

The Relationship between Socioeconomic Status and Happiness, Health, and Education: The Review of Literature

Yi Han^{1,a,*}

¹Weifang No.4 Middle School of Shandong Province, Weifang, 261206, China

a. hy18753667179@gmail.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: This literature review attempting to specify how socioeconomic status (SES) is related to happiness, health, and education from different sections. Different theories and categories describe different associations of SES and these three aspects, and some of them have not been the consensus in both psychology and sociology. Based on the former theories and discovery, it is arbitrary to identify the opinion that the high SES is directly related to the high happiness, and the relationship between SES and health is not always casual. In addition, SES associations with education should be evaluated variously under different circumstances.

Keywords: Socioeconomic status (SES), Happiness, Health, Education

1. Introduction

The experts and researchers from all over the world devote to find the influence of socioeconomic of status (SES) to people's life in all the aspects. For this review of literature, it will focus on the SES associations with the happiness, health, and education these three aspects. Although there are many consensuses in this field, many former research and experiments also shown that the associations which are most commonly recognized might not always be true. Consequently, the former evaluation of their relationship should take some other situations and circumstances into the consideration to make the results more accurate and comprehensive.

In this article, the SES will be defined "the social standing or class of an individual or group" [1], which is same as the explanation to this term in The American Psychological Associations (APA). As the definition of happiness is so diverse that it is necessary to limit its scope of discussion. Consequently, in this article, it will be defined as the degree to which an individual would judge his/her life positively [2]. The health emphasizes the physical body health instead of mental health, and the education is divided into different groups: the parental education and school education, the examination-oriented education and quality-oriented education. Besides that, the educational system is also classified into the homogeneous and heterogeneous, centralized and decentralized. Furthermore, the homogeneous means the nation force schools provide the same quality and content of education, and the heterogeneous means the nation allow schools to change their content of teaching adjusted for the certain situation. A centralized education system means the nation will gather all the education resources (e.g. at the national level), which means the whole education

system has little autonomy [3]. While in decentralized educational systems, municipalities would supervise the school funding for all types of schools, including the public and private [4].

The section begins by explaining the relationship between SES and happiness from macro and micro level of society these two dimensions, as well as introducing the common method to measure the happiness. In the next section, the article describes the associations to SES and health in the casual theory, as well as introducing its limitations. In the end part of the essay, we discuss different associations of family SES and academic achievements, and different degree of different educational system being influenced, including the homogeneous and heterogenous, the centralized and decentralized.

2. Happiness

The word of “happiness” is defined in different meaning in different circumstances and conditions. However, in this section, the content will follow the definition of happiness in the World Database of Happiness, which is the degree to which an individual would judge his/her life positively, which means how much a person likes the life he/her lives [2,5].

The methods to measure the happiness is mainly subjective well-being (SWB). The subjective well-being (SWB) means how people would evaluate their lives with many variables such as the life satisfaction, lack of anxiety and depression, positive moods [6]. Although self-report measures are the most common measure in the field of SWB, but it is also important to realize the danger of measurement bias. Consequently, the research would use both the self-report and also non-self-report, such as: the observer report, facial measures, physiological measures, and emotion-sensitive tasks, which pursue the objectiveness of the measurement [7].

In the experiment which use the SWB as their experimental method, the researcher will use some questions to measure their SWB [2]. All the questions will be checked if they are suitable for the definition given in this experiment before being asked to the subjects. The most common example is named liker scale:

The soaring stream of research on happiness has made it difficult to keep an overview of results but it can be analyzed by two dimensions followed by their conditions [8].

2.1. Macro Level of Society

From the perspective of macro level of society, it can be introduced by wealth, freedom, equality and security [8]. evidence shows that, with the increase of wealth and population density, the relationship between SES and SWB will be strengthened. Besides, it is widely known that the security can directly influence the social mobility. However, the research also shows that the decrease of social mobility can also lead to the strong SES-SWB associations [9].

