

**EFFECTS OF RANK VERSUS CATEGORY
IN MEASURING SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL INEQUALITY**

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KEY WORDS: Social inequality, social stratification, response categories

1. Preliminary note

In survey research the subjective self perception of the individual's own location in the stratification system is either measured by a question confronting the respondent with categories of social stratification or by letting allocate her-/himself on an open (only at the end points verbalized) ranking scale. measure we do not exactly know what is in fact measured because usually there is no information about the criteria underlying the respondent's choice for a specific category or a specific scale point. The Neither in a "categorical" nor in an "open ranking" process of "scaling" is left to the respondent for the "categorical" as well as for the "open ranking" measure:

a) With respect to the "categorical" measure, on the one hand, the researcher not only assumes that the respondent understands his (the researcher) system of stratification categories but also is willing and able to apply these categories in day to day life to locate him-/herself in the stratification system.

b) With respect to the open ranking, on the other hand, it is assumed that the space of socio-economic-status in society is identically perceived by each respondent, regardless of the respondent's own location within this space.

2. The instruments of "categorical" and "open ranking" measure

This analysis includes two different "categorical" and one "open ranking" measure which are regularly use in national surveys in Germany.

Figure 1: The "categorical" measures

measure A

lower middle class (LMC)
middle middle class (MMC)
upper middle class (UMC)
upper class (UC)

measure B

working class (AS)
middle class (MC)
upper middle class (UMC)
upper class (UC)

The first categorical measure represents an ordinal scale of stratification from "bottom" through a differentiated "middle" to "top". This categorical measure is fairly abstract, because the categories do not describe specific - or real - social categories or groups. The five-point categorical scale is symmetric in the sense that there is an equal number of categories for lower than middle as there are categories for higher than middle. It is assumed that the symmetry of the scale is not affected by labeling the categories.

The second categorical measure represents a mixture of a labeled five-point "bottom-top" scale: In contrast to the first measure, the second measure defines a specific social category or group: by labeling one of the categories as "working class", the workers

as a group are addressed. The term "working class" has a specific ideological meaning in Germany: "workers" are only "blue collar" workers and the label "working class" corresponds to what Karl Marx described as "working class" in the meaning of "Proletariat". The German label "Arbeiterschicht" activates the ideological background of the class society or at least of class consciousness even without using the term "class".

The symmetry of the five-point categorical scale is disturbed by the ideological weight associated with "Arbeiterschicht" which takes the position of "lower middle" from the first measure. "Arbeiterschicht" is not an abstract theoretical term from social stratification theory but refers to a specific

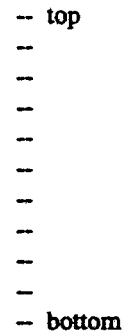
group of "blue collar" workers. Additionally, the area of the "middle" is no longer symmetrically differentiated in both directions "bottom" and "top"; it is only differentiated in the direction of "top".

Since in the face to face interview the order of both categorical measures is read to the respondent from bottom to top one can assume, that workers immediately identify with the "Arbeiterschicht" without listening to much to the other categories. Thus, the two categorical measures are assumed to produce different subjective stratification picture because the distributions might very depending on which measure is used.

The third measure is what we call the "open ranking" scale. It consists of ten boxes where the box at the bottom is labeled "bottom" and the box at the top is labeled "top". The respondent gets a list with this scale and is asked to specify by pencil that box to which she/he believes to belong.

The following results are based on the data of a West German national survey which contained the open ranking as well as the two categorical measures.

Figure 2: Ten point open ranking scale with verbalized end points



3. Results:

3.1 "lower middle class" versus "Arbeiter-Schicht"

A first inspection of the table relating the two categorical measures shows that the "middle" is most

Figure 3: "lower middle class" (column) versus "working class" (row), in %

		lower middle class							
		LC	LMCMMC	UMC	UC	n.a.	n		
working class	LC	56	31	3				9	32
	AS	49	3		0				
	MC	5	49	32		1		14	358
	UMC	43	60	14		3			
	UC	0	12	76		3		8	844
	n.a.	5	34	81		20			
n.a.	UMC	1		25		72		1	138
	UC	3			4	76			
n.a.						14		86	7
n.a.						1		89	
n.a.			2	1				11	
n		37	296	795		131		6	
total									1405

n.a. = no answer

bold = measure B: "AS"; not bold = measure A: LMC

preferred for subjective location into the stratification system and that the two extreme categories - either

"lower class" or "upper class" are not frequently chosen.

As postulated, there are differences of subjective location depending on which of the two categorical measures is used:

Respondents locating themselves into the "lower class" in measure A (containing "lower middle class") split up into two groups of nearly equal size if the next higher category is "working class" (in measure B); half of the measure A "lower class" people staying in the lower class in measure B, half of the measure A "lower class" changing to "working class" in measure B. That is 49 % of people describing themselves as lower class stay there, but 43 % change to the next category "working class" if offered this label.

Thus, if the "working class" label is introduced, respondents tend to change from "lower" to "working" class because this category seems to offer a more appropriate description in their own view. Similarly, 60 % of the people judging themselves as "lower middle class" in measure A change to "working class" in measure B. Additionally, one third (32 %) of the "working class" people in measure B come from the "middle middle class" in measure A which confirms the hypothesis: an ideological background of the identification with the label "Arbeiterschicht" in the sense of the Marxistic term "Arbeiterklasse" or proletariat. But there is still a group of people who do not want to describe themselves as being member of the "Arbeiterschicht". If the category "lower middle" does not exist, they identify with the label "middle class", which makes up a small proportion of 12 % out of N = 844 persons in this group.

