried physicians and pharmacists working in hospitals and for the Sécurité sociale.

Among information, artistic and entertainment occupations (*professions de l'information, des arts et des spectacles*, CS 35), we include: A+ grade civil servants in cultural occupations and their private-sector equivalents (heritage curators, etc.); senior positions in the media and publishing (editors-in-chief, senior reporters, etc.), in film, broadcasting and live entertainment (producers, directors, filmmakers, etc.) in cultural entities (opera house directors, lead dancers, soloists, etc.), and fashion (haute couture designers, top models).

Among corporate administrative and commercial managers (*cadres administratifs et commerciaux et cadres administratives et commerciales d'entreprise*, CS 37), the category includes: generalist directors with responsibility for a department, a branch or a firm with 50 or more employees; directors with high-level specialist functions or holding senior positions of responsibility, with no size threshold (director for France,⁽¹⁵⁾ of financial control, etc.); directors of the largest stores or trade outlets; bank directors and financial market specialists.

Among corporate engineers and technical specialists (*ingénieur-es et cadres techniques d'entreprise*, CS 38), the category comprises: generalist technical directors with responsibility for a department, branch or firm with 50 or more employees; directors with specific technical functions or in specific technical domains involving high-level expertise or responsibility, without a size threshold (directors of R&D, of IT security, research engineers, etc.); senior management or expert occupations in the transport sector (airline pilots, etc.).

3. Methodological discussion

The category was defined with reference to the collected list of job titles used for PCS 2020, which offered a key opportunity to specify more clearly the threshold within each segment of the occupational structure. This did not resolve all of the methodological problems encountered during the delimitation process, however.

(15) Expression used in certain companies.

Generally speaking, the contours of the category depend on the number of social and cognitive registers used to describe one's occupation. For the practical definition, it must be possible to add a limited number of terminological clarifications without affecting the concision of the coding system, which must be readily understood by the entire working population. Fortunately, several relatively simple general principles can be applied to both define the boundary within each occupational domains and to guarantee the consistency of the definition across domains.

In the corporate sector, the most senior positions are identified mainly via the term *directeur* (director), excluding the terms *chef* (head) and *responsable* (manager) which most often refer to less senior positions (as objectified by qualifications and salary levels; see below). We also exclude some *directeur* job titles referring to managers of small entities in certain sectors, such as supermarkets or mini-markets, agencies (postal, dating, surveillance, security, funeral services, temporary employment), youth hostels, campsites, holiday camps, etc. This rule shows the importance of considering the economic weight of the department, entity or firm headed by the *directeur*, a weight that depends both on sector of activity or area of specialty (generally known via with the job title) and size (which provides justification for only considering titles with the mention '50 or more employees' for managing directors in administrative, commercial and technical domains).

In addition, the civil service corps and grades which are still important markers of rank in the senior civil service are also used to identify situations based on the position held (identification method similar to that used for the private sector via the term *directeur/directrice* and the mention of '50 or more employees' or equivalent thresholds in terms of population size for local government entities⁽¹⁶⁾): the category thus includes both the titles 'general director of local government services (80,000 population or more) (*directeur-trice général-e des services d'une collectivité territoriale*) and 'local government administrator' (*administrateur-trice territorial-e*). In line with the definition of the A+ category for the central government civil service, we also include, among others, the corps of newly qualified graduates of the École polytechnique, École nationale d'administration⁽¹⁷⁾ and the École nationale de la magistrature. The titles of executives and engineers mentioning these corps are also included when they correspond to salaried corporate positions.

Last, in the sectors of health, law, economic or technical studies, the occupation names themselves, in the strong sense of profession as defined in American sociology (de Verdalle, 2012), are sufficient to delimit the contours of the category. For the health sector, an initial version (Amossé et al., 2019) only included, among salariat occupations, practitioners with directorship

(16) The thresholds were determined in collaboration with the DGAFP.

(17) Institut national du service public (INSP) since 1 January 2022.

positions (hospital practitioners with university teaching functions, chief physicians or departmental directors). This distinction was abandoned due to the practical impossibility of associating hierarchical distinctions with medical specialties for all job titles, but also because of the very high qualifications and levels of income of medical practitioners as a whole.

Wherever possible, the rules followed are based on established occupational delimitations (professions, senior civil service). In all other cases, areas of equivalence were established on the basis of similarity, taking account of empirical constraints linked to the official socio-economic classification. This is notably the case for the threshold of 50 employees or more used to distinguish self-employed and salaried corporate executives. The boundary aims to be consistent both within a given occupational domain, and between domains. This consistency is confirmed by the exploratory statistics that follow.

Note that in certain occupational domains (primarily art, science and sport) where the highest positions may reflect the recognition of individual qualities, the category simply identifies professionally and institutionally established situations. In line with the chosen mode of identification and scale of analysis, senior positions in the music sector are identified by the fact of being a soloist. In the scientific sector, they are defined as A-ranked positions in higher education or research. In sport, being a professional sportsperson is considered as evidence of a sufficient level of expertise.

More broadly, the empirical limits of the proposed category are those of any socio-economic classification based on occupations combined with a limited number of additional variables (status, firm size, occupational qualification): a same job title may correspond to positions that are not totally alike and may omit certain distinctions, whatever the level of detail. To be used as a reference tool for social statistics, its empirical construction must be transparent, stable over time and remain faithful to its defining principles. This latter requirement, of key importance due to the narrow scope of the category (3% of the working population), rules out the use of job titles that, in a significant share of cases, correspond to situations quite different from the one the category aims to identify.⁽¹⁸⁾ The category thus aims to identify a very large proportion of the most high-ranking job positions, but not to guarantee that all are included. Given these reservations, an approach based on reasoned realism is needed for its analysis, in which the conventional dimension of the measure is acknowledged but does not rule out the production of positive knowledge: with caution for estimating numbers, with more confidence for their comparisons and trends (both internal and external).

(18) This choice is based on statistical reasoning whereby the identification of a small group is highly prone to 'false positives' (individuals included wrongly in the group) which, even if their number is small on the scale of the population as a whole, may easily represent a large share of the group and mask its specificities (Banens and Le Penven, 2016).

III. Empirical analyses

We conclude this article presenting the top-level executives and professionals category with a series of initial empirical explorations to illustrate its practical utility. They are based on data from the 2021 Labour Force survey,⁽¹⁹⁾ the first for which its final coding is available.

1. Using job titles to validate the category

The first set of analyses serves to validate the construction of the category by examining the job titles in the list as selected by respondents in the survey, hence by getting close to situations actually observed in the working population.

While established on the basis of relatively small samples, and therefore subject to caution, these analyses reveal that job titles in the category are highly concentrated. Although the corpus contains 322 different titles (out of a possible total of 1,500) for the 1,203 individuals of the elite,⁽²⁰⁾ the 10 most frequent words cover 73% of the entire sample, and the 20 most frequent 84% of the sample (Table 1; the results by socio-economic category are given, in French, in the Appendix).

The category includes a large share of titles with the words *directeur/directrice* (director) and *médecin* (physician), or titles associated with the various medical specialties such as psychiatrist, radiologist or gynaecologist, for example. Cutting across different occupational domains (private and public sectors; administrative, commercial and technical functions; independent and hospital physicians), the variants of these terms and the associated job titles account for more than half of the members of the category. Note that certain common job titles including the term *directeur* (such as IT director, director of communication) are rarely found in the category as only job titles that also specify ‘50 or more employees’—far less numerous than those without this additional specification—are included.

The other most common titles also correspond to recognized professions with well-established titles. They cover the main defining fields of the category: self-employed professions, be it health (dental surgeon, pharmacist, veterinarian), law (lawyer, notary, bailiff), technical domains (architect), finance (chartered accountant); technical expertise (engineer); business management (employer, business executive); senior civil service (senior officer, magistrate) or higher education (full university professors and *classe préparatoire* teachers).

(19) Information on income is available for only around one-sixth of the sample. Likewise, data on social origin are only available for a part of the sample.

(20) Out of 39,647 individuals interviewed in the first quarter of 2021, 1,203 are in the top-level executives and professionals category, representing 3% of the survey sample (unweighted data).

Table 1. Most frequent job titles in the ‘top-level executives and professionals’ category in 2021

First (or only) word of the title	English translation	Most frequent additional words, if any	English translation	Number, share (aggregate share) in the category
<i>Directeur-trice</i>	Director	<i>de projet informatique, commercial-e (50 salariés ou plus), des ressources humaines (50 salariés ou plus), des marchés financiers, marketing</i>	IT project, commercial (50 or more employees), human resources (50 or more employees), financial markets, marketing	328, 27% (27%)
<i>Médecin</i>	Physician	<i>généraliste, spécialiste, hospitalier-ère (praticien-enne hospitalier-ère), du travail</i>	general practitioner, specialist, hospital (hospital practitioner), occupational physician	228, 19% (46%)
<i>Ingénieur-e</i>	Engineer	<i>chercheur/chercheuse, de l'industrie, des mines et télécommunications, financier-ère</i>	research, industrial, mining and telecommunications, financial	78, 6% (53%)
<i>Avocat-e</i>	Lawyer	<i>associé-e</i>	partner	57, 5% (57%)
<i>Chirurgien-ne</i>	Surgeon	<i>dentiste</i>	dental	52, 4% (62%)
<i>Pharmacien-ne</i>	Pharmacist			44, 4% (65%)
<i>Professeur-e</i>	Teacher	<i>agrégé-e dans le supérieur (CGPE), des universités</i>	post-secondary elite, university (full position)	31, 3% (68%)
<i>Expert-e</i>	Accountant	<i>comptable, commissaire aux comptes</i>	chartered, auditor	25, 2% (70%)
<i>Architecte</i>	Architect	<i>DPLG</i>	licensed	22, 2% (72%)
<i>Cadre</i>	Manager	<i>dirigeant-e (50 salariés ou plus)</i>	executive (50 or more employees)	18, 2% (73%)
<i>Psychiatre</i>	Psychiatrist			16, 1% (75%)
<i>Vétérinaire</i>	Veterinarian			16, 1% (76%)
<i>Administrateur-trice</i>	Administrator	<i>de la fonction publique d'État</i>	State civil service	15, 1% (77%)
<i>Notaire</i>	Notary	<i>associé-e</i>	partner	14, 1% (79%)
<i>Chef-fe</i>	Executive	<i>d'entreprise</i>	business	13, 1% (80%)
<i>Radiologue</i>	Radiologist			13, 1% (81%)
<i>Gynécologue</i>	Gynaecologist			11, 1% (82%)
<i>Huissier-ère</i>	Bailiff	<i>de justice</i>	court	11, 1% (83%)
<i>Magistrat-e</i>	Magistrate	<i>judiciaire</i>	judicial	11, 1% (84%)

Coverage: Working population in the top-level executives and professionals category ($n = 1,203$), France excluding Mayotte.

Note: The main words, and complements, are given in decreasing order of frequency; the top-level executives and professionals category was coded by the authors (for the coding program see <https://www.nomenclature-pcs.fr/coder/coder-la-categorie-des-dirigea>). Provisional unweighted data used to validate the proposed category.

Source: 2021 Labour Force survey (first quarter), INSEE.

A second set of analyses (Table 2) shows that the delimitation of the *directeur/directrice* job titles in the top-level executives and professionals category clearly identifies the top of the income hierarchy in the various domains in which it is defined, by comparison with other *directeur* titles and with those of *chef* and *responsable* (which, with a few rare exceptions, are excluded from

the category). This is especially the case in the private administrative and commercial sectors where the directors belonging to the category have substantially higher median net incomes: the difference is €1,550 per month with respect to other directors. This is confirmed for job titles only included in the category if they include the mention '50 employees or more': the difference with respect to those without this mention is €1,394 per month.

Table 2. Median full-time monthly income (in euros) in 2021 of persons with the job title *responsable*, *chef-fe*, and *directeur-trice* (depending on whether they are included or not in the top-level executives and professionals category)

Job title	Public sector, teaching, culture, health CS 33 to 35 and CS 42 to 45		Private sector, administrative and commercial CS 37 and CS 46		Private sector, technical CS 38 and CS 47-48	
	Excluded	Included	Excluded	Included	Excluded	Included
<i>Responsable</i> (manager)	2,148 (18)	– (0)	2,400 (122)	– (0)	2,583 (76)	– (0)
<i>Chef</i> (head)	2,564 (8)	10,000 (1)	2,494 (25)	4,500 (1)	2 600 (77)	– (0)
<i>Directeur-trice</i> (director)	2,900 (31)	4,000 (8)	3,500 (51)	5,050 (24)	3,540 (12)	4,000 (18)
<i>Directeur-trice</i> with (included) / without (excluded) the mention '50 employees or more'	4,500 (1)	4,700 (1)	3,300 (45)	4,694 (18)	3,250 (10)	4,000 (3)

Coverage: Population in full-time salaried employment ($n = 4,617$) of the socioeconomic category groupings, France excluding Mayotte.

Interpretation: The sample contains 76 job titles beginning with the word *responsable* in the private sector technical categories; all are excluded from the category and their median income is €2,583 per month.

Note: Top-level executives and professionals category coded by the authors (for the coding program, see <https://www.nomenclature-pcs.fr/coder/coder-la-categorie-des-dirigea>); monthly full-time median income in euros at the survey date (numbers correspond to observations where income is known). Provisional unweighted data used to validate the proposed category.

Source: 2021 Labour Force survey (first quarter), INSEE.

