

Senior Executives and High-Level Professionals: A Statistical Definition of the “Socio-Professional Elite”

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Abstract:

This article introduces the theoretical framework, construction method, and initial analyses of a new category within the official French socioeconomic classification (*Professions et catégories socioprofessionnelles*; PCS 2020), named “top-level executives and professionals.” This category aims to identify the highest-ranking occupations in French society. Among managers, professionals, and higher-level intellectual occupations, this category pinpoints the upper echelon of positions (whether salaried or otherwise) that entail significant responsibilities within work organizations and/or recognized high-level expertise. These positions, identified based on their titles and occupational characteristics, constitute an “occupational elite” (comprising 3% of the working population) that bridges the sociology of stratification and the sociology of elites. Incorporating this category into public statistical surveys offers a fresh perspective for analyzing socioeconomic inequalities, complementing those approaches based on educational level or income. As an initial demonstration of its empirical utility, this article presents evidence of pronounced intergenerational reproduction at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy.

Keywords:

Elite
Social stratification
Occupational categories
Upper classes
Inequalities
Social mobility

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1. Introduction

Economic inequalities measured at the top of the social structure have been the subject of renewed scientific and media interest for several years now, particularly in terms of the increase in the share of income received by the richest 1% in many countries ^[1]. French sociology

has long been concerned with the issue of elites, as demonstrated by studies on the upper middle classes and their neighborhoods ^[2], the educational institutions central to the training of economic, administrative, and political elites ^[3-6], high incomes in the finance sector ^[7], and the overall “structure of the field of power” ^[8]. However,

because of their very small size, these groups have rarely been captured in the major national quantitative surveys, which Savage and Williams point out are fundamentally blind to elites because of the lack of precision in the categories used ^[9]. This methodological difficulty feeds the distinction between two fields of study that have developed separately. On the one hand, the sociology of elites and the economics of inequality focus on highly selective groups—the top 0.1% or even less of income earners—using specialized sources (for example, Who’s Who or the Bottin Mondain in France ^[10,8]) or exhaustive administrative files (like the work on very high incomes or wealth based on tax data ^[11,7,12]). On the other hand, the sociology of stratification and social classes focuses on broader groups, mainly based on national surveys of representative samples ^[13]. There is a quantitative gulf between the *énarques* or big bosses studied by the first trend, who represent at most a few tens of thousands of people, and the socio-professional group of “managers and higher intellectual professions” analyzed by the second trend, which represents several million people. This problem is not specific to France: for example, Savage, highlighting the internal “fracture” in the British category of upper service class (equivalent to *cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures* in the official NS-SEC classification), calls on sociology to “distinguish a slightly broader group (than the 1%) at the top of the social structure” ^[14].

The category of “high-level managers and professionals” presented in the article is intended to fill this gap and thereby respond to the desire to have, in official statistics, a hierarchical analysis grid within the group of “managers and higher intellectual professions” ^[15]. This category groups several hundred thousand people, around 3% of jobs, and therefore makes it possible to carry out analyses at the junction of the sociology of stratification and the sociology of elites. It delimits, within company managers and executives and the higher intellectual professions, the upper fraction of positions occupied in the social division of labor, positions characterized by significant responsibility in work organizations (whether as an employee or as a self-employed person) or expertise recognized as being of a high level. While income from work and qualifications are considered to be indicators of a high position in a

given field, their levels vary from one field to another—it is understood that the dominant positions in society represent a variable proportion of the workforce in each field, depending on its position in the hierarchy of fields. The proposed category is therefore not simply a measure, albeit an indirect one, of these dimensions: its objective is indeed to identify people with a high level of power, i.e. responsibility or expertise, attached to a formal position in the division of labor and which can, therefore, be objectified by a job description and characteristics of the professional situation.

The category of high-level managers and professionals is one of the innovations in the latest revision of the nomenclature of occupations and socio-professional categories (PCS) in 2020 ^[16,17]. It is the result of design work carried out by the authors of this article within the working group of the *Conseil national de l’information statistique* (CNIS), in parallel with the renovation of the PCS coding process, which allows more precise identification of occupational situations through the use of a list of several thousand standardized job descriptions in the collection. The degree of statistical precision obtained in this way has few equivalents in general population surveys in France or elsewhere. It enables regulated professions, civil service grades and positions in company organization charts to be identified with great precision.

The resulting variable has been included in national statistical surveys since 2021, beginning with the Employment Survey conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). Although it lacks the precision of definition and analysis offered by prosopographic studies and monographic surveys in the sociology of elites, the category encompasses a broader social spectrum. Its major contribution is to enable the establishment of cumulative knowledge in different fields of research thanks to a definition that is stable over time and homogeneous in different sources. It will enable us, for example, to identify selection mechanisms for access to the socio-professional elite, to analyze in greater detail the “glass ceiling” that women face in their careers, and to gain a better understanding of social mobility and homogeneity. Based on general population surveys, these analyses are likely to complement existing approaches to the elites, which are essentially limited to an approach

based on the most prestigious educational backgrounds or the highest incomes and wealth.

The following article presents the theoretical underpinnings of the category (part I), its definitional principles, and the methodological challenges posed by its implementation in statistical surveys (part II), as well as initial analyses (part III) based on data from the 2021 Employment survey, which detail the socio-demographic characteristics of high-level managers and professionals and illustrate the category's contribution to the analysis of social mobility.

2. Theoretical presentation

More than twenty years ago, Grusky and his co-authors^[18,19] questioned the need to rethink the framework of class analyses, which were then presented as being in decline because they were linked to the philosophy of Marxist history. They proposed moving away from the macro-sociological level of the “great classes” used by specialists in social stratification towards the sociology of work, by adopting a meso-sociological approach of “microclasses.” From this perspective, class analyses were led to focus on occupations or groups of occupations which, alone, still appeared sociologically consistent in that they all referred to access procedures, specific types of organization and working conditions, shared career paths, and professional sociability, rules, and values, and sometimes even specific lifestyles or political orientations. The creation of the category of high-level managers and professionals was inspired by this trend.

It takes on board the limited size of the proposed category, but also—and more fundamentally — the importance of anchoring the analysis of social stratification in the reality of professional worlds, and the segmentations and hierarchies with which they are endowed. Its components, defined as the upper fractions of different socio-professional categories, are akin to micro-classes. While they do not directly form spaces of inter-acquaintance and “*entre-soi*” that can only be approached by narrow definitions of the elite, they do constitute common training outlets, spaces of professional socialization, and shared areas of career mobility. Reflecting combinations of social characteristics

(economic, cultural, etc.) linked to work situations and environments, they are defined in a multidimensional way, like the socio-professional nomenclature as a whole^[20]. By statistically aggregating these different components, the category developed should enable social science researchers to examine, at least in the form of a hypothesis, the unity and consistency of a “socio-professional elite,” thus extending to a wider scale a classic question in the sociology of elites.

The category is not limited to capturing high levels of income or wealth. Following the pioneering work of Piketty^[11], the development of this approach has certainly made a decisive contribution to highlighting the strengthening of economic inequalities to the benefit of the richest fractions of French society, but it has only enabled an analysis of inequalities through their economic component, whereas using work situations offers a broader understanding, not confined to income or qualifications^[21]. This limitation also applies to studies that focus on the formation of elites exclusively from the point of view of qualifications^[22]. Furthermore, the measurement of income suffers from classic pitfalls (under-reporting, including in tax sources; temporal variability as a function of economic conditions and the life cycle), and information on diplomas in itself says nothing about the positions acquired during a career. All these factors explain why occupational status, which is easy to collect in a variety of surveys, remains the key to analysis in the quantitative sociology of social stratification^[23,13].

2. 1. Identifying positions and describing occupations

The purpose of the high-level managers and professionals' category is to identify the highest positions in each field defined by one of the socio-professional categories of executives and higher intellectual professions or company managers, on the assumption that these positions can reasonably be captured by the wording of the professions, which reflect their position in work organizations, and more broadly in society. In the vocabulary of the sociology of elites, the approach adopted here is therefore positional, in that it is based on the formal positions occupied by individuals, as opposed

to the reputational (based on mutual recognition of elite members) and decision-making (based on observation of concrete actions^[24]) approaches. This approach is consistent with that advocated by Charles Wright Mills, according to whom “the elite is not simply the most advantaged men, for they could not ‘be advantaged’ without the positions they occupy in the major institutions. Indeed, these institutions are the necessary foundations of power, wealth and prestige”^[25].

In line with the Bourdieusian approach in terms of fields^[26,27] or the Millsian approach in terms of institutional orders^[25], the approach followed does not assume that high positions can be identified based on a single criterion, valid uniformly for all fields—whether, for example, income, qualifications, or a combination of these two variables. On the contrary, since each field is relatively autonomous and follows its logic, the classification criteria are not a priori reducible to a single dimension: it is important to identify the occupational hierarchies specific to each field to pinpoint the highest positions, which presupposes accepting that those in a given field may, on one or other criterion, occupy a less favorable position than those in another field. If this rule is not followed, the resulting category will be no more than an approximate measure of income or qualifications, of limited sociological value. This construction principle is close in spirit to the one used by Delruelle-Vosswinkel^[28] to study the “notables in Belgium” (although the scope was much more restricted).

Relying on occupational titles to identify the highest positions amounts to sanctioning the result of classification struggles within each field, as crystallized in job titles, company organization charts, branch collective agreements, civil service grids, or even laws governing the practice of the liberal professions. In this respect, the proposal presented here follows the spirit of the PCS nomenclature, whose categories are defined based on the social compromises involved in classification^[20]. Instead of relying on theoretical criteria established a priori (for example, the use, uniformly or in cross-tabulations, of variables such as self-employed/employed status, company size, or income level—etic approach, it intends to rely on ordinary categorizations and thus make sense to the players—emic approach). In practice, the approach has benefited from work on

the job descriptions declared in statistical sources^[29,30]. Associated with the beginnings of the socio-economics of conventions, this research has shown the plurality of ways of declaring one’s occupation, and hence of the practical and normative supports which organize work activities. Highlighting this plurality, which can be linked to the “cities” of pragmatic sociology^[31], guided the work carried out to delimit, in a specific way, the hierarchies within the corpus of wordings corresponding to the different fields.

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

The category of high-level managers and professionals is based on criteria found in various theoretical currents. By referring to positions of power in the division of labor, it is close to the categories studied by the sociology of elites, although these are far from unified, as Genieys has pointed out^[32]. For example, in terms of principles, it is close to part of the definition given by Scott^[33]. According to Scott, elites can be recognized by the fact that they exercise domination, i.e. a power that takes the form of stable and lasting relationships of control and is achieved either by coercion (force or incentive) or by authority (expertise or command). The two criteria used to define the category, responsibility and expertise, correspond to the two dimensions of authority he identifies^[34], and are also central to contemporary theories of social class. According to the neo-Marxist theory of Wright^[35], it is these two dimensions that enable the most privileged employees to be allocated part of the surplus resulting from the exploitation of other employees by the owners of the means of production. They also explain, in the neo-Weberian theory of Erikson and Goldthorpe^[36], why employees in the service class benefit from advantageous employment conditions.

Nevertheless, the approach adopted here implies adopting an extensive, structural understanding of power and domination, whereas Scott adopts a strict interpretation, limited to cases where these notions can be individually objectified. In fact, by attempting to build a bridge between the sociology of elites and the sociology of social classes, the category of high-level managers and professionals deviates in practice, through its broad scope, from the definition of the elite

adopted by the sociologist. The objective of the proposed category is closer to that pursued over the last fifteen years by Savage and Williams^[9], who have attempted to reintegrate studies on elites into the quantitative analysis of social classes, after observing the marginalization of the former due to the fragmentation of their objects and their methodological options. Since the turn of the 1970s in France and Great Britain, most sociological studies of elites have focused on limited fractions of the social space, analyzed in the form of monographs based on local or prosopographical data. Although these studies are empirically in-depth and provide a wealth of information on their field of investigation, even when they take a structural approach^[8], they do not fully allow for a society-wide analysis of the different fractions of the elite, understood in a broad sense (including comparisons with other groups).

