

Social Class in Europe

An introduction to the European
Socio-economic Classification

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This book is dedicated with respect and affection to the
three sociologists who made our endeavours possible:

Robert Erikson

John H. Goldthorpe

and

David Lockwood

6 The comparative measurement of supervisory status

*Reinhard Pollak, Gerrit Bauer, Walter Müller,
Felix Weiss and Heike Wirth*

Introduction

As we have seen in previous chapters, one important element in the operational definition of ESeC is supervisory status. Supervisors are seen as being somewhere between managers and ordinary employees, but it is notoriously difficult to establish where exactly the boundaries should be set and on what basis. As we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, in the construction of the ESeC class schema supervisory status is used to allocate to class 2 occupations which would otherwise be coded to class 3; and to class 6 those that would be in classes 7, 8 or 9. While detailed measurement instructions exist for occupation, for instance, international manuals describing occupational titles in great detail, the systematic study of supervisory status is much less developed. In this chapter, we examine two basic issues. First, we present findings from a pilot study that examines how the proportion of employees identified as supervisors depends on the operational procedure used. We find that different procedures to assess supervisory status may lead to quite substantial variation in class distributions within the ESeC schema. Second, we explore the procedures used to measure supervisory status in two major European surveys that each aim to provide data at a high degree of cross-national comparability: the European Social Survey (ESS) and the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Our conclusion is that in both surveys there is considerable room for improvement in cross-national comparability.

Measures of supervisory status and characteristics of supervisors identified

Manifestly, the measurement of supervisory status must depend on the theoretical basis of the concept. The literature, however, is not very explicit on this issue. In sociology the concept has its most explicit formulation in the various versions of Erik Olin Wright's conceptions of the class structure. In its early version (Wright 1976, 1978) his conception echoes the often emphasized ambivalent position of supervisors between employers or their agents on the one side and ordinary employees on the other. Supervisors are in a position of conflict, as they have to ensure that orders from above are

properly executed by their fellow employees in work groups of which the supervisors themselves are part. Supervisors are thus in a 'contradictory class location' between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat but, as Wright explicitly states, they are rather closer to the proletariat: they have minimal control over labour, but no control over physical or money capital. They have control over the direct producers as subordinates, but are not part of the hierarchy as such, have no autonomy over the immediate labour process and do not even participate in decisions concerning narrow aspects of sub-units of production. In later versions of his theory (Wright 1985) the class structure is assumed to be based on the unequal distribution of productive assets (ownership of capital, of skills and of organization assets) which then give rise to exploitation by the asset owners of non-owners of the respective assets. In this conception supervisors have limited control over organization assets (still in an intermediate position between managers and their subordinate workers) and they are further differentiated according to the level of skill assets they possess. When, between the first and second versions of Wright's theory, supervisors are rightly moved to a less marginal position in the class structure, it becomes difficult to see how and in what sense they may be seen as exploiters of their fellow workers.

As we have seen in previous chapters, for Goldthorpe and his associates, on whose class conception ESeC is essentially based, the aim of the class schema is to differentiate positions within labour markets and production units 'in terms of the employment relations that they entail' (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992: 37). For employees in dependent work this concerns the nature of the relationship with their employers; and in this context the position of supervisors is characterized as taking a mixed form between the two prototypical contractual arrangements regulating the employment relationship, the labour contract and the service relationship. Of the two elements that constitute the *raison d'être* of a service contract the requirement of asset specificity rather than the presence of monitoring problems makes supervisors' jobs different from those that are regulated under a labour contract. While this assertion may be correct, it does not lead much further in indicating the specific characteristics that render a job supervisory. However, as supervisors are conceived to be in a socio-economic category clearly different from that of other employees, this implies that,

what is crucial is that those persons coded as supervisors should be only those in occupations that are formally recognized, usually in the actual job title, as having primarily supervisory functions and responsibilities – and thus status. Otherwise, their employment relations are unlikely to be different from those of rank-and-file workers.

(John Goldthorpe, personal communication)

Hence, simply being responsible for supervising anyone else's work would not be sufficient, because then every craftsman with a mate, or every clerical

worker with an office junior, would have to be considered a supervisor. Their numbers would be grossly inflated and the connection with employment relations would be lost.

Even if we accept these considerations as a starting point for the definition of supervisory status in the construction of ESeC, it still remains unclear how its measurement may best be operationalized. It is well known that survey results can be sensitive to the way survey questions are asked (Groves *et al.* 2004). For some concepts variations in question wording may have huge effects; for others the effect of variations may be small. As such, variations cannot be known a priori and can hardly be derived theoretically; often empirical tests are needed to establish the characteristics of measurement procedures. The measurement of supervisory status is no exception to this rule.

In order to gather initial empirical evidence we report here the results of a small pilot study carried out in Germany. The study probes different ways of operationalizing supervisory status and then examines (1) the effects on the number of supervisors identified; (2) the specific supervisory responsibilities found among those identified through the different measurement procedures; and (3) the consequences of the different measurement procedures on the implied ESeC class distributions.

The study was carried out as a field experiment. Several questions were included as part of the University of Mannheim Study of 'Employment and the Family'. Data were collected through a telephone survey during spring 2006 and cover the German population aged 18 to 65 years. In total, it includes 931 respondents¹ who were mainly interviewed on their work life experiences and concept of the family.

