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An Unreliable Ladder: Top–Bottom Self-Placement, Subjective Social Status, and Political Preferences

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Abstract: Research on right populist support and redistribution preferences increasingly argues for the explanatory power of subjective over objective social position. However, scrutiny of a widely used measure underlying such findings is lacking. I provide a multifaceted assessment of the Top–Bottom Self-Placement question ("Topbot"), which is primarily used in the International Social Survey Programme. Through 36 cognitive interviews and analysis of secondary data sets, I evaluate Topbot's psychometric qualities, how it is interpreted by respondents, and how far this corresponds to the (contradictory) interpretations assumed by researchers. Consonant with findings of low reliability and high, non-random non-response when a "Don't know" option is available, the interviews highlight that Topbot is worded ambiguously, leading to varied interpretations and often puzzlement. The most frequently mentioned bases of self-placement represent economic resources. Clustering of responses in the middle is widely known; interviews reveal explanations beyond misestimation. As additionally evidenced by convergent validity analyses, interpretations of Topbot as measuring perceived income decile or subjective social status in a specifically Weberian sense are untenable, and empirical claims made on these bases should be revisited.

Keywords: subjective social status; populism; radical right; subjective income rank; perceptions of inequality; cognitive interviewing

Reproducibility Package: Stata code and anonymized interview transcripts are available on the Open Science Framework repository (https://osf.io/q4sjr/). The online supplement includes information about accessing the secondary data sets analyzed.

WHERE individuals stand in relation to others in their society is arguably the concern that unifies sociology as a discipline. Typically, researchers measure position on objective dimensions of stratification. However, influential arguments have been put forth that what distinctively matters for some outcomes is people's subjective sense of their position in society (Cansunar 2021; Choi 2019; Engelhardt and Wagener 2014; Gidron and Hall 2017, 2020). Such self-perceptions are held to independently explain preferences regarding immigration and redistribution—issues at the core of the "border question" and "property question," which together shape a society's overall inequality regime (Piketty 2020). The concept of subjective social position also has much wider applicability and, like other subjective evaluations, stands as an important outcome in its own right (Engzell and Ichou 2020; Gugushvili 2024; Präg 2020; Schneider 2019).

In the objective stratification tradition, researchers increasingly emphasize the multidimensionality of socioeconomic position (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2013; Erikson 2016; Hällsten and Thaning 2022; Jæger 2007; Mood 2017). If the term "subjective social position" seems too vague, then, that is broadly the point of this

article: I argue that a closer look at the measurement and interpretation of subjective social position in existing research raises important concerns and invites renewed attention toward the concept.

Accordingly, this article aims to provide a multifaceted assessment of a widely used measure of subjective social position and its role in research on a range of substantive topics, with a particular focus on the political sociology of right populism (RP), where it is treated as a measure of subjective social status (SSS) in a specifically Weberian sense.

The measure in question is the "Top–Bottom Self-Placement" ("Topbot") instrument used in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) (Smith 1986), also known as the "social ladder" or by its General Social Survey mnemonic, "rank." Respondents are presented with a vertical scale running from 1 to 10, with the extremes representing the "top" and "bottom" of society.[1] The question asks:

> *In our society there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. Below is a scale which runs from top to bottom. Where would you put yourself on this scale?*

I address two research questions: Is this item reliable, valid, and otherwise psychometrically adequate for measuring the concepts it is predominantly used to measure in existing research? Because my answer is negative, I further ask: what, if anything, does it measure?

I evaluate the item's level and pattern of non-response, reliability, and validity with novel quantitative evidence from a variety of secondary data sets. Next, I use cognitive interviewing to assess how respondents interpret the question and decide on their answer. This empirical contribution comprises findings from 36 interviews with a diverse sample of UK adults. Respondents were presented with Topbot and asked to "read it and basically think out loud as you answer it," with further prompts to encourage elaboration.

Topbot was brought to new prominence by Gidron and Hall (2017),[2] who interpret it as a measure of SSS, which they define as "the level of social respect or esteem people believe is accorded to them within the social order" (S61). They conclude that "lower levels of subjective social status are associated with support for right populist parties" (2017, P. S57). That the SSS of low-skilled workers has declined, contributing to the rise of RP, emerged as "the consensus view among political scientists" (Oesch and Vigna 2022, P. 1130).

Although it would be convenient for Topbot to be a valid single-item measure of SSS—not least because it has already been administered for decades in an international survey program now spanning 45 countries—whether this is true requires investigation. Notably, it stands in contradiction to an interpretation of Topbot as "[perceived] position in the income distribution" (Cansunar 2021; Engelhardt and Wagener 2014; Knell and Stix 2020, P. 2; Schulz, Mayerhoffer, and Gebhard 2022), which is frequently found in research on perceptions of inequality and also lacks validation.

The contradictory interpretations of Topbot across substantively important research areas present one motivation for this study. Further motivation is furnished by concerns about the psychometric qualities of the item, its confusion with a different scale among researchers, and explicit calls to explore what, if anything, it might

be said to measure. First, anchoring the scale with only the abstract terms "top" and "bottom" offers extremely limited guidance to respondents, potentially inhibiting comprehension, reliability, and interpersonal comparability (King et al. 2004). Although an imperfect analog, the left–right scale used in political surveys makes for a cautionary tale (Bauer et al. 2017; Evans, Heath, and Lalljee 1996). Second, as I elaborate below, researchers using Topbot frequently confuse it with the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al. 2000); this includes, crucially, citing validation studies of the latter in support of the former. The MacArthur Scale differs in important respects. I believe this confusion has deflected attention from Topbot's limitations. Third, what Topbot measures remains an open and curiously understudied question, one posed in published work (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2021; Chan et al. 2020) as well as in many informal discussions.

The article is structured as follows. I first review Topbot's use in existing research, showing how it forms the basis of claims in a variety of ongoing debates. My review focuses initially on the political sociology of RP, where the measure has been most widely adopted, and then ranges more broadly. Next, I examine Topbot's measurement properties, using quantitative evidence from a range of data sets. I then present findings from the cognitive interviews, beginning with a thematic analysis that classifies, describes, and quantifies elements of interviewees' responses, before classifying overall responses into *types* characterized by different dominant themes. I conclude by drawing together the foregoing to answer the questions above and by highlighting implications for future research.

Topbot in Existing Research: The Political Sociology of Right Populism

In recent media commentary and research across the social sciences, status has emerged as central to the explanation of support for populism and especially RP, which is characterized by nationalist, anti-immigration, anti-elite, and often authoritarian sentiment (Bonikowski 2017; Gest 2016; Goodhart 2020; Gradstein 2024; Hochschild 2016; Mutz 2018; Parker and Lavine 2024). It is widely argued that groups who feel their status in society has fallen or is under threat are receptive to promises to buttress or restore that status through measures that weaken the position of out-groups, particularly immigrants and liberal elites. Status may offer a framework for integrating accounts that foreground *either* economic *or* cultural forces and relegate the other (Berman 2021; Guriev and Papaioannou 2022).

Gidron and Hall (2017, 2020) propose low SSS, measured using Topbot, as an explanation for RP support among groups whose economic self-interest would dictate support for the left. This section provides context for an understanding of Topbot as SSS in the specific sense in which Gidron and Hall interpret it, reviews their argument and its implications, and maps out the line of research that has followed their lead in using Topbot in this way and yielded mixed results.

Social Status

Contemporary understandings of social status are typically rooted in Weber's distinction between resources, power, and status, with the latter "involv[ing] a

claim to positive or negative privilege in social estimation" (Weber [1921] 2019, P. 455). According to Weber ([1921] 2019), "it is the way [people] lead their lives that is the decisive point in establishing [status]" (P. 456), and such lifestyles are conditioned primarily by upbringing, education, and occupation.

Attempts to operationalize Weberian status reveal diverging interpretations of the original concept. One approach, which I term "associational," begins from Weber's statement that status is "expressed primarily in intermarriage [and] eating together" (Weber [1921] 2019, P. 455), and constructs measures based on the occupational stratification of intermarriage and close friendship (Alderson, Junisbai, and Heacock 2007; Chan and Goldthorpe 2004). A second set of approaches, "attributional," take attributions of prestige or esteem and expectations of deference as the observable manifestations of status (Freeland and Hoey 2018; Newlands and Lutz 2024), foregrounding the idea of "social estimation . . . based on prestige" (Weber [1921] 2019, P. 455). Associational occupational hierarchies have well-educated traditional professionals at the top and manual work at the bottom. Prestige or deference scores give greater weight to moral evaluation of the work as prosocial (but come closer to the first approach when the survey asks about "social standing"), rewarding a perception of low pay relative to a job's demands and social contribution.[3] This may decrease the correlation between attributional status and income compared with associational measures. In contrast, the latter suggest that people *respect* or *admire* nurses and firefighters, but behaviorally most value association with respectable occupations that are also well-remunerated.

It is not clear that either approach is more correctly faithful to Weber (indeed status groups in the specific sense he described were highly context-specific). Nonetheless, all sides agree that an occupation's social status, though it may have material consequences (Ridgeway 2014), is conceptually distinct from its material rewards.

This distinction turns out to be empirically consequential, even for the associational measures under which status and income are more closely linked. Chan and Goldthorpe (2004, 2007) use a measure based on close friendship and examine political outcomes. While occupational *class* predicts left–right or "first dimension" attitudes, status predicts libertarian–authoritarian or "second dimension" attitudes. Carella and Ford (2020) take the approach a step further by showing that the same measure of status strongly predicts support for UKIP in the UK and for RP parties (and anti-immigration attitudes) across Europe.

Subjective Social Status

Gidron and Hall (2017, 2020) characterize SSS as "similar, but by no means identical" to "objective" social status in the Weberian sense, which they describe, following Ridgeway, as "depend[ing] on 'widely shared beliefs about the social categories or 'types' of people that are ranked by society as more esteemed and respected compared to others' (Ridgeway 2014, P. 3)" (Gidron and Hall 2017, P. S61). Their definition of SSS casts it as individuals' perception of their place in this same objective order and thus firmly distinct from material resources. They further view SSS itself as representing or assessing social integration, understood first as whether someone feels a fully recognized member of society (Gidron and Hall 2017, P. S61), then more broadly as also embracing feeling part of a shared normative order and participating in social interaction (Gidron and Hall 2020, P. 1031).

Notwithstanding questions it may raise about the correspondence between individuals' self-perceptions and others' views (and the degree of dispersion in the latter), a self-reported measure of social status is attractive for several reasons. One considerable advantage is that it is a global measure and thus does not require that social status is wholly or even largely determined by occupation (cf. Fiske 2011), that status is constant within occupations (cf. Frank 1985), or that we can map the occupation-based status order with sufficient accuracy and granularity. Individuals can take account of all their status-relevant characteristics.

The role of SSS, according to Gidron and Hall (2017), is that of a proximate cause mediating the effects of economic and cultural factors on vote choice; it is the outcome of a variety of economic and cultural influences that each feed into each other and SSS.[4] Groups whose status has declined may favor RP parties in part because the latter cast themselves against a progressive establishment and in favor of a return to traditional ways of life, including traditional hierarchies. The nationalism expounded by right populists may appeal to those "lack[ing] other sources of social status" (2017, P. S62) for whom national identity serves as a point of distinction from still-lower immigrants.

A central thread of this argument is that SSS converts both economic and cultural factors into a unidimensional sentiment, a kind of fungible "common currency" for one's place in society. Thus, according to Engler and Weisstanner (2021), SSS "is key in understanding how difficult economic circumstances lead to support for a party family that puts most emphasis on cultural, rather than economic issues" (P. 154); it explains how RP parties appeal by offering "non-economic criteria of social status" (P. 155). As regards Topbot, it is thus assumed that Topbot measures SSS and that a deficit thereof, independent of economic circumstances, motivates support for RP parties promising to restore or maintain status.

Gidron and Hall's (2017, 2020) work has catalyzed extensive further research into the links between SSS and RP. These still-current debates have focused on understanding, first, which specific groups, if any, have experienced status decline in recent decades—and, relatedly, what the basis of such comparisons should be. Gidron and Hall (2017) hypothesize that the rising RP support "within the white working class" (P. S63) is attributable in part to the concurrent decline in SSS among that group, and show declines in the status of non-college educated men relative to the national average across a range of countries. Chan et al. (2020) observe that for several countries, the evidence Gidron and Hall (2017) present for such a decline "seems less clear cut on closer inspection" (P. 833). Oesch and Vigna (2022) also query the decline, focusing on class directly in their reanalysis of ISSP data: SSS among the working class exhibited no clear cross-national trend of decline, either in absolute terms or relative to the upper middle class. Nolan and Weisstanner (2022) focus on Germany and the United States as two "most likely" cases and find modest decline in the status of the working class only in Germany and only in relative terms—compared to that of salariat and intermediate classes. In the United States, they demonstrate change *within* the working class, as the SSS of working-class sub-groups other than white males improved over the period, whereas that of white males did not. Closely related is a wider debate over whether actual declines in status are key, or rather the threat or expectation of decline; indeed, Gidron and Hall (2017) also observe that RP may appeal particularly to those "a few rungs up"

in the status hierarchy (P. S66) who fear falling to the bottom (cf. Im et al. 2023; Kurer 2020; Parker and Lavine 2024).

Second, further work has paid closer attention to the role of income inequality (Nolan and Weisstanner 2022). Income inequality has risen across western nations across the same time span as growth in RP vote share, albeit the increase has varied in timing, magnitude, and underlying patterns behind a headline rise. Gidron and Hall (2020) document a negative correlation between income inequality and a country's average SSS. This accords with the expectation that rising income inequality may harm SSS among lower- and middle-income groups. Because rising income inequality signals more pronounced differences in material conditions between social strata, Engler and Weisstanner (2021) argue that it also prospectively conveys greater threat associated with status loss. They find that high-income inequality is associated with support for the radical right most strongly among those with high SSS, offering further support for foregrounding the threat of status decline rather than low status itself. The impact of income inequality on SSS itself remains unclear however, particularly the question of how its impact may vary across groups—albeit Hajdu (2024) finds a negative association between *perceived* income inequality and SSS.

A third issue is the clarification of for whom low or threatened SSS motivates support for the radical or populist right rather than similarly non-mainstream parties of the left, or indeed abstention from voting. Far-left parties campaign on large-scale redistribution as a direct answer to economic strain. Despite the term "right," RP parties vary across the left–right economic spectrum and tend not to highlight their position on redistribution; rather the implication is that besides cultural or symbolic goals, reducing immigration will benefit workers in precarious positions and public service users. Whereas Engler and Weisstanner (2021) suggest that the promise of restoring lost social status is key to explaining a preference for the radical right over the radical left given both groups' antipathy toward elites and globalization and the left's offer of a larger welfare state, Gidron and Hall (2020) interestingly find that the linear relationship between SSS and voting for the radical left is at least as strong as for the radical right and stronger conditional on demographic and socio-economic covariates. Bolet (2023) reports similar findings. Melli and Scherer (2024) find that SSS is linked to populist attitudes per se in Italy.

In addition, this research program has begun to consider within-country geographical variation in SSS. Oesch and Vigna (2022) suggest that expected declines in SSS for which they found no evidence at the level of occupational classes might rather appear at the level of deindustrialized or economically peripheral *regions*; however, Vigna (2023) later found little support for such declines in France and Germany.

Topbot in Existing Research: Perceptions of Inequality and Other Topics

Topbot is also used to study perceptions of the extent of economic inequality and their implications for redistributive preferences. Such perceptions theoretically

mediate the path from actual inequality to redistribution (Meltzer and Richard 1981)—but at the same time, actual and perceived inequality may diverge: "individual citizens perceive economic inequality spectacularly wrong" (Schulz et al. 2022, P. 306). This too is an active debate. Weisstanner and Armingeon (2022) describe—and challenge—"[a]n emerging consensus . . . that 'subjective' (mis)perceptions of income inequality better explain redistributive preferences than actual 'objective' conditions" (P. 135).

Topbot is used in this literature both at the individual level as a measure of subjective income rank (Bobzien 2020; Cansunar 2021; Knell and Stix 2020) and at the aggregate level to derive measures of perceived economic inequality (Choi 2019; Engelhardt and Wagener 2014; Gründler and Köllner 2017; Schulz et al. 2022). These measures underlie conclusions about both the (mis)perception of inequality per se and how the perceived income distribution (and one's place within it) relates to redistribution preferences. For example, Cansunar (2021) explains the broadly similar levels of support for redistribution among high- and low-income groups as a consequence of most individuals, regardless of actual income, placing themselves in a middle subjective income rank, and the latter being a stronger predictor of supporting redistribution than the former. Choi (2019) concludes that "perceived inequality, not actual inequality, is significantly associated with redistributive preferences" (P. 220). Of course, these studies are only part of a broader literature employing a diversity of measures (Karadja, Mollerstrom, and Seim 2017; Kuhn 2019), but they have the broadest spatial and temporal coverage due to the use of ISSP data.

These studies make assumptions about Topbot that merit investigation. First, Topbot is assumed to mainly capture income. Some authors note that the question does not explicitly ask about income; at the same time, the effects of actual income and "perceived income" are often directly compared. As Cansunar (2021) writes, that "calls for measuring these variables with precision" (P. 1300). Second, Topbot is assumed to measure rank, such that a perfectly informed and representative sample would yield a uniform distribution. However, respondents may not interpret the question in this way. Some may instead interpret the scale points as equal-interval range bins (which in turn could be on either a linear or logarithmic scale). I propose that due to the lack of guidance in the question, there is no meaningful "true" distribution of income corresponding to Topbot, as there is in a question explicitly asking for an estimate of one's quantile rank. Third, it is assumed that respondents choose a middling value if and only if they feel this reflects their position in the distribution.

In addition, Topbot appears in a broader range of literatures in both stratification research per se (Kelley and Kelley 2009; Kim and Sommet 2023; van Noord et al. 2019) and its intersections with migration (Engzell and Ichou 2020), life satisfaction (Schneider 2019), and health (Präg 2020; Präg, Mills, and Wittek 2016). Interpretations range from SSS in a narrower or broader (more agnostic, more general) sense to subjective social class or subjective socioeconomic status. Space considerations preclude a more detailed look at the measure's role in these cases; I only note the broad substantive relevance of a close examination of the measure.

Topbot's Psychometric Qualities

This section draws together diverse secondary evidence to critically evaluate Topbot as a question per se, and then as a measure of SSS or subjective income rank. I first suggest that inattention to the specific item being used has led researchers to neglect these questions. I then address Topbot's level and demographic pattern of non-response, its reliability, and its construct validity.

Gidron and Hall (2017) introduce Topbot by stating that it is "widely seen as a good measure of subjective social status with adequate test-retest reliability" (P. S67), citing Operario, Adler, and Williams (2004), Evans and Kelley (2004), and Lindemann and Saar (2014). However, these studies offer no endorsement of that claim. Evans and Kelley (2004) do not argue for a Weberian conception of what Topbot measures: "we do not seek to engage in debates about labels for this phenomena [sic]" (P. 3). They often use the term "class"; indeed, they test hypotheses that Topbot distributions will match the class structures envisioned by Marx or Durkheim.[5] Lindemann and Saar (2014) also draw no particular connection to SSS, using this label once but tending to prefer "subjective social position." They remain agnostic about what concept the scale measures.

Operario et al. (2004) in fact address a different instrument altogether, the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status, introduced independently by Adler et al. (2000) and widely used in health research. Comparing the two, there is good reason to think they should not be considered interchangeable: the MacArthur Scale is explicit about the characteristics that constitute being "at the top" (and bottom). It specifically equates being "at the top of the ladder" with having "the most money, the most education and the best jobs" (Adler et al. 2000, P. 587).[6] It is introduced and frequently referred to as a "subjective SES scale" (*ibid.*). Topbot is more open to subjective interpretation, offering no guidance about what it means to be at the top or bottom. Many authors either refer to Topbot as the MacArthur Scale (Melli and Scherer 2024; Nolan and Weisstanner 2022; Richards, Heath, and Carl 2021) or exclusively cite research on the latter as evidence on the determinants or correlates of the former (Chan et al. 2020; Gidron and Hall 2017, 2020; Hajdu 2024). This altogether suggests that the distinction is not widely appreciated, which may have allowed Topbot to escape scrutiny.

Item Non-response: Level

High item non-response can have a range of causes depending on context. There is no strong reason to expect it for the evaluation of subjective social position, especially under self-completion survey modes. Accordingly, low non-response to Topbot (3.1 percent among a subsample of migrants in the 2012 European Social Survey) has been interpreted positively as "suggesting that the question[was] meaningful to respondents and that respondents did not find [it] difficult to answer" (Engzell and Ichou 2020, P. 479). However, for Topbot, the level of non-response is sensitive to whether an explicit response option (e.g., "Don't know") makes non-response a more available choice to respondents.

As shown in Table 1, non-response to Topbot is low in a selection of ISSP surveys, where non-response is not presented as an explicit option. Recently, Topbot was

Table 1: Non-response to Topbot and comparator items.

Question	Survey	% DK/NA	Explicit DK/NA Option	Mode
Topbot	ESS 2012 (Engzell and Ichou [2020] sample)	3.1	No (available to interviewer but not on showcard)	P&P FtF
Topbot	ISSP GB 1987	4.4	No	P&P SC
Topbot	ISSP US 1987	4.3	No	P&P SC
Topbot	ISSP DE (West) 1987	1.9	No	P&P SC
Topbot	ISSP GB 2019	2.6	No	P&P SC
Topbot	ISSP US 2019 (12/2020 to 5/2021)	2.4	No	Online SC (90%) and CATI (10%)
Topbot	ISSP DE 2019 (7/2020 to 9/2020)	0.8	No	P&P SC
Topbot	ISSP GB 2021	3.5	No	Online SC
Topbot	BESIP w21 (5/2021)	25.1	Yes (*Don't know*)	Online SC
Topbot	BESIP w23 (5/2022)	21.7	Yes (*Don't know*)	Online SC
Topbot	SOECBIAS-COVREF 2020–22	3.1	Yes (*Don't know*)	Online SC
Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? (0 ... 10)	BESIP w21 (5/2021)	2.9	Yes (*Don't know*)	Online SC
Do you ever think of yourself as belonging to any particular class? (Yes, middle class/Yes, working class/Yes, other [allows text entry]/No)	BESIP w21 (5/2021)	5.4	Yes (*Don't know*)	Online SC
How does the *financial situation of your household* now compare with what it was 12 months ago? (Got a lot worse ... Got a lot better)	BESIP w21 (5/2021)	2.7	Yes (*Don't know*)	Online SC
How do you think the ... financial situation of your household will change over the next 12 months? (Get a lot worse ... Get a lot better)	BESIP w21 (5/2021)	6.9	Yes (*Don't know*)	Online SC
During the next 12 months, how likely or unlikely is it that: You will be out of a job and looking for work? (Very unlikely ... Very likely)	BESIP w21 (5/2021)	9.2	Yes (*Don't know*)	Online SC

Note: ESS: European Social Survey. *ISSP:* International Social Survey Programme. *BESIP w21:* British Election Study Internet Panel wave 21. *SOECBIAS-COVREF:* Beblo et al. (2024). *DK/NA:* "Don't know," no answer, refusal, or similar. *P&P:* pencil and paper. *FtF:* face-to-face interview (interviewer records responses). *SC:* self-completion. *CATI:* computer-assisted telephone interview. Unweighted percentages.

fielded for the first time in the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP), which happens to have a blanket policy of including an explicit "Don't know" option. Under these conditions, non-response was 25.1 percent for a representative British sample and 21.7 percent 12 months later for the same panel, which had been refreshed to maintain cross-sectional representativeness. This is not a widespread feature of the survey: non-response was much lower for other subjective self-evaluations such as subjective class identification (5.4 percent), even those involving 12-month predictions such as risk of unemployment (9.2 percent)—at a time of considerable economic uncertainty.

Topbot was also fielded across four European countries in the SOECBIAS project and repeated in one for the linked COVREF project (Beblo et al. 2024). Missingness is low despite the availability of a "Don't know" option. However, certain idiosyncrasies might explain this and limit comparability to Topbot as administered elsewhere: in this case, respondents were asked to drag onto a 32-level unnumbered scale (or into a "Don't know" box) four markers representing themselves, themselves five years ago, their neighbors, and their friends. This was the second question in the survey. Respondents may have felt more comfortable giving satisficing answers than successively dragging four markers into "Don't know," especially on only the second question. Prior to the first question, the respondents were instructed "Anytime you don't know an answer, just give your best guess."

The BESIP evidence suggests difficulties of comprehension and/or answer formulation. It further suggests that many ISSP respondents would choose "Don't know" if presented with the option. Some ISSP respondents may be giving 1–10 answers that are not meaningful; more positively, they may be prompted to greater effort by the higher bar to non-response.

Item Non-response: Pattern

Non-response is less problematic if uncorrelated with variables of substantive interest. What these are depends on each study, but correlation of non-response with common demographics would be of general concern.

Figure 1 reports a linear regression, using the BESIP data, of Topbot non-response (choosing "Don't know") on sex, ethnicity, age, social class (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification [NS-SEC]), and education.[7] Being female, younger, working class, and less educated are all substantially associated with a greater likelihood of non-response. Illustrative predicted probabilities are 0.11 for a degree-educated lower salariat man in his 60s and 0.44 for a working-class woman in her 30s educated to General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the proportion of variance in a measure that can be attributed to variation in the true score rather than random error (Tufiş, Alwin, and Ramírez 2024). The claim that Topbot exhibits "adequate test–retest reliability" (TRT) (Gidron and Hall 2017, P. S67) appeals to a correlation of 0.41 over a two-year period in unspecified Australian data (Evans and Kelley 2004, P. 12). This would generally be regarded as low (Hout and Hastings 2016) and compares unfavorably with the
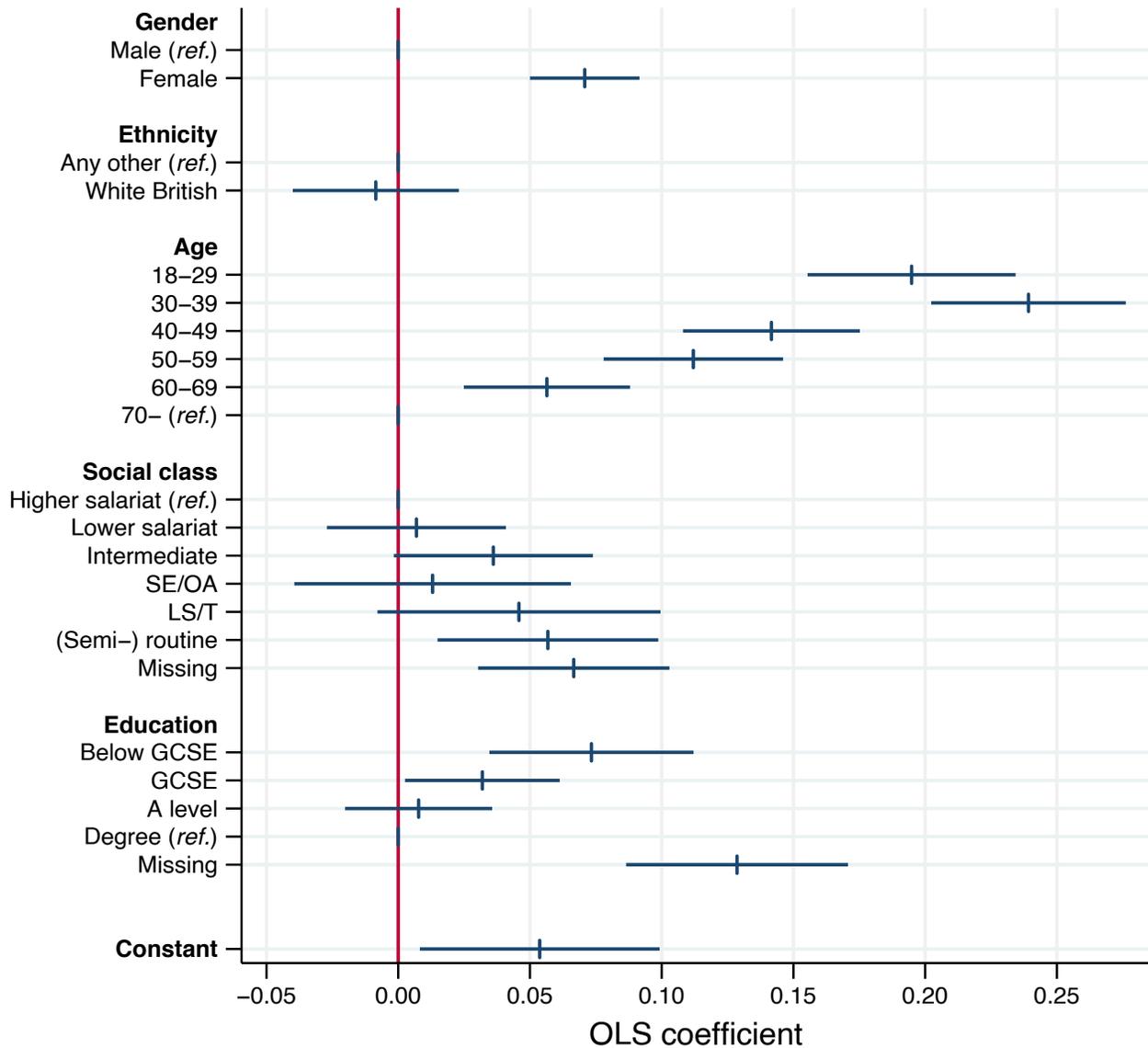
Figure 1: Linear regression of "Don't know" Topbot response on demographic variables. *Data:* BESIP wave 21 (May 2021). $N = 6,886$. For the corresponding regression table, see Table S1 in the online supplement. *Ref.:* reference category. *Social class:* NS-SEC. *SE/OA:* small employers and own account workers. *LS/T:* lower supervisory and technical occupations.

corresponding figures given for life satisfaction (0.59) and income (0.71). Table 2 shows various reliability estimates. These include all instances of repeated measures of Topbot of which I am aware, all of which are limited to two waves. A reliability of 0.69 from BESIP is marred by the fact that 34.2 percent of the panel answered "Don't know" in at least one wave. Estimates from the General Social Survey (0.28, 0.39, and 0.40) are again low. The SOECBIAS-COVREF data set contains a repeated measurement of Topbot for only one country, Germany, producing a moderately higher TRT (0.48).

Table 2: Reliability estimates for Topbot and comparator items.

Measure	Survey (Years of Repeated Measurement)	Reliability	Method	Source
Topbot	Australian data	0.41	TRT (2 years)	Evans and Kelley (2004, P. 12)
Income	Australian data	0.59	TRT (2 years)	Evans and Kelley (2004, P. 12)
Life satisfaction	Australian data	0.71	TRT (2 years)	Evans and Kelley (2004, P. 12)
Topbot	BESIP w21 and w23 (2021 and 2022)	0.69	TRT (1 year)	Author calculation
Topbot	GSS 2008–12 Panel (2010 and 2012)	0.28	TRT (2 years)	Author calculation
Topbot	GSS 2016–20 Panel (2016 and 2020)	0.40	TRT (4 years)	Author calculation
Topbot	GSS 2016–20 Panel (2018 and 2020)	0.39	TRT (2 years)	Author calculation
Topbot	SOECBIAS-COVREF DE (2020 and 2022)	0.48	TRT (2 years)	Author calculation
Relative income	GSS 2006–14 Panels (pooled)	0.59	TRT (2 years)	Author calculation
Relative income	GSS 2006–14 Panels (pooled)	0.59	Heise	Hout and Hastings (2016, P. 984)
Relative income	GSS 2006–14 Panels (pooled)	0.62	Hout–Hastings	Hout and Hastings (2016, P. 984)
Subjective social class	GSS 2006–14 Panels (pooled)	0.68	TRT (2 years)	Author calculation
Subjective social class	GSS 2006–14 Panels (pooled)	0.71	Heise	Hout and Hastings (2016, P. 984)
Subjective social class	GSS 2006–14 Panels (pooled)	0.70	Hout–Hastings	Hout and Hastings (2016, P. 984)
12 self-assessment measures	GSS 2006–14 Panels (pooled)	0.58	TRT (2 years)	Tufiş et al. (2024, P. 1027)
12 self-assessment measures	GSS 2006–14 Panels (pooled)	0.65	Heise	Tufiş et al. (2024, P. 1027)
14 self-perception measures	GSS 2006–14 Panels (pooled)	0.69	TRT (2 years)	Tufiş et al. (2024, P. 1027)
14 self-perception measures	GSS 2006–14 Panels (pooled)	0.74	Heise	Tufiş et al. (2024, P. 1027)

Note: Income, Life satisfaction: no further information provided. *Relative income:* "Compared with American families in general, would you say your family income is far below average, below average, average, above average, or far above average?" *Subjective social class:* "If you were asked to use one of four names for your social class, which would you say you belong in: the lower class, the working class, the middle class, or the upper class?" *BESIP:* British Election Study Internet Panel. (BESIP estimate excludes the 34.2 percent who responded "Don't know" in either wave.) *GSS:* U.S. General Social Survey. *SOECBIAS-COVREF:* Beblo et al. (2024). *TRT (n years):* test–retest reliability with tests *n* years apart. *Heise, Hout–Hastings:* three-wave reliability measures adjusted for item stability (Hout and Hastings 2016; Tufiş et al. 2024).

However, the two-wave TRT approach cannot distinguish between unreliability and instability (i.e., true change). Three waves of measurement allow the estimation of reliability adjusted for instability (Hout and Hastings 2016; Tufiş et al. 2024). Table 2 also shows some comparisons of TRT and three-wave reliability estimates for items comparable to Topbot, as an indication of how reliable Topbot might be with true change taken into account. If Topbot behaves similar to such socioeconomic self-perceptions, these comparisons indicate that we might expect its reliability to improve when adjusted for stability, but only very modestly. These comparisons also show that the TRT reliability of Topbot is substantially lower than subjective measures of relative income (0.59) and social class (0.68), which each barely change with adjustment for stability.

Might Topbot's TRT and instability-adjusted reliabilities in fact diverge substantially more than we see for other items, such that its reliability *is* acceptable? This would require Weberian SSS to be inherently more changeable than other self-perceptions of social position. Gidron and Hall's (2017, 2020) theoretical characterization of it does not point this way. Among the sets of factors that determine SSS, objective economic position appears likely the most unstable, sensitive to shocks such as job loss. Most other determinants of social status likely add to its stability: wholly or relatively time-invariant characteristics such as sex, ethnicity, educational level, and geographical location (Ridgeway 2014). I see no reason to expect the process of subjective evaluation to add substantial instability relative to other subjective measures. As to sources of change, Gidron and Hall's (2017, 2020) account centers on gradual (decades-long) shifts in prevailing cultural values and local economic outlook. There is little reason to expect Topbot, if measuring Weberian SSS, to exhibit a level of true over-time change that would invalidate a conclusion of low reliability. I reach the same conclusion regarding Topbot as a measure of subjective income rank: the reliability estimate for a closely related measure from the GSS—relative income—changes little with adjustment for stability, as shown in Table 2.

Validity: Quantitative Assessment

Validity is a multifaceted concept (Boateng et al. 2018). This section addresses the limited quantitative evidence currently available on Topbot's construct validity as a measure of SSS or subjective income rank.

Without a criterion—a definitive, "gold standard" measure of the outcome in question—the extent to which an item or scale measures its purported object is assessed through a family of approaches known as construct validation (Cronbach and Meehl 1955). Two are convergent and discriminant validity: does the item correlate strongly with other (accepted) measures of the same construct and weakly with measures of distinct constructs? Gidron and Hall (2020) present evidence along each of these two lines, which they interpret as supportive of the validity of Topbot as a measure of SSS. I disagree with this conclusion.

In a test of discriminant validity, they aim to "assess whether this measure of [SSS] is not simply a proxy for objective SES," and report that income, education, and occupational class together "explain only a limited amount of the variance in subjective social status [$R^2 = 0.247$]" (2020, P. 1037).[8] They infer that "even individuals [in high-SES positions] can feel that they are accorded more or less social respect" (*ibid*.). Although a substantial amount of unexplained variance indeed remains—though the authors do not state what level would represent contrary evidence—their interpretation of its source brings in the concept of "social respect" by assumption. Furthermore, this analysis cannot test the extent to which Topbot is distinct from *subjective* SES, the alternative concept for which a discriminant validity analysis is most pertinent.

Taking a convergent validity approach, Gidron and Hall (2020) next show that Topbot is positively associated with indicators of social integration available in the 2012 European Social Survey: trust, frequency of social interaction, and perceived

Table 3: Evidence on the convergent validity of Topbot as a measure of SSS or subjective income rank.

Concept	Comparator Item	Survey	Country (Year)	Internal Consistency with Topbot	Pearson Correlation with Topbot
SSS	Using this card, [showing a scale running from 0 (Not at all) to 6 (A great deal)] please tell me to what extent . . . you feel that people treat you with respect?	ESS 2012	15 countries, pooled	0.41	0.26
			UK	0.44	0.28
			DE	0.44	0.28
			IT	0.38	0.24
			PL	0.33	0.20
			SE	0.53	0.36
Subjective income rank	"How many percent of the population in [country] (18 years or older) do you think had a total yearly net household income that was <u>lower</u> than yours was in 2019 [2021]?"	SOECBIAS-COVREF	5 country-years, pooled	0.36	0.22
			DE 2020	0.47	0.30
			IT 2020	0.23	0.13
			PL 2020	0.23	0.13
			SE 2020	0.45	0.29
			DE 2022	0.47	0.31

Note: Internal consistency: Spearman–Brown coefficient (Eisinga et al., 2013). *ESS:* European Social Survey. *SOECBIAS-COVREF:* Beblo et al. (2024). Preceding questions in the SOECBIAS-COVREF surveys explain the terms "net" and "total" income.

respect. This last item ("please tell me to what extent you feel that people treat you with respect") is similar to Gidron and Hall's (2017) clearest statement as to what Topbot measures and thus offers a valuable insight into how far it can indeed be taken as a measure of "the level of social respect or esteem people believe is accorded to them within the social order" (P. S61). Of the three social integration items, they report that "The most variance is explained by people's feelings about whether others treat them with respect" (2020, P. 1038). However, a model including this respect item, the same SES measures which yielded an R^2 of 0.247, *and* further socio-demographics such as *unemployed*, *foreign-born*, *female*, and *church attendance* produces a not-much-larger R^2 of 0.291. Thus, it appears inconsistent to argue based on explained variance that Topbot is a valid measure of Weberian SSS.

