FAQ 26: How can I measure children's socio-economic background?

What's the issue?

The socio-economic and socio-ecological backgrounds of children and their families are very complex: they are constituted by an interaction of the different aspects and settings of families' daily lives (e.g. neighbourhood, family styles such as single-parent families, interrelation between family members, family income, and so on) (Paus-Hasebrink & Bichler 2008).

It is clear that children's access to, and use of, the internet and online technologies differs according to their socio-economic status (SES). Yet this is difficult to measure and, as so often, varies by country, academic discipline, and research method (especially whether interviewing parents or children). Since inequalities are crucial to internet research, it is important that researchers undertake this task and do not omit measuring SES in their research design.

Common practice

Several approaches are possible:

- Sample children according to schools. It is generally possible to identify schools in poor, average, and well-off neighbourhoods, on the basis of official statistics. It is accepted practice to assume that children from these schools will differ systematically by SES (although the same assumption should not be made for individual children).
- Ask children for information that will indicate, approximately, their SES. Teenagers may be expected to know how much education their parents received (below high school, finished high school, further education, university); younger children may know if they went to university or not, and this provides a fair proxy for SES.
- Use proxy measures. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Survey developed two measures to construct the SES index for their 2003 survey, namely: "About how many books/cars are there in your parents' or caretakers' home?" Torney-Purta *et al*. (2001) show that these questions provide reasonable proxies for educational and economic resources, respectively, and the answers are sufficient to subdivide children by SES, even though the measures are, of course, inexact.
- Ask parents directly for information that will indicate SES. In some countries, terminal age of education is asked, or you could ask household income (by income brackets centred on the national average income and with more categories below the average than above). Or you could ask questions about occupation, etc. according to a standard system of classification. This means either interviewing the parents, or sending a questionnaire to parents when interviewing their child (most efficiently, this could accompany the parental consent form, which must in any case be returned signed to the researcher).

Pitfalls to avoid

Don't ask children what their parents do for a living – first, you must hand code the answers, which is very time-consuming; second, the answers will be ambiguous (does an "engineer" service the central heating or design bridges?, what does "works in an office" mean?); third, many children do not know the answer. These questions may also result in social desirability biases, as children may feel uncomfortable saying that their parents have low education or no car.

Examples of good practice

> In our research, questions like age and place of birth, and questions regarding SES (such characterization can consider the parents' level of education, type of job, economic sector and position, income, etc.) were complemented with a questionnaire to the parents, which also included one open question regarding their opinion on the provision of public television for children. Both questionnaires were given a code number so that they could be matched for the purpose of characterizing the family unit. (Sofia Leitão, Portugal)

In the UK, market researchers ask a standard series of questions in order to classify people thus: A – Upper middle class (Higher managerial administrative or professional occupations, top level civil servants), B – Middle class (Intermediate managerial administrative or professional people, senior officers in local government and civil service), C1 – Lower middle class (Supervisory or clerical and junior managerial administrative or professional occupations), C2 – Skilled working class (Skilled manual workers), D – Working class (Semi and unskilled manual workers), E – Those at lowest levels of subsistence (all those entirely dependent on the state: long term, casual workers, those without regular income). SES is strongly correlated with measures of parental occupation, education and income. In the UK Children Go Online research, parents were asked these questions when recruiting children. (Sonia Livingstone, UK)

References and further resources

Paus-Hasebrink, I. & Bichler, M. (2008). Analyse des Wandels von Sozialisation. Veränderung von Kindheit in sozial schwächeren bzw. anregungsärmeren Milieus im Kontext des Wandels der Medien (Analysis of the change in socialization. The change of childhood of children from less advantaged homes in the context of the change of media). Endbericht an den Jubliäumsfonds der Österreichischen Nationalbank (*Final report for the Jubilee Fund of the Austrian National Bank*). Unