Measurement Error in Imputed Consumption

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April 2, 2019

Abstract

Because of limitations in survey-based measures of household consumption, a growing number of research papers in household finance uses an alternative measure of consumer expenditures commonly referred to as "imputed consumption." This approach typically utilizes annual snapshots of household income and wealth from administrative tax registries to calculate household spending as the residual of the household budget constraint. In this paper we use transaction-level retail investment data to assess the measurement error in the portion of imputed consumption flowing from financial wealth. We show that substantial discrepancies between imputed and actual financial consumption arise due to trading costs, asset distributions, variable intra-year trade timing, and volatile asset prices between two annual snapshots. While these errors tend to be quantitatively small and centered around zero on average, we demonstrate that they vary across individuals of different types and income levels and are highly correlated with individual financial standing, balance sheets, asset prices, and the business cycle. We end by suggesting ways to minimize the impact of these imputation errors in future household finance research and we discuss which research questions are least likely to suffer from such errors.

JEL Codes: C81, D12, D14, E21, G11.

Keywords: transaction data, measurement error, retail investors, household portfolios.

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> *"One of the biggest impediments to further development of empirical research on intertemporal allocation seems to be the lack of good longitudinal data on expenditures and/or saving."* Browning and Leth-Petersen (2003)

1 Introduction

Financial economists need accurate measures of spending to analyze consumption and saving behavior in response to changes in individual's balance sheets on the assets or liabilities sides. Consumption data free of measurement error are difficult to come by, especially when seeking detail over a long period of time. Consumption surveys use paper or phone interviews to ask stylized questions on spending in a few broad consumption good categories over a particular recall period (e.g., the Interview Survey of the Consumer Expenditure Survey, CEX). Alternatively, households can be asked to keep track of recurrent expenditures, such as groceries, for a short period of time in a diary (e.g., the Diary Survey of the CEX).

For obvious reasons, survey respondents may have difficulties in recalling past purchases and have little incentive to answer the questions accurately. For instance, respondents may not understand the wording of the questions, behave differently in practice, simply forget some past purchase transactions, or strategically underreport to avoid more detailed follow-up questions (Parker and Souleles 2017).[1] Moreover, such measurement error or noise in the data generated by surveys that simply ask about past purchases can increase with the length of the recall period (de Nicola and Giné 2014).[2]

In recent years, researchers in household finance have gained access to two alternative sources of consumption data. First, using collaborations with private-sector companies, researches have gained access to deidentified consumer transaction data. Such data automatically tracks household spending behavior and other financial transactions at high frequency with minimal recording errors.[3] Second, a growing number of papers in household finance develop and utilize an alternative measure of consumption based on highly-detailed administrative data, often referred to as "imputed consumption," which avoids many of the problems with standard survey-based data and often covers the country's entire population.[4] Imputed consumption is constructed as a residual from a household's budget constraint, the part of total income that was not saved or invested. This approach imposes heavy data requirements on the measurement exercise because the researcher needs comprehensive measures of income as well as comprehensive asset transactions, holdings, and price data for both real and financial assets.

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[1] A large literature has documented basic problems with survey-based measures of consumption (e.g., Pistaferri 2015). Ahmed et al. (2006) for example compare two measurements for the same set of households and find that recall food consumption data, which is the basis of a great deal of empirical work, suffers from considerable measurement error, while diaries records are found to be somewhat more accurate. Other work has compared consumption measures across different surveys or across different waves of the same survey (e.g., Bound et al. 2001, Pudney 2008). The measurement error in household-level consumption data, and the difficulty of estimating nonlinear models in the presence of such error, have led some to call for abandoning Euler equation estimation altogether (Carroll 2001).

[2] Additionally, surveys can produce data with systematic biases if respondents have justification bias, concerns about surveyors sharing the information, or stigma about their consumption habits (Karlan and Zinman 2008).

[3] See for example Gelman et al. (2014), Grinstein-Weiss et al. (2014), Kuchler and Pagel (2015), Baker (2017), Kueng (2018), Ganong and Noel (2018), or Olafsson and Pagel (2018) for a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of this type of data.

Sweden, Norway, and Denmark collect most of the required information at an annual level as part of their tax registries (or they collected this data previously in the case of Sweden), often supplemented by additional administrative data. The registries, when utilized in full by researchers, can be quite comprehensive, containing data on stocks, bonds, mutual funds, and bank accounts each taxpayer owns at the end of the year. Furthermore, data on capital gains and dividends is available for some years and some researchers have managed to obtain additional information on intra-year security transactions (e.g., Eika et al. 2017 for Norway). Furthermore, home-ownership and household permanent address can be tracked via the housing registry, and the data also contains information on labor and financial income and transfers.

Sweden also runs standard consumer expenditures surveys that can be matched with the households in the registry data (Koijen et al. 2014). This setup allows for the comparison of registry-imputed and survey-based measures of consumption. Koijen et al. (2014), for example, uncover significant discrepancies between registry- and survey-based consumption measures that increase in income and wealth.[5] Koijen et al. (2014) show that registry-based consumption is sensitive to an accurate imputation of returns that households are earning on their assets. The authors show that incorrectly applying a broad total return measure to a household's financial asset holdings leads to substantial deviations from the properly imputed registry measure and that these discrepancies are increasing in wealth.

The registry-based or imputed consumption approach thus attempts to measure all consumer spending on services and non-durable and durable goods at an annual frequency. While the benefits of this approach relative to other measures can be substantial, some caveats remain. The imputed consumption approach generally cannot distinguish between *types* of consumption or spending, but only aggregates. For some countries with sufficient registry information regarding large durables like cars, a partial distinction between durables and nondurables may be made. In addition, as with many survey- or transaction-based consumption measures, the imputed consumption approach can likewise not distinguish between quantities and prices. This distinction can be significant under many utility functions (e.g., non-homothetic preferences). Finally, there may be measurement issues arising from actions taken by households to evade taxes and thus render some assets or income less visible to government registries. Alstadsæter et al. (2017) find that there exists non-trivial amounts of tax evasion in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, especially among the wealthy.

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[4] Important studies include Browning and Leth-Petersen (2003), Koijen et al. (2014), Bach et al. (2015), Sodini et al. (2016), Fagereng et al. (2016), Fagereng et al. (2017), Eika et al. (2017), and Kolsrud et al. (2018).

[5] While the mean and median of the consumption distribution are similar, the survey understates the consumption of wealthy and high-income households, while slightly overstating consumption of the poorest quintile of households.

In this paper, we shed additional light on how individual's financial assets may introduce measurement error in imputed consumption and how that measurement error is correlated with the outcome variables that financial economists are interested in. We use high-frequency transaction-level retail investment data on trades and portfolio holdings for approximately 20,000 retail investors in Germany from 2004 to 2015 to document potential measurement error affecting imputed consumption.

More specifically, discrepancies between imputed and actual consumption may arise whenever investors buy and sell assets at different points within the year, incur trading costs, or are paid dividends or other asset distributions that differ from those of the market at large, and researchers only observe administrative records at the end of the year. That is, miscalculating asset growth experienced by a household will mistakenly attribute changes in asset values to the household consuming more or less than it actually does. As one example, it is well-known that some U.S. retail investors have substantial annual turnover, have significantly different levels of returns relative to the market, and may incur substantial trading costs that can eat up the entire historical equity premium (Barber and Odean 2000). More recently, similar results have been documented for Scandinavian and German investors (e.g., Bach et al. 2015, Koestner et al. 2017).

Our study accomplishes the following goals. First, we demonstrate that imputing consumption from annual portfolio snapshots using a variety of methodologies can lead to substantial measurement error, both in absolute terms and relative to household income, especially for high-income and wealthy households. Second, we show that these imputation errors, both across households and within household over time, are not purely "classical" measurement error, i.e., uncorrelated with the outcome variable or the regression error term. In particular, we show that these imputation errors on financial consumption are correlated with household-level financial characteristics like income, wealth, and trading behavior. These financial characteristics are exactly the ones studied as outcome variables by researchers in household finance. Third, we show that the measurement error in imputed consumption from investment portfolios is correlated with aggregate economic and financial variables such as home prices, stock market returns, and GDP growth. Finally, we suggest ways to minimize the impact of these imputation errors in future household finance research and we discuss which research questions are least likely to suffer from such errors and which results will be most sensitive.

While we do demonstrate that there exists substantial amounts of measurement error for some (economically important) households, consumption imputation errors stemming from household equity portfolios are relatively small for most households, *on average*. This is especially true in Germany, where many households do not participate in equity markets at all. In addition, the inclusion of data that seems to be available to researchers across numerous countries can substantially reduce issues arising from imputation errors. We discuss these recommendations for researchers in Section 5.

This paper is most closely related to the contemporaneous paper by Eika et al. (2017). Using data from a different country and using financial transactions from a bank instead of administrative registry data, we reach a similar conclusion. Many assumptions in consumption imputation are not innocuous—substantial measurement error and even biased average values can result from an annual snapshot approach—especially for households with higher levels of income, wealth, and financial market trading activity. Relative to Eika et al. (2017), we focus on the measurement error stemming from households' financial assets and correlate those with outcome variables that researchers in household finance are specifically interested in.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes our data. Section 3 discusses the methodology of imputing consumption from the household's intertemporal budget constraint and potential sources of measurement error. Section 4 assesses the financial portfolio's contribution to measurement error in imputed consumption using the German investment accounts data. Section 5 recommends steps researchers can take to minimize the impact of these imputation errors on their analysis. Section 6 concludes.

2 Transaction-Level Investment Data

To investigate the extent of measurement error in imputed consumption data, we use a unique panel data set that tracks the daily trading of over 20,000 private investors in Germany spanning the years 2004 to 2015. The investment data comes from a large German bank, with a random sample being drawn from the several hundred thousand clients the bank's brokerage serves. With this data, we can precisely measure each trader's daily activity from his logging into an account to every single trade that he makes. We are also able to identify quasi-automatic trades, such as savings plan transactions. Moreover, trading decisions in our sample are not moderated by any influence from third parties, such as financial advisors.

This data set has been used and discussed in detail in previous studies (e.g., Schmittmann et al. 2014). It consists of a monthly asset position file, a daily transactions file, a file containing bookings to cash accounts, and a file containing investor demographics. The monthly asset position file contains identifiers for the investor, the securities as well as the respective volumes and values in euros. The transactions file contains identifiers for the investors and traded securities, transaction volumes, prices, and dates, as well as information on order types (orders with and without limits). Investors may also hold checking, savings and settlement accounts, with transfers between accounts being common.