Other approaches for estimating convergent validity may be informative. As shown in Table 3, I calculate, using the same data, the internal consistency of a scale that sums Topbot and the respect item—that is, a measure of the extent to which they measure the same concept. Pooling across countries, this yields a Spearman–Brown coefficient of 0.41; interpretation is as for Cronbach's alpha (Eisinga, te Grotenhuis, and Pelzer, 2013), meaning that it would be regarded as unacceptably low. The

Pearson correlation is 0.26. There is no indication that this is driven by a particular country or group of countries.

The SOECBIAS-COVREF data set includes a specific measure of subjective income rank. This offers a unique opportunity to test the convergent—arguably criterion—validity of Topbot as a measure of subjective income rank. I apply the same approaches as in the previous paragraph, with the results shown in Table 3. On this evidence, Topbot is a poor proxy for subjective income rank. As noted earlier, however, Topbot has an idiosyncratic response format in this survey, so the result may not fully generalize.

High and non-random non-response, low reliability, and low convergent validity to two different target concepts together invite a closer examination of how respondents interpret and answer Topbot. In the early stages of scale development, cognitive interviewing is often employed to anticipate problems of interpretation and confirm content validity—that is, that the measure adequately assesses the domain of interest. This approach underlies the study's primary empirical contribution, and I introduce it in the next section.

Cognitive Interviews: Data and Methods

Cognitive interviewing is routinely used in survey development to "assess the extent to which questions reflect the domain of interest and that answers produce valid measurements" (Boateng et al. 2018, P. 3; Collins 2015; Willis 2005). Respondents are asked to think aloud as they answer the question(s), and then given follow-up questions or "probes." Cognitive interviewing is usually employed as part of the pre-testing of a prospective survey to identify discrepancies between the interpretation intended by the question designer and that adopted by respondents.

The sorts of problems that cognitive interviewing is designed to detect are illustrated by the following questions taken from the coding scheme of Presser and Blair (1994, P. 84): " [Does the respondent have any difficulty] . . . coming to an understanding of what the question means? . . . understanding the meaning of particular words or concepts in the question? . . . recalling, formulating, or reporting an answer?" and "[Do] different respondents have different understandings of what the question refers to?" Willis (2005) abounds with examples of unanticipated sources of response error unearthed by cognitive interviewing.

I apply this approach retrospectively to identify discrepancies—and their sources—between respondents' interpretations and that ascribed to them by data analysts. I complement the method's usual focus on identifying *problems* by using the interviews to elicit in an unprompted, open-ended manner the reasons given by respondents for their Topbot scores. This allows me to compare what emerges with prevailing interpretations of Topbot and will be informative more broadly for *any* research (considering) using Topbot. The method affords an in-depth examination of how respondents interpret the Topbot question and decide on their answer, in a context that allows back-and-forth exchange to confirm mutual understanding rather than the unidirectional, one-shot submission of a response.

Cognitive interview samples usually range from 5 to 15 respondents, based on an informal consensus that this is usually sufficient for any problems to emerge

Table 4: Sample characteristics (frequencies).

	Non-graduate		Graduate	
Age	Male	Female	Male	Female
18–34	1	1	4	5
35–54	4	1	4	3
55	4	4	1	4

Note: N = 36. University students included under "Graduate."

(Willis 2005). My sampling strategy was based on two further considerations. First, as the response process may vary among population sub-groups, I sought a sample of at least moderate socio-demographic diversity and therefore aimed to recruit at least one respondent from every cell of a three-way cross-classification of sex, age, and education (see Table 4). Second, I continued data collection until I judged that qualitatively new information was emerging at a negligible rate (Beatty and Willis 2007). I did not aim for population representativeness or sufficient power to make statistical inferences. Thus, my quantitative results here are only loosely indicative of the relative prevalence of different sorts of interpretation and response in the wider population (adults living in the UK).

I recruited from a university research center's pool of individuals who had previously expressed interest in paid participation in social science research. In addition to past and current students, this pool includes many others recruited through online, social media, and in-person advertisement. Invitations advertised the study's topic as "how people interpret and answer a survey question concerning self-perception." I conducted 36 interviews, all online. Respondents provided informed consent.

Interviews consisted of two main parts.[9] I began by stating: "This study is about a particular question that is often asked in surveys. I'll share my screen so that you see the question, and then what I'd like you to do is read it and basically *think out loud* as you answer it. Does that make sense? [clarify if necessary and share screen to display question] . . . Ok, here is the question, can you see it ok? [confirm]." Second, once the respondent finished this standardized initial "turn," I asked further questions in reaction to the respondent's statements, seeking clarification and expansion (e.g., "And what makes you say that?"). Some questions were specific to particular interviews ("emergent probes" in the typology of Willis [2005]) and others were used in multiple interviews as, in effect, reformulations of the original question, where it seemed necessary ("conditional probes"; e.g., "what kind of thing would make you put yourself one point higher on the scale?"). Thus, the interviews harnessed both the "think aloud" and "verbal probing" approaches to cognitive interviewing, which each have strengths and limitations (Priede and Farrall 2011). Before ending, interviewees were asked if they had anything further to add.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were coded using the NVivo software package in an inductive, iterative process, identifying relevant themes across interviewees' responses. This allows a quantitative presentation of the distribution of themes of interest, which follows in the next section. I discuss the
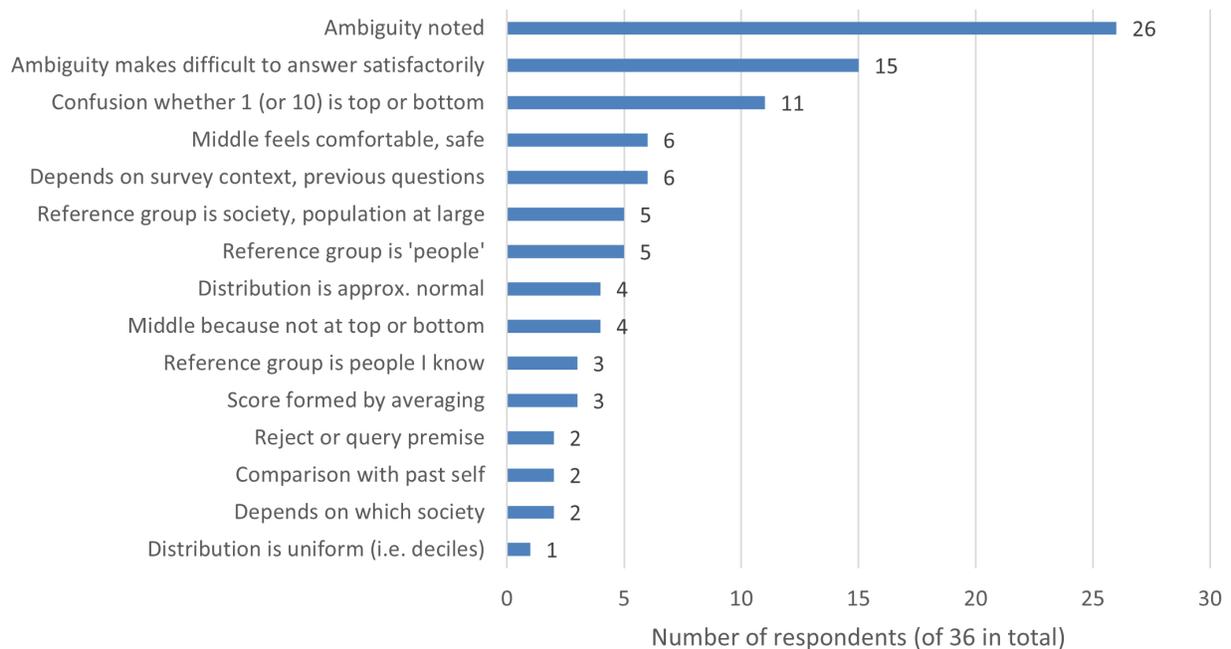
Figure 2: Themes characterizing the response process.

most salient and/or common themes. I then complement this with a respondent-level typology.

Results: Thematic Analysis

Figures 2 and 3 show the number of interviews in which each theme was coded as present. The themes shown in Figure 2 describe the response process, whereas those in Figure 3 describe characteristics, such as income, that respondents indicated were salient to their self-placement on the scale.

Out of 36 interviewees, 26 spontaneously noted that the question was ambiguous. For example, "OK. So, that's kind of vague [. . .] it doesn't say what it's about" (Laura), "Well, depends how you define top and bottom" (Jocelyn), and "it's not very clear, um, what it's actually referring to" (Megan).

Many participants noted ambiguity but nevertheless happily proceeded to offer an answer. Although they often found it *effortful* to answer, they accepted responsibility for interpreting the question: "so here it's not specified, but I'm thinking [. . .]" (Amanda), "there's a scarcity of information, but going on [. . .] that's what occurred to me first. . . Um. . . *Possibly wrongly* but yeah" (Toby), "it doesn't say what it's exactly about. So it's my interpretation of it" (Shirley), and "if I was given like a set amount of time to reply, I would probably. . . you know, think about it for–a few times, do a few like iterations, in my mind" (Megan).

I distinguish, as a subset of those who noted ambiguity in the question, respondents indicating that this ambiguity made it difficult for them to give a satisfactory

answer (15). This group expected more clarity from the question and expressed dissatisfaction: "Oh no I'm—I'm happy to try to give [an answer] but the trouble is [. . .] I could give you [. . .] three different ones" (Nicholas), "OK, um, the question doesn't say really towards the top or bottom of *what*. So that's a bit of a guess [. . .] Could be *anything* really" (Rebecca), "Well the question is quite general, so it's not very easy for me to decide about myself" (Raghav), and "So it really all depends on what the scale is measuring [. . .] I think it's a very poor question cause the scale doesn't tell me what it's measuring" (Carol).

