

STUDYING SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS IN THE FIELD OF PSYCHOLOGY: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF CURRENT PRACTICES

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Abstract

Sociodemographic variables are of great importance to social sciences in terms of shaping or predicting psychological outcomes. Socioeconomic status (SES) is one of the most prominent of these variables that are widely used in psychological research. Upon thorough examination of the literature, one can observe numerous methodological strategies regarding the use of SES. This situation may be interpreted as a result of SES being used as a descriptive variable instead of a primary variable; thus, researchers do not allocate enough time to its operationalization. The present research aims to test this assumption by reviewing the long-term research projects (i.e., theses/dissertations) that approach SES as the primary focus of the project. Accordingly, this systematic review covers the psychology theses submitted to the Turkish National Thesis Center between 2000 and 2023. Sixty-five theses that appeared as a result of the filtered search were screened and selected in terms of the following criteria: to have SES as a precise primary variable in the research, to be written in English or Turkish, to use quantitative methods, and to be open-access at the time of searching. Twenty-three theses were included in the review after the screening and selection phases. The synthesized review findings demonstrated that only 34.8% of the theses provided a definition or a discussion of the SES concept, while the remaining 65.2% did not give any coverage of conceptualization. In addition, the theses with SES definitions varied among themselves regarding the indicators of SES they mentioned, such as education, income, occupation, prestige, power, and wealth. In terms of methodology, the level of SES assessment (i.e., area, family/household, individual) showed a significant variety. All measurements were examined in terms of subjectivity, the type of indicators included, and the final SES variable types. Overall, review findings showed that even in the long-term projects where SES is the primary focus, most researchers still do not attach sufficient importance to the conceptualization and measurement of SES. Examining these methodological inconsistencies highlights the necessity of a clear SES conceptualization in psychology and provide psychometrical insights for future research.

Keywords: *Socioeconomic status, social class, psychological measurement.*

1. Introduction

Socioeconomic status (SES) has been frequently used in psychological research both as a sociodemographic sample descriptor and a main predicting variable. However, the definition of SES and how it is measured is not clear and consistent among studies that use it for different purposes. Many research focuses on the distinction between objective and subjective SES and how subjective SES is typically a stronger predictor of psychological outcomes compared to objective SES (e.g., Kraus et al., 2009; Singh-Manoux et al., 2005). While the objective-subjective distinction is theoretically quite explicit, there are various overlooked conceptual and methodological details with different practices in the literature; such as the choice of SES indicators (e.g., income, education, occupation), the level at which SES is measured etc. Antonoplis (2023) approaches this issue from a researcher's perspective and argues that finding a clear pathway to follow while studying SES is not straightforward. As a consequence of this confusion, researchers may take the easy way out and use the most convenient and practical measure due to time and effort constraints. The present study addresses how researchers approach SES when they conduct studies with less time pressure and greater opportunity to focus on the conceptualization of their variables detailedly.

2. Objectives

This study aims to test the assumption that the large variation in SES' operationalization may be due to the fact that it is often not treated as a main variable resulting in limited methodological attention. For this purpose, long-term research projects in which SES is the primary focus of the study are reviewed.

Graduate theses and dissertations are considered a proxy for long-term projects where researchers are expected to allocate more time on how they operationalize their main variables, including SES. Therefore, this systematic review provides an overview of the theses and dissertations that have SES as one of their main variables.

3. Methods

This review study was conducted and will be reported following the The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (*PRISMA*) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The search for the review was conducted in Ulusal Tez Merkezi (*Turkish National Thesis Center*). This database comprises all the master's theses and doctoral dissertations that were conducted in the universities that are situated in Türkiye. In addition, theses from the degrees whose equivalencies are approved by Yükseköğretim Kurulu (*Turkish Council of Higher Education*) are available at this thesis database. As the goal was to reach graduate theses in psychology that consider SES one of their main variables, the search was limited with the "psychology" subject. Titles of the theses had to include one of the SES-related words that were used as search words; i.e., socioeconomic, socio-economic, social class, social status, or SES. The date of search was March 22, 2023. Search results were restricted to the period between 2000 and 2023 in terms of submission time. The language of the theses was either Turkish or English. As a result of the search with the filters given, 65 theses appeared.