The impact of question wording on the proportion of employees identified as supervisors

In total, five different questions were used to assess whether a respondent holds a supervisory position. Not all respondents were asked all questions because the sample was split into two randomly assigned groups whose members received supervision-related questions, as shown in Table 6.1.

The questions were chosen in order to be as close as possible to existing operationalizations of the supervisor concept in several core, large-scale surveys in Europe, but mainly the ESS and the LFS. Respondents' answers to the questions should thus have implications for the size of ESeC classes between the several existing operationalization options currently used. As the study was carried out in Germany, we relied primarily on the German wording used in the implementation of these surveys, but we have also included other aspects, either used in the operationalization in other countries or those discussed in the ESeC project.

As a first question in this module, Split A received the supervisor question as implemented in the German ESS survey. Split B first received a supervisor

Table 6.1 Supervisor questions asked in the Mannheim Study of Employment and the Family 2006

	English translation ^a	Original question in German ^a	Short name
Random Split A			
A1	In your job, do tasks include supervising the work of other employees?	Gehört es bei Ihrer beruflichen Tätigkeit zu Ihren Aufgaben, die Arbeit anderer Mitarbeiter zu beaufsichtigen?	ESS-question (German ESS)
if question A1 is 'yes'			
A2	In your job, are you formally responsible for supervising the work of other employees?	Sind Sie in Ihrer beruflichen Tätigkeit formal dafür verantwortlich, die Arbeit anderer Mitarbeiter zu beaufsichtigen?	Formal responsibility (British LFS)
A3	Is supervising other employees part of the main tasks in your job?	Zählt das Beaufsichtigen von Mitarbeitern zu Ihren Hauptaufgaben bei Ihrer beruflichen Tätigkeit?	Supervising as main task (modified ESeC proposal)
Random Split B			
B1	In your main job, are you in a leading position?	Sind Sie in Ihrer (Haupt-) Erwerbstätigkeit in einer leitenden Position tätig?	Leading position (German LFS)

Note

^a Questions are shown in present tense only. For former employment, we asked the same questions in past tense.

Data source and questions: Mannheim Study of Employment and the Family (2006).

question as implemented in the LFS in Germany by the Statistisches Bundesamt, the German National Statistical Institute.² As respondents were allocated randomly to either one of these 'treatments', differences in the proportion of supervisors found will be produced by the differences in question wording, except for random sampling error.

We consider the ESS question to represent a very broad understanding of supervision. Besides employees with an explicit supervisory status, it may, for instance, include the monitoring of the work of apprentices or of newly recruited personnel when first introduced to the job.³ Under this operationalization a large proportion of workers should be identified as supervisors, probably more than those with explicit supervisor status. In contrast, the operationalization in the German LFS question seems to be rather exclusive as it is closer to measuring managerial status than supervisory status.

In order to cover additional aspects of supervisory status, one of the two treatment groups was administered further questions. In Split A, those

answering the ESS question with 'yes' were then asked if they were *formally responsible* for supervising the work of other employees and, in a third question, if supervising the work of other employees constituted *one of the main tasks* in their job.⁴ The 'formal responsibility' question is derived from the UK LFS. Since it emphasizes the formal assignment of supervisory responsibility, we expect it to code fewer employees as supervisors than the ESS question alone. The third question relates to a definition of supervisors in *The ESeC User Guide*: 'Supervisors are employees who are neither managers nor professionals but who are responsible as their main job task for supervising the work of other employees' (Harrison and Rose 2006: 10).⁵ However, instead of asking whether supervision is *the* main task, as suggested by Harrison and Rose, we relaxed the high requirement of this formulation by asking whether supervising is *part of* the main tasks. It may be assumed that many workers who have supervisory status may nevertheless have various other tasks and thus the exclusive reference to the main task might be too narrow.

Conceptually, there is a clear hierarchy among these questions. From question 1 to question 3 the requirements to be adjudged a supervisor become ever more demanding. Positive answers to questions 2 and 3 imply a positive answer to question 1.⁶ In the following we first compare the difference in the proportion of workers identified as supervisors by the ESS and the German LFS questions. As these questions are the first asked to each randomly generated split, the splits can be treated like experimental groups. As Table 6.2 shows, the two groups differ by about 16 percentage points in the proportion of workers identified as supervisors. The German LFS question identifies a clearly smaller proportion of workers as supervisors than the ESS question. According to a two-sample-comparison t-test (assuming equal variances) the group difference is statistically significant at least at the 0.01 level.

Table 6.2 Proportions of dependent workers identified as supervisors by ESS question and further specifications

Supervisor question	Percentage of supervisors	Total N	95% conf. interval %
Random Split A			
A1 ESS question	42.2	360	[35; 49] ^b
A2 Formal responsibility	30.8	172 ^a	
A3 Supervising as main task	13.4	172 ^b	
Random Split B			
B1 Leading position (German LFS)	26.6	365	[21; 33] ^b

Notes

^a Based on cases who were asked both questions only. The percentage refers to all employees.

^b According to a two-sample-comparison t-test (assuming equal variances) the group difference between Split A and Split B is statistically significant at least at the 0.01 level.

Data source: Mannheim Study of Employment and the Family (2006).