2. Sociodemographic description of the category

In addition to these initial analyses confirming the validity of the choices made to define the category, the data from the 2021 Labour Force survey can be used to describe the social characteristics of top-level executives and professionals and to compare them with other higher-level occupations and the rest of the working population (Table 3). The statistical analyses are based on the classification of job classes established for the PCS 2020 (Amossé et al., 2022), which divides individuals into four classes (A*, B*, C* and D*), with higher-level occupations (salaried or self-employed) corresponding to class A*.⁽²¹⁾ For these analyses, a separate category is used for top-level executives and professionals,

(21) This population is very similar, in practice, to that of higher-level occupations and of employers with more than 10 employees in the PCS, with 87% of the A* class belonging to these PCS group and category.

Table 3. Characterization in 2021 of top-level executives and professionals by sex, age, income and qualification (compared with other higher-level occupations and the rest of the working population)

	N	Top-level executives and professionals n = 4,801 (%)	Other higher-level occupations n = 35,154 (%)	Other jobs n = 120,113 (%)
Sex	160,068	100	100	100
Man		63	53	50
Woman		37	47	50
Median age (1st and 3rd quartiles)	160,068	47 years (38–56)	43 years (34–52)	42 years (32–52)
Age group	160,068	100	100	100
Below 30		8	17	23
30–39		24	26	24
40–49		28	28	25
50–59		25	23	24
60+		15	5	5
Median net monthly income of full-time workers (1st and 3rd quartiles)	20,830*	€4,800 (€3,312–€6,250)	€2,700 (€2,200–€3,500)	€1,680 (€1,400–€2,020)
Net monthly income of full-time workers	20,830*	100	100	100
Below €2000		6	15	71
€2,000–€3,999		31	67	27
€4,000–€5,999		26	13	1
€6,000–€9,999		27	4	1
€10,000 and above		11	1	0
Qualification	159,573	100	100	100
8+ years higher education, <i>grande école</i> , etc.		55	19	1
Other 5 years higher education		22	28	4
Less than 5 years higher education		23	52	95

Coverage: Population in employment (n = 160,068), France excluding Mayotte.

Note: The association between each variable and belonging to the category is statistically significant at the 1% level according to chi-square tests of independence; * income is known only at the time of first interview. Weighted data.

Source: 2021 Labour Force survey, INSEE.

and they are removed from class A*. Based on the associated qualifications and incomes, these initial analyses confirm that this category captures the specific characteristics of the most top-ranking socio-economic positions.

A sign of the glass ceiling and, more generally, of the gendered selection mechanisms that hold back women’s careers, the proportion of men in the top-level executives and professionals class is higher than in other higher-level occupations (63% vs. 53%). The members of the category are also slightly older (median age 47 years vs. 43 years), with half as many people under age 30 (8% vs 17%) and three times as many over-60s (15% vs 5%). This shows that the

highest-ranking positions are rarely accessible to young people in their first job but are occupied more frequently towards the end of the working career, with a later retirement age.

Logically, the differences between top-level executives and professionals and the other higher-level occupations are even more pronounced in terms of qualifications and income. More than three-quarters (77%) of the category have a qualification corresponding to at least five years in higher education (vs. 49%). They stand out even more strongly if we focus on the most advanced or prestigious qualifications: 55% hold a PhD or an advanced teaching qualification (*agrégation*), are graduates of a *grande école* or qualified to exercise a profession (lawyer, notary, etc.), versus just 19% among other higher-level occupations.

In 2021, the net median income of top-level executives and professionals working full time (€4,800 per month) was 77% higher than that of other higher-level occupations (€2,700 per month), a difference slightly larger than between this latter group and the rest of the working population (61%, €1,680 per month) and a ratio of three to one between the first and last group. It is for incomes above €4,000 per month that top-level executives and professionals stand out most markedly: 64% have incomes above this threshold, compared with just 18% of other higher-level occupations and 2% of the rest of the working population. The difference is even greater at the €10,000 threshold, with 11% of this category earning above this amount, versus just 1% of other higher-level occupations.

3. Illustrating the utility of the category: social mobility into and out of the occupational elite

Since its origins in France—with the pioneering work of the demographer Alain Girard (1951, 1961) and the statistician Jacques Desabie (1955)—up to the most recent developments (see, for example, Veljkovic, 2022), the history of the analysis of social mobility has faced major challenges in terms of data and methods. The category presented in this article, associated with the employment class scheme (Amossé et al., 2022), makes an original contribution to this research by providing a specific measure of the summit of the socio-economic hierarchy. It addresses the limitations of the ‘higher-level occupations’ group which, thanks to the strong upward shift in the structure of qualifications, now includes one-fifth of all working people.