Initially, sixty-five theses were screened based on their title and abstracts. Theses that do not have SES as a precise main variable ($n=13$) and whose full-texts were not available at the time of the search ($n=7$) were excluded. Additionally, 9 studies were removed since the search words with abbreviation (i.e., SES) were used in texts with meanings other than socioeconomic status. After these exclusions, 36 theses were screened based on their full texts. The same inclusion criteria were applied to the full-text screening process. Thirteen theses that handle SES with methods other than self-reports or researcher-assigned groups, that have not used quantitative methods, and theses that have relevant yet different variables than SES (e.g., socioeconomic *adversity*, socioeconomic *characteristics*) were excluded from the final list of studies included. Therefore, 23 theses were included in the review.

From 23 studies, the following information was extracted: year of submission, degree obtained with the thesis (master's vs. Ph.D.), the term used to describe the SES variable both in Turkish and English abstracts, whether a clear definition of SES or any argument over the definition is provided, the emphasized aspects/indicators of SES if a definition is stated, the method of measuring SES, the level at which SES is operationalized (i.e., area-, household/parental-, or individual-level), the indicators of SES represented in the measurement (income, education, occupation etc.), whether the focus of the measurement was subjective- or objective-SES, and final variable type (categorical vs. continuous).

4. Results

The present study draws mainly on descriptive analyses. Only 2 out of 23 theses were doctoral dissertations, whereas the remaining 21 were master's theses. In the abstracts, the most commonly used term to refer to SES was "socioeconomic status" appearing in 16 theses (69.6%). Four other theses used "socioeconomic level", one used "socioeconomic situation", one used "social status", and one used "SES" alone as an abbreviation. In terms of providing a definition, the majority (65.2%) did not define SES in their introduction or methods sections. Specifically, 8 (34.8%) theses (i.e., Ateşyakar, 2021; Erdoğan, 2002; Gönül, 2020; Keşir, 2019; Kızıllakça-Soyaslan, 2022; Maviöğlü, 2018; Taşdelen, 2019; Yılmaz, 2022) either provided a definition or a discussion over the conceptualization such as SES' theoretical background or what it represents in terms of specific indicators (see Appendix A for the full citation list of the theses included in the review).

The level of SES assessment (i.e., area/school, parental/household, individual) showed a significant variety. Majority of the theses (56.5%) measured SES considering either parental or household-related information. Six theses measured SES at the area/school-level (i.e., Atalay, 2010; Çakıcı, 2006; Hantal, 2007; Karagöbek, 2014; Kılıç-Duran, 2007; Sancakoğlu, 2011). Number of studies that measured individuals' SES based solely on their own information was relatively small (i.e., Ateşyakar, 2021; Erdem, 2015; Keşir, 2019; Yılmaz, 2022; Yiğitoğlu, 2009). For the area/school level measurements, interpreting the subjectivity of the measurement may not be feasible as the

participants/subjects are not directly involved in the measurement process.. Nevertheless, among the parental/household- and individual-level ones, there were 14 objective (12 parental/household-; 2 individual-level) and 4 subjective measures (2 parental/household-; 2 individual-level). As one study (i.e., Ateşyakar, 2021) included both objective and subjective measures, the total number of objective and subjective measures is higher than the total number of relevant theses (see Table 1 for the summary of the information regarding SES measurement in each thesis).

Out of 23 theses, the final SES-variable types were: 19 ordinal categorical and 5 continuous. Total number is 24 instead of 23 as Baydarol (2007) included both categorical and continuous versions of the final SES variable. Ten included two categories (e.g., low/high, lower/upper etc.) while 8 included three categories (e.g., low/middle/high), and one had 5 categories (i.e., low/low-middle/middle/middle-high/high; Çıtak, 2008).

5. Discussion

The present systematic review aimed to examine how SES is approached conceptually and methodologically in relatively long-term psychological research practices. A 23-year period was searched and screened systematically on the Turkish National Thesis Center database. Data were extracted from theses that mainly focused on SES with quantitative methods. Overall, the findings demonstrated that even in the long-term projects where SES is the primary focus, limited importance is attached to the conceptualization and measurement of SES, consistent with the previous research (see Antonoplis, 2023; Liu et al., 2004). Conceptualization of SES remains insufficiently addressed, and the selection of SES indicators in methodology lacks a consistent theoretical basis.