The consequences:

First, by inspecting these results more closely it becomes obvious that of those respondents checking the category "working class" have term "worker" in their occupational label. Thus, job status, label of category and subjective perception of location in the stratification system are highly correlated. While in measure A (containing "lower middle class") about 60 % of the "blue collar workers" choose the category "middle class", this proportion is reduced to 40 % in measure B (containing "working class"). Those occupational groups which do not belong to the "blue collar workers" avoid the category "working class" in measure B and choose the next higher category "middle class" instead, although they have checked "lower middle class" in measure A.

Second, if one does not only look for occupational status but for job autonomy which means here: autonomy of decision in the job, it becomes obvious, that without the category "working class" nearly 50 % of those people with lowest levels of job autonomy locate themselves into the "middle class" which can be seen from the corresponding proportions of measure A. In measure B there are only 30 % people of this low job autonomy groups left in the middle class.

3.2 "open ranking" versus categorical measures

60 % of the respondents rank themselves above the middle area. Since there is no easy middle category on a 1 to 10-point-scale most respondents try

Figure 4: top-bottom ranking versus categorical measure A (Arbeiterschicht) and B (lower middle class), in %

Category Instrument	UC/UC		UMC/UMC		MMS/MS		LMC/AS		LC/LC		total rank	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B		
Rank-Value												
top	1	17	14	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	1
	2	50	57	2	2	2	2	1	1	-	-	2
	3	33	29	30	33	5	6	2	2	3	3	7
	4	-	-	39	46	15	14	3	5	3	-	14
	5	-	-	20	20	48	46	22	24	6	6	36
	6	-	-	5	3	18	18	25	25	17	10	18
	7	-	-	2	-	8	9	26	23	19	13	12
	8	-	-	1	-	2	3	13	12	17	23	5
	9	-	-	-	1	1	1	4	5	22	29	3
bottom	10	-	-	-	-	1	1	3	2	14	16	1

to locate themselves in the middle by choosing either category 4, 5, or 6, which contain more than two thirds of the respondents.

Comparing the subjective locations on the open ranking measure to those on two categorical measures it is obvious that

- a) respondents describing themselves as being "upper class" are most consistent in their judgements over all three measures,
- b) category in both categorical measures, the larger the range of ranks used. In other words: respondents who choose lower stratification categories tend to spread over the whole 1 to 10-point range of the open ranking measure, which is especially true for the "middle class" or "mid of middle class" and the "working" in measure B or "lower middle class" in measure A.

Even the respondents describing themselves as "lower class" need 8 ranking categories to assign themselves a "rank" in the "bottom"- "top" system of society.

Thus, even if there is some congruity of judgements between the ranking and the two

categorical measures, the range of ranks within the categories is too large to assume that both - ranking and categorical judgement - refer to the same process of subjective location in the social stratification system.

4. Subjective self-perception and objective characteristics of individuals socio-economic-status

While the two categorical measures reflect the learned hierarchy of the social stratification system and thus give the absolute subjective position in that system, the ranking measure refers to the relative subjective position. That is, the relative position results from social comparison processes in which groups and people who are near to the subject's own position are perceived more exactly than groups or people who are more or less distant to the subject's own position. In contrast to the two categorical measures, the ranking instrument thus measures relative social distance by reflecting the space of the respondent's own social experiences within the society.

Figure 5: SES objective versus subjective, in %

		objective education	prestige	income	subjective category	rank
high	1	9	10	20	1	3
	2	7	15	15	11	30
	3	7	41	27	64	54
	4	30	27	20	24	12
low	5	48	7	18	1	2
	n		1180	643	1130	1168

In the extreme case the subjective position on the ranking scale might be restricted to only that one category the respondent has chosen in a categorical measure.

The objective status variables like education, job prestige and income show little or no relation to the subjective location of respondents into the stratification system. This can be shown by comparing the distributions of education, prestige and income with the distribution of the ranking scale and the categorical measure B which is the standard in the German national survey instrument for measuring subjective location.

While most respondents locate themselves in the middle class or middle or higher rank (ranks

recoded into five groups here) the distributions of the objective variables show:

- a) that for education the largest percentage is in the lowest educational level
- b) that for prestige the largest percentage is on the middle level and
- c) that income is equally distributed over the categories.

Thus it seems that only job prestige has at least something to do with self location into categories using measure B.

5. Summary and conclusion

The comparison of three measures of subjective stratification location shows

1st That the device of the measure influence the results, where respondents tend to assign themselves a higher position on the ranking than on the categorical measure;

2nd that judgements on the ranking and categorical measure are more or less independent of each other because people locating themselves into the middle category do not necessarily assign themselves a

middle rank position but use the whole range of the ranking scale;

3rd that the choice of a category depends on the category label describing one social stratum:

4th that in contrast the choice of a rank position seems to indicate the relative social distance within the social reality to which the respondent is used.

The conclusion so far is, that the three measures which have been compared cannot be considered as functional equivalents of each other because each of them touches a different subjective reality.