However, most of this group still gave an answer despite their dissatisfaction: "I would answer as best I can, but only because. . . Put bluntly, if—if a question's there, there's obviously value to it to someone" (Vernon), "I guess–guessing in terms of–if we just go the socio-economic side, I guess I'd probably say. . . [sigh] I kind of. . . [laughs] I don't know, it's difficult. Maybe a—maybe a 5 but again, it depends on *what*" (Joanna), and "I'm unable to say, without knowing what it's the top or the bottom *of*, with any degree of accuracy, so. . . [. . .] I'd be like, *Oh, that's–you know, could just pick any one, really and I think this is what they mean maybe*." (James).

In six cases, respondents said that their answer, if they were asked this question in a survey, would depend on the context—either the survey topic or the preceding questions: "the way it's formulated there – as a standalone question – that's quite meaningless. But yes, if–if it was put in context by a previous question then it would be reasonable to answer it" (Graham), "d'you know, it would be totally dependent on what the survey was supposed to be about" (James), and "I could possibly answer that question in different ways according to the context of other questions surrounding it" (Fraser). It is noteworthy in this context that the focal topic of the ISSP rotates each year.

The version of Topbot shown to respondents (from the 2009 British Social Attitudes self-completion questionnaire) uses 1 as the "top" and 10 as the "bottom." 11 respondents either confused the direction of the scale or noted that having 1 as the top was counterintuitive: "I think a 1 or a 2 would be people who are. . . [. . .] struggling" (Alan) and "I'm looking at this question and I'm thinking: who would I put on the top half of those numbers, like 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10?" (Marcus).

Whether 1 or 10 denotes the top varies across ISSP survey years and countries. Notably, the top was 1 for the first three years with social inequality as the ISSP's focal topic (1987, 1992, and 1999) and 10 for the latter two years (2009 and 2019).[10] This is a potential source of measurement error and could confound comparisons over time. The problem is intuitively less likely to arise if respondents are required to make a mark on the scale rather than answer verbally. However, many ISSP surveys use face-to-face interviews with the vertical Topbot scale shown to the respondent on a card. This mode is susceptible to the confusion encountered here.

Researchers have noted a tendency for Topbot scores to cluster in the middle. This has been attributed primarily to reference group effects: people compare themselves with their close associates, who mostly occupy the same social stratum (Evans and Kelley 2004). Of those who mentioned to whom they were comparing themselves, a similar number used broad terms such as "society" or "the population" (5) as referred to people they knew (3). Others used non-specific terms such as "people" (5): "I'm not as disadvantaged as a lot of people" (Lee).

I find some additional motivations for giving middling answers. First, six respondents viewed the middle as a "safe" option in the face of confusion: "So. . . I'm not quite sure. Uh, so if I'm not sure, so I would place it in the middle" (Chetan, answered 5) and "Because there's no *definition* on what top and bottom means, so middle is probably the safest answer" (Alex, 5). Second, some (four) respondents appeared to collapse the scale into top, middle, and bottom as a cognitive shortcut and, rejecting the idea of being at the *very* top or bottom, chose 5 rather than attempting to distinguish their position among the other options: "Definitely not at the top, and I'm definitely not at the bottom, so I put myself in the middle" (Pat, 5) and "It could mean all sorts of different things, so I sort of just. . . went for the middle, cause I'm neither really top or bottom for any of those, so. . . " (Shirley, 5). Third, a tendency to conceive of the distribution as concentrated around the middle—broadly speaking, normally distributed—also influenced some respondents: "I think most people are [. . .] between the. . . 4 and. . . 7" (Stuart) and "at the top, um, I would put *very few* people" (Marcus). In contrast, only one respondent interpreted the 10 "rungs" of the ladder as (equally sized) deciles: "I'm assuming that each. . . fraction represents ten percent of the society" (Nathan). A fourth attraction of the middle, difficult to disentangle from respondents' stated explanations, may be the social desirability of modesty on the one hand and face saving on the other; this would have been exacerbated by the interview context but not unique to it.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of characteristics that respondents indicated were salient to their self-placement on the scale. It also includes instances where respondents mentioned a characteristic when describing people at the top or bottom or when stating directly what they thought the scale was measuring. It excludes factors that respondents thought the scale "could" be measuring. Table S3 in the online supplement gives short interview extracts exemplifying each of the themes shown in Figure 3.

Income (mentioned in 23 of 36 interviews), occupation (17), wealth (16), and education (16) stand out as the most widely identified characteristics. Mentions of "class" (11) specifically were coded as a distinct theme because people understand this term in disparate ways.[11] I treated use of the specific terms "(dis)advantage" and "privilege" (together; 4) and "socio-economic (status)" (5) in the same way; these two, together with family background (9) and neighborhood (6), further indicate a tendency to view Topbot position as determined by socioeconomic position.

Relationships (10) were frequently mentioned in the context of explaining one's self-placement: in these instances, respondents simply referred to their relationships, usually familial (e.g., "[I've] got a. . . partner, child, grown-up child" [Jacqueline]) or said that they had good relationships. I treated this as distinct from people citing relationships, especially beyond immediate friends and family, in more instrumental terms (social capital, connections, and resources; 3). The "Undefined" (8) category refers to terms that do not specify a substantive characteristic, such as respondents saying that they were "average" or "normal," or their score reflected them "in general" or "in life."

For Weberian social status, I used the theme "respect, status, standing, how viewed by others" (8) and coded inclusively; that is, I included all responses that arguably match Weberian social status broadly conceived. A similar number of
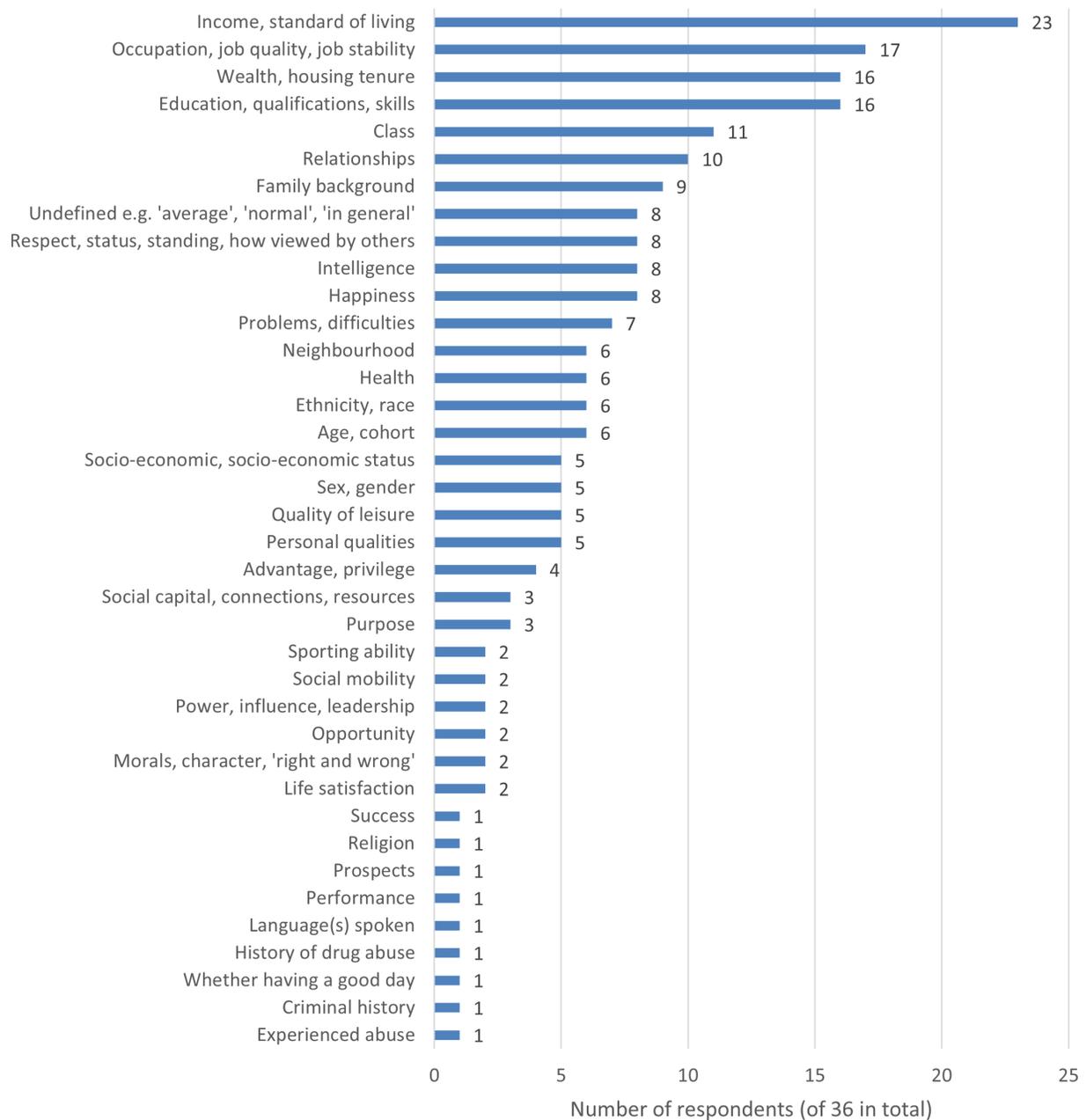
Figure 3: Characteristics identified as salient to Topbot self-placement. *Note*: see Table S3 in the online supplement for examples.

respondents indicated that they viewed their intelligence (8) or happiness (8) as partly or wholly determining their self-placement.