The Labour Force survey asks respondents about their parents’ occupations at the time when they completed their education. The data collection and coding method is the same as for the respondents’ own occupations, although membership of the category may be underestimated due to the lesser degree of precision in the respondents’ answers about their parents’ occupations. Among persons aged 35–59 who have ever worked, a standard scope for analysis of social mobility (see, for example, INSEE, 2020), 23% of people who are

top-level executives and professionals (or for whom this was the last occupation) also had a mother or father in the same situation when they completed their education, compared with 9% among those in a non-elite higher-level occupation (and 5% on average) (Table 4). More generally, 65% of top-level executives and professionals had a mother or father in an elite or other higher-level occupation (A*), compared with 43% among those currently or previously in a non-elite higher-level occupation (and 23% on average). Conversely, 14% of those with a mother or father in an elite occupation are, or have been, in an elite occupation themselves, compared with 6% of those with a parent in a non-elite higher-level occupation (and 3% on average).

Table 4. Table of social origins and positions in 2021 using the starred employment class scheme and the top-level executives and professionals category (%)

Parents' class (dominance approach)	Child's class (respondent)											
	Elite		A* (non-elite)		B*		C*		D*		Overall	
Elite	14	23	46	9	20	4	12	2	9	2	100	5
A* (non-elite)	6	42	41	34	26	21	15	10	11	8	100	18
B*	2	15	26	21	30	23	26	16	16	12	100	18
C*	1	16	16	25	23	35	34	43	25	38	100	35
D*	0	3	10	9	17	15	34	24	38	32	100	20
Situation unknown	1	1	13	3	17	3	31	5	38	8	100	5
Overall	3	100	22	100	23	100	28	100	23	100	100	100

Coverage: Persons aged 35–59 who have ever worked (n = 20,604), France excluding Mayotte.
Note: The parents' employment class is constructed based on the dominant occupation approach, i.e. the parents belong to the elite if the father or mother work as a top-level executive or professional, to class A* if the father or mother's job is ranked in class A*, etc. Each cell indicates the column percentage (top right) and row percentage (bottom left). First interview, weighted data.
Interpretation: 14% of respondents with at least one parent in an elite occupation belong to the elite; 23% of members of the elite have at least one parent in an elite occupation.
Source: 2021 Labour Force survey, INSEE.

The odds ratios (OR) measuring intergenerational social mobility show the strength of social reproduction for the occupational elite. In the first column of Table 5, they reveal the strong gradient of social selection mechanisms for access to the highest positions across different social backgrounds. Taking skilled routine occupations (C*) as reference, the odds ratios range from 0.3 for unskilled routine occupations (D*) to 11 for non-elite higher-level occupations (A*) and 33 for the elite. While the odds ratios corresponding to situations of social reproduction (on the diagonal of Table 5 and Figure 1) follow a U-shaped curve, the values are much higher in the upper echelons of the social hierarchy (OR = 33) than in the lowest (OR = 1.5). Social closure is therefore

much stronger at the top of the social hierarchy than at the bottom. Moreover, the difference between the occupational elite and the other higher-level occupations (A*) is very pronounced. These analyses confirm the utility of the top-level executives and professionals category for the analysis of social mobility.

Table 5. Odds ratios corresponding to the table of social origins and positions in 2021 using the starred employment class scheme and the top-level executives and professionals category

Parents' class (dominance approach)	Child's class (respondent)				
	Elite	A* (non-elite)	B*	C*	D*
Elite	33.0 (23.7-45.9)	8.5 (6.8-10.7)	2.5 (2.0-3.3)	Ref.	1.0 (0.8-1.4)
A* (non-elite)	11.2 (8.6-14.4)	5.9 (5.2-6.6)	2.6 (2.3-2.9)	Ref.	0.9 (0.8-1.1)
B*	2.5 (1.9-3.4)	2.2 (1.9-2.4)	1.7 (1.5-1.9)	Ref.	0.8 (0.7-0.9)
C*	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
D*	0.3 (0.2-0.6)	0.7 (0.6-0.8)	0.8 (0.7-0.9)	Ref.	1.5 (1.4-1.7)