The scope of the category proposed here is much broader than that usually used in the sociology of elites. We cannot therefore expect the individuals included in it to be very homogeneous, let alone mutually recognized. This is not the “power elite” described by Mills^[25]—defined by the fact that its position at the top ensures its members’ dominance over all fields and an ability to transfer their power from one field to another—nor even the “contemporary personalities” studied by Girard^[37] in his analysis of “social success in France.” On the other hand, the perimeter chosen here is akin to an extension to the national scale of what Mills^[23] calls the “local upper class” or “local high society,” to what Giddens^[38] refers to as the “secondary structure” of the elite, or to what Dogan^[39] calls the “third circumference.”

The development of the category of high-level managers and professionals can be compared with the program recently proposed by Bukodi and Goldthorpe^[40] to revive elite studies. As they point out, “it is not clear why it would be so fundamental to consider as elites only those groups that can be directly associated with the exercise of power (like Scott) or to consider elites only in the context of class analysis (like Savage).” It is precisely this observation that calls for an attempt to find a middle way between the two approaches. However, Bukodi and Goldthorpe’s proposal differs from the one adopted here: in fact, the two authors set a priori a much lower order of magnitude for the components of the elite

that they define, each of which must be counted “in tens, hundreds or, at most, small thousands,” whereas the category proposed here includes almost a million people (see below). If we adopt their terminology, high-level managers and professionals would rather constitute the pool from which the elites are recruited, whose social composition these authors suggest should be studied, particularly concerning that of the elites themselves. It is also in this sense that the category links the sociology of elites and the sociology of social stratification: it is a statistical tool for examining processes of social selection leading—both in intergenerational and intragenerational terms—from the socio-professional *elite lato sensu* to the *elite stricto sensu*, which would be identified by monograph.

The difference in the order of magnitude with work in the sociology of elites means that the category obtained is less refined and the program of analysis that can be envisaged is reduced. However, these drawbacks are offset by the wide availability of the variable in official statistics surveys, which should make it possible to obtain cumulative knowledge on a vast range of issues relating to the internal and external comparison of the various components of the “socio-professional elite” thus defined. While the approach advocated here is not the most appropriate for analyzing the exercise of individual or local mechanisms of domination—a central issue in the sociology of elites—it does enable a detailed study, differentiated according to the professional universe and comparative over time, of inequalities at the top of the social structure.

2.3. How can the top of the social stratification be identified statistically?

Similar in principle to certain concepts developed by the sociology of elites, the size of the category of high-level managers and professionals places it at the limit of the quantitative sociology of social stratification, where it appears to have no equivalent, except for the Norwegian categorization proposed by Hansen and her co-authors^[41].

None of the major socio-economic or social class classifications makes it possible to identify a top group that is close to the 3% of jobs to which the category proposed here corresponds. In France, to identify the top of the socio-professional structure, it would be

appropriate to use the group of “managers and higher intellectual professions (3)” and the category of “heads of companies with more than 10 employees (23)” in the PCS nomenclature, but the scope would be much wider than for the category considered here (19% of the population in employment in 2020). In international classifications, the categories grouping the highest positions also have a broad scope^[42]: from 13% to 25% of the population in employment depending on whether we consider the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP) classification^[43], the European Socio-Economic Groups (EseG)^[44] and the European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC)^[45], Wright’s class scheme^[35] or Oesch’s^[46].

Conversely, defend the importance of paying attention to the top of the social structure, because of its role in the increase in economic inequalities and the transformations of capitalism^[9,14], Savage and colleagues^[47] have called an “elite” (sometimes referred to as “ordinary”) a class comprising 6% of the population identified inductively using an automatic classification procedure. This class is over-represented by “chief executive officers (CEOs), information technology (IT) managers, marketing and sales managers, financial managers, management consultants, as well as the elite liberal professions such as dentists and lawyers,” i.e. some of the professions included in this proposal. However, this approach differs from the one advocated here: on the one hand, its size is twice as large; on the other hand, its use is limited to certain specific surveys, since its implementation is based on ad hoc variables relating to economic and cultural resources, and not on occupation alone.

A priori, only one classification includes a category similar to that defined here: the Oslo Register Data Class Scheme^[41]. Developed for Norwegian administrative register data to study small groups, this class scheme has been in use for around ten years and has given rise to numerous publications^[48]. Inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, it is based on the Norwegian nomenclature for salaried occupations (STYRK) and income for self-employed occupations and artists, to construct 13 classes, which are distinguished both according to their overall volume of capital and according to the composition of this capital. The upper level, known as the “elite”

or “upper class,” comprises 4% of the Norwegian population classified. It is divided into three fractions: cultural, economic, and with a balanced composition of capital (which includes the professions). While the upper level of the class schema is very similar to the present proposal, its definition is slightly less precise and its scope slightly broader.

3. Construction of the category

The new system used since 2020 to code the socio-professional nomenclature is based on computerized data collection using a list of thousands of standardized job titles and a reduced number of additional variables required for coding. This makes it easier to produce the nomenclature, enabling it to be used in a larger number of statistical sources. Following on from work in the sociology of occupations^[49], this system also makes it possible to pinpoint certain occupational fields or segments that cut across the nomenclature, such as “digital occupations,” “green occupations,” or the “socio-professional elite” presented here^[16]. It is the existence of this revamped process that has made it possible for the empirical implementation of a category following the theoretical objectives and principles set out in the first part.

3.1. Relying on a detailed list of occupations

The list of titles drawn up for the (computerized) collection of the PCS 2020 meets a twofold objective: to enable respondents to find their occupation easily and without error; and to have sufficiently rich information (with the additional variables) to obtain a single occupation code, as well as additional domains or segments, such as the category presented here. To achieve these objectives, the list was drawn up based on the wordings spontaneously declared in the main INSEE sources (census and employment surveys), wordings in which the respondents are likely to find themselves. The wide range of registers used to declare an occupation (logic of occupation, position, title, grade, etc.), as well as the variety of details given (sectoral, functional, etc.), were retained when they were necessary for coding occupations and categories and when they were not accompanied by excessive length or too many labels

(which can make it difficult to read and select from the list during data collection).