In addition to portfolio holdings and trades, we also have the time series of checking, savings, and settlement account transactions as well as balances for all investors. The settlement account is used as the vehicle to execute trades into and out of the portfolio. With the data on all transactions in all accounts, we can infer all transfers within the bank as well as all transfers out of the bank. Transactions are automatically categorized and labeled, such as wire transfers, ATM withdrawals, or debit card transactions. We measure gross financial wealth as the sum of all assets an investor holds plus his checking, savings, and settlement account balances. The file with cash bookings contains bookings into the investor's cash accounts.

With respect to investor demographics, we observe a customer's income, age, gender, geographic location (postal code), marital status, employment status, whether or not they hold a doctoral degree, and self-reported risk-preferences.

2.1 Sample selection

We restrict the user sample to individuals who the bank flags as likely using this bank as their only banking institution, i.e., individuals that do not hold other bank relationships. This flag is based on an account being dedicated as containing the tax-free allowance (i.e., Freistellungsauftrag), account activity such as income and spending transactions, and the linking or lack of other accounts via the bank's financial aggregation facility. Nevertheless, our measure of financial/investment consumption may be biased if investors perform offsetting trades in other investment accounts. Therefore, we undertake multiple steps to ensure that we restrict the sample to individuals who utilize only this bank. Furthermore, in Germany, holding multiple checking accounts is discouraged as this hurts individual credit scores.

It is important to note that the bank from which we obtained the data is not only one of the largest retail brokerages in Germany, but also a multi-service retail financial institution offering checking and savings account services as well as overdraft facilities, credit cards, mortgage and auto credits, insurance, and retirement savings vehicles. Needless to say, the bank also offers all common online transfer facilities and automatic checking account transactions. Because cash payments are still prevalent in Germany, the bank also offers a dense network of ATMs.

2.2 Representativeness

Table 1 displays summary statistics for our sample, including mean and median of each component of gross financial wealth. The table also shows annual portfolio turnover as defined by Barber and Odean (2000), and the annual sum of all trading fees.

[Table 1 about here.]

The sample does not comprise the entirety of the bank's customer base, but a 7% sample of all customers. The bank did not pick the sample of retail investors by trading frequency but rather chose a random sub-sample of all bank users who held a brokerage account. In that sense, our sample is representative for individuals in Germany holding an investment portfolio at a major bank.

Panel A displays summary statistics of the customer sample from the bank. For comparison, Panels B and C provide similar statistics based on two representative surveys, the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP), which is comparable to the PSID, and the "Private Haushalte und ihre Finanzen" survey of the Bundesbank (PHF), which is comparable to the SCF. One issue when comparing statistics between the bank sample and these surveys is differences in the unit of observation. The bank data samples accounts rather than individuals as is the case for the GSOEP or households for the PHF. While each account is clearly linked to one natural person (i.e., there are no joint accounts), a couple might nevertheless use just one account instead of two separate ones.

The average age of the account holder is 44, which is comparable to the population, but the age distribution is more compressed in our sample of investors. Our sample is also substantially more male than the nation. Brokerage clients are generally expected (Cole et al. 2014) and found to be more financially sophisticated than the overall population (Dorn and Huberman 2005). This is also true for our sample: 5.5% of our investors hold a doctoral degree, which is higher than the 1.4% in the German adult population age 25-64 in 2016 according to the OECD.[6]

We see that our sample has both higher income and higher financial wealth than the average person in the nation as a whole. Income observed in the bank data is conceptually closest to labor income in the GSOEP, including regular salary payments after taxes and social security contributions, but also contains repeated wire transfers such as government transfers. In our sample of investors, average and median labor income is about twice as high as in the population and average financial wealth (estimated as the sum of portfolio value, checking, and savings account) is about three times larger. Both sample distributions have much larger right tails than the population. These descriptive statistics are comparable to those reported by household finance studies using U.S. data (e.g., Barber and Odean 2000).

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[6] Source: OECD.Stat, educational attainment and labour-force status, https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?datasetcode=EAG_NEAC.

Thus, our sample is not representative for the German population as a whole; less than half of Germans are invested in equities, either directly or indirectly. However, it is a fairly representative sample of self-directed active retail investors in Germany. We believe that this portion of the population is of particular interest and importance when thinking about measurement error in imputed consumption precisely because these individuals are the most likely to be performing asset trades and seeing the greatest amount of heterogeneity in asset price growth. Households without substantial volatile assets (e.g., equity portfolios) are therefore less likely to experience the types of imputation errors that we describe in this paper.

3 Calculating Actual and Imputed Financial Consumption

In this section, we discuss our method of computing "financial consumption" and sources of measurement error that may arise from incomplete information about various aspects of the financial portfolio. By "financial consumption", we mean a type of active savings or dis-savings flowing to or from investment accounts, defined precisely below. With this formulation, "financial consumption" need not be actually consumed by the household; these active savings may simply flow from a checking account to an investment account or be observed elsewhere on the balance sheet and would not induce error if measuring consumption directly through spending transactions. However, mismeasurement of "financial consumption" *will* directly impact imputed consumption derived as a residual of the budget constraint because it implies a mismeasurement of the amount of savings being done.

3.1 Calculating Actual Financial Consumption

3.1.1 The Period Budget Constraint

The goal of this paper is to assess the contribution of a household's financial portfolio to imputed consumption, which is based on administrative records of income taxes and annual snapshots of wealth, and potential measurement error resulting from the need to impute unobserved elements of the household's portfolio.

Financial assets' contribution to imputed consumption play an important role in the residual methodology, especially for the upper tail of the income and wealth distribution where financial asset holdings are a large component of overall wealth. For this group in particular, mismeasurement of financial returns can be potentially large relative to measured income. This is both because financial asset prices and returns can be volatile relative to non-financial asset prices (e.g., home prices) or household income and also because households will buy and sell securities much more often than they will sell homes or change jobs. So, mismeasurement of returns can pose a persistent problem for imputing consumption in every year that an individual or a household is in a sample, even when remaining at the same job and living in the same home.

There are three main approaches to expressing consumption expenditures as a residual of the budget constraint: the flow approach, the stock approach, and the return approach. Denote A_t the vector of financial asset positions (including cash as well as debt as negative elements) of a household's financial portfolio at date t (which we define to be the end of period t over which we measure flows) and P_t the corresponding vector of prices (equal to 1 for cash, the numeraire).

The flow measure of imputed consumption equates expenditures and revenues. Consumption expenditures C_t during period t can be financed in three ways: (i) with capital income net of capital income taxes, capital gains taxes, and wealth taxes as well as trading and other fees; (ii) with dis-saving (net asset sales); and (iii) with earned income and transfers net of earned income taxes,

$$\begin{aligned} C_t &= CI_t^{net} - S_t + E_t^{net} \\ &= CF_t' A_{t-1} - P_t' \Delta A_t - Fees_t + (E_t - Taxes_t). \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

- $CI_t^{net} = CF_t' A_{t-1} - Fees_t - Tax_t^{CI} - Tax_t^{CG} - Tax_t^{W}$ is capital income (i.e., cash flows from assets) net of capital income taxes Tax_t^{CI} (if treated differently than earned income taxes), capital gains taxes Tax_t^{CG}, wealth taxes Tax_t^{W}, and fees (both trading fees and other fees, such as annual account fees). CF_t is the vector of cash flows during period t, which include mainly interest payments and dividends.

- $S_t = P_t' \Delta A_t$ is active saving (dissaving if $P_t' \Delta A_t < 0$).

- $E_t^{net} = E_t - Tax_t^{E}$ is earned income E_t, including transfers (government transfers, gifts, etc.), net of earned income taxes Tax_t^{E}. The second line simplifies notation by collecting tax terms, $Taxes_t = Tax_t^{E} + Tax_t^{CI} + Tax_t^{W} + Tax_t^{CG}$.

The budget constraint (1) for period t relates to the different administrative tax records that the residual consumption imputation method can ideally access: personal income tax records and personal wealth tax records. Financial fees on the other hand are typically not observed in tax records, although they might be available from other administrative records which could be linked using social security or other personal identifiers.

The second expression of imputed consumption uses a stock approach. Defining financial wealth $W_t = P_t' A_t$, we can decompose changes in financial wealth over period t into active saving and passive capital gains, $\Delta W_t = P_t' \Delta A_t + \Delta P_t' A_{t-1}$. Substituting for active dis-savings $-P_t' \Delta A_t$ in equation (1), we obtain

$$C_t = CF_t' A_{t-1} - (\Delta W_t - \Delta P_t' A_{t-1}) - Fees_t + (E_t - Taxes_t). \tag{2}$$

The third approach expresses the budget constraint using return notation. Denoting portfolio return $r_t^p = \sum_{j \in A_{t-1}} \frac{CF_{jt} + \Delta P_{jt}}{P_{j,t-1}} \cdot \frac{P_{j,t-1} A_{j,t-1}}{W_{t-1}} \equiv \sum_{j \in A_{t-1}} r_{jt} \cdot \omega_{j,t-1}$, capital income and passive capital gains equal the return on financial wealth, $CF_t' A_{t-1} + \Delta P_t' A_{t-1} = r_t^p \cdot W_{t-1}$ such that imputed consumption can alternatively be expressed as

$$C_t = r_t^p \cdot W_{t-1} - \Delta W_t - Fees_t + (E_t - Taxes_t). \tag{3}$$

This expression has the advantage that it does not require separate information about asset prices and quantities, A and P, but only about total financial wealth W and its portfolio return r^p. However, as we will see, accurately measuring this portfolio return requires the actual purchase and sale prices of all assets between two transactions.

3.1.2 Accounting for Intra-Year Trading

The consumption flow expressed as a residual of the budget constraint in equations (1)-(3) above is accurate only between two *trading dates* but typically not for an entire year. Given that prices fluctuate during the year and individuals trade securities during the year, equations (1)-(3) are incompletely specified. Both realized and unrealized capital gains throughout the year need to be fully taken into account.

Suppose an individual makes N_t trades in year t. Denote t_{N_t} December 31 of year t when the individual makes a last trade or when the administrative records are consolidated to assess taxes and t_0 January 1 of year t.[7] Hence, there are $N_t + 1$ dates $n = 0, 1, ..., N_t$ that we need to keep track of to accurately impute *annual* consumption expenditure flows starting from period budget constraint (1).

Let X_{t_n} denote the flow of X in period t_n between trading dates t_{n-1} and t_n and $X_t = \sum_{n=1}^{N_t} X_{t_n}$ the annual flow of X from January 1 to December 31 of year t.[8] Using this notation, annual consumption expenditures in year t can be written using equation (1) as

$$C_t = \sum_{n=1}^{N_t} \left[CF_{t_n}' A_{t_{n-1}} - P_{t_n}' \Delta A_{t_n} \right] - Fees_t + (E_t - Taxes_t) \tag{4}$$

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[7] January 1 is a trading holiday so that the value of tradable assets is the same on January 1 and on December 31 of the previous year, i.e., $Z_{t_0} = Z_{(t-1)_N} \equiv Z_{t-1}$.

[8] Similarly, since stocks are measured at the end of period, the end-of-year stock of variable Z is $Z_t = Z_{t_{N_t}}$.

The first term, $\sum_n CF'_{t_n} A_{t_{n-1}}$, is the annual flow of dividends and interest. The second term, $\sum_n P'_{t_n} \Delta A_{t_n}$, is the net realized capital gain throughout the year. Note that prices refer not only to the end-of-period security price but the correct price at which the asset was actually bought or sold (e.g., a security contained in A_{t_N} may not have been purchased at price P_{t_N}).

Relative to this means of measurement in equation (4), using equation (1) to impute consumption from two annual snapshots will cause measurement error in two ways. First, if P_{t_N} is used to measure the purchase price of a security rather than the true but unobserved purchase prices P_{t_n}, active savings will be measured incorrectly. Second, the annual snapshot approach will entirely miss gains or losses from intermediate trades conducted during the year that are partially netted out, e.g., if $\sum_{n=1}^{N_t} |A_{t_n} - A_{t_{n-1}}| \neq A_{t_{N_t}} - A_{t_0}$. Both of these sources of errors will bias imputed consumption either upwards or downwards, depending on how security prices P_{t_n} vary through the year, unless the researcher observes active dis-saving flows $-P_{t_n}\Delta A_{t_n}$ directly, say because they are recorded in the capital gains and loss tax registry.[9]

3.1.3 Contribution of Investment Accounts to Imputed Consumption

To focus on the role of financial investment accounts for measures of imputed consumption, we define a financial portfolio's contribution to consumption as

$$\begin{aligned} FinCon_t &\equiv C_t - RealCon_t - CashCon_t - (E_t - Taxes_t) \\ &= \sum_{n=1}^{N_t} \left[CF'_{t_n} A_{t_{n-1}} - P'_{t_n} \Delta A_{t_n} \right] - Fees_t \\ &= \sum_{n=1}^{N_t} \left[CF'_{t_n} A_{t_{n-1}} + \Delta P'_{t_n} A_{t_{n-1}} \right] - \Delta W_t - Fees_t \\ &= \sum_{n=1}^{N_t} r^p_{t_n} \cdot W_{t_{n-1}} - \Delta W_t - Fees_t.^{[10]} \end{aligned} \tag{5}$$

The three items we exclude from the analysis are the contribution of net earnings $E_t - Taxes_t$ to consumption (which is typically well measured in income tax records) and two types of assets from the vector A, the contribution of real assets, $RealCon_t$ (e.g., owner-occupied housing), and the contribution of cash, $CashCon_t$ (e.g., currency and checking accounts), both of which we do not observe in our data.[11]

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[9] Note that new purchases and hence the initial cost basis of an asset position will not generate a gain or loss and hence will not show up in the capital gains and loss tax registry. The cost basis might be available from the wealth tax registry.

[10] The third and fourth lines use the fact that $\sum_{n=1}^{N_t} \Delta W_{t_n} = W_{t_N} - W_{t_0} = W_t - W_{t-1} = \Delta W_t$.

[11] We abuse notation slightly here as the vectors A, P, and CF now only contain a subset of the elements of

While we do not observe these other aspects of household income and consumption, we think that it is relatively unlikely that measurement error in income or real assets would vary negatively with measurement error in financial consumption. Without such a negative correlation, $FinCon_t$ will be linked directly with consumption, so the amount of error we measure in $FinCon_t$ will be translated directly into error that affects the measurement of total consumption.

3.2 Imputing Financial Consumption

3.2.1 Potential Sources of Measurement Error

We now simulate how different issues of missing financial data that often occur with administrative tax records affect imputed consumption. Measurement error in this type of consumption imputation can stem from a number of sources. Compared to a method of constructing a measure of actual financial consumption, these errors range from generally less consequential, like neglecting trading fees or dividend and interest payments, to much more substantial errors based on mismeasuring portfolio composition or neglecting portfolio growth altogether. We seek to understand just how large the potential measurement error might be in each case.

Broadly speaking, these sources of potential error are:

(a) *Missing or incomplete trading fees.* If researchers exclude fees from their calculation of financial consumption ($FinCon_t$), they will *overstate* financial consumption by implicitly assuming that $Fees_t = 0$.

(b) *Missing or incomplete cash flows from assets.* If researchers exclude dividends and interest income from their calculation of financial consumption, they will *understate* financial consumption by implicitly assuming that $CF_{t_n} = 0$. Even when a researcher knows the exact portfolio composition at year-end, if the timing of asset purchases within a year is unknown, researchers may be unable to recover whether an individual would have received a particular cash flow. For example, whether a stock was purchased cum- or ex-dividend.

(c) *Missing intra-year gains or losses.* Researchers with annual snapshots reporting only actual portfolio holdings (and prices) may exclude trading conducted during the year that was "netted out" in the same year (e.g., buying 10 shares of firm X at $10 in February and selling them 6 months later for $15 each). That is, ΔA_t will be an accurate portrayal of *net* asset holding changes, but will miss intermediate trades conducted during the year (e.g., if $\sum_{n=1}^{N_t} |A_{t_n} - A_{t_{n-1}}| \neq \Delta A_t$) and thus bias imputed consumption either upwards or downwards

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the corresponding vectors in the previous equations.

depending on how security prices P_{t_n} vary through the year and when exactly an individual bought and sold the security.

(d) *Price errors in intra-year portfolio changes.* Researchers with annual snapshots that only report quantities of securities being held will mis-measure the price at which those securities were purchased or sold. To the extent that securities vary in price throughout the year, this will lead to errors in the measurement of $FinCon_t$. Similarly to above, this means of measuring asset changes (i.e, using ΔA_t) will obscure intra-year gross changes in asset holdings. In addition, P_{t_N} will be mis-measured even when calculating the impact of *net* asset changes on $FinCon_t$

(e) *Incorrect assumptions about portfolio composition and returns.* If researchers only observe the total portfolio value (e.g., they observe $P'A$ rather than P and A separately), they will be unable to determine the actual annual growth of a given portfolio. Researchers may attribute a broad market return to the portfolio, neglecting any variation across households in risk preferences, etc. Again, here both P_t and ΔA_t will be mis-measured to an even greater extent, depending on how significantly an individual's portfolio differs from a broad market index.

(f) *Neglecting portfolio growth altogether.* Potentially the largest source of measurement error may be to neglect any growth altogether, taking the difference between year-end portfolio balances ΔW_t as being equal to $-FinCon_t$

3.2.2 Illustrative Imputation Methods

For the purposes of this paper, we construct six different measures of imputed financial consumption, denoted $\widehat{FinCon}$ and listed below, corresponding roughly to the sources of measurement error identified above. We then define the imputation error ϵ by comparing measured financial contribution to the portfolio's true contribution to consumption, $FinCon$, which might not be available to the researcher,

$$\epsilon_t = \widehat{FinCon}_t - FinCon_t = \widehat{C}_t - C_t. \tag{6}$$

Each imputation method is not aimed at precisely mimicking procedures taken in any particular paper, but attempt to more broadly span the types of imputation that have been seen in the literature to this point.

Our versions of imputed financial consumption are created as follows:

(i) *No fees.* For this method of imputation, we assume that the researcher has sufficient information on trading behavior to calculate a given portfolio's true growth, purchases, sales, and dividend and interest payments. However, the researcher is unable to observe trading and other portfolio fees and thus *overestimates* the amount of financial consumption obtained by the individual. This is generally the best case scenario for registry-based imputed consumption, assuming that researchers have all relevant information from administrative records (e.g., all tax records and additional administrative records of asset prices and asset holdings or transactions as in Eika et al. 2017). Formally, $\widehat{Fees}_t = 0$ such that $\epsilon_t^{(i)} = Fees_t$.

(ii) *No dividends and interest income.* Again, we assume that the researcher is able to construct the actual financial consumption (including fees) except cash flows from assets. This scenario might occur if capital income taxes are stored in a separate database that researchers cannot access. Because cash flows are strictly positive, researchers thus *underestimate* the true amount of financial consumption being undertaken by the individual if they ignore cash flow distributions from assets. Formally, $\widehat{CF}_{t_n} = 0$ such that $\epsilon_t^{(ii)} = -\sum_n CF'_{t_n} A_{t_{n-1}}$.

(iii) *No intra-year gross trades.* With this method of imputation, the researcher can only observe the *net* changes in portfolio composition across annual snapshots and the cost basis of the net purchases.[12] This scenario might occur if financial institutions directly report to the tax authority (so that the cost basis of each security is observed), but the researcher does not observe realized capital gains and losses, which might be stored in some other administrative tax database (e.g., different tax records for wealth, capital gains, and personal income taxes). Thus, for frequent traders, the researcher will measure trading gains and losses within the year with error. Formally, $\sum_{n=1}^{N_t} |A_{t_n} - A_{t_{n-1}}| \neq A_{t_{N_t}} - A_{t_0}$ and intra-year gross asset positions $\hat{A}_{t_n}$ are not observed.[13]

(iv) *Mid-year prices instead of cost basis.* Similar to the previous method, the researcher can observe year-end individual asset positions held by the individual and year-end prices. However, the researcher is now unaware of the price at which a share was purchased (i.e., the cost basis). Again, any intra-year trading that is netted out (in terms of the *number* of shares, not the *gains* or *losses*) by the end of the year will be unobserved by the researcher. In addition, to the extent that individual securities (stocks, bonds, mutual funds, etc) vary in price throughout the year, the ability to only observe changes in the number of securities will introduce error. This scenario might occur if researchers only have access to wealth tax records, but not the capital gains tax records which also contain the cost basis. Here, a sensible approach is to attribute change in securities held to have occurred mid-year on June 30th at the prevailing price, $P_{t_{June30}}$, which the researcher can link to the data from an external source such as Thomson Reuters Datastream. Formally, $\sum_{n=1}^{N_t} P'_{t_n}\widehat{\Delta A}_{t_n} = P'_{t_{June30}}\Delta A_t$ such that $\epsilon_t^{(iv)} = -\Big[P'_{t_{June30}}\Delta A_t - \big(\sum_n P_{t_n}\Delta A_{t_n}\big)\Big]$.