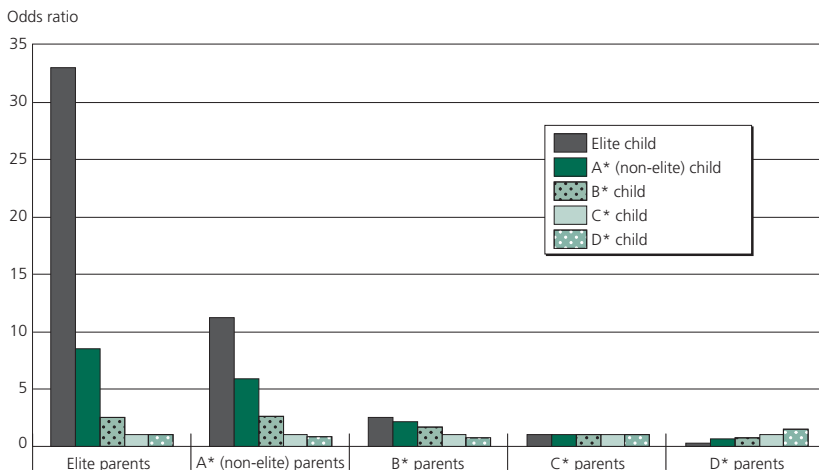
Coverage: Persons aged 35–59 who have ever worked and whose mother's or father's occupation is known ($n = 19,512$), France excluding Mayotte.

Note: The parents' employment class is constructed based on the dominance approach (see note under Table 4). Each cell gives the odds ratio and its 95% confidence interval according to the parents' class, the reference situation being class C* (multinomial logistic regression). The unweighted analyses give very similar results. First interview, weighted data.

Interpretation: The probability of holding a position in the occupational elite rather than a skilled routine position (C*) is 33 times higher if one's mother or father held an elite position rather than a skilled routine position (C*).

Source: 2021 Labour Force survey, INSEE.

Figure 1. Odds ratios corresponding to the table of social origins and positions in 2021 using the starred employment class scheme and the top-level executives and professionals category



Coverage: Persons aged 35–59 who have ever worked and whose mother's or father's occupation is known ($n = 19,512$), France excluding Mayotte.

Note: Graphic representation of Table 5.

Interpretation: The probability of holding a position in the occupational elite rather than a skilled routine position (C*) is 33 times higher if one's mother or father held an elite position rather than a skilled routine position (C*).

Source: 2021 Labour Force survey, INSEE.

Conclusion

The top-level executives and professionals category presented in this article is one of the main innovations of the latest version of the French socio-economic classification (of occupations), alongside the PCS Ménage (Household PCS) (Amossé and Cayouette, 2022) and the employment class scheme (Amossé, Cayouette and Gros, 2022). This is a new instrument to analyse inequalities at the top of the social structure. Tying in with the multidimensional socio-economic categories, and taking account of social rules and conventions in classifying occupations, it identifies the highest positions in the division and organization of work within a range of occupational domains via a precise definition of job titles made possible by the new coding system of PCS 2020.

Based on clearly defined theoretical principles and empirical delimitations, the category and its various components provide a descriptive tool open to a wide range of interpretative approaches. Attempting to create a bridge between sociology of the elite and sociology of social classes, it offers—at least as a hypothesis to nurture scientific debate—the notion of ‘occupational elite’ whose components such as social mobility (or reproduction), spatial circulation (or segregation), housing characteristics, educational strategies, cultural practices, wealth composition, etc. can be analysed internally and compared externally. As a first empirical illustration, the article demonstrated the statistical force of the mechanisms of social reproduction that characterize this elite.

With respect to the empirical materials deployed by the sociology of elites, the proposed category has certain limitations: in theoretical terms, it cannot precisely identify the various types of prestige, the mechanisms of recognition and the capital specific to each of its segments (Denord et al., 2011); in empirical terms, despite its high detailed level of breakdown, it does not strictly identify all of the most top-ranking positions in the socio-economic hierarchy.

That said, this new category, developed in accordance with transparent and stable rules of definition, and available in official statistical surveys since 2021, aims to fill a void in the identification of the various segments that form the summit of the social structure, providing a means of objectification that goes beyond local monographs or investigations limited to a single field. Extending well beyond the 0.1%, and even the 1% of the new economics of inequality, this category will help to shed light on how the elites and upper classes interact, be it through selection processes (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2021) or objective alliances (Herlin-Giret, 2019). Amid persistent media focus on the polarization between a fantasized elite and a mythicized population of ordinary people, it may also help to uncover the mechanisms and layers of social stratification in all their complexity.

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APPENDIX

The appendix is not translated into English as there is not an exact correspondence between detailed job titles in English and French. Analysis is only meaningful in the language of origin.

The table below presents the most frequent initial words in the French titles of top-level executives and professionals in each occupational category (CS). These titles, which account for more than half of all members of the category in each CS, give an accurate idea of the occupations included within each one.