At the same time, details were added to the headings when they were necessary for coding and did not make it difficult to use the list. Concerning the category of managers and high-level professionals, information relating to the size threshold of the companies or departments in which the jobs are held by salaried managers, indications of the level of responsibility or expertise of certain professions (particularly in the civil service), and how certain liberal professions are practiced were incorporated into the wording.

To establish the boundaries of the category of high-level managers and professionals within the various socio-professional categories, or the more restricted professional universes within them, the work was based on the breakdowns revealed by the spontaneously declared wordings and on the knowledge of professions collectively established when the PCS nomenclature was renewed. This information was supplemented by legal documents delineating occupational hierarchies, such as collective agreement classifications and civil service corps (and their pay scales), data from official statistics or professional social networks (LinkedIn or Glassdoor), and scientific publications (from the sociology of professions in particular) or professional organizations (Apec, consultancies, employers' and employees' unions, etc.) to objectify the income levels—and sometimes diploma levels—of different professions in a given field. Meticulous work was therefore carried out before the data collection: based on scattered and sometimes incomplete information—in the absence of general data making it possible to characterize and prioritize job descriptions corresponding to an often limited number of people—it was subjected to two successive validation phases using data collected in 2020 in the pilot version of the Employment survey, and then in 2021 in its recast version. The results of this second analysis are detailed in the third part of the article.

3.2. Detailed description by socio-professional category

The end of this section presents a summary of the occupational titles used to define the category (more than 1,500 of the 5,400 or so titles included in the list needed

to code all the PCS) and then examines the general construction criteria. The details of how the category was constructed cannot be fully reproduced in an article, due to lack of space, but is accessible online in the form of a matrix of labels on the Insee website (<https://www.insee.fr/fr/information/6050075>), as well as on the website dedicated to the socio-professional nomenclature (<https://www.nomenclature-pcs.fr>).

Heads of companies with 10 or more employees (CS 23) include those who manage companies with 50 or more employees (corresponding to occupation 23A1). However, on a more exceptional basis, some self-employed persons working in companies with 11 to 49 employees in highly qualified service sectors such as banking, insurance, property development, culture, or health are included.

The liberal professions (CS 31) include: all health professions requiring a doctorate when practiced on a self-employed basis, such as specialist and general practitioners, dental surgeons, veterinary surgeons, and pharmacists; notaries; certain legal and accountancy professions when practiced either on a self-employed basis and the business comprises at least two people, or as partners (lawyers, chartered accountants). Generally speaking, all occupations in this CS are included as long as their company employs at least 10 people (architects, chartered surveyors, etc.).

Among civil service administrative and technical managers (CS 33), the category is based in particular on the A+ category defined by the *Direction générale de l'administration de la fonction publique* (DGAFP) ^[50], albeit with a more restrictive definition. The following are included: senior management, inspection, control, and expertise bodies in the state civil service, including senior and chief engineers; equivalent positions in the local and hospital civil service, using population thresholds consistent with those used by the DGAFP ^[51]; magistrates; senior officers of the rank of colonel and above, as well as military doctors, dentists, pharmacists and veterinary surgeons; members of parliament, elected representatives of large local authorities and representatives of trade unions and employers at national level.

Among the professors and higher scientific professions (CS 34), the category includes: higher

education supervisory professions (regional educational inspectors, head teachers, etc.) and higher education (school headmasters); university professors, research directors, and teachers in preparatory classes; doctors and pharmacists employed by hospitals and the social security system.

Among the information, arts, and entertainment professions (CS 35), the following have been included: A+ level civil servants in the cultural sector and their equivalents in the private sector (heritage curators, etc.); senior positions in the media and publishing (editorial directors, senior reporters, etc.), audiovisual and audiovisual industries (as well as in the private sector), audiovisual and entertainment (producers, directors, etc.), cultural structures (opera directors, prima ballerinas, soloists, etc.) and fashion (haute couture designers, top models).

Amongst administrative and commercial managers and company administrative and commercial managers (CS 37), this category includes: general managers in charge of a department, establishment, or company with 50 or more employees; managers performing functions requiring a high level of specialization or occupying positions of high responsibility, with no size threshold (France managers, financial control managers, etc.); managers of the largest retail or commercial outlets; bank managers, as well as specialized financial market professionals.

Among engineers and technical managers (CS 38), this category includes: generalist technical managers with responsibility for a department, establishment, or company with 50 or more employees; managers with specific responsibility for certain technical functions or fields involving a high level of expertise or responsibility, with no size threshold (research and development managers, IT risk managers, research engineers, etc.); management professions or transport experts (airline pilots, etc.).

3.3. Methodological discussion

The development of the category benefited from the collection of job titles adopted as part of the PCS 2020, a decisive opportunity to better define the boundaries within each fraction of the socio-professional structure. However, this did not resolve all the methodological difficulties associated with its delimitation.

Generally speaking, the contours of the category

depend on the plurality of registers used to declare an occupation. Their practical definition requires the addition of a limited number of terminological clarifications, so as not to alter the economy of the coding system, which must be understood by the entire working population. Fortunately, several general principles make it possible to draw a relatively simple line between the different professional universes and to ensure that the definition is consistent across these universes.

Within companies, the most senior positions have mainly been identified using the term “director,” to the exclusion of “head” and “manager.” This is because these terms more often than not refer to less senior positions (as can be seen from the analysis of diploma and salary levels - see below). Similarly, some terms for “manager” of small units have been excluded in certain sectors: supermarkets or mini-markets, agencies (postal, matrimonial, surveillance, security, undertaker, temping), youth hostels, campsites, holiday centers, etc. This rule shows the extent to which it is possible to exclude the “manager” of small units. This rule shows the extent to which it is necessary to take into account the economic importance of the department, establishment, or company being managed, an importance which depends both on the sector of activity or area of specialization (generally included in the title) and on the size (which is why only titles bearing the words “50 employees or more” are used for general managers in administrative, commercial and technical areas).