Demographic variables such as ethnicity (6), age or cohort (6), and sex or gender (5) are near the middle of the ordered distribution, as is health (6). Beyond this, the distribution shown in Figure 3 exhibits a long tail of characteristics each mentioned
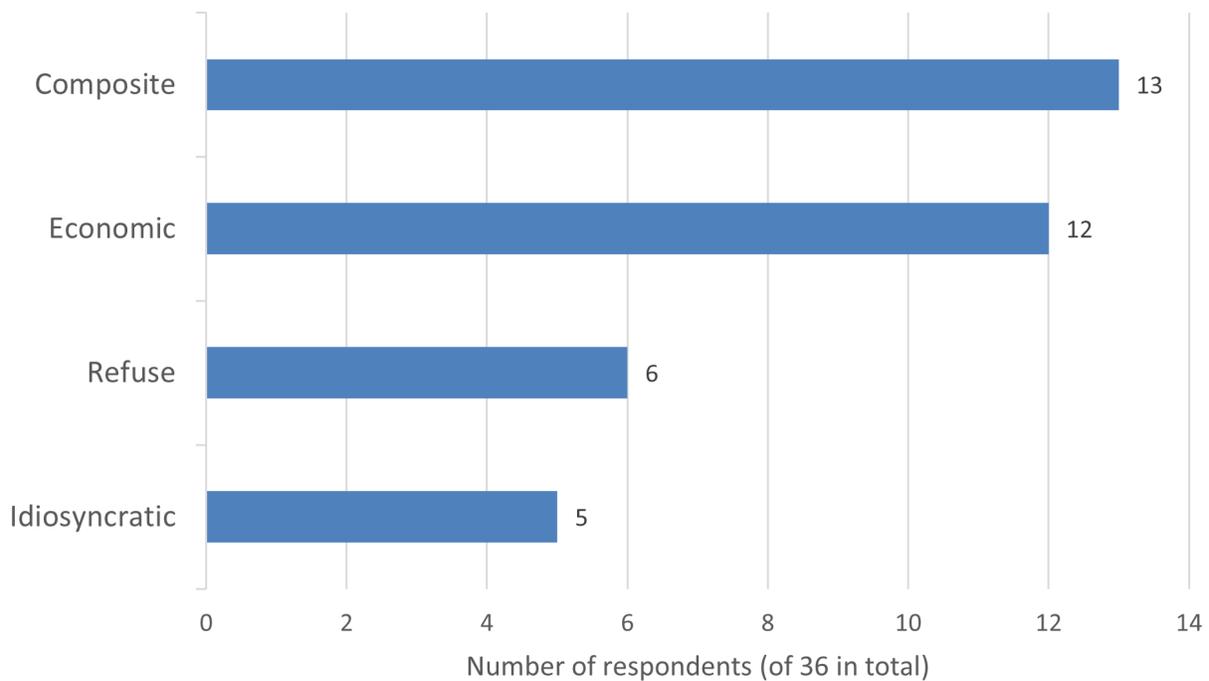
Figure 4: Respondents by type.

by a small fraction of respondents, such as purpose (3), power (2), and sporting ability (2).

Results: Respondent Typology

Next, I aim to describe holistic *types* of response and their distribution. Types of response are characterized by similar dominant themes. This builds on the previous section by parsimoniously conveying patterns of clustering and disjunction among themes. Types were conceived and respondents classified based on author judgment of the transcripts. Figure 4 shows the results.

I refer to the most frequent response type (13) as "Composite." These participants indicated that their self-placement would be substantially influenced by one or more of income (or standard of living), occupation, wealth, and education, *and* by one or more other characteristics, such as intelligence, happiness, or the "respect, status, standing, how viewed by others" code. For example, Ying felt lower on account of being "people of colour" and female, but higher because "my family's doing OK, so I do think I have some privilege." Mary interpreted the scale as distinguishing the upper, middle, and working class in her first turn speaking, but it became clear that for her this schema was as much about status as economic resources: "[sometimes, talking to people] in higher classes, you feel like, well, they're talking down to me and I'm not *good enough* to be having this conversation."

Economic resources were the dominant theme for a similar number (12, "Economic"). These responses focused almost exclusively on income and wealth. Occu-

pation was mentioned, but predominantly in terms of its financial rewards: "when I look at this [. . .] it's my job I think of [. . .] I'm not even like an average earner sort of thing" (Phil), "my financial status is good, I'm not struggling. I own a home, as I said. I'm. . . *relatively comfortable* I–so I feel like I'm. . . doing better than some people, and therefore I put myself higher in that sense" (Laura), "considering my, um, economic background, utmost [. . .] that is the most, um, important factor" (Ji-woon), and "for me, the higher up is, you know, you're comfortably employed, you don't really have to worry about. . . paying the rent, paying the bills" (Vernon).

A substantial minority (6, "Refuse") so disliked the question they indicated that, if asked it in a survey, they would give a random or non-informative answer, refuse, or even leave the survey. This was due to the question's lack of specificity. Ellie said the lack of clarity, in a survey context, would probably lead her to "get a bit frustrated and click through and pick random numbers [. . .] [W]hen I don't feel like it's valid, relevant to me, or I can answer it [. . .] I don't feel like I should give it my effort." Colin immediately wondered "top and bottom of *what*?," which led him to conclude "I'd find it very hard. . . to pick a number [. . .] and indeed I'd probably refuse." Graham felt similarly: "if a survey asked me a question like that, I would tend to drop out of the survey. Because that means they really haven't thought what they're trying to ask. And then–well, or if they *have* thought about it, I wouldn't have a clue what they were asking."

Other respondents (5, "Idiosyncratic") interpreted the question idiosyncratically, diverging from the normal range of interpretation. Marta placed herself toward the top "in terms of how–how I, um, process my feelings and emotions, my. . . life choice—uh–choices and my interests." The shared understanding that emerged was that for her, a high placement meant leading a life made meaningful by integration within a tight-knit local community. As a student and an athlete, Megan's immediate impulse was to answer based on academic performance and sporting ability. On reflection, she considered taking socio-economic variables into account, but said that if faced with the question she'd most likely stick with her first impression, given the question's ambiguity and the risk of going down a "huge rabbit hole" by spending a long time deliberating. Pat's response was dominated by her health and its impact on her daily life. Carlos answered 8 on account of his doubtful prospects for progression at work despite working long hours to the detriment of his relationships. James placed himself at 3 based on taking pride in his level of skill and ability at work and having overcome "some hard times recently" to find "happiness within myself." Both James and Marta observed that the score they chose was at odds with where they stood financially.

Discussion

Research on political preferences fundamental to societies' inequality regimes has increasingly argued for the explanatory power of subjective over objective social position. Scrutiny of the underlying measurement of subjective social position is therefore crucial. Perhaps due to confusion with the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status, such scrutiny has so far been lacking for one widely used measure, the ISSP Top–Bottom Self-Placement question, or "Topbot." This has been interpreted

as, inter alia, subjective income decile and, contrastingly, SSS, defined as "the level of social respect or esteem people believe is accorded to them" (Gidron and Hall 2017, P. S61). Topbot has become the measurement workhorse of a widely cited and fast-growing literature seeking to explain the widespread rise of RP through the lens of social status.

Through cognitive interviews with respondents as they read, processed, and answered this question—complemented with a psychometric evaluation of Topbot using secondary data—this study sought to shed light on Topbot's qualities as a question, how it is interpreted and what it might be said to measure, and how far this corresponds to the interpretations assumed by researchers.

My findings raise major concerns about Topbot's psychometric quality in general and about its validity as a measure of either SSS or subjective income rank specifically. I begin with reliability, as this is a precondition of validity. Test–retest reliabilities from two-wave panel data are in the range of 0.28–0.48, which is widely regarded as unacceptably low. To my knowledge, we currently lack the three-wave data needed to estimate reliability while accounting for true change. However, other self-perceptions and self-assessments have higher test–retest reliabilities, adjusting for instability changes those estimates very modestly, and there is little reason to expect that Topbot would behave differently when similarly adjusted.

The reliability estimates' implication that respondents have difficulty answering is echoed by the finding that the number choosing "Don't know" can be in the 20–25 percent range when the survey offers it as an explicit response option. Importantly, choosing "Don't know" also correlates with socio-demographic variables that are often the focus of analyses employing Topbot. Furthermore, where Topbot is measured in the same survey as items more directly tapping SSS in the Weberian sense and subjective income rank, it correlates weakly with these measures, indicating low convergent validity.

Consonant with the psychometric evidence, the cognitive interviews highlight that the question is worded ambiguously, leading to varied interpretations and often puzzlement. This runs contrary to basic principles of item construction (Boateng et al. 2018; Willis 2005). Most respondents observed that the question contained no guidance about what criteria they should use to place themselves on the scale. Although many were comfortable with the need to come up with an interpretation, a large minority not only noted the question's ambiguity but also expressed frustration, feeling they could not answer satisfactorily because they could not understand what the question wanted to know. This led to uninformative responses such as refusal or choosing the middle as a "safe" option. Some said they would take the content of preceding questions as a cue to what Topbot was "about." ISSP surveys exhibit low non-response rates for Topbot, but these findings suggest this is attributable to non-response being only an implicitly available option and conceals a substantial proportion of uninformative responses.

There was considerable variation in the characteristics that interviewees thought the scale was measuring or thought were salient to their self-placement. The most mentioned characteristics were economic resources or the labor market assets from which they proceed: income, occupation, education, and wealth. Considering the dominant themes of each interview, a substantial minority focused almost exclusively on their economic resources. A similar sized, more heterogeneous

group referred to one or more of these four dimensions of socioeconomic position plus others from a diverse array of other characteristics. The latter comprised demographics, social status or its manifest indicators, and a miscellany including happiness, intelligence, health, and relationships. Notable minorities responded in idiosyncratic ways or said they would probably refuse the question.