The large variety of the methodologies underscores the need for a clear conceptual framework and a general consensus on the measure for SES. For instance, the current review shows the matches between different SES terms and their reflections on the measures. Specifically, while “socioeconomic status” is mostly measured with levels of education, income/wealth, occupation or household- information (e.g., Erdoğan, 2002; Ünsal Özberk, 2016); “social status” is measured with popularity- and attractiveness-related variables (e.g., Yılmaz, 2022). However, despite this distinction being observable through the measures; most of the literature treats these terms as if they refer to the same construct. Such interchangeable use may result in approaching the literature of different constructs as if they refer to the same one.

With a systematic and data-driven approach, this review aimed to highlight inconsistencies in the use of SES even when it is more than a descriptive, secondary variable. Future research that develops clear conceptual frameworks for SES might help promote coherent use of SES in psychological research and generate more reliable, generalizable results.

Table 1. Summary of the Information Regarding the SES Measurements in 23 Theses Included in the Review.

Author & Year	Measurement	SES Indicators
Alan, 2016	Subjective evaluation of household monthly income	Income/wealth
Atalay, 2010	SES levels assigned to schools based on school directors' evaluations	NA
Ateşyakar, 2021	1) Early-Objective SES: Parental education level and number of bedrooms per person in the family house; 2) Current-Objective SES: Standardized mean of individual's own education and monthly household income; 3) Early-Subjective SES: Parents' position on the MacArthur's Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000) 4) Current-Subjective SES: Individual's own position on the MacArthur's Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000)	1) Education & household type/goods 2) Education & income/wealth 3/4) Education, income/wealth, and occupation
Baydarol, 2007	Parental education level	Education
Çakıcı, 2006	SES levels assigned to schools based on the statistics received from the state databases	NA
Çıtak, 2008	Socioeconomic Status Scale (Bacanlı, 1990) adjusted by the researcher	Education, occupation, household members/family type, household type/goods

Erdem, 2015	Assigning people who applied for financial or social support to the Ministry of Family and Social Services to the low-SES group	Income/wealth
Erdoğan, 2002	Socioeconomic Status Scale (Bacanlı, 1997) adjusted by the researcher	Education, occupation, income/wealth, household members/family type, household type/goods
Gönül, 2020	Parental education level	Education
Güven, 2015	Household monthly income	Income/wealth
Hantal, 2007	SES levels assigned to schools based on the kind of the school: Private vs. state	NA
Karagöbek, 2014	SES levels assigned to schools based on the researcher's assumption regarding the areas	NA
Keşir, 2019	Level of education	Education
Kılıç Duran, 2007	SES levels assigned to schools based on the kind of the school: Two private vs. four state	NA
Kızıllakça Soyaslan, 2022	Socio-economic Status Scale (Kalaycıoğlu et al., 2010)	Education, occupation, income/wealth, household type/goods, and other possessions
Mavioğlu, 2018	Standardized mean of parental education and family income	Education & income/wealth
Pala Sağlam, 2016	Maternal education level	Education
Sancakoğlu, 2011	SES levels assigned to schools based on the kind of the school: Private vs. state	NA
Taşdelen, 2019	A composite score of household income and parental education level	Education & income/wealth
Toprak Coşkun, 2012	Number of family/household members, owner of the house, number of bedrooms in the house, household goods, and possessions	Household members/family type, household type/goods
Ünsal Özberk, 2016	Maternal education level	Education
Yılmaz, 2022	Scale of Subjective Social Status (Sweeting & Hunt, 2014; Türkay et al., 2018)	Popularity, doing well at school, being attractive/stylish, powerful, trouble-maker, attractive or stylish, sporty, to be respected
Yiğitoğlu, 2009	Subjective SES evaluation	Not specified

Note. NA: Not applicable. Indicators were stated as “not applicable” in the area/school-level measurements to avoid potential misinformation.

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Appendix A. Full Citation List of the 23 Theses Included in the Review.

- Alan, C. (2016). *Lise öğrencilerinin saldırganlık davranışları ile sosyoekonomik durumları ve anne baba tutumları arasındaki ilişkinin incelenmesi: İstanbul ili Sultangazi ilçesi örneği*. (Unpublished master's thesis). İstanbul Ticaret University, İstanbul.
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Note. All of the given theses/dissertations can be reached through search in Turkish National Thesis Center's website <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/giris.jsp>. As the links are not specified for each thesis, they were stated as unpublished works.