Tableau A1. Principaux débuts de libellés de dirigeants et professionnels de haut niveau, par catégorie socioprofessionnelle (CS)

CS	Effectifs de la catégorie dans la CS	Proportion de la CS couverte par les débuts de libellés affichés (%)	Débuts de libellés les plus fréquents
23	44	89	chef-fe d'entreprise (8), cadre dirigeant-e (7), gérant-e (6), d.* (7, dont: d'agence, 2 ; associé-e, d'assurance, d'hôpital, de restaurant, industrie, 1), vice-président-e (4), d. général-e (4), président-e (3)
31	342	89	médecin (107), avocat-e (55), chirurgien-ne (42), pharmacien-ne (33), expert-e-comptable (25), architecte (21), vétérinaire (16), notaire (14), huissier-ère (11), dentiste (9), radiologue (9)
33	84	71	administrateur-trice (14), magistrat-e (11), haut-e fonctionnaire (10), contrôleur/contrôleuse aérien-ne (9), d. de l'administration (6), inspecteur-trice général-e (6), d. d'hôpital (5), ingénieur-e électronicien-ne des systèmes de sécurité aérienne (4), médecin (4), d. de cabinet (3), d. général (3), d. juridique (3), ingénieur-e général-e (3), secrétaire général-e (3)
34	205	82	médecin (117), professeur-e agrégé-e (19), professeur-e des universités (12), pharmacien-ne (11), psychiatre (11), chirurgien-ne (10), gynécologue (9), anesthésiste (6), d. de recherche (5), praticien-ne hospitalier-e (5)
35	33	82	d. (8, dont: de production, 3 ; artistique, d'édition, de conservatoire, de musée, photographique, 1), producteur-trice (6), rédacteur-trice en chef (6), conservateur-trice (4), réalisateur-trice (3)
37	112	58	d. commercial-e (19), d. des ressources humaines (13), ingénieur-e financier-ère (13), d. régional-e (12), d. (marché financier) (11), cadre dirigeant-e (10), d. administratif/administrative (10), d. du développement (9), d. du marketing (8), d. de la stratégie (7)
38	126	72	d. de projet (36), ingénieur-e chercheur-e (31), ingénieur des mines (18), d. qualité (7), pilote de ligne (6), d. logistique (6), d. technique (5), d. de division (4), d. de laboratoire (4), d. de site (4), d. de travaux (4)

Champ: Population en emploi.

Légende: *Pour simplifier la lecture du tableau, les libellés « directeur-trice » sont indiqués par l'abréviation « d. ».

Note: Codage de la catégorie des dirigeants et professionnels de haut niveau réalisé par les auteurs ; les 10 débuts de libellés les plus fréquents sont indiqués pour chaque CS, ceux cités une seule fois étant exclus ; les premiers mots de chaque libellé ont été identifiés après mise en équivalence des libellés féminins et masculins, et pour certains termes génériques fréquents (« directeur-trice », « ingénieur-e », « professeur-e ») en les déclinant selon les deuxièmes et parfois troisièmes mots pour plus de détail ; certaines précisions ont, de la même manière, été ajoutées pour faciliter la compréhension d'autres libellés (« secrétaire général-e », « contrôleur/contrôleuse aérien-ne »). Données provisoires non pondérées utilisées à des fins de validation de la catégorie proposée.

Source: Enquête Emploi 2021 (premier trimestre), Insee.

Les libellés pour les chef-fes d'entreprise de plus de 10 salariés (CS 23, seuil d'inclusion à 50 salariés), CS qui contribue relativement peu en termes d'effectifs, couvrent les différentes formes juridiques de direction d'entreprise (indépendante ou salariée) : chef-fe d'entreprise, cadre dirigeant-e, gérant-e, directeur-trice.

Concernant les professions libérales (CS 31), ainsi que les professeur-es et professions scientifiques (CS 34), on peut souligner le poids des libellés commençant par « médecin » qui, d'une part, font de ces CS les plus importantes en termes d'effectifs inclus et, d'autre part, prennent le pas sur les autres professions en leur sein. Ces libellés regroupent à eux seuls un cinquième des individus retenus, alors même que d'autres libellés existent pour chaque spécialité médicale (« chirurgien-nes » notamment, ainsi que « psychiatres », « radiologues », « dentistes » et « gynécologues »), en plus des libellés « praticien-ne hospitalier-e » et « professeur-e des universités ». D'autres professions libérales sont néanmoins relativement fréquentes dans la CS 31: avocat-e, pharmacien-ne, expert-e-comptable, architecte, vétérinaire, notaire et huissier-e. En revanche, les professions intellectuelles, professeur-es et chercheur-es hors santé, sont minoritaires dans la CS 34, les libellés les plus fréquents étant « professeur-e agrégé » (en classes préparatoires) et « professeur-e des universités ».