Low reliability indicates response inconsistency within individuals. The between-respondent variability of interpretation revealed by the interviews indicates a further issue: interpersonal incomparability. Variance arising from respondents interpreting the scale in different ways cannot be distinguished from true variance in the construct being measured (Bauer et al. 2017; King et al. 2004). This study did not investigate whether respondents' interpretation correlates with Topbot scores, demographics, or outcomes of interest. This is a task for future research; Bauer et al. (2017) exemplify a potential approach. My analysis of the correlates of non-response in the BESIP should prompt some caution as to the assumption that differences of interpretation are ignorable, as selecting "Don't know" was associated with age, sex, class, and education.

What if we put these issues aside, perhaps on the grounds that ISSP data offer unprecedented cross-national and over-time coverage? Can Topbot be interpreted as measuring SSS? Evidence for this is extremely thin. Next to no-one used the terms "status," "esteem," or "respect." On an inclusive reading of the transcripts, only about a quarter of respondents alluded to the concept of social status broadly conceived, or to characteristics or experiences that flow from or reflect social status, such as feeling spoken "down" to or feeling superior to coworkers on account of cultural tastes. The convergent validity evidence described above also fails to support this interpretation.

Might the scale be measuring SSS, with respondents mostly naming its "causal" indicators (Bollen and Lennox 1991), the variables that together *determine* one's social status? And might these not vary from person to person so that Topbot's very appeal lies in respondents answering in the spirit of "whatever it means to you"? The problem with such arguments is that they are not specific to SSS. The same evidence might on the same grounds be taken as showing that Topbot measures socioeconomic position, for instance, or life satisfaction. So far as these arguments go, they apply only to a theory-free description of what Topbot measures: simply "top–bottom self-placement." Because the target concept is unclearly specified, any more detailed assertion of a specific theoretical construct measured by Topbot goes beyond the data. In the end, the view that this question measures SSS comes down to a conviction based on one's own reading of the question and an assumption that others consistently read it in the same way—for which I find little support.

A limitation of my approach is that I miss determinants of Topbot scores that respondents are, for various reasons, unlikely to express. Social desirability and trust or comfort with the interviewer place one such limit on the findings. It is difficult to assess the extent of this limitation except to note that respondents were assured of their anonymity and several felt free to express quite personal thoughts and experiences. Another limitation is that the interview sample is limited to a single country; a different picture may emerge in a culturally or linguistically different context.

This study adds to recent work employing open-ended response formats to understand the reasoning behind answers to closed-ended and, in particular, subjective survey questions (Ferrario and Stantcheva 2022; Gugushvili 2024). A study of the Cantril Ladder, widely used to measure life satisfaction, showed that where the target concept is not stated explicitly, respondents' interpretations can be strongly influenced by subtle presentational choices (Nilsson et al. 2024). Breyer, Palmtag, and Zollinger (2023) asked a German sample to describe groups at the top, middle, and bottom of society (rather than elaborate on their own self-placement) through open-ended text response. Consistent with my findings, they conclude that "people largely have hierarchies of income, wealth, and generally economic resources in mind when they think about the top or bottom of society" (2023, P. 26). More broadly, my findings are consistent with research arguing for the continuing salience of class in the sense of a durable and widespread mental schema by which people place themselves and others in a hierarchy primarily according to the distribution of economic resources, even in the highly egalitarian context of Denmark (Harrits and Pedersen 2018; Stubager and Harrits 2022; Stubager et al. 2018).

Topbot emerges as a noisy aggregation of diverse individual interpretations, with economic resources as the most consistent theme. On that basis, what are the implications for past findings founded on this item? In short, inferences about SSS or subjective income rank specifically—as distinct from related concepts—must be called into question and, where possible, re-evaluated using better measures.

One obvious example is that of an independent cross-sectional association between SSS and RP support. Because income or standard of living was the factor most widely mentioned by respondents, I conjecture that some findings in the politics literature may be partly explicable by Topbot capturing individuals' detailed, granular knowledge of their own economic position and near-term prospects.[12] Thus, groups supporting RP may be concerned about their economic prospects as much as their threatened social esteem or respect. Indeed, RP voters often voice their concerns about migration in terms of its economic impact (Mudde 2019). However, I certainly do not dismiss the potential relevance of SSS. Better measurement of SSS might affirm its explanatory power or at least clarify its role and in turn resolve conflicting findings.

A second example concerns what for Schulz et al. (2022) is the first "stylised fact" of inequality perceptions, that "irrespective of their objective status, all individuals perceive themself [sic] to be in the middle of the social hierarchy" (P. 307). Along with the result itself, Evans and Kelley's (2004) explanation in terms of reference group effects is widely accepted. I find that this middle clustering has a range of further explanations rooted in the Topbot response process rather than misestimation of subjective rank: respondents chose the middle variously due to conceiving of the true distribution as concentrated in the middle (describing absolute values rather than rank positions), as a cognitive shortcut, and due to confusion. Table S4 in the online supplement reports standard deviations of subjective income rank from various nationally representative surveys and standard deviations of Topbot from ISSP for the same country-years. This is only an exploratory analysis based on comparison across data sets, and middle clustering remains evident when explicit measures of subjective income rank are used.[13] Nonetheless, standard deviations of

subjective income rank are 28 percent larger on average, supporting the contention that Topbot substantially exaggerates this "middle bias."

More generally, future research should use measures that have been validated as measuring the concept of interest; a necessary condition is that the underlying survey items are consistently understood among the target population (Boateng et al. 2018; Fowler 1995). If subjective social position is of interest, I encourage analysts to reflect on the theoretical mechanism envisaged and, in light of that, the specific dimension(s) they aim to measure. If subjective socioeconomic status in a broad, general sense is the target, the MacArthur Scale is a widely accepted single-item composite. If SSS is the concept of interest, reflection on the mechanism might in some cases lead to the theorization and measurement, instead, of a yet more specific concept, avoiding potential confusion and unnecessary exegetical debate. A more specific concept such as perceived societal respect, in turn, may be amenable to single-item measurement in reasonably unambiguous terms, for example, asking to what extent "people like me are respected in this country." A single-item question asking directly about the respondent's "social status," however, may be unsatisfactorily abstract and ambiguous unless clarified by other more specific terms. If feasible, use of a multi-item scale is preferable. Future work might usefully develop a validated, multi-item scale of Weberian SSS, explore its dimensionality, and elucidate the trade-offs involved in using only a single item. As for existing measures, some options with similarities to SSS are Gest, Reny, and Mayer's (2018) measure framed in terms of centrality and importance to society, the less used "community ladder" version of the MacArthur Scale, and the multi-item Perceived Societal Marginalization Scale of Bollwerk, Schlipphak, and Back (2022) and Bollwerk et al. (2024).

Researchers will also want to continue to exploit already-collected Topbot data, but this should be done with caution. To that end, further research is needed into how respondents have understood the item. The approach of Galvan et al. (2023) in their study of the MacArthur Scale provides one model for work in this direction. This involves testing the question's correlations with an array of similarly presented items with clearer meanings. The present study can inform such work.

Notes

1 Whether 10 represents the top and 1 the bottom, or vice versa, varies across (country-year) surveys. Translation inherently risks some variation in meaning, but international comparability is a central aim of the program, so care was taken to minimize this. There is minor within-language variation in the wording due to revisions over time. Differences of presentation across surveys are discussed below. The item was first included in ISSP surveys in 1987 and dates back at least as far as the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) of 1980.

2 As of July 2025, 1,045 citations are recorded on Google Scholar, with a further 532 for the authors' 2020 paper.

3 For instance, *firefighter* and *nurse* score toward the top of attributional scales but around the middle of associational scales, whereas *accountant* and *banker* score highly on association but can score similarly to *bricklayer* and *assembly line worker* on attribution.

4 Richards et al. (2021) found that SSS did not mediate associations between education, class, and political preferences in the UK, providing one counterpoint to Gidron and Hall's (2017) argument.

5 This concern with class and their attention to the advantages of Topbot *relative to existing subjective social class questions* (Evans and Kelley 2004, P. 11) both speak to a conception of Topbot as a potential solution to the problem of internationally comparable measurement of subjective social class (Dempsey 1984; Evans, Kelley, and Kolosi 1992; Smith 1986).

6 "Best jobs" is sometimes phrased "most respected jobs."

7 Table S2 in the online supplement reports descriptive statistics.

8 Several other studies offer evidence on Topbot's determinants, though not generally as the focus of the research. It is associated with sex, age, education, occupation, and income (Andersson 2018; Evans and Kelley 2004; Lindemann and Saar 2014), the only individual-level variables included in these studies. In Evans and Kelley's (2004) models, sex, age, and education together yield R^2 values under 0.1 for most countries, whereas the other two papers do not report R^2.

9 At the end of the interview, further basic demographic information was collected (sex, age, education, region, and political party identification) to measure progress against my quota target (see text) and confirm the sample was not notably homogeneous with respect to region or political views.

10 This applies to the source or "basic" questionnaire, which each country adapts and, if necessary, translates. Some countries appear to have diverged from the 1999 to 2009 scale reversal to maintain over-time within-country consistency.

11 In cases where interviewees indicated that class substantially influenced their self-rating, I sought clarification if it was unclear what they meant by the term. This means that another theme such as income, occupation, or status is always coded as present in addition to class itself.

12 The measure of social status underlying other findings linking it to RP voting and authoritarian attitudes (Carella and Ford 2020; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007) has also, in parallel, been criticized for in fact capturing both economic and social position (e.g., Flemmen, Jarness, and Rosenlund 2019).

13 Table S4 in the online supplement also compares the standard deviations of subjective income decile and Topbot within subjects using the SOECBIAS-COVREF data set, and the picture is mixed across country-years. The specific version of Topbot used here—in which respondents place markers on the same scale ranking themselves, themselves five years ago, their neighbors, and their friends—may encourage more dispersion in the responses.

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