As Table 6.2 indicates, when using the broad ESS definition, about 42 per cent of all employees are identified as supervisors. Given the constraint of formal responsibility (UK-LFS) the proportion shrinks to 31 per cent. The modified ESeC approach ('one of the main tasks') is the most exclusive concept and categorizes only 13 per cent of all employees as supervisors. As expected, the three measures are increasingly exclusive. In fact, they may be understood as an ordinal measurement.

Effects of question wording on responsibilities held by employees identified as supervisors

What are the characteristics of a supervisory position and how do the supervisory concepts differ with respect to these characteristics? In the Mannheim Study we tried to identify several areas in which supervisors could be expected to have special responsibilities. The first two items (see Table 6.3) address the coordination and assignment of work, since supervisors could be seen as being responsible for the assignment of work duties to their fellow employees and of being in command of how the work should be conducted. The second set of items refers to the evaluation of subordinates, including performance appraisals, the authority to take disciplinary actions and wage or salary rises for subordinates. The last item, 'strategic planning', could be seen as one that tends rather more towards managerial duties. Finally, the median number of subordinates is reported. For each of the items the respondents were asked whether they have power of decision, whether they have to consult others for a decision, or whether they have no influence at all. In Table 6.3 the first number in each cell refers to the proportion of supervisors who have full decision power in a given field. The italicized number accumulates supervisors who have at least some decision power (see Table 6.3, notes a and b). Finally, the median number of subordinates is reported.

Two main results may be read from the table. If we look at the columns and move from the left to the right, a substantial decrease in the proportion of positive answers becomes apparent. Starting from the left, the majority of supervisors have full or at least partial discretion for work assignment and in the command of how subordinates should do their work. More formally or legally relevant items like performance appraisals, disciplinary actions and wage increases are markedly less often left to the supervisor's own decision. Pay increases in particular are apparently not an issue for supervisors to rule on, but this could be specific to Germany. Lastly, even though more supervisors have some say in strategic planning than in pay increases, the former is still likely to be more of a managerial task.⁷ In sum, the items obviously address different elements of supervisory duties and there is a substantial variation in the likelihood of these items being answered positively by supervisors. The list of items used here is not exhaustive, but it is a first step for future work on the clarification of the supervisor concept. For the present

Table 6.3 Supervisory responsibilities by various definitions of supervisory status. Percentage of supervisors who have full^a or at least some^b decision power in a given field

Wording of the supervisory question according to	Number of cases (N)	Assigning work duties (%)	Command of how employees to conduct work (%)	Giving performance appraisal (%)	Taking disciplinary action (%)	Raising wage/salary (%)	Strategic planning (%)	Number of subordinates (median)
ESS: supervising task	148	55 ^a 91 ^b	49 89	28 76	10 61	2 31	6 61	5
British LFS: formally responsible	94	69 97	55 94	39 88	15 80	3 40	7 65	7
Modified ESeC proposal: among main tasks	29	86 97	72 93	59 93	28 93	7 52	10 69	13.5
German LFS: 'leading' position	95	77 96	67 91	40 87	19 79	6 42	13 67	7
British LFS net: formally responsible, but not as a main task	68	60 96	48 94	29 85	9 75	1 35	6 62	5
ESS net: Supervisory task, but not formally responsible and not as a main task	48	30 82	35 79	10 54	0 21	0 12	4 56	3

Notes

Respondents had three response categories for any given area: (1) R is able to decide on his or her own; (2) R has to consult co-worker and/or senior for decision; (3) R has no decision power at all.

^a Proportion (%) of supervisors who have full decision power in a given field.

^b Proportion (%) of supervisors who have at least some or full decision power.

Data source: Mannheim Study of Employment and the Family (2006).

purpose, however, we focus on the second main result of the analysis which relates to the different definitions of a supervisor.

Looking at the first three rows of Table 6.3, we find strong variation in the answers depending on the supervisory concept concerned. As expected, the ESS definition is the most comprehensive one. For all items, these supervisors have the lowest numbers of positive answers and also have the lowest median number of subordinates. The UK-LFS definition is somewhat more exclusive than the ESS one while the modified ESeC definition ('one of the main tasks') is the most exclusive of all. Together with other co-workers and seniors, almost all supervisors have some say with respect to the first four items. The decline in positive answers as we move to the items at the right-hand side of the table is also found for supervisors defined by the modified ESeC proposal. Yet this decline is much less pronounced, in particular for cases of at least some decision power. The German LFS question returns similar results to the UK-LFS question. It is only in the first two items where the German LFS definition shows more supervisors who can decide independently.

Overall, the most exclusive supervisor definition (modified ESeC proposal) returns hardly any *false positive* supervisors, i.e. employees coded as supervisors even though they do not have supervisory responsibilities. The 'ESeC supervisors' seem to be well equipped with supervisory rights in the area of work organization and evaluation of their subordinates. One could argue, though, that some of them could even be seen as managers or, in other words, that the high level of supervisory responsibilities found may be due to the fact that 'ESeC supervisors' are, to a large extent, actually managers. Of course, supervisors are sometimes called 'first line managers' (see e.g. Hales 2005). However, a replication of the present analysis, in which managers (identified by ISCO-88) are excluded returns practically the same results and thus does not affect our conclusions. The modified ESeC definition, therefore, appears to be an adequate one to identify 'true' supervisors. Yet, the question is whether the modified ESeC definition produces *false negatives*, i.e. respondents who are not coded as supervisors even though in fact they are. This question arises because the number of supervisors identified by the UK-LFS question is three times as high as the number identified by the modified ESeC question. Regarding the rather moderate differences between these two definitions of supervisor characteristics in Table 6.3, one might suspect that the modified ESeC definition in fact misses some 'true' supervisors.

To explore this issue, the fifth row in Table 6.3 represents those supervisors who are formally responsible for supervising the work of other employees, although it is not one of their main tasks, i.e. we consider the 'net supervisor definition' of the UK-LFS question. The italicized numbers show that at least three-quarters of these supervisors have at least some decision power with respect to the first four items. About 60 per cent of them are independent when it comes to work assignments, 48 per cent when it comes

to the conduct of work of subordinates and 29 per cent give performance appraisals independently. One could well argue that these respondents should be regarded as supervisors too.

In the last row of Table 6.3, the same analysis was undertaken with the ESS question. We only considered those respondents who were coded as supervisors under the ESS definition, but not under the definition of the UK-LFS or the modified ESeC proposal. As is readily apparent, these respondents are very much restricted in supervising their subordinates independently. Only about one-third of the respondents are eligible to assign work duties and control the conduct of work of their subordinates. In all other fields they have much less influence.

In sum the findings show that the three main definitions of supervisors (ESS, UK-LFS and modified ESeC proposal) differ substantially both when it comes to the number of supervisors identified and the characteristics and autonomy that supervisors have. The modified ESeC definition is a very strict one and we suspect that it might produce *false negatives*. One could argue that the best definition is somewhere in between the modified ESeC definition and the UK-LFS definition. The ESS question, however, is apparently too inclusive. It produces too many *false positives*, at least for Germany.

The definition of supervisors, however, might affect the distribution of ESeC classes because supervisory status is seen as entailing a special kind of employment relationship that results in a 'higher' class position. It is this effect of the supervisory definitions on ESeC to which we will now turn.

The impact of question wording on the distribution of ESeC classes

Given that the different questions clearly identify different proportions of supervisors, what is the impact on the construction of the ESeC classes? To examine this, four ESeC versions are constructed, using each supervisor procedure in turn. Table 6.4 illustrates how different procedures lead to different sizes of the ESeC classes.

The higher salariat is by definition not affected by supervisory status. The (remarkable) differences in Class 1 proportions between the different versions in Split A (10.7 per cent) and Split B (6.8 per cent) can only be caused by random sample differences; however, considering only workers in dependent employment, how does the assignment of respondents to the other six ESeC classes alter as the supervisor question varies?

The proportions of respondents assigned to both class 2 and class 6 decrease as the supervisor question is formulated in an ever more narrow way. In Split A the proportion of class 2 declines from 29 to 24 per cent and the proportion of class 6 decreases from 19 to 5 per cent. The German LFS version produces 24 per cent in ESeC 2 and 12 per cent in ESeC 6 and thus comes closest to the 'formal responsibility' variant in Split A. As the findings show, the varying supervisor questions have much more effect on the size of ESeC class 6 than on ESeC class 2. This is probably due to the fact that being

Table 6.4 ESeC classes based on different supervisor questions

ESeC class	Random Split A			Random Split B
	ESS (A1)	Formal responsibility (A2)	Supervision as main task (A3)	German LFS (B1)
1 Higher salariat	10.7	10.7	10.7	6.9
2 Lower salariat	29.4	27.5	23.9	24.4
3 Intermediate	16.5	18.4	22.0	19.6
6 Lower supervisory and technician	18.7	11.3	4.9	11.8
7 Lower service	8.0	9.5	11.9	15.4
8 Lower technical	7.0	9.5	11.4	10.8
9 Routine	9.8	13.2	14.7	11.1
N	327	327	327	332

Data source: Mannheim Study of Employment and the Family (2006).

coded into class 2 is mainly a result of being employed in a specific occupation, whereas class 6 codes mainly derive from supervisory responsibilities.

In contrast, all other ESeC classes become larger when supervisors are defined more narrowly. Interestingly, the proportions of each of classes 3, 7, 8 and 9 increase at a similar rate (proportional to the size of each of these classes). In other words, when we move from a strict to a less strict operational definition of supervisors, a similar proportion of respondents coded in each of the classes 3, 7, 8 and 9 become supervisors.

We draw the following conclusions. To a non-negligible extent the wording of the 'supervisory questions' influences the proportion of workers identified as supervisors and consequently also the ESeC class distribution. In order to improve the distinctiveness of the ESeC classes, a question is needed that identifies only those employees as supervisors who hold a clearly distinct position from other employees with the same job. Given this requirement, the ESS question might be too broad and might code too many employees as supervisors. In thinking about a theoretically appropriate operationalization, it should be of particular interest to consider which aspect of the supervisory situation justifies shifting an employee to another class position. Although our analysis is limited to the German case, we believe that similar variation will also exist in other countries. For comparative research at least two further complications can be expected. The first may derive from diverse institutional arrangements of supervisory functions that are due to different national legislative norms, work organization and agreements among social partners. The second may be due to the difficulties inherent in administering surveys in multiple languages across Europe and the obstacles to finding functionally equivalent measurement procedures using different languages in different institutional settings. In the next section we will turn to these issues and especially examine the ESS and

LFS operationalizations of supervisory status as presently implemented in the various countries which participate in these surveys. We are particularly interested in the comparability (both between the two surveys and among different countries) of the measurement procedures used.