2.2. Micro Level of Society: Family SES and Individual SES

The micro level of society also contains four conditions, which is social status, education, social participation and intimate ties [8]. Theoretical and empirical work had proved that the family SES will influence on the happiness of children. Specifically speaking, many studies suggest that the growing environment filled with poverty in childhood have the negative impacts on adult subjective wellbeing [10]. Evidence also suggested the higher social class you are, the greater happiness you will have [11]. Consequently, a family with high SES can give enough capital and security to the growth of children but the rest of conditions prefer to depend on the certain situation because many successful people also have some peculiarities which may do harm to the freedom and equality. In addition, many experiments also find that socioeconomic status in childhood affect adult subjective wellbeing directly and positively, implying that the negative impacts of poverty on children may

extend throughout adulthood [12] and the research also confirmed that adults with high socioeconomic status would probably have the positive social emotion [13]. As a result, it can be speculated that the family with higher SES can offer better parental education to their young generation which is suitable for the above four conditions.

In addition, it is interesting to find that the expanding class divide in happiness the social status which people belong can directly affect their happiness [14]. The education may be likely to depends on family SES more than the individual. However, the rest of the conditions may be the adversity to confirm the overall view of the relationship between individual SES and happiness. This is because the feature that happiness is stochastic phenomenon. People with high SES will have the positive mood less frequently or intensely, which results that they cannot feel happiness frequently [15]. Consequently, it is not quite bright to identify the opinion that people with higher SES are more happiness than those with lower SES. In addition, when people have less social participation in the society, they would have the feeling of loneliness which do seriously harm to their happiness, but many people whatever SES is high or low would have less social participation in the elder age so the relationship between SES and happiness would not be obvious under this circumstance [16].

To sum up, the relationship between happiness and SES can be evaluated from two dimensions: macro level of society, and micro level of society. For the macro level, SES will have more obvious associations with SWB when the wealth and population density rise. Furthermore, from the micro position, the family SES and individual SES can both have impact on the people's happiness. If the childhood filled with poverty, this would influence the adult well-being negatively. The individual SES is affected by the family because the family with higher SES can provide individual better quality of education (both parental and school), which is beneficial for their future development. Except all the mentioned conclusion, it is also interesting to find that the expanding class is dividing in happiness as well, which is elaborated from the stochastic phenomenon and feeling part of society.

3. Health

Since human started to do research on the topic how the health is related to SES, the debate of the exact coordination between them had begun. Some people hold the view that the relationship between SES and health should be causal, but the others would prefer to agree with the point that it is too arbitrary to justify the relationship between both sides is causal.

3.1. Causal Theory

The most widely believed point is that SES influences health status [17]. This can be divided into two dimensions to explain. One dimension is to refer to underlying characteristics of persons that may cause differentiations in health status, which can also be divided into two groups: resource-dependent characteristics, such as wealth, assets and the ownership of your house, and another is non-resource-dependent characteristics, like: religious, genetic, and psychological. The second dimensions should be the period of a person's life, which cause the inequality of people's health status, such as differences in diets, habits, and occupation; and the inequalities resulted from the different standards of their health care services [18]. Specifically speaking, people with higher wages and social status can have more chances and enough capital to accept much more advanced treatment than those with poor income. Besides, the high SES all received higher education, which means they avoid many bad habits that do harm to the body health [19].

Besides, some people also think different national economic situation has different health circumstances influenced by SES. Many researches show that, in the developed countries, people with high-SES would prefer to take some organic and fresh foods to keep their slim body, but in the

developing countries, positive associations between SES and body size were most common [20]. Consequently, the SES would influence people's health in different situations.

3.2. The Limitations of Casual Theory

However, people who are the opponents of casual theory think that the theory fails to take all the possible circumstances into the consideration. For example, a person who just won a lottery still have the habits that do harm to their body health (e.g. smoking), which is conflicted with the content of casual theory. Consequently, people who become rich in a short time is also belonged to those people with high SES, but they are still in a bad health condition [21].