Les cadres administratifs/administratives et techniques de la fonction publique (CS 33) comportent pour leur part une proportion importante de haut-es fonctionnaires, d'administrateurs-trices et de magistrat-es, mais aussi de personnels techniques de haut niveau (ingénieur-es et contrôleurs/contrôleuses aérien-nes).

Les professions de l'information, des arts et spectacles (CS 35) contribuent assez peu à la catégorie en termes d'effectifs, du fait d'abord de la taille limitée de ce champ mais aussi, comme on l'a noté plus haut, des difficultés à en saisir les positions les plus élevées à travers les libellés de profession. Les professions du cinéma, de la presse et du secteur public sont les plus représentées (producteur-trice, rédacteur-trice en chef, conservateur-trice, réalisateur-trice, ainsi que des directeur-trices), alors que les artistes sont presque complètement absent-es.

Les cadres administratifs et commerciaux/administratives et commerciales d'entreprise (CS 37) présent-es dans la catégorie sont constitué-es presque exclusivement de directeur-trices », avec toutefois une part notable de consultant-es et d'ingénieur-es financier-ères – la finance est d'ailleurs le domaine le plus représenté si on les additionne au libellé « directeur-trices (marché financier) ».

Enfin, les ingénieur-es et cadres techniques d'entreprise (CS 38) sont aussi principalement des directeur-trices techniques. Si cette catégorie comprend une proportion notable d'ingénieur-es chercheur-es, les autres libellés d'ingénieur-e apparaissent dispersés en fonction de leur école d'origine ou spécialité de formation (Mines, télécommunications, etc.).

Dans l'ensemble, les différents libellés directeur-trice regroupent plus d'un quart des individus retenus. On les retrouve dans toutes les catégories socio-professionnelles, à l'exception des professions libérales.

– Parmi les chefs d'entreprise (CS 23) : directeur-trice « d'agence », « associée », « d'assurance », « d'hôpital », « de restaurant », « industrie ».

– Parmi les cadres administratifs d'entreprise (CS 37) : directeur-trice « commerciale », « des ressources humaines », « régional-e », « marché financier », « administratif/administrative ».

– Parmi les cadres techniques d'entreprise (CS 38) : principalement directeur-trice « de projet ».

– Parmi les cadres administratifs/administratives et techniques de la fonction publique (CS 33) : directeur-trice « de l'administration », « d'hôpital », « de cabinet », « général-e », « juridique ».

– Parmi les professions de l'information, des arts et spectacles : directeur-trice « artistique », « d'édition », « de conservatoire », « de musée », « photo », « de production ».

Enfin, parmi les individus retenus, quelques dizaines (de l'ordre de 1 sur 20) ont un libellé qui inclut l'adjectif « général » : notamment « directeur-trice général-e », « secrétaire général-e », « inspecteur-trice général-e », « ingénieur-e général-e ». On les trouve parmi les chef-fes d'entreprise (CS 23), les cadres administratifs/administratives et techniques du public (CS 33) et du privé (CS 37 et CS 38).



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Résumé

Thomas Amossé, Milan Bouchet-Valat • DIRIGEANTS ET PROFESSIONNELS DE HAUT NIVEAU : UNE DÉFINITION STATISTIQUE DE L'« ÉLITE SOCIOPROFESSIONNELLE »

Cet article présente le cadre théorique, la méthode de construction et les premières analyses d'une nouvelle catégorie associée à la nomenclature des professions et catégories socioprofessionnelles (PCS 2020), les « dirigeants et professionnels de haut niveau », qui vise à identifier les positions professionnelles les plus élevées au sein de la société française. Cette catégorie délimite, parmi les chef-fes d'entreprise et les cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures, la fraction supérieure des positions (salarisées ou non) caractérisées par une responsabilité importante dans les organisations de travail et/ou une expertise reconnue comme étant de haut niveau. Objectivées par un libellé d'emploi et des caractéristiques professionnelles, ces positions définissent une « élite socioprofessionnelle » (3 % de la population en emploi) qui permet de réaliser la jonction entre la sociologie de la stratification et la sociologie des élites. Mise à disposition dans les enquêtes de la statistique publique, cette catégorie contribue à renouveler l'analyse des inégalités socioprofessionnelles de façon complémentaire aux approches s'appuyant sur les plus hauts niveaux de diplôme ou de revenu. En guise de première illustration de ses possibles apports empiriques, cet article met en évidence une très forte reproduction intergénérationnelle en haut de l'espace social.