Operationalization of supervisory status in the ESS and LFS

While in the previous section the focus was on the implications of different operationalizations of supervisory status on the ESeC classification, we now briefly review the practice of comparative measurement of supervisory status in two widely used large-scale population surveys in Europe: the ESS and the EU-LFS. These surveys differ from each other in many respects (such as subjects covered, methodology, sampling procedures and sample size), but both explicitly aim to collect data with a high degree of comparability, albeit by using different strategies. The ESS strives to achieve comparability mainly through *input harmonization* using equivalent measurement procedures (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik and Wolf 2003). The most important means for achieving this is to use identical survey instruments, ideally differing between countries only in the language used. To realize this, a master questionnaire written in a source language (English in the case of the ESS) is translated into other languages with the aim of attaining for each question a semantically equivalent wording.⁸ The approach of the LFS is different. It follows the strategy of *output harmonization*. Output harmonization starts with an internationally agreed definition for *variables* (including their categories) rather than questions and leaves it to each country's research team to determine how to implement them in their survey. In the case of an *ex ante* output harmonization the international standard is already included in the measurement procedure. In the case of an *ex post* output harmonization, conversion procedures are used to adapt existing national data to the agreed international standard (Ehling 2003).

The evaluation of the comparability of the respective questions in the ESS and LFS questionnaires in different countries is not easy and the following exploration can only be a very tentative first step. A major difficulty lies in understanding exactly what has been measured by questionnaires written in so many different languages. We used experts to translate the supervisor question from the different languages into English. The original language questions and back-translations into English are available online from the authors.⁹ These translations may not be fully adequate in all cases. However, we believe that, even on this initial and perhaps rudimentary examination, the results are clear enough to indicate that for both surveys further efforts should be made to improve the comparability of the measurement of supervisory status.

In order to examine the questions it is useful to distinguish between-country and within-country variations. Between-country variation may occur even for countries sharing a common language, i.e. when the question

is asked differently in the countries concerned. Within-country variation may occur when a country implements the questionnaire in more than one language.

Supervisory status as measured in the ESS

The starting point in the ESS is the following question in the English 'Source Language Questionnaire': 'In your *main job*, do/did you have *any responsibility for supervising* the work of other *employees*?' (emphasis added). Each country then translates this question for its national questionnaire in which the crucial aim is semantically equivalent translation. Consequently we focus mainly on this aspect. As already mentioned, the ESS question represents a rather broad conception of supervisory status. In comparing different translations of the source question, particular attention is therefore paid to the italicized terms because they refer to essential elements in the ESS understanding. A different articulation of these elements in the translation may affect respondents' understanding of the question and their responses to it. Now, how do the translations represent the different elements?

First of all, almost all country-specific translations refer directly to the respondent's *main job*. 'Responsibility' and 'supervising', on the other hand, appear to be conceptualized with different connotations. In many instances, for example, the reference to the extensive qualifier 'any responsibility' is lacking. 'Supervising' sometimes receives the connotation of 'leading' or 'managing'. Another important distinction is whether supervisory responsibility refers to other 'employees' or, much broader, to other 'people' or 'persons'. A teacher, for example, might not necessarily be supervising other *employees* (as intended in the concept of supervisor status) when he or she affirms responsibility for the supervision of other *persons* (e.g. students).

To take a somewhat more systematic approach, we classified the translations under consideration into three groups: (1) close to English wording; (2) at most one element clearly different from English wording; and (3) more than one element clearly different from English wording. Even though there is a range of interpretation concerning the placement of the given translations into the three groups and we were rather liberal in the understanding of 'close to English wording', in quite a number of cases the translations are not 'close' to the meaning of the question in the master questionnaire.¹⁰ Instead of discussing each single case, we select a few exemplary cases in which we focus on different national translations into an 'identical' target language.

For the ESS, the question has been translated into three different German versions for Switzerland, Austria and Germany. French versions exist for Switzerland, France, Belgium and Luxembourg. Both of these country groups provide good examples to illustrate how differently the same source question can be translated into a largely identical language (Table 6.5), even within a culturally quite homogeneous area. Among the German translations, the one

Table 6.5 The wording of German and French ESS supervisor questions in different countries

English master question: 'In your main job, do/did you have any responsibility for supervising the work of other employees?'		
Country	German	English
Austria	Haben/Hatten Sie in Ihrer Hauptbeschäftigung irgendwelche Verantwortung in der Aufsicht über die Arbeit anderer Beschäftigter?	Do/Did you have in your main job any responsibility for supervising the work of other employees?
Germany	Gehört/gehörte es in Ihrem Hauptberuf zu Ihren Aufgaben, die Arbeit anderer Mitarbeiter zu beaufsichtigen?	In your main job, does/did your tasks include supervising the work of other employees?
Switzerland	Sind/waren Sie in Ihrem Hauptberuf für die Beaufsichtigung von anderen Mitarbeitenden verantwortlich?	In your main job are you responsible for the supervision of other employees?
<hr/>		
	French	English
Belgium and Switzerland	Dans votre emploi principal, av(i)ez-vous la responsabilité de superviser le travail d'autres employés?	In your main job, do you have responsibility for supervising the work of other employees?
France	Dans votre travail principale, av(i)ez-vous la responsabilité d'encadrer d'autres personnes?	In your main job, do you have responsibility for supervising other persons?
Luxembourg	Dans votre travail principal, avez/aviez-vous des responsabilités de supervision du travail d'autres employés?	In your main job/work, do you have responsibilities for supervising the work of other employees?

used in Germany itself appears to be problematic. It contains one clearly different element. Instead of referring to supervisory *responsibility*, it refers to supervisory *tasks*. The Swiss and the Austrian translations both come close to the English original, though their wording is different. The Austrian translation is almost literal, but is clumsy and hardly corresponds to everyday language use. The Swiss version is better in this latter respect, but the 'any' element of the source question is missing.

Among the French versions, Belgium and Switzerland use exactly the same wording. All key terms – *main job*, *supervises/supervision*, *employees* and *responsibility* – are included, but 'any' before 'responsibility' is replaced by the definite article. Therefore, we consider the Belgian and Swiss versions, as well as the translation used in Luxembourg, as close to the English master question. The translation used in France may have more general connota-

tions. The use of the word 'encadrer' may be understood as supervising, but it can also have the meaning of 'taking care of someone'. Especially as the question refers to other persons and not to other employees, it may not be understood as supervision in the intended sense.

Substantial differences in question meaning may also result when different languages are used within a country. Take Israel as an example. Whereas the Hebrew and Arabian translations refer respectively to 'responsibility of supervision' and 'supervisory responsibility', the Russian-language version, 'Are you responsible for the work of other colleagues (or co-workers) at your main working place?', clearly means something rather different.¹¹ Another example is Belgium. While the French version is close to the English source, the Flemish version does not refer to the main job; and besides 'supervision' it also mentions 'give leadership'.

Even though the ESS project has made substantial efforts to achieve equivalent translations with its TRAPD procedure, the resulting instruments for measuring supervisory status still appear to vary somewhat in the questionnaire versions for different countries. The different instruments are then likely to lead to measures of supervisory status that are not fully comparable.

The supervisory question in the European Labour Force Surveys

As shown above, in academic surveys such as the ESS the preferred strategy to attain international comparability is mostly based on input harmonization. Starting from internationally agreed standards, all participating countries use harmonized methods (e.g. the same wording of questions and response categories, as well as sequence of questions) in implementing the standards. As a rule, country-specific differences should be restricted to the language used for the questionnaire. Thus while in the ESS there is a master question regarding the 'supervisory status' of employees which may be used to look for variations between countries, no equivalent exists with respect to the Labour Force Surveys (LFS). As a starting point we therefore use the explanatory notes given in the Draft Commission Regulation (European Commission 2004) regarding the implementation of the variable 'supervisor responsibilities' in the LFS. While the codification rules (name, column, periodicity, code, description, filter) of the variable are compulsory¹² for the National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) when transmitting the data to Eurostat, the explanatory notes are only recommendations and do not have legal status. Nevertheless these recommendations and their application are essential for obtaining comparable data at the European level and therefore may be used as a baseline to compare the supervisor questions between participating countries.

According to the explanatory notes, 'a person with supervisory responsibilities takes charge of the work, directs the work and sees that it is satisfactorily carried out' (European Commission 2004: 33). In this sense

supervisory responsibility includes 'formal responsibility for supervising other employees¹³ (*other than apprentices*), whom they supervise directly'; and 'sometimes doing some of the work they supervise'. Supervisory responsibilities do not include 'quality control . . . and consultancy'. Furthermore the supervisory responsibilities refer to the *main job*. Persons who have supervisory responsibilities only on a temporary basis, because they are replacing another individual who is absent, should not be considered as supervisors. Where the supervisory responsibility is only part of a person's job or is shared with others, that person should nevertheless be considered as having supervisory responsibility. Persons are considered to have supervisor responsibilities if they supervise the work of at least one other employee.

In the next step we explore whether specific key terms mentioned in the explanatory notes are included in the wording of the LFS supervisor questions. By comparing different questions, the focus is on the terms 'formal responsibility', 'other than apprentices', 'main job' and 'regular basis'. The country-specific questions and their English translation are again available from our website. To begin with, none of the LFS questions explicitly includes all four key terms and only a few refer to at least one of them. Most often the questions refer to the criteria 'formal responsibility'; the other criteria are each mentioned only once. The summarized results are listed in Table 6.6. The missing reference to the 'main job' might simply be explained by a preliminary filter set in the questionnaires; that is, the supervisory question in fact only refers to the respondent's main job. In the case of the other criteria, 'formal responsibility', 'other than apprentices' and 'regular basis', we do not know whether the missing reference in the question actually means that these

Table 6.6 The extent to which the wording of the 'supervisory question'^a in the European Labour Force Surveys^b meets the criteria mentioned in the explanatory notes

LFS supervisor question mentions . . .	
. . . at least one of the key terms	. . . none of the key terms
Cyprus	Austria
Czechia	Belgium
France	Denmark
Germany	Greece
Ireland	Hungary
Switzerland	Italy
UK	Luxembourg
	Norway
	Slovenia
	Spain
	Sweden

Notes

^a Inclusive additional notes in the questionnaire, as far as we understand them.