In addition, the bodies and grades, which remain important positional markers in the senior civil service, have completed the identification of situations based on the function occupied (an identification similar to that carried out in the private sector, with the use of the term “director” and the mention “50 employees or more,” or equivalent thresholds in terms of the number of inhabitants for the local authorities covered): the category thus includes both the terms “director-general of services of a local authority (80,000 inhabitants or more)” and “territorial administrator.” In line with the definition of category A+ for the state civil service, the main graduates of the *École polytechnique*, the *École nationale d'administration* and the *École nationale de la magistrature* have been included. The titles of managers and engineers mentioning these bodies have also been

retained when they correspond to salaried company jobs.

Finally, in the fields of health, law, economics, or technical studies, it is more directly the names of professions, in the strong sense given to it by American sociology^[52], which are sufficient to delimit the contours of the category. In the healthcare field, an initial version^[16] included only managerial positions for employees (university professors and lecturers, hospital practitioners, senior physicians, or department directors). This distinction was abandoned due to the practical impossibility of cross-referencing the hierarchical and medical specialty distinctions for all the wordings, but also due to the particularly high income and diploma levels of all the medical professions.

Thus, whenever possible, the rules followed have been based on established delimitations of the world of work (delimitation of liberal professions, senior civil service). In the opposite case, areas of equivalence were established by homology, according to the empirical constraints linked to the socio-professional nomenclature. This is particularly the case for the size threshold of 50 employees or more, used to distinguish between salaried and self-employed company managers. The boundary is thus intended to be consistent both within a given professional universe and between professional universes, a consistency that is borne out by the exploratory statistics that follow.

As far as limitations are concerned, it should be noted that, in certain professional universes (mainly art, science, and sport) where the highest positions may refer to the recognition of individual qualities, the category confines itself to identifying situations that are professionally and institutionally established. Consistent with the method of identification and the scale of analysis used, the highest positions in the field of music are thus identified by the fact of holding a soloist position. In the scientific field, top positions are defined by holding an A-rank post in higher education or research. Finally, in sports, the fact of declaring oneself to be a professional sportsman or sportswoman was considered to be an indicator of a sufficiently high level of practice.

More generally, the empirical limitations of the proposed category are those of any socio-economic classification based on occupations combined with a small number of ancillary variables (status, size of

company, qualifications): the same wording can cover partially heterogeneous situations and miss certain distinctions, whatever its level of detail. Its use as a reference tool for social statistics presupposes that the empirical construction is transparent, stable over time, and faithfully reflects the principles on which it is based. This last requirement, which is decisive given the limited scope of the category (3% of the population in employment), has led to the exclusion of wordings that correspond, in a significant proportion of cases, to situations that are far removed from the intended reality. The aim of the category is therefore to identify the majority of the highest professional positions, not to guarantee that all of them are included. Given these reservations, it is advisable to adopt a stance of reasoned realism for its analysis, where the conventional dimension of measurement is assumed but does not prevent the production of positive knowledge: cautiously for estimates of numbers, with more assurance for their comparisons and trends (both internal and external).

4. Empirical analysis

This article presenting the category of high-level managers and professionals concludes with a series of initial empirical explorations that illustrate its relevance using data from the Employment 2021 survey, the first in which its definitive coding is available.

4.1. Validation of the category based on labels

A first set of analyses is used to validate the construction of the category by examining the wording of the list as selected in the survey by the respondents, thus coming closer to the situations actually observed in the employed population.

Although these analyses were based on relatively small numbers, which means that they should be treated with caution, they do show a high concentration of wording in the category: while the corpus contains 322 different wordings (out of a possible 1,500) for the 1,203 individuals in the elite, the 10 most frequent words account for 73% of the numbers, and the 20 most frequent for 84% of the numbers (**Table 1** shows the results by socio-occupational category are reproduced in the appendix).

The category relies heavily on terms including “director” and “doctor” (or terms associated with different medical specialties, such as psychiatrist, radiologist, or gynecologist, for example). Transversal to different professional universes (business as well as the civil service, administrative and commercial as well as technical functions, etc.); private practice as well as hospitals), the variations of these terms and the associated labels represent more than half of the

workforce in this category. It should be noted that some of the most common director titles (e.g. director of information systems or director of communication) are only rarely found in this category, as only those that also specify “50 or more employees” are present, even though they are well in the minority compared to those that do not include this clause.

The other most frequent wordings also correspond to established professions, which have well-established

Table 1. Most frequent headings in the “high-level managers and professionals” category in 2021

First (or only) word in description	Most frequent complements	Number	Share in category (%)	Cumulative share (%)
Director	IT project manager, sales manager (50 employees or more), human resources manager (50 employees or more), financial markets manager, marketing manager	328	27	27
Doctor	General practitioner, specialist hospital doctor (hospital practitioner), occupational physician	228	19	46
Engineer	Engineer/researcher industry, mining and telecommunications, finance	78	6	53
Lawyer	Partner	57	5	57
Surgeon	Dentist	52	4	62
Pharmacist		44	4	65
Professor	<i>Agrégé-e</i> in higher education, <i>Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles</i> (CPGE), universities	31	3	68
Expert	Accountant, statutory auditor	25	2	70
Architect	<i>Diplômé Par Le Gouvernement</i> (DPLG)	22	2	72
Executive	Manager (50 employees or more)	18	2	73
Psychiatrist		16	1	75
Veterinarian		16	1	76
Director	State civil service	15	1	77
Notary	Partner	14	1	79
Manager	Corporate	13	1	80
Radiologist		13	1	81
Gynecologist		11	1	82
Bailiff	of justice	11	1	83
Magistrate	judicial	11	1	84

Scope: Employed population in the high-level managers and professionals category ($n = 1,203$), France excluding Mayotte.

Note: The first words, as well as the complements, are indicated in descending order of frequency; the coding of the category of high-level managers and professionals was carried out by the authors (for the coding program, see <https://www.nomenclature-pcs.fr/coder/coder-la-categorie-des-dirigea>). Provisional unweighted data was used to validate the proposed category.

Source: Employment Survey 2021 (first quarter), INSEE.

names. They cover the main fields in which the category is defined: the liberal professions, whether in health (dental surgeon, pharmacist, veterinary surgeon), law (lawyer, notary, bailiff), or the technical (architect) and economic (chartered accountant) spheres; technical expertise (engineer); company management (company director, senior executive); senior civil service (administrator, magistrate) and higher education (university or preparatory class teacher).