Another limitation of casual theory is that it ignores the influence of time lag. For example, some people may feel anxious recently, and for them the best way to relieve the pressure is to have the junk food. It is widely known that the junk food does harm to people's health but this for that group of people, they would prefer to get a better mode in a short-term even at a cost to health in a long-term [21]. As a result, the causal theory only focusses in the long-term, but it ignores if a person has decided to suicide because of the short-term anxiety, the long-term health is meaningless to him/her. Above all, it can be summarized to a conclusion: "health" is not a unitary construct that would be promoted by a specific set of actions, which results that it is too arbitrary and simple for judging the magnitude of an action. Under this circumstance, the resources belonged to the high-SES may just bring limited benefit to them [21].

Under the above two circumstances, the original casual theory is not comprehensive enough to summarize the relationship between SES and health.

4. Education

Education is one of the components of SES, which has become a consensus. Many scholars believed that SES not only made the achievement of education become inequal, but also caused the inequality of the chance to be educated [22].

4.1. Family SES and Education Achievement

Theoretical and empirical work has proved the existence of influence to the educational outcomes by family SES. The experts believe this associations can be achieved by three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social capital, which means these three forms lead to the difference of student achievements [23].

4.1.1. Economic Capital

The economic capital would lead to the diversity of education achievement. For example, the parents with high-SES can send their children to learn more extra curriculums and take a part in more different activities and competitions, which is helpful for their application to the university in the future and build a more valuable social circle [24]. However, for children born in the family with low-SES, their parents cannot afford the cost of these activities, which results they have a limited outcomes and simple achievement.

4.1.2. Cultural Capital

The cultural capital are mainly defined as the knowledge of cultural symbols and ability of decode cultural messages, helps parent transmit their advantages to children and reproduce social class [25]. It is widely known that the education can be divided into many different types. The parental education and school education are two most common types.

Parental education For the parent education, the cultural capital can be understood as a spirit of the family, including the rules, beliefs and also the regulations in some specific occasions, which is a particular embodied properties, and this property exist as a consequence of specific class practices [26]. This kind of outcomes is difficult to learn from school or the library. The process of getting these habits and adopting to a different growth environment also need the support from parents and other family members.

School education School is also an important institution to share the cultural capital. Children from higher social classes are also talented in obtaining academic credentials. This is because those children have the access to the school with more cultural capital so that they have more chances to get in touch with the cultural activities. Besides that, the school teachers' style of teaching, class atmosphere, the course set and the conversation with classmates can all be different in practicing children's ability of socialization, communicating skills and also their emotional quotient [27].

4.1.3. Social Capital

The possession of social capital mainly reflects the resources contained in social relations [28]. Parents with high-SES mainly have a large and high-quality social circle, which means they can give their young generations much more choices in education than the poor, by using their relationships. In addition, the relationship between schools and communities can be used to explain the higher educational achievements of students based on excepted achievements with respect to their socioeconomic status [29].

According to the above introduction, it is obvious that the SES and education is influenced by each other. Furthermore, if an individual can be born in a family with high SES, it has a large possibility of receiving the best educational resources and be benefited from different forms of capitals in the future. Moreover, this person will also probably gain the high SES in the future because of its education achievement.

4.2. Differences in educational system

As mentioned before, the education can be evaluated from many different sides, and the educational system is same as that. The magnitude of SES should be adjusted for the certain situation and circumstances.

4.2.1. Homogeneous Versus Heterogeneous

Some research proved that school homogeneity on a large scale is the source of equality in education because it diminishes the influence of school characteristics on students' performance in examinations [30]. The content of all the courses, all the examinations, and the quality of teaching is all the same, which can reduce the gap between students from different family with different SES. Take another word, if the educational system is in a high level of similarity between schools, it can reduce the impact of school variable on students' performance score [31,32]. Oppositely, in many countries with heterogeneous educational system, the educational inequality will only increase with the increase of stratification of schools. In America, inequalities of children's educational outcomes is considerable, as children have begun their educational experiences based on the unequal education resources, and the differences will accumulate as they get older [24].

4.2.2. Centralized Versus Decentralized

Many evidence has shown that the centralization will mainly lead to the standardization of curriculum, instruction, and central examinations in an educational system, which is greatly helpful

with reducing inequalities since it mitigates the influence of students' family background [22]. However, researchers found that the evidence preferred to support the view that in developed countries, decentralized education systems play a more effective role in reducing academic outcome inequality than centralized systems [33].

To sum up, the main relationship between education and SES is that the education has the positive associations with SES, which means the higher SES you are, the more possibility of gaining more education achievements. However, their relationship should also be evaluated under different kind of circumstances. The first difference is that in a country with homogenous educational resources allocation, this relationship will become less obvious because the educational resources are relatively equal, which means the high SES has difficulty in leading the larger education achievements. Besides, this associations will also become less obvious in a centralized country because the government master all the types of education resources and the rights to rule the education system, which can also give the chances of receiving the excellent education to the poor. Nevertheless, this kind of role might not be played in the developed country because the wealth will also have the political rights in the developed country. Moreover, the decentralized is one of the solutions. This is because the decentralized can help the nation disperse the education resources, which means the students from rural area can also have the possibility of being benefited by the excellent education resources from the urban area.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the SES do have influenced many aspects of a person. This essay focus on the happiness, health and education these three sides, which can also be understood from the mental, physical and realistic influence on a person. For these three sides, they almost all have the positive associations with SES. For the happiness, the key discovery is that expanding class also divide in happiness, and the relationship between happiness and SES is different in different situations. In addition, the health associations with SES are not always suitable for the casual theory, and the situation in the relationship with SES and education also varies because of the diversity of types of education and educational system. The relationship between them can help us understand the influence of SES to the people's life and make some changes according to their relationship.

References

- [1] *Socioeconomic Status*. (2020). Retrieved from Apa.org website: <http://www.apa.org/topics/socioeconomic-status/>
- [2] Veenhoven, R. (2011). *World Database of Happiness. Example of a Focused "Findings Archive."* SSRN Electronic Journal. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1808609>
- [3] Bohlmark, A., & Lindahl, M. (2008). *Does School Privatization Improve Educational Achievement? Evidence from Sweden's Voucher Reform.* SSRN Electronic Journal. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1267832>
- [4] Oppedisano, V., & Turati, G. (2012). *What are the causes of educational inequality and of its evolution over time in Europe? Evidence from PISA.* *Education Economics*, 23(1), 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09645292.2012.736475>
- [5] Ruut Veenhoven. (1984). *Conditions of happiness.* Dordrecht; Lancaster: Reidel.
- [6] Diener, E., Suh, E., & Oishi, S. (1997). *Recent findings on subjective well-being.* (Vol. 24, pp. 25–41). *Indian journal of clinical psychology.*
- [7] Diener, E., & Ryan, K. (2009). *Subjective Well-Being: A General Overview.* *South African Journal of Psychology*, 39(4), 391–406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/008124630903900402>
- [8] Veenhoven, R. (2015). *Social conditions for human happiness: A review of research.* *International Journal of Psychology*, 50(5), 379–391. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12161>
- [9] Tan, J. J. X., Kraus, M. W., Carpenter, N. C., & Adler, N. E. (2020). *The association between objective and subjective socioeconomic status and subjective well-being: A meta-analytic review.* *Psychological Bulletin*, 146(11), 970–1020. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000258>