^b The list is incomplete. We did not contact all NSIs, nor did all NSIs contacted reply to us.

criteria are not considered or whether further explanations concerning the supervisory question are to be found in the LFS interviewer manuals.¹⁴ However, even if there are further explanatory notes in the manuals, the international comparability of the data would improve considerably if the important key terms were explicitly included in the questions.

As with the ESS, it seems that the conceptualization of 'supervisory responsibilities' in the LFS has different connotations in different languages or countries. Provided that our English translations of the questions are adequate, a quite striking contrast, which could affect the comparability of the data, is that in some countries the respondents are asked whether they are supervising or *coordinating* the work of other employees. Coordination could include supervising, but does not have to do so. A secretary, for example, typically coordinates the work of other employees (e.g. meetings, business trips), but is not supervising them. Therefore asking not only for 'supervising' but also for 'coordinating' seems to widen the scope of the supervisory concept too far. A similar problem arises when, as is true for many LFS supervisor questions, the respondents are asked whether they are supervising and/or *managing* the work of other employees. According to our understanding 'managing' refers to the executive personnel and therefore is a much narrower concept than 'supervising', which rather refers to foreman functions.

Among the LFS questions we investigated, a rather deviant concept of supervisory responsibilities is found in both the German and the Austrian LFS. As shown in Table 6.7 the respondents are either asked whether they have a leading function (Austria) or a leading position (Germany). This

Table 6.7 The wording of German EU-LFS supervisor questions in different countries

Country	German	English
Austria	Haben Sie in Ihrer Tätigkeit Leitungsfunktion? (Das kann auch in weniger qualifizierten Berufen der Fall sein)	Do you have a leading [managerial] function in your job? (This could also be the case in less qualified jobs)
Belgium	Trägt F/H Verantwortung, d.h. hat F/H die Aufsicht bzw. die Koordination über die Arbeit anderer Arbeitnehmer	Does she/he have responsibility, that is supervise or coordinate the work of other employees?
Germany	Sind Sie in Ihrer (Haupt-) Erwerbstätigkeit in einer leitenden Position tätig?	In your (main) job, are you in a leading [managerial] position?
Switzerland	Wie viele Personen sind Ihnen direkt oder indirekt insgesamt unterstellt?	How many persons altogether are directly or indirectly responsible to you?

concentration on a leading or managerial function (or, even worse, 'position') seems a quite exclusive concept because it refers mainly to executive personnel. It may therefore be assumed (as has been shown by the Mannheim Study) that the share of respondents answering 'yes' will be quite small, at least much smaller than in the case of 'supervisory/coordinating' or 'supervisory/managing' questions. One might wonder why Germany and Austria depart to such an extent from other countries. A quite simple explanation may be found in the *Official Journal of the European Union* (L71/41; 17.3.2005) in which the codification of the LFS supervisor question (not the wording of the question) is specified. Thereafter the official EU translation of 'supervisor responsibilities' is '*Leitungsfunktionen*'.¹⁵ This seems a rather bewildering translation, given the explanatory notes to the supervisory concept described above. Moreover, like the reference to 'coordinating' or 'managing' in some LFS questions, this translation indicates that there is some uncertainty concerning what precisely should be measured by the supervisory concept.

The extent to which the conceptualization of supervisory status varies even when the same language is used is illustrated in Table 6.7 for Austria, Germany, Switzerland and Belgium, all of which have a German version of the LFS questionnaire. While the Austrian and German questions as described above refer exclusively to a leading function (or position), the Belgian question refers to supervising and coordinating responsibilities. In contrast, in the Swiss questionnaire the respondents are simply asked how many persons they were responsible for. In terms of the explanatory notes all questions are imperfect. Nevertheless, while the Austrian and German supervisory questions are much too exclusive and the Belgian question seems much too broad, the Swiss version in our understanding is the most adequate implementation of the supervisory concept. It not only asks for the number of subordinates, but by using the term '*unterstellt*' it also implies a formal responsibility, thus making sure that the respondent doesn't mistake 'coordination' for 'supervising'.¹⁶

We also discovered some important variations in the English- and French-language versions (see the online appendix referred to in note 9). Even if they are not as crucial as in the German versions, slight differences in the meaning of questions might influence the share of 'supervisors', as has been shown by the Mannheim Study.

Discussion

Supervisory status is an important element in constructing the ESeC. This chapter has explored several problematic issues in the measurement of supervisory status in comparative research. Even though the analyses we provide are exploratory and rudimentary, several observations should be taken into consideration for further improvement in the measurement of supervisory status.