A second series of analyses (**Table 2**) shows that the definition of “director” as belonging to the category of high-level managers and professionals does indeed make it possible to structurally identify the top of the income hierarchy in the various fields in which it is defined, concerning the other “director” categories and those of “head” and “manager” (which, with rare exceptions, are excluded from the category). This is particularly the case in the private administrative and commercial sector, where managers in this category stand out for their significantly higher median net incomes: the difference is €1,550 per month compared to other managers. This is particularly true for those who are only included in the category if they have “50 or more employees,” the difference with those who do not have this designation is €1,394 per month.

4.2. Socio-demographic description of the category

In addition to these initial analyses attesting to the validity of the choices made to define the category, the data from the 2021 Employment survey make it possible to sketch a description of the social characteristics of high-level managers and professionals and to compare them with other high-level jobs and with the rest of the employed population (**Table 3**). The statistical analyses are based on the classification of job classes developed as part of the PCS 2020^[53], which divides individuals into four hierarchical classes (A*, B*, C*, and D*), with higher-level jobs (salaried or self-employed) corresponding to class A*. For these analyses, an additional category is distinguished for managers and high-level professionals, who are thus removed from class A*. Under the qualifications and income associated with it, these initial analyses confirm the category’s ability to capture the specific characteristics of the highest socio-professional positions.

As a sign of the glass ceiling and, more broadly, of the gendered selection mechanisms that hinder women’s careers, men are more likely to be found among top-level managers and professionals than in other top-level jobs

Table 2. Median monthly full-time income (in €) and numbers (in brackets), in 2021, of people with the titles “manager,” “chief,” and “director” according to whether they are included or excluded from the top-level managers and professionals, by whether they are included or excluded from senior managers and professionals

Wording	Public, education, culture, health CS 33–35 and CS 42–45		Private administrative and commercial CS 37 and CS 46		Private technical CS 38 and CS 47–48	
	Excluded	Included	Excluded	Included	Excluded	Included
Manager	2,148 (18)	– (0)	2,400 (122)	– (0)	2,583 (76)	– (0)
Chief	2,564 (8)	10,000 (1)	2,494 (25)	4,500 (1)	2,600 (77)	– (0)
Director	2,900 (31)	4,000 (8)	3,500 (51)	5,050 (24)	3,540 (12)	4,000 (18)
Director with (included)/ without (excluded) “(50 employees or more)”	4,500 (1)	4,700 (1)	3,300 (45)	4,694 (18)	3,250 (10)	4,000 (3)

Scope: Population in full-time salaried employment ($n = 4,617$), France excluding Mayotte.

Interpretation: The sample contains 76 names beginning with “manager” in the private technical socio-professional categories; all are excluded from the category, and their median income is €2,583 per month.

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

Source: Employment Survey 2021 (first quarter), INSEE.

Table 3. Characterization in 2021 of top-level managers and professionals by gender, age, income, and qualifications, compared with other top-level jobs and the rest of the employed population

	<i>N</i>	Senior managers and professionals <i>n</i> = 4,801(%)	Other senior level jobs <i>n</i> = 3,5154 (%)	Other jobs <i>n</i> = 12,0113(%)
Gender	160,068	100	100	100
Male		63	53	50
Female		37	47	50
Median age (1st and 3rd quartiles)	160,068	47 years old (38–56)	43 years old (34–52)	42 years old (32–52)
Age group	160,068	100	100	100
Under 30s		8	17	23
30–39 years old		24	26	24
40–49 years old		28	28	25
50–59 years old		25	23	24
60 and over		15	5	5
Median net monthly income for full-time workers (1st and 3rd quartiles)	20,830*	€4,800 (€3,312–€6,250)	€2,700 (€2,200–€3,500)	€1,680 (€1,400–€2,020)
Net monthly income for full-time workers	20,830*	100	100	100
Less than €2,000		6	15	71
€2,000–€3,999		31	67	27
€4,000–€5,999		26	13	1
€6,000–€9,999		27	4	1
€10,000 and more		11	1	0
Degree	159,573	100	100	100
<i>Bac</i> +8, <i>Grande Ecole</i> , etc.		55	19	1
Other <i>Bac</i> +5		22	28	4
< <i>Bac</i> +5		23	52	95

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

Note: The association between each variable and category membership is statistically significant at the 1% level according to independent chi-square tests.

*Income is only known for individuals in the first survey. Weighted data.

Source: 2021 Employment Survey, INSEE.

(63% compared with 53%). Members of this category are also slightly older (median age 47, compared with 43), with half as many under 30s (8%, compared with 17%) and three times as many over 60s (15%, compared with 5%). This reflects the fact that access to the highest positions is rarely from the first position, that it is more common to reach them at the end of one's career, and that retirement ages are later.

The differences between top-level managers and professionals and the rest of the top-level jobs are,

logically, even more marked in terms of qualifications and income. More than three-quarters (77%) of the members of this category have a degree of 5 years or more (compared to 49%). They stand out even more clearly when we focus on the highest or most prestigious qualifications: 55% hold a doctorate, a diploma from a *grande école*, an *agrégation* or a professional qualification (lawyer, notary, etc.), compared with just 19% for other higher-level jobs.

In 2021, the median net income of top-level managers and professionals working full-time (€4,800

per month) is 77% higher than that of other top-level jobs (€2,700 per month), slightly more than the gap between this latter group and the rest of the employed population (61%, €1,680 per month) and a threefold ratio between the first and last groups. It is particularly at income levels above €4,000 that top-level managers and professionals stand out: 64% exceed this threshold, compared with only 18% of other managers and 2% of the rest of the working population. What's more, while 11% of members of this category earn an income over €10,000, this is the case for only 1% of other professional and managerial staff.

4.3. Illustration of the contribution of the category: what social mobility from and towards the socio-professional elite?

From its origins in France—with the pioneering work of demographer Alain Girard^[37,54] and statistician Jacques Desabie^[55]—to its most recent developments^[56], the history of social mobility analysis has been marked by the importance of data and methodological issues. The category presented in this article, which is linked to the

job class scheme^[53], makes an original contribution to this work by providing a detailed measure at the top of the socio-professional structure: it corresponds to the limit of the “managerial and higher intellectual professions” group which, thanks to the sharp rise in the structure of qualifications, now represents around one person in five in employment.

The Employment survey asks individuals about their parents' occupation when they left school. The data collection and coding system is the same as for the occupation of the respondents, although there is a risk of underestimating the number of people in this category due to the less precise nature of the declarations for the occupation of the parents. In the field of people aged 35 to 59 who had already worked, which is usual for analyzing social mobility (Insee^[57]), 23% of people who had a job as a manager or high-level professional (or whose last job it was) also had their father or mother in this situation when they finished their studies, compared with 9% of those who have or had another job at a higher level (and 5% on average) (**Table 4**). More generally,

Table 4. 2021 of social origins and destinies using the starred job class scheme and the top managers and professionals category (in %)

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

Scope: People aged 35 to 59 who have already worked ($n = 20,604$), France excluding Mayotte.

Note: The parents' job class is constructed according to the dominant approach, i.e. the parents are part of the elite if the father or mother has a job as a manager or high-level professional, and otherwise are classified as A* if the father's or mother's job is classified as A*, etc. Each cell shows the percentage in the column (top right) and in the row (bottom left). Interpretation: 14% of people with at least one parent in the elite belong to the elite; 23% of members of the elite have at least one parent in the elite.

Source: 2021 Employment Survey, INSEE.

Table 5. Odds ratios corresponding to the table in 2021 of social origins and destinies using the starred job class scheme and the category of high-level managers and professionals

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

Scope: People aged 35 to 59 who have already worked, and whose father's or mother's employment status is known ($n = 19,512$), France excluding Mayotte.

Note: The parents' employment class is constructed according to the dominant approach (see **Table 4**). Each cell indicates the odds ratio and its 95% confidence interval as a function of the parents' class, the reference situation being class C* (multinomial logistic regression). Unweighted analyses give very similar results. First question, weighted data. Interpretation: The probability of having a job in the socio-professional elite rather than a job qualified as execution (C*) is 33 times higher when one's father or mother held a job in the socio-professional elite rather than a job qualified as execution (C*).

Source: Employment Survey 2021.

65% of high-level managers and professionals had their father or mother in a higher-level job (A*), compared with 43% of those who have or had another higher-level job (and 23% on average). Conversely, 14% of those whose father or mother had a high-level managerial or professional job have or had a high-level job, compared with 6% of those whose father or mother had another high-level job (and 3% on average).

The odds ratios measuring intergenerational social mobility show the strength of social reproduction for the socio-professional elite. In the first column of **Table 5**, they show the strong gradation of social selection mechanisms for access to the highest positions according to social origins: taking skilled operational jobs (C*) as the reference, the odds ratios range from 0.3 for unskilled jobs (D*) to 11 for higher-level non-elite jobs (A*) and 33 for the elite. If the odds ratios (OR) corresponding to situations of social reproduction (on the diagonal of **Table 5** and **Figure 1**) follow a U-shaped curve, the values are higher in the upper fraction of the social space (OR = 33) than in the most disadvantaged fraction (OR = 1.5). Social closure is therefore much stronger at the top of the social space than at the bottom. In addition, the difference between jobs in the socio-professional elite and other higher-level jobs (A*) is very marked. These analyses thus confirm the contribution of the category of

high-level managers and professionals to the analysis of social mobility.

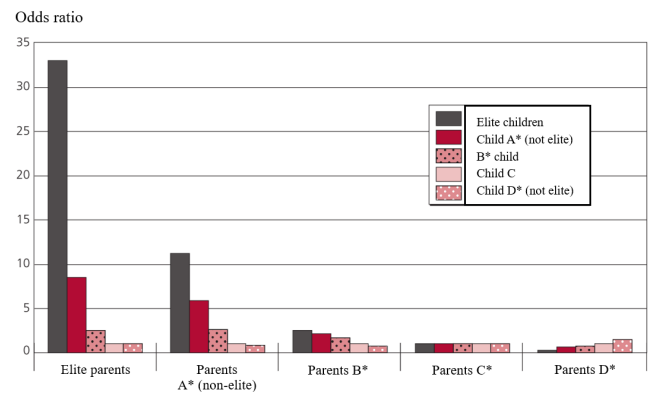


Figure 1. Odds ratios corresponding to the 2021 table of social origins and destinies using the starred job class scheme and the category of high-level managers and professionals

(Scope: People aged 35 to 59 who have already worked, and whose father's or mother's employment status is known ($n = 19,512$), France excluding Mayotte. Note: Graphical representation of **Table 5**. Interpretation: The probability of having a job in the socio-professional elite rather than a job classified as execution (C*) is 33 times higher when one's father or mother held a job in the socio-professional elite rather than a job classified as execution (C*). Source: 2021 Employment Survey.)

5. Conclusion

The category of high-level managers and professionals presented in this article is one of the main innovations of the latest revision of the French socio-professional

nomenclature, alongside the PCS *Ménage* ^[58] and the job class scheme ^[53]. It allows us to take a fresh look at the issue of inequality at the top of the social structure. Articulated with the socio-professional categories, multidimensional and reflecting the social compromises involved in classification, it identifies the highest positions in the division and organization of work in a plurality of professional universes, thanks to a precise delimitation of the job descriptions made possible by the renewed PCS 2020 coding system.

Precise in both its theoretical principles and its empirical delimitation, the category and its various components constitute a descriptive tool open to numerous interpretative schemes. Attempting to build a bridge between the sociology of the elite and the sociology of social classes, it proposes—at least as a hypothesis to fuel scientific debate—the notion of a “socio-professional elite,” whose internal components and external comparisons can be analyzed in terms of social mobility (or reproduction), spatial circulation (or segregation), housing characteristics, educational strategies, cultural practices, asset composition, etc. As an initial empirical illustration, the article demonstrated the statistical strength of the mechanisms of social reproduction that characterize it.

In terms of the empirical material mobilized by the sociology of elites, the proposed category suffers from certain limitations: theoretically, it does not make it possible to identify precisely the forms of prestige, recognition mechanisms, and capital specific to each of its fractions ^[8]. Empirically, despite the finesse of the delimitations it provides, it does not strictly identify all of the highest positions in the socio-professional structure.