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[12] We take the 'first in, first out' (FIFO) approach as the relevant cost-basis for tax considerations.

[13] Expressing the error term $\epsilon_t^{(iii)}$ mathematically would require a substantial amount of additional notation without yielding much further insights. Hence, we limit the exposition to this specific example.

(v) *Using market returns, but no individual securities observed.* This method of imputation is simply a less precise version of (iv). Here, the researcher is able to see only aggregate portfolio values at year end, e.g., the value of stocks, bonds, etc. The researcher assumes that the household holds a portfolio with an equity return equal to that seen by the DAX, a standard composite equity index in Germany similar to the S&P 500 Index in the United States. The portfolio is assumed to grow at the same rate as the DAX, with any adjustments to the portfolio being made on June 30th. Thus, the researcher will observe true financial consumption with error if the individual's portfolio differs significantly from broad market holdings. Formally, $\hat{r}_t^p = r_t^{DAX}$ in equation (3) such that $\epsilon_t^{(v)} = r_t^{DAX} W_{t-1} - \sum_n r_{t_n}^p W_{t_{n-1}}$.

(vi) *"Raw" portfolio change.* For the most basic imputation of financial consumption, the researcher looks only at changes in portfolio size between annual snapshots, disregarding any compositional change or growth. That is, the total financial portfolio balance at the end of year t is subtracted from the total financial portfolio balance at the end of year $t-1$ to obtain the imputed financial consumption during year t. Formally, $\widehat{FinCon}_t = -\Delta W_t$ such that $\epsilon_t^{(vi)} = r_t^p \cdot W_{t-1}$.

4 Assessing Accuracy of Imputed Financial Consumption

Being able to observe an investor's actual or 'true' financial contribution to imputed consumption, in this section we determine whether and how these different means of imputing financial consumption might impact the interpretation of research using these methods. To begin we compare the imputed consumption measures, by portfolio-year, against the actual financial consumption exhibited by that portfolio-year. Because investors in our sample have dramatically different portfolio sizes and income, we scale the difference in actual and imputed financial consumption by average after-tax income over all investor-years, E_i^{net},

$$\frac{\epsilon_{it}}{E_i^{net}}. \tag{7}$$

We also exclude individuals with portfolio sizes under 1,000 euros so that this scaling is not driven by miniscule portfolios.

[Table 2 about here.]

4.1 Distribution of Imputation Errors

Table 2 shows means, standard deviations, and percentiles of this relative error measure for each of the different imputation methods that are enumerated in Section 3. The first row shows the relative error if we only lack information on fees (method i). This is the best case scenario for imputed consumption, assuming that researchers have all relevant information from all tax records. As would be expected, errors stemming from neglecting trading fees are uniformly positive (*overstating* actual financial consumption). In general, these errors are not substantial relative to the individuals' average income, with an interquartile range of 1.5%. However, in the tails, we see that trading fees may be over 20% of non-financial income for the heaviest traders (see also Barber and Odean 2000).

Previous research shows that the amount of trading has a large person fixed effect (e.g., men tend to trade substantially more; see Figure 3 below). Controlling for individual fixed effects in panel data or individual characteristics such as gender in cross-sectional data could partially alleviate this issue. However, trading might still be substantially correlated with the business cycle, say if investors trade more in downturns, which could lead to biased estimates of the cyclicality of consumption. Researchers might therefore try to construct proxies for the annual number of trades, say by counting the number of asset positions that changed across two annual snapshots.

Errors stemming from omitting portfolio cash flow distributions in the second row (method ii) are uniformly negative , therefore *understating* actual financial consumption. Similar to the first row, these errors are not substantial relative to the individuals' average income (interquartile range of 2%), but disregarding cash flows understates of financial consumption by 10% of income in the 10th percentile.

For the other imputation methods, errors can be both substantially positive and negative. The third row shows that omitting intra-year trading (method iii) leads to small errors on average with a mean (median) error of 0.4% (0%) of income, and an interquartile range of only 0.3%. However, the errors in boths tails of the distribution are very large, understating financial consumption by more than 60% of household income in the 10th percentile and overstating it by more than 75% in the 90th percentile.

The fourth row shows that when researchers also lack the cost basis at which additional assets were purchased and instead have to use mid-year prices (method iv), the tails of the error distribution become heavier. For instance, the interquartile range of the error increases from 0.3% to 5% of income.

Finally, assuming portfolios simply return the average market return as in the fifth row (method v) or neglecting returns entirely as in the sixth row (method vi) has extremely large effects on imputed financial consumption across the error distribution. These errors are largely driven by a combination of factors, including investors holding portfolios that differ substantially from (efficient) market portfolios and by realized returns over the specific sample period, both for the overall market index and for the the cross-section of individual asset returns. Because realized returns can be highly correlated with other measures that researchers want to study in relation to consumption, such as individual income or the business cycle, this measure of imputed consumption could result in significant biases.

[Figure 1 about here.]

In Figure 1, we display plots of actual (or "true") financial consumption on the horizontal axis against financial consumption imputed according to our six different procedures on the vertical axis. Both actual and imputed financial consumption are measured in nominal euros at a portfolio-year level with zero measurement error for a given portfolio-year being represented by a point anywhere along the 45-degree line. The vertical distance between any point and the 45-degree line represents the imputation error, measured in euros. For display purposes in these figures, we censor financial consumption at the 1% and 99% level. With this level of censoring, we find that 'true' annual financial consumption ranges between approximately 150,000 euros and -150,000 euros. That is, households actively are investing or withdrawing up to approximately 150,000 euros.

The top-left panel displays the relationship between actual financial consumption and financial consumption omitting fees, i.e., method (i). As seen in the summary statistics, every deviation from the 45-degree line is above the line, implying that the true level of financial consumption is weakly less than what is imputed while missing any trading fees. In contrast, the top-right panel shows the relationship between true and imputed consumption where the imputation includes fees but excludes cash flows, i.e., method (ii), and all deviations are below the 45-degree line.

In the center and bottom rows, we display the relationship with actual financial consumption for our four other versions of imputation—no intra-year trading (iii), individual securities with wrong prices (iv), using only market returns (v), and "raw" portfolio differences (vi). These measures have substantially larger levels of error than seen in the top row. In particular, almost every portfolio-year in the final two imputation methods has appreciable levels of error.

One feature to highlight in the bottom row is the tendency for there to be substantial amounts of error even for cases in which there is no actual change in financial consumption. This can be seen as the vertical cluster of data points above and below the origin in several of the graphs. That is, for a large number of households, they exhibit no active saving or dis-saving during the year, solely seeing changes in portfolio value due to passive capital gains and reinvested cash flows. When incorporating only market returns or "raw" portfolio value changes, we mistakenly attribute these changes to consumption or savings on the part of the household.

This particular source of imputation error is greatly diminished in the center row where we are at least taking into account the composition of the portfolio in terms of the number of shares of a given security. Since the main source of error here is in prices of purchases and sales, a household conducting no trades during the year will have a relatively well-measured zero even when imputing financial consumption.

4.2 Correlation of Imputation Errors with Economic Outcomes

An important question is whether and how these imputation errors correlate with economic outcomes of interest.

[Figure 2 about here.]

As a start, Figure 2 shows bin-scatter plots of the imputation error using method (iii)—ignoring intra-year gross trades and assuming that transactions occur at mid-year prices, which is the most commonly applied imputation method—against investors' average portfolio value and average income. The top row shows that imputation errors (normalized by investors' average income) are systematically related to both financial wealth and income: The relative errors become more negative as investors get richer.

The middle row shows that controlling for household characteristics—including average income when plotting errors against average portfolio balance and average portfolio balance when plotting errors against average income—helps to mitigate the the systematic bias with income but does not help to resolve the systematic relation with portfolio size.[14] The bottom-left panel shows that the relative imputation error is more dispersed for wealthier households, and the bottom-right panel shows that the relative imputation error increases less than proportionally with income.

[Figure 3 about here.]

In Figure 3, we show box plots of the distribution of imputation errors (again relative to average income) for a number of subsets of our data. Each panel illustrates relative imputation error for one of our six methods of imputation in Section 3. Note that the y-axis expands in scale for the center and bottom rows, denoting much wider distributions of measurement error for these imputation methods.

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[14] The other controls include age fixed effects, gender, employment status, marital status, and fixed effects for self-reported risk tolerance.

Each panel shows how the relative imputation errors are distributed across the full sample and 7 different subsets of our sample. These subsets are: incomes below 60,000 euros, incomes between 60,000 and 100,000 euros, incomes above 100,000 euros; male account-holders, female account-holders; years with positive market returns, and years with negative market returns.

One notable pattern is seen in the measurement error among female account-holders. Across all versions of our consumption imputation, female account-holders tend to have significantly lower levels of measurement error. This is driven primarily by the fact that female account-holders tend to trade less often than do males, thereby generating fewer trading fees, less intra-year trading or pricing measurement error, and perhaps less impulsive selling in down-market years (see also Byrnes et al. 1999 or Barber and Odean 2001).

Similarly, account-holders with higher income and higher levels of wealth tend to have the highest levels of measurement error associated with them. Again, this seems to be caused by the significantly higher levels of intra-year trading and by deviation of the individual's portfolio return from return of the market portfolio. For instance, we see that intra-year trading measurement error for these individuals, in the left-center panel of Figure 3, exhibits a distribution about 5-10 times wider than the overall distribution.

Finally, the subset of our sample that exhibits the most distinct measurement error distribution in terms of median error is for years in which the market had negative returns. In these years, the entire distribution of measurement error often shifts in the opposite direction as when markets are positive for the year. This fact may be troublesome for researchers interested in investigating the time-series or panel properties of consumption at an individual level. That is, measurement error for consumption shifts significantly in a manner correlated with the business cycle and overall income growth.

[Table 3 about here.]

Table 3 displays a set of results regarding some of the time-series properties of two of our measures of imputation errors. The first is the imputation methodology in which we exclude any intra-year trades that were netted out by opposite trades during a given year, method (iii). The second is the imputation methodology in which we assume all households obtain a market rate of return (e.g., the return on the DAX) for a given year, method (v). Errors are measured in three ways: (a) in euros, ϵ_{it}; (b) relative to household labor income, $\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i$; and (c) as the absolute value of (b), $|\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i|$.