- 1 The current existence of different ways to conceptualize and operationalize supervisory status leads to clearly different proportions of employees being identified as supervisors. The groups identified as supervisors by the different, more or less strict delimitations clearly vary in their supervisory responsibilities. In turn this also leads to statistically significant differences in the distribution of the ESeC classes. It is thus important that both an explicit definition of supervisor status and well-defined measurement procedures are elaborated and used in data collection.
- 2 To date, measures of supervisory status in different large-scale surveys in Europe such as the ESS and the LFS have been based on different conceptions. In the ESS supervisory status is operationalized rather broadly. By referring to 'any responsibility of supervision' it is likely to identify workers as supervisors even if their supervisory functions constitute only marginal elements of their job profile that hardly make them different from other employees. The LFS requires *formal* responsibility for supervising other employees. If we can trust the findings of our pilot study for Germany to be more generally indicative of work and job organization in modern organizational contexts, then *formally* having supervisory functions does represent a stricter definition of supervisory status than the ESS concept. On the other hand, under the LFS definition employees are considered supervisors if they supervise at least *one* other employee. The LFS may thus also identify supervisors with very limited supervisory functions. In contrast, the ESeC notion that supervisors 'are responsible as their *main task* for supervising the work of other employees' (Harrison and Rose 2006: 11) may be too exclusive a requirement. Supervisors often have a rather complex task profile. It might thus be more adequate to require only that supervising the work of other employees is *part of (or among) the main tasks* of an employee. Even with this latter requirement the proportion of supervisors declined rather markedly in the German pilot study. Whatever solution will be found to this issue, it would be highly useful if a standard could be developed and this standard applied in a uniform way in future surveys, be they carried out by social science researchers or by National Statistical Institutes.
- 3 Another source of heterogeneity particular in cross-national comparative research derives from incompatible implementations of agreed concepts in different countries. As our explorations of this issue show, the problem occurs with both input and output harmonization strategies. One reason why this occurs may be that, in the implementation stage, insufficient attention is given to scrutinizing all the different national and language versions of a questionnaire in order to bring to light such inconsistencies. If they can be found *post festum*, when the data are already collected, it must also be possible to find them before the survey is fielded. One way to reduce the problem would involve

meetings of expert groups who critically check instrument by instrument and pursue this task for all countries or at least large groups of countries taken together. This is certainly rather onerous, but inconsistencies are most likely to come to light if different implementations are compared.

- 4 Even though we do not yet have a perfect solution for all issues, this does not invalidate the efforts made in developing ESeC, as discussed further in Chapter 13. Progress is an incremental process. Just to see more clearly where additional work is needed is an important step. The comparative measurement of supervisory status could certainly be improved with experiments similar to those described in the first section of this chapter, but with larger samples and in a larger set of countries. Even without such experiments the formulation of questions designed to measure supervisory status should be revised to become more consistent with the intended concepts, at least in some of the countries.

In the next chapter, the French team also consider problematic aspects with regard to supervision. However, in addition they raise various concerns in respect of ESeC that were commented upon in Chapter 1.

Notes

- 1 The survey is mainly conducted for teaching purposes. Each student in an undergraduate class in methods of social science research has to interview six respondents via computer-assisted telephone interviews.
- 2 Split B was asked one further question. All respondents should have been asked this additional question subsequent to the German LFS question. Due to a technical problem, however, only half of the sample was asked the questions in this way. Therefore we omitted this question from the analysis because the number of cases was too small and the result would add no further evidence to our main argument.
- 3 The English wording of the ESS question is in fact even broader, as it refers to any supervisory responsibility.
- 4 We are aware that some respondents might answer 'no' to the first and 'yes' to one of the following questions. In our pre-test we asked every question of every respondent and the number of 'yes' answers after a 'no' to the first question was close to zero. Further, the logic inherent in the ordering of the questions is quite clear and implies that this response pattern makes no sense.
- 5 'Some datasets have a supervision question which includes the number of people supervised. In such cases we recommend that someone should be supervising at least three people in order to be regarded as a supervisor' (Harrison and Rose 2006: 11).
- 6 Owing to the conceptually clear order of the questions and the results of our pre-test, we had not intended to ask a further question of those respondents who answered the ESS question with 'no'. However, about half of the respondents were asked all questions due to a technical problem during the data-collection process. In this group, we can see that only a small minority (four out of 100) reply 'yes' in questions A2 and A3 after replying 'no' in question A1. Therefore, the construction of our ESeC classes is based on all cases.
- 7 As an additional cross-tabulation shows, about 86 per cent of all managers (ISCO-88 OUGs 1200-1319) have at least some say in this area.
- 8 The translation procedure implemented in the ESS follows the so-called 'Translation, Review, Adjudication, Pre-Testing and Documentation (TRAPD)' approach. For details see European Social Survey 2004.
- 9 See <http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/publications/misc/ESS_online_Appendix.pdf> (consulted 12 February 2009).
- 10 Translations we consider as being far from the English source include, for example, the Swedish version, which does not refer to the main job and asks for 'leadership function' in work rather than 'supervisory responsibility'; and the Polish version, which uses the wording 'oversee the work of other people' and thus can mean quite different things from 'supervising other employees'. An example of smaller deviations in the middle category is the Hungarian version. This only asks whether the respondent has any subordinates, but it does not refer to supervisory responsibility.
- 11 In Israel three language versions are required and none of these is shared with any other ESS country. To reduce somewhat the burden of questionnaire translation with all the TRAPD rules, Israel was allowed a somewhat less strict translation procedure (European Social Survey 2004: 9).
- 12 These elements are made explicit in Commission Regulation EC No. 430/2005 (see European Commission 2005).
- 13 In this sense the function, not the job title, defines supervisory responsibilities. A 'playground supervisor', for example, supervises children but not employees and therefore is not considered to have supervisory responsibilities. In addition, a 'store manager' could be simply a storekeeper and not a supervisor of employees (European Commission 2004: 33).
- 14 In Austria, for example, the LFS interviewer manual points out that supervision of apprentices should not be considered as supervisory responsibilities.
- 15 Which read backwards would be rather translated as leading or managerial functions.
- 16 Another term with a similar meaning would be '*weisungsbefugt*' ('authorized to issue directives').