Nevertheless, established according to transparent and stable definitional conventions, and available in official statistics reference surveys from 2021, it is intended to fill a gap in the identification of the different fractions at the top of the social structure, which it can help to objectify, beyond local monographs or investigations limited to a field. Far exceeding the 0.1%, and even the 1% of the new economy of inequalities, the category should, in particular, facilitate an understanding of how elites and upper classes articulate themselves, between selection processes ^[40] and objective alliances ^[59]. In a context where the polarization between

a fantasized elite and a mythologized populace is constantly highlighted in the media, it can also help to restore the complexity of the mechanisms and levels of social stratification.

6. Appendix

Table A1 below shows the beginnings of the most frequent titles for managers and high-level professionals in each socio-professional category (SC). These headings, which account for more than half of the category’s workforce in each CS, give an accurate idea of the occupations included.

The head of companies with more than 10 employees (CS 23, cut-off point 50 employees), a relatively small CS in terms of number of employees, covers the different legal forms of company management (independent or salaried): head of company, executive manager, manager, director.

With regard to the liberal professions (CS 31), as well as teachers and scientists (CS 34), it is worth highlighting the weight of the headings beginning with “doctor” which, on the one hand, make these CS the largest in terms of numbers included and, on the other hand, take precedence over the other professions within them. These headings alone account for a fifth of the individuals included, even though other headings exist for each medical specialty (“surgeons” in particular, as well as “psychiatrists,” “radiologists,” “dentists,” and “gynecologists”), in addition to the headings “hospital practitioner” and “university professor.” Other liberal professions are relatively common in CS 31: lawyers, pharmacists, chartered accountants, architects, veterinary surgeons, notaries and bailiffs. On the other hand, intellectual professions, professors and researchers outside healthcare, are in the minority in CS 34, with the most frequent titles being “associate professor” (in preparatory classes) and “university professor.”

Administrative and technical managers in the civil service (CS 33) include a large proportion of senior civil servants, administrators and magistrates, as well as high-level technical staff (engineers and air traffic controllers). The information, arts and entertainment professions (CS 35) make a relatively small contribution to the category in terms of numbers, firstly because of the limited size

Table A1. Main beginnings of titles for high-level managers and professionals, by socio-professional category (SC)

CS	Number of employees in the category in the CS	Proportion of the CS covered by the beginnings of labels displayed (%)	Most frequent wording starts
23	44	89	company director (8), senior executive (7), manager (6), director* (7, of which: agency, 2; partner, insurance, hospital, restaurant, industry, 1), vice-president (4), managing director (4), president (3)
31	342	89	doctor (107), lawyer (55), surgeon (42), pharmacist (33), chartered accountant (25), architect (21), veterinary surgeon (16), notary (14), bailiff (11), dentist (9), radiologist (9)
33	84	71	administrator (14), magistrate (11), senior civil servant (10), air traffic controller (9), administrative director (6), inspector general (6), hospital director (5), electronic engineer for air safety systems (4), doctor (4), cabinet director (3), director general (3), legal director (3), general engineer (3), general secretary (3)
34	205	82	doctor (117), associate professor (19), university professor (12), pharmacist (11), psychiatrist (11), surgeon (10), gynecologist (9), anesthetist (6), research d. (5), hospital practitioner (5)
35	33	82	d. (8, of which: production, 3; artistic, publishing, conservatory, museum, photographic, 1), producer (6), editor (6), curator (4), director (3)
37	112	58	sales manager (19), human resources manager (13), financial engineer (13), regional manager (12), financial market manager (11), senior manager (10), administrative manager (10), development manager (9), marketing manager (8), strategy manager (7)
38	126	72	project manager (36), research engineer (31), mining engineer (18), quality manager (7), line manager (6), logistics manager (6), technical manager (5), division manager (4), laboratory manager (4), site manager (4), works manager (4)

Scope: Population in employment.

Legend: *To simplify the reading of the table, the words “director” are indicated by the abbreviation “d.”

Note: Coding of the category of high-level managers and professionals carried out by the authors; the 10 most frequent beginnings of titles are indicated for each CS, those cited only once being excluded; the first words of each heading were identified after equating the feminine and masculine headings, and for certain frequent generic terms (“director,” “engineer,” “professor”) by declining them according to the second and sometimes third words for more detail; certain precisions were, in the same way, added to facilitate the comprehension of other headings (“general secretary,” “air traffic controller”). Provisional unweighted data was used to validate the proposed category.

Source: Employment Survey 2021 (first quarter), INSEE.

of this field but also, as noted above, because of the difficulties in capturing the highest positions through the job descriptions. Occupations in the film industry, the press and the public sector are the most represented (producer, editor, curator, director, as well as directors), while artists are almost completely absent.

The administrative and commercial managers (CS 37) present in this category are almost exclusively directors, although there is a notable proportion of consultants and financial engineers—finance is also the most represented field if we add them to the “directors (financial market)” category.

Finally, engineers and technical managers (CS 38) are also mainly technical directors. While this category

includes a significant proportion of research engineers, the other engineer titles appear to be scattered according to their school of origin or training specialty (mines, telecommunications, etc.).

Overall, more than a quarter of the individuals surveyed are classified as directors. They are found in all socio-professional categories, with the exception of the liberal professions.

(1) Among company managers (CS 23): “agency,” “associate,” “insurance,” “hospital,” “restaurant,” “industry” director.

(2) Amongst company administrative managers (CS 37): “sales,” “human resources,” “regional,” “financial market,” “administrative” manager.

(3) Among technical managers (CS 38): mainly “project” managers.

(4) Among administrative and technical managers in the public service (CS 33): “administration,” “hospital,” “cabinet,” “general,” “legal” director.

(5) Information, arts and entertainment professions (CS 35): “artistic,” “publishing,” “conservatory,” “museum,” “photo,” “production” director.

Finally, among the individuals selected, a few dozen (around 1 in 20) have a job title that includes the adjective “general”: in particular “director-general,” “secretary-general,” “inspector-general,” and “engineer-general.” They are found among company directors (CS 23), administrative and technical managers in the public sector (CS 33), and the private sector (CS 37 and CS 38).

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