For each column, we regress the relevant imputation error on the logged amount of turnover that a portfolio undergoes through the year, including time and household fixed effects. The impact on the average trading error is ambiguous, with some measures increasing and others decreasing as more trading occurs. For instance, a doubling of trading volume decreases the average amount of intra-year imputation error (method iii) by approximately 153 euros and increases the amount of market returns imputation error (method v) by approximately 510 euros.

However, in columns (3) and (6), we see that the absolute amount of error increases unambiguously as more trading is done. A doubling of trading volume tends to increase imputation error relative to income by approximately 1.5-1.7%. Thus, the more trades that an individual or household conducts, the larger the imputation error—either positive or negative—tends to become.

[Table 4 about here.]

Table 4 further explores the correlation of the imputation errors with the state of the economy. Each column regresses the measure of imputation error on real GDP growth, the annual return of the market, or the change in home prices in Germany (each independent variable run separately). Because these are all measured on a country-wide basis, we do not include annual fixed effects in any of the regressions.

For almost all macro variables and imputation error measures, we find that increases in the macro variable tends to increase both the average error (measured in euros or relative to income) and the absolute value of the average error. That is, the mean and standard deviation of imputation errors is pro-cyclical by a number of different metrics.

For instance, for every percentage point increase in German home prices, financial consumption tends to be overestimated by approximately 39 euros or 900 euros, depending on the imputation methodology. In addition, for every percentage point increase in German home prices, the absolute value of imputation errors tends to increase by 0.1%-1% of average income.

We do not assert that imputation errors are *driven* by changes in GDP or home prices, but merely note that there exists significant cyclicality in imputation errors that co-varies with important macro trends. Thus, researchers utilizing any sort of aggregate variation in imputed consumption are likely to both be picking up actual changes in consumption alongside non-classical measurement error.

[Table 5 about here.]

Table 5 demonstrates that these patterns can have much more striking magnitudes across the distribution of wealth. Because households with larger portfolio balances are subject to higher levels of potential financial consumption imputation error, any heterogeneity in error may be similarly magnified for this higher-wealth group. Table 5 performs the same analysis as with market returns in Table 4 but interacting market returns with indicators that indicate which quintile of the portfolio-balance distribution a household is in.

Unsurprisingly, we find that the largest source of errors, both absolute and relative to household income, are found within the households with the largest portfolio balances. These errors are quantitatively large for richer households: if equity markets increase by 50% in a year, the market returns imputation method (method v) can overstate consumption by as much as 20% of income for households in the highest portfolio balance quintile. In contrast, the lowest portfolio balance quintile may see an imputation error of only 1.5% of income. This feature of the data is largely repeated across the different imputation methods and error measurements and demonstrate the extent to which imputed consumption can exhibit errors both over the business cycle but also differentially across households with varying financial characteristics.

[Table 6 about here.]

Given that many papers turn to imputed consumption data to study how consumption responds to changes in income, Table 6 tests whether changes in household income are directly correlated with imputation error. Here, all columns employ the imputation methodology in which we exclude any intra-year trades that were netted out by opposite trades during a given year (method iii), which is a conservative method in the sense that it leads to relatively mild imputation errors on average (see Table 2).

Column (1) finds that an increase in household income of 1% yields an increase in mean imputation error of approximately 2.5 euros. In column (2), we find that changes in income do not exhibit a significant relationship with mean imputation error measured as a fraction of household income. However, increases in income do tend to increase the variation in imputation error, as seen in column (3) using the absolute value of imputation error.

Columns (4)-(6) demonstrate that, for all three metrics, households in the highest quintile of average portfolio balance exhibit stronger positive relationships between imputation error and income. This makes intuitive sense, as small portfolios will mechanically have a narrower scope to be measured with substantial error (either measured in total euros as in column (4) or relative to income as in column (5)). Column (5) shows that mean imputation error for the lowest three quintiles of portfolios varies little by income, but there is a significantly positive relationship with income for the highest quintile. Moreover, the variation in imputation errors increases most significantly for the highest quintile, as seen in column (6).

These results suggest that imputation error can be significant for richer households with large asset portfolios and can vary within-household as income varies. Again, there is not necessarily a mechanical linkage that drives this relationship, but households experiencing changes in income may adjust trading strategies to reflect changing beliefs or to better smooth consumption.

Despite the statistically significant differences, the magnitudes in this table are well below those seen in Table 5. This is largely because the imputation errors are primarily driven by equity market behavior and, in our sample period in Germany, equity market returns are virtually uncorrelated with income (correlation = 0.01). In periods or countries with higher levels of correlation, substantial amounts of imputation error on consumption could occur and researchers will be unable to control for this error with simple time effects given the types of heterogeneity we see in our sample.

5 Recommendations for Researchers

With these results in mind, we now suggest steps that researchers can take to minimize the impact of these imputation errors on their analysis and discuss which research questions are least likely to suffer from such errors.

Our analysis shows that consumption imputation errors stemming from household equity portfolios are relatively small for most households, *on average*. Most households in Germany do not actively participate in financial markets and financial income constitutes a small share of total income for them. Research that focuses on the general population or middle- and lower-income households is therefore least likely affected by this type of measurement error. Researchers focusing on behavior or financial outcomes among the top of the income and wealth distributions may have more substantial problems with this source of imputation error.

Other countries, including Scandinavian countries, have considerably higher financial market participation rates (Campbell 2006, Calvet et al. 2007). In countries with higher shares of active investors we would expect imputation errors to affect a larger part of the population. For instance, because the U.S. largely shifted from defined benefit to defined contribution pension plans (and substantially increased the liquidity and accessibility of such plans), many more U.S. households actively participate in financial markets and have to allocate their financial portfolio. The contribution of financial consumption to total consumption is therefore larger in the U.S. and has substantially larger variance across households, according to idiosyncratic equity holdings.

Moreover, while the contribution of financial portfolios to consumption imputation errors is small for most households in many countries, similar issues might arise in the case of non-financial assets. For instance, Eika et al. (2017) find significant imputation errors for a large fraction of households below the top if real estate transaction data are missing and need to be imputed.

Our most general recommendation therefore echoes most previous studies of measurement error: where possible, obtain and utilize better data. While this might be cheap advice in other contexts (e.g., with survey data where it is often very costly or impossible to improve the data ex post), we believe it is realistic advice in this case where researchers can request access to many different types of administrative records which can then be linked.

Researchers interested in consumption behavior—especially at the top of the income and wealth distribution—should request intra-year data for both real estate and financial transactions or, at the very least, request asset-level holdings data rather than assuming that households hold an average portfolio.[15] This level of granularity is available not just in Norway but also in Sweden (Calvet et al. 2007, Kolsrud et al. 2017) and likely also in other countries that have a wealth tax.

Tables 4 and 5 highlight that using such granular asset holdings rather than a broad market index (such as measure *v*) matters quantitatively. Table 4 shows that moving to individual asset holding data greatly reduces the variance of the error over the business cycle and its correlation with market returns and home prices. Similarly, Table 5 shows that a 20 percentage point change in market return (roughly equivalent to its annual standard deviation) induces errors of almost 10% of annual income for the wealthiest quintile when using market returns (measure *v*), but only 1% when using annual snapshots of individual-level asset holdings (measure *iii*).

In addition, researchers should bear in mind that these sorts of imputation error seem to be substantial in the cross section, but perhaps vary less within households over time, on average. For instance, while Table 2 documents substantial variation in imputation errors and Figure 3 shows that these vary systematically across subsets and demographics (e.g., by gender), our analysis also shows that including individual-level fixed effects controls for much of this variation. The reason is that most households' portfolios (and, consequently, the risk profile and expected return of the portfolio) do not change much from year to year.

Changes in income within households, for example, are only mildly correlated with consumption imputation errors (Table 6). Even in the top quintile of financial wealth, the upward bias in the marginal propensity to consume (MPC) out of monthly income changes is only 0.5 percentage points. This is small compared to the typical estimates of such MPCs, which are about 30 percentage points in the short-run.

6 Conclusion

Survey-based measures of consumption are analyzed in a large number of empirical research papers in household finance despite suffering from considerable measurement error. For that reason, a number of recent papers turn to an alternative measure of consumption derived from annual administrative records on income and asset holdings. Commonly referred to as "imputed consumption," this approach calculates consumption as a residual from the household's budget constraint: the part of total income that was not invested or saved.

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[15] While most researchers currently do not have access to such comprehensive data, Eika et al. (2017) show that it is possible to obtain such data at least for Norway, including intra-year data for both real estate and financial transactions.

However, due to incompleteness in asset records, this measure of consumption may suffer from measurement error, as well. In this paper, we use transaction-level data from German households' balances, asset trades, and asset holdings to assess the potential shortcomings in using annual snapshots of wealth and income in imputing what we call financial consumption.

We find that imputing financial consumption from annual portfolio snapshots can lead to substantial measurement error, both in absolute terms and relative to household income. Moreover, these errors are correlated with both household financial characteristics as well as key financial and macroeconomic variables like such as turnover, income, GDP growth, and house price growth. In short, financial economists should treat annual snapshot-derived imputed consumption with care, since, especially for households with high levels of income and wealth, measurement error can bias or distort the results of common empirical specifications.

The findings in this paper should not be understood as arguing against using this methodology. We certainly believe that using detailed administrative tax registries, which include comprehensive data on wealth, income, and changes in financial portfolios, provides an important alternative to survey-based measures of consumption. In many or even most cases, this may be a superior approach to measuring consumption than most traditional metrics. Instead, we encourage researchers to obtain comprehensive access to the different administrative registries to reduce non-classical measurement error in imputed consumption and to be cautious when imputing consumption for households with large financial portfolios.