- [10] Oshio, T., Sano, S., & Kobayashi, M. (2009). *Child Poverty as a Determinant of Life Outcomes: Evidence from Nationwide Surveys in Japan*. *Social Indicators Research*, 99(1), 81–99. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-009-9567-x>
- [11] Piff, P. K., & Moskowitz, J. P. (2018). *Wealth, poverty, and happiness: Social class is differentially associated with positive emotions*. *Emotion*, 18(6), 902–905. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000387>
- [12] Wang, L., Li, F., Meng, K., & Dunning, K. H. (2022). *Childhood Socioeconomic Status and Adult Subjective Wellbeing: The Role of Hope and Sense of Control*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.879132>
- [13] Cohen, S., Janicki-Deverts, D., Chen, E., & Matthews, K. A. (2010). *Childhood socioeconomic status and adult health*. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1186(1), 37–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.2009.05334.x>
- [14] Twenge, J. M., & Cooper, A. B. (2020). *The expanding class divide in happiness in the United States, 1972–2016*. *Emotion*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000774>
- [15] Lykken, D., & Tellegen, A. (1996). *Happiness Is a Stochastic Phenomenon*. *Psychological Science*, 7(3), 186–189. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1996.tb00355.x>
- [16] Niedzwiedz, C. L., Richardson, E. A., Tunstall, H., Shortt, N. K., Mitchell, R. J., & Pearce, J. R. (2016). *The relationship between wealth and loneliness among older people across Europe: Is social participation protective?* *Preventive Medicine*, 91, 24–31. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2016.07.016>
- [17] ADLER, N. E., & OSTROVE, J. M. (1999). *Socioeconomic Status and Health: What We Know and What We Don't*. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 896(1), 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1999.tb08101.x>
- [18] Feinstein, J. S. (1993). *The Relationship between Socioeconomic Status and Health: A Review of the Literature*. *The Milbank Quarterly*, 71(2), 279. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3350401>
- [19] Gerdtham, U.-G., & Johannesson, M. (2001). *The relationship between happiness, health, and socio-economic factors: results based on Swedish microdata*. *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, 30(6), 553–557. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1053-5357\(01\)00118-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1053-5357(01)00118-4)
- [20] McLaren, L. (2007). *Socioeconomic Status and Obesity*. *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 29(1), 29–48. <https://doi.org/10.1093/epirev/mxm001>
- [21] Berkman, L. F., Ichirō Kawachi, & M Maria Glymour. (2014). *Social epidemiology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [22] Van de Werfhorst, H. G., & Mijs, J. J. B. (2010). *Achievement Inequality and the Institutional Structure of Educational Systems: A Comparative Perspective*. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36(1), 407–428. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102538>
- [23] Buchmann, C. (2002). *Methodological Advances in Cross-National Surveys of Educational Achievement*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/10322>
- [24] Lehman-Frisch, S. (2011). Annette Lareau (2003), *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life*. *Carnets de Géographes*, (3). <https://doi.org/10.4000/cdg.2421>
- [25] O'Shea, D. W., & Richardson, J. G. (1987). *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. *Contemporary Sociology*, 16(4), 571. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2069964>
- [26] Tittenbrun, J. (2016). *Concepts of capital in Pierre Bourdieu's theory*. *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica*, 17(1), 81–103. (n.d.).
- [27] Barone, C. (2006). *Cultural Capital, Ambition and the Explanation of Inequalities in Learning Outcomes: A Comparative Analysis*. *Sociology*, 40(6), 1039–1058. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038506069843>
- [28] Bourdieu, P. (2018). *The forms of capital*. In *The sociology of economic life* (pp. 78–92). Routledge. (n.d.).
- [29] Mikiewicz, P., Torfi, J., Gudmundsson, J. G., Blondal, K. S., & Korczewska, D. M. (2011). *Social capital and education: Comparative research between Poland and Iceland, final report*. Wroclaw: University of Lower Silesia. (n.d.).
- [30] Ornstein, A. C. (2010). *Achievement Gaps in Education*. *Society*, 47(5), 424–429. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-010-9354-y>
- [31] Kell, P., & Kell, M. (2010). *International Testing: Measuring Global Standards or Reinforcing Inequalities*. *The International Journal of Learning: Annual Review*, 17(9), 485–502. <https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9494/cgp/v17i09/47269>
- [32] Mostafa, T. (2010). *Decomposing inequalities in performance scores: the role of student background, peer effects and school characteristics*. *International Review of Education*, 56(5-6), 567–589. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-010-9184-6>
- [33] Byun, S., & Kim, K. (2010). *Educational inequality in South Korea: The widening socioeconomic gap in student achievement*. *Research in the Sociology of Education*, 155–182. [https://doi.org/10.1108/s1479-3539\(2010\)0000017008](https://doi.org/10.1108/s1479-3539(2010)0000017008)