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Table 1: Summary Statistics of Retail Investment Accounts

			Percentiles				
	Mean	St.Dev	10th	25th	50th	75th	90th
Panel A: Bank Data							
Portfolio Value	141,775	236,285	5,538	19,039	59,126	157,099	347,135
Checking Acct Balance	9,408	34,321	136	1,237	4,198	11,104	24,487
Savings Acct Balance	57,719	168,943	1,518	7,108	22,312	58,882	129,668
Gross Financial Wealth	208,902	339,025	14,433	39,716	103,146	242,108	483,152
Annual Turnover*	252,135	627,961	3,982	15,038	53,605	191,166	600,891
Annual Trading Fees	1,103	2,026	47	139	401	1,142	2,800
Labor Income	79,826	167,713	16,343	26,888	47,429	86,204	157,570
Age	44	13.7	27	33	44	54	64
Male	0.88	0.33	0	1	1	1	1
Has a PhD	0.055	0.23	0	0	0	0	0
Risk Aversion Index	3.1	1.7	1	1	3	5	5
Number of Individuals	20,557						
Panel B: GSOEP							
Gross Income	39,463	48,489	196	6,732	32,621	56,599	84,565
Net Income	35,852	28,242	13,013	20,168	30,956	44,748	62,395
Labor Income	36,629	41,365	0	1,443	30,944	54,600	81,760
Age	44	23	10	25	45	62	74
Male	0.48	0.50	0	0	0	1	1
More than High-School	.15	.36	0	0	0	0	1
Number of Individuals	353,746						
Panel C: PHF							
Gross Financial Wealth	50,844	n/a	188	2,908	15,572	55,769	120,450
Number of Households	4,461						

Notes: Nominal values are in real euros of 2010, deflated with the German Consumer Price Index ("Verbraucherpreisindex"). Panel A uses the sample from the bank for years 2004-2014. Panel B uses the Cross-National Equivalent Files (CNEF) of the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) for years 2004-2014, which is comparable to the PSID in the U.S. Panel C is based on summary statistics from the survey "Private Haushalte und ihre Finanzen" (PHF) which is run by the German Bundesbank in 2014 and is comparable to the SCF in the U.S. Because the 25th and 75th percentiles are not reported by the Bundesbank, we instead use the averages of the 20th and 30th respectively the 70th and 80th percentiles.
* Annual turnover is the sum of the value of securities bought plus the absolute value of securities sold during the year divided by two. Hence, if the investor would sell and immediately repurchase the same securities at the same price at one day and not trade at any other day, annual turnover would equal the portfolio value.

Table 2: Summary Statistics of Imputation Errors (Relative to Average Income, $\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}$)

			Percentiles						
	Mean	St.Dev	1st	10th	25th	50th	75th	90th	99th
(i) No fees	.01648	.03667	0	0	.00056	.00408	.01490	.03073	.2016
(ii) No cash flows	-.01886	.02006	-.1010	-.05181	-.02529	-.01406	-.00533	0	0
(iii) No intra-year trades	.00353	.1834	-.6096	-.07307	-.00296	0	.00025	.08001	.7678
(iv) No cost basis	.00028	.2010	-.8241	-.08218	-.02031	0	.03064	.09363	.6711
(v) Only market returns	.08922	.2194	-.4490	-.07727	-.02707	.07105	.1804	.3280	.8672
(vi) ‘Raw’ portfolio diff.	-.00721	.27846	-.6719	-.2880	-.1565	-.04495	.10408	.2272	.8765

Notes: The six imputation methods (i)-(vi) that we employ in this paper are are as follows: (i) No Fees - disregard any trading fees charged to the household, yielding weakly larger levels of imputed financial consumption; (ii) No cash flows - disregard any dividends paid out to households, yielding weakly smaller levels of imputed financial consumption; (iii) No consideration of intra-year trades which were netted out during the year (e.g., if you bought 12 and sold 10 shares of Volkswagen, only keep track of the net 2 that you were holding at the end of the year) but purchase/sale prices are ’correct’ for those net purchases/sales; (iv) Similar to (iii) but using the incorrect prices of purchase/sale for any net changes in securities held (prices assumed to be equal to the June 30th price during the previous year); (v) Market Returns imputation dispenses with actual portfolio holdings and assumes that the household holds the DAX and that any adjustment (i.e., financial consumption) occurs on June 30th at June 30th prices; (v) ‘Raw’ imputation - disregarding growth altogether and assuming any change in portfolio value ΔW_t is the result of active savings or dis-savings.

Table 3: Trading and Imputation Errors

	(iii) No Intra-Year Trades			(v) Only Market Returns		
	ϵ_{it}	$\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}$	$\lvert\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}\rvert$	ϵ_{it}	$\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}$	$\lvert\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}\rvert$
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ln(Turnover Value)	-153.0***	-0.00268***	0.0159***	510.2***	0.0121***	0.0171***
	(18.24)	(0.000512)	(0.000694)	(32.61)	(0.00102)	(0.000938)
Observations	46,308	22,166	22,166	45,302	21,718	21,718
R^2	0.084	0.098	0.388	0.322	0.336	0.482
Mean of Dep Var	72.9	0.002	0.057	3922	0.083	0.135
Year FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Individual FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Notes: Each column denotes the results of regressions examining how individual trading affects the size of imputation errors. Columns (1)-(3) use imputation error derived from our third imputation method, (iii) no intra-year trades. Columns (4)-(6) use imputation error derived from our fifth imputation method, (v) Only Market Returns. Columns (1) and (4) look at levels of imputation errors in euros, ϵ_{it}; columns (2) and (5) look at imputation errors relative to individual investors' average income, $\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i$; and columns (3) and (6) look at the absolute value of imputation errors relative to individual income, $|\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i|$. Trading values are computed as an individual's total gross annual trades multiplied by the price of securities at the time of trade. Standard errors are clustered by investor. ***, **, * denote statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level, respectively.

Table 4: GDP, Market Returns, Home Prices, and Imputation Errors

	(iii) No Intra-Year Trades			(v) Only Market Returns		
	ϵ_{it}	$\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}$	$\lvert\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}\rvert$	ϵ_{it}	$\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}$	$\lvert\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}\rvert$
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Real GDP Growth	-865.7	-0.0168	0.229***	34,392***	0.628***	0.202***
	(1,153)	(0.0351)	(0.0260)	(1,718)	(0.0509)	(0.0364)
Observations	51,862	24,748	24,748	50,862	24,321	24,321
R^2	0.073	0.088	0.348	0.243	0.260	0.434
Individual FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Annual Market Return	1,706***	0.0330***	-0.00771**	6,122***	0.107***	0.00113
(DAX)	(177.2)	(0.00504)	(0.00345)	(338.3)	(0.00984)	(0.00638)
Observations	50,648	24,169	24,169	50,862	24,321	24,321
R^2	0.078	0.094	0.350	0.248	0.264	0.434
Individual FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Real Home Price Growth	3,936.7***	0.0999**	0.125***	93,239***	1.971***	0.901***
	(1,380.3)	(0.0430)	(0.0462)	(3,139.1)	(0.0954)	(0.0776)
Observations	36,640	17,198	17,198	35,906	16,888	16,888
R^2	0.108	0.114	0.417	0.295	0.326	0.495
Individual FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Notes: Each column and row denotes a regression of imputation errors on annual GDP growth in Germany, the annual return of the DAX (German S&P-500 equivalent), or annual housing price changes in Germany. Columns (1)-(3) use imputation error derived from our third imputation method, (iii) no intra-year trades. Columns (4)-(6) use imputation error derived from our fifth imputation method, (v) Only Market Returns. Columns (1) and (4) look at levels of imputation errors in euros, ϵ_{it}; columns (2) and (5) look at imputation errors relative to individual investors' average income, $\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i$; and columns (3) and (6) look at the absolute value of imputation errors relative to individual income, $|\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i|$. All independent variables are measured on a -1 to 1 scale (i.e., 1% real GDP growth is denoted at 0.01). The sample standard deviation is 2.5% for real GDP growth, 20% for the market return, and 2.4% for the real home price index. Standard errors are clustered by investor. ***, **, * denote statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level, respectively.

Table 5: Imputation Errors from Market Returns by Portfolio Balance Quintiles

	(iii) No Intra-Year Trades			(v) Only Market Returns		
	ϵ_{it}	$\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}$	$\lvert\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}\rvert$	ϵ_{it}	$\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}$	$\lvert\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}\rvert$
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Mkt. Ret. $\times W_t$ Quintile 1	-98.78	-0.00542	-0.0436***	-1,029***	-0.0346***	-0.0735***
	(168.8)	(0.00629)	(0.00564)	(263.2)	(0.00975)	(0.00893)
Mkt. Ret. $\times W_t$ Quintile 2	721.1***	0.0144*	-0.0299***	1,151***	0.00905	-0.0549***
	(261.1)	(0.00835)	(0.00667)	(309.0)	(0.0124)	(0.0101)
Mkt. Ret. $\times W_t$ Quintile 3	2,299***	0.0496***	-0.00537	2,827***	0.0704***	-0.0380***
	(326.8)	(0.00984)	(0.00773)	(480.7)	(0.0153)	(0.0113)
Mkt. Ret. $\times W_t$ Quintile 4	3,337***	0.0604***	0.0137	9,427***	0.189***	0.0303**
	(436.8)	(0.0118)	(0.00887)	(741.0)	(0.0217)	(0.0147)
Mkt. Ret. $\times W_t$ Quintile 5	3,043***	0.0471***	0.0364***	28,179***	0.386***	0.204***
	(652.5)	(0.0145)	(0.0110)	(1,539)	(0.0386)	(0.0261)
Observations	50,648	24,169	24,169	50,862	24,321	24,321
R^2	0.080	0.096	0.353	0.277	0.279	0.442
Individual FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Notes: Each column and row denotes a regression of imputation errors on the annual return of the DAX (German S&P-500 equivalent) interacted with a household-level indicator denoting which quintile of portfolio value W_t the household is in. All columns (1)-(6) use imputation error derived from our third imputation method, (iii) no intra-year trades. Columns (1) and (4) look at levels of imputation errors in euros, ϵ_{it}; columns (2) and (5) look at imputation errors relative to individual investors' average income, $\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i$; and columns (3) and (6) look at the absolute value of imputation errors relative to individual income, $|\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i|$. Market returns are measured in percentage points (i.e., 1% real GDP growth is denoted at 0.01). Standard errors are clustered by investor. ***, **, * denote statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level, respectively.

Table 6: Household Income and Imputation Errors (Levels, Relative, and Absolute)

	(iii) No Intra-Year Trades					
	ϵ_{it}	$\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}$	$\lvert\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}\rvert$	ϵ_{it}	$\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}$	$\lvert\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}\rvert$
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ln(Income)	258.2**	0.00205	0.00592***			
	(103.7)	(0.00176)	(0.00166)			
ln(Inc) $\times W_t$ Quintile 1				76.66***	0.000950*	-0.00118**
				(27.31)	(0.000524)	(0.000459)
ln(Inc) $\times W_t$ Quintile 2				104.4***	0.00193***	0.000837*
				(28.01)	(0.000554)	(0.000479)
ln(Inc) $\times W_t$ Quintile 3				193.5***	0.00329***	0.00215***
				(30.56)	(0.000596)	(0.000516)
ln(Inc) $\times W_t$ Quintile 4				266.5***	0.00450***	0.00372***
				(33.41)	(0.000652)	(0.000549)
ln(Inc) $\times W_t$ Quintile 5				285.5***	0.00533***	0.00527***
				(36.95)	(0.000708)	(0.000637)
Observations	24,729	24,748	24,748	24,729	24,748	24,748
R^2	0.079	0.091	0.352	0.086	0.097	0.363
Year FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Individual FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

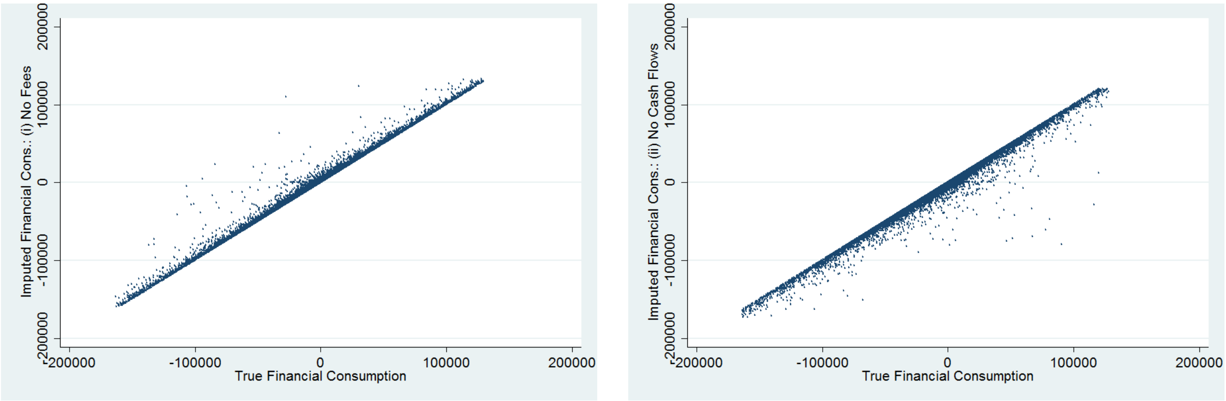
Notes: Columns (1)-(3) use imputation error derived from our third imputation method, (iii) no intra-year trades. Columns (4)-(6) use imputation error derived from our fifth imputation method, (v) Only Market Returns. Columns (1) and (4) look at levels of imputation errors in euros, ϵ_{it}; columns (2) and (5) look at imputation errors relative to individual investors' average income, $\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i$; and columns (3) and (6) look at the absolute value of imputation errors relative to individual income, $|\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i|$. Standard errors are clustered by investor. ***, **, * denote statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level, respectively.

Table 7: Household Income and Errors Across Imputation Methods

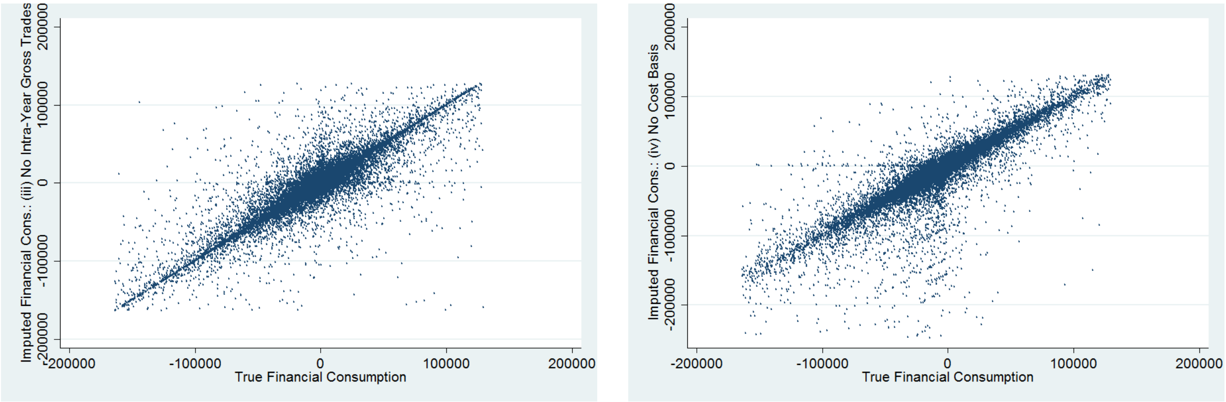
	$\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i^{net}$					
	No Fees (1)	No Cash Flows (2)	No Intra-Year (3)	No Cost Basis (4)	Market Returns (5)	Raw Diffs (6)
Panel A: Average						
ln(Income)	0.00118***	-0.000391	0.00205	0.000649	0.00419	0.00295
	(0.000269)	(0.000337)	(0.00176)	(0.00190)	(0.00282)	(0.00341)
Panel B: By Wealth						
ln(Inc)×W_t Quintile 1	-0.000329***	0.00125***	0.000950*	0.00121**	-0.00300**	0.00469**
	(9.33e-05)	(0.000246)	(0.000524)	(0.000511)	(0.00141)	(0.00201)
ln(Inc)×W_t Quintile 2	-1.51e-05	0.000942***	0.00193***	0.00107**	-0.00103	0.00673***
	(9.27e-05)	(0.000250)	(0.000554)	(0.000536)	(0.00143)	(0.00205)
ln(Inc)×W_t Quintile 3	0.000230**	0.000564**	0.00329***	0.000551	-0.000324	0.00606***
	(9.85e-05)	(0.000254)	(0.000596)	(0.000577)	(0.00143)	(0.00207)
ln(Inc)×W_t Quintile 4	0.000485***	4.85e-05	0.00450***	0.000322	0.00122	0.00172
	(0.000105)	(0.000263)	(0.000652)	(0.000634)	(0.00147)	(0.00212)
ln(Inc)×W_t Quintile 5	0.000922***	-0.00133***	0.00533***	1.29e-05	0.00292*	-0.00925***
	(0.000120)	(0.000281)	(0.000708)	(0.000740)	(0.00154)	(0.00229)
Observations	25,545	25,545	24,652	24,652	24,748	24,748
Year FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Individual FE	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Notes: Panel A displays regression coefficients from a regression of logged income on imputation errors at an individual level. Panel B interacts logged income with the quintile of equity wealth that an individual possesses. All columns utilize the imputation errors relative to individual investors' average income, $\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i$, as the dependent variable. The type of imputation error utilized is noted above each column and we cover all six of our imputation methods. Standard errors are clustered by investor. ***, **, * denote statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level, respectively.

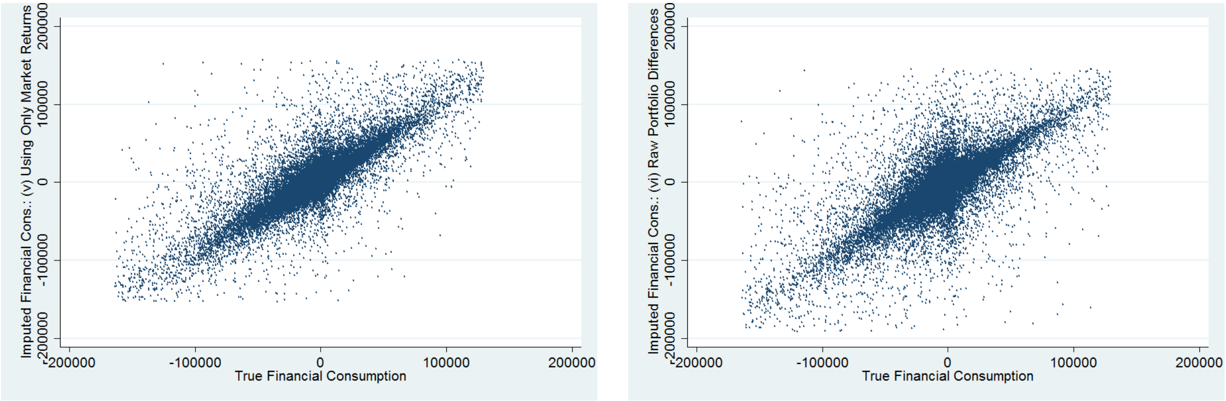
Figure 1: Financial Consumption – Imputed vs. Actual


(i) No Fees

(ii) No Cash Flows


(iii) No Intra-Year Gross Trades

(iv) No Cost Basis & No Intra-Year Trades


(v) Only Market Returns

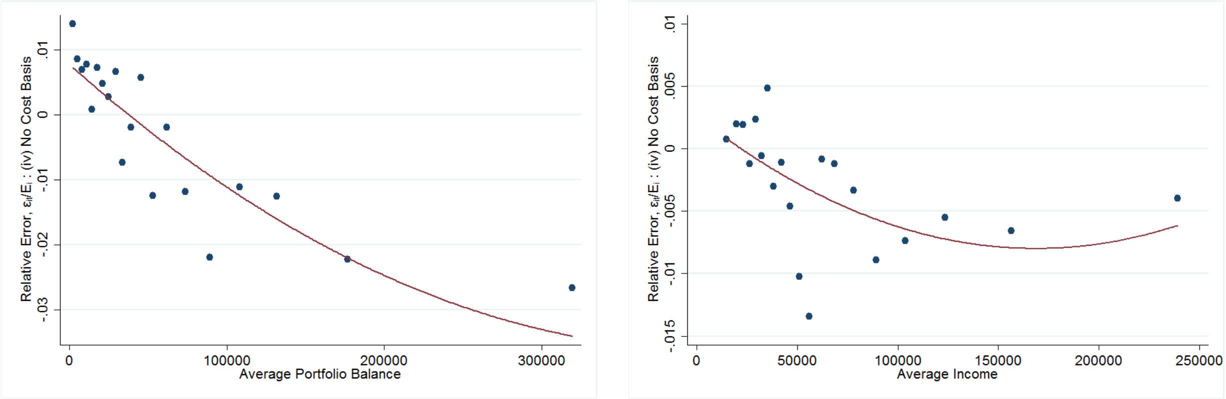
(vi) 'Raw' Portfolio Differences

Notes: Each panel plots imputed financial consumption according to one of six imputation methods against true financial consumption. From left to right and top to bottom, the imputation methods follow Section 3: (i) No Fees – disregard any trading fees charged to the household, yielding weakly larger levels of imputed financial consumption; (ii) No Cash Flows – disregard any dividends paid out to households, yielding weakly smaller levels of imputed financial consumption; (iii) No Intra-Year Gross Trades – no consideration of intra-year trades which were netted out during the year (e.g., if you bought 12 and sold 10 shares of Volkswagen, only keep track of the net 2 that you were holding at the end of the year) but purchase/sale prices are 'correct' for those net purchases/sales; (iv) No Cost Basis & No Intra-Year Trades – Similar to (iii) but using the incorrect prices of purchase/sale for any net changes in securities held (prices assumed to be equal to the June 30th price during the previous year); (v) Only Market Returns – imputation dispenses with actual portfolio holdings and assumes that the household holds the DAX Index and that any adjustment (i.e., financial consumption) occurs on June 30th at June 30th prices; (vi) 'Raw' Portfolio Differences – disregarding growth altogether and assuming any change in portfolio value ΔW_t is the result of active savings or dis-savings.

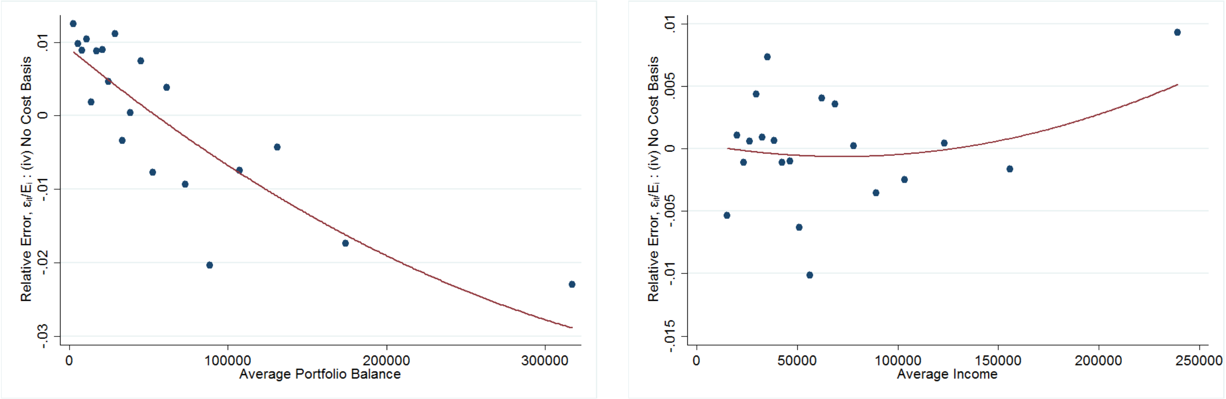
Figure 2: Imputation Errors by Portfolio Size and Average Income

A. by Portfolio Size B. by Average Income

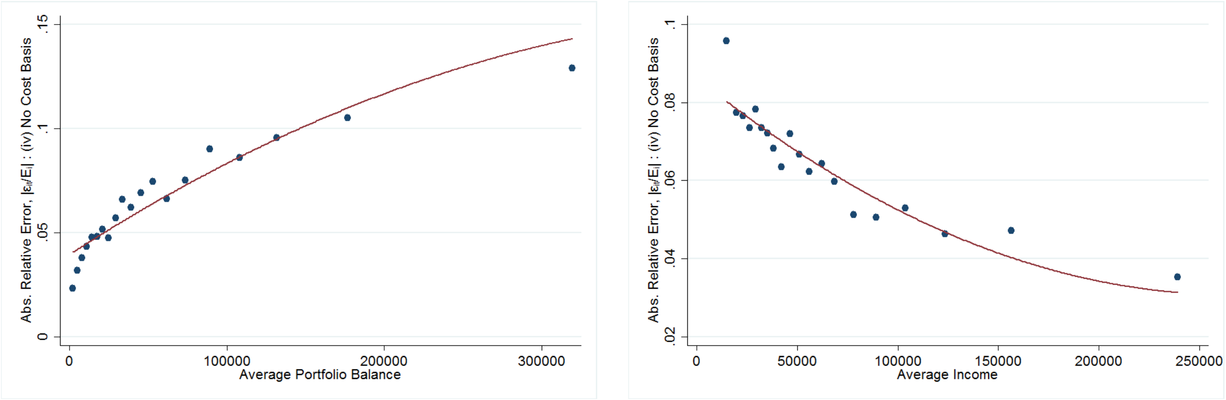
bias



bias (residualized imputation error)

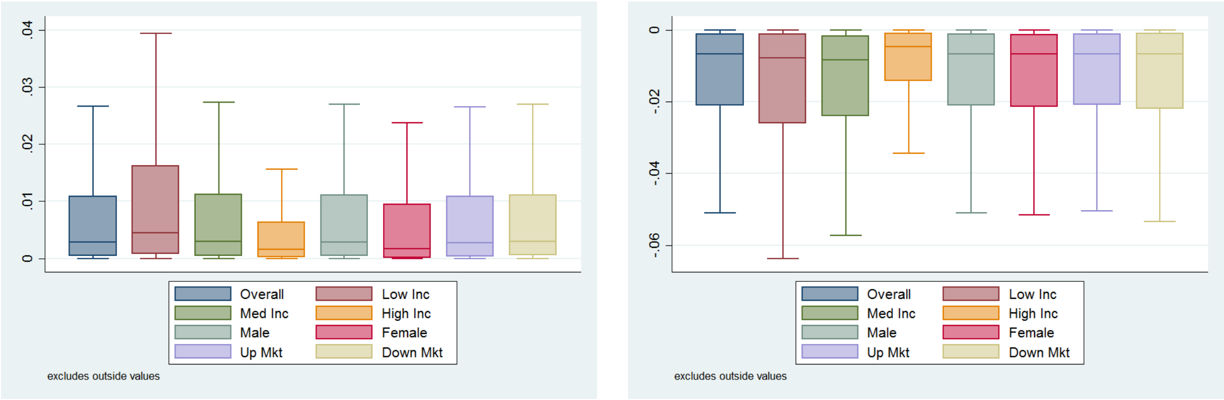


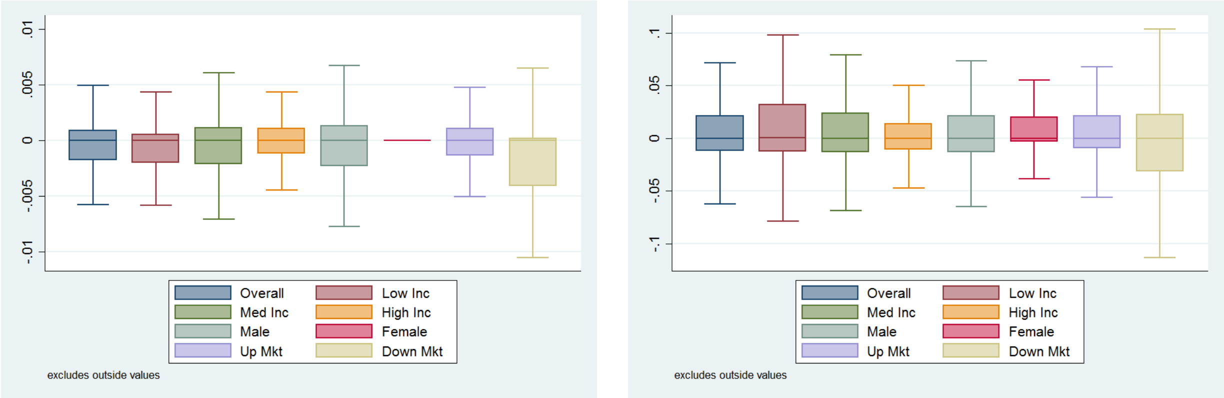
dispersion (absolute value of imputation error)

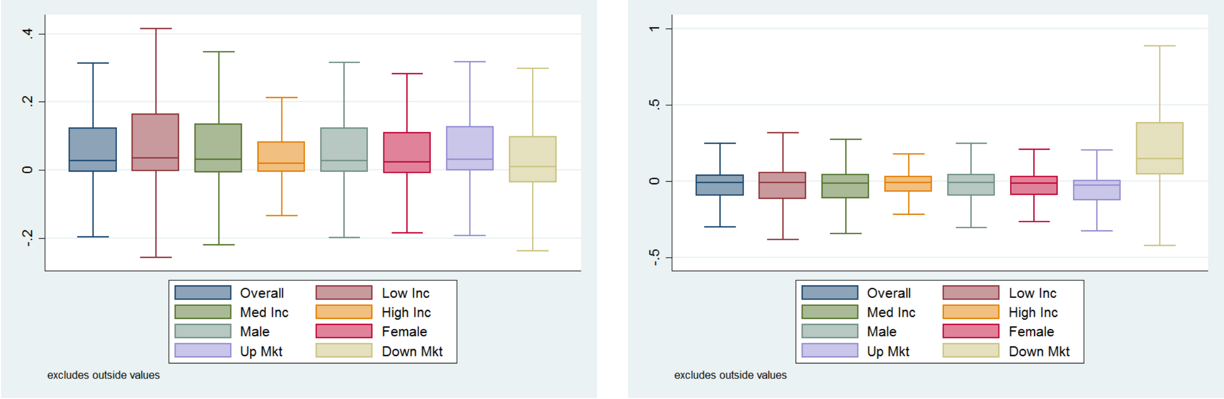


Notes: The left Panel A (Panel B) display bin-scatter plots across 20 quantiles of average financial consumption imputation errors against average individual portfolio balances (average individual income). All imputation errors are measured as in method (iii) of Section 3 and relative to average individual income, $\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i$ (e.g., -0.01 means an annual error 1% the size of average income for that individual that is *underestimating* financial consumption). The middle row first regresses the relative imputation errors on average income in Panel A and on average portfolio balance in Panel B and a set of household characteristics, which include age fixed effects, gender, employment status, marital status, and fixed effects for self-reported risk tolerance. The bottom assesses changes in the dispersion of relative imputation errors using absolute values instead, i.e., $|\epsilon_{it}/\bar{E}_i|$.

Figure 3: Imputation Error by Subset


(i) No Fees (ii) No Cash Flows


(iii) No Intra-Year Gross Trades (iv) No Cost Basis & No Intra-Year Trades


(v) Only Market Returns (vi) 'Raw' Portfolio Differences

Notes: Each panel plots imputation errors in financial consumption (*FinCon*) scaled by average individual income according to one of six imputation methods (i)-(vi) of Section 3. Each panel plots the overall distribution of error (left-most bar) as well as the error for 7 different subgroups. These groups are: (1) lowest tercile income individuals; (2) middle tercile income individuals; (3) highest tercile income individuals; (4) males; (5) females; (6) years with positive market returns; (7) years with negative market returns). Bars denote interquartile ranges, with the middle lines being the median error scaled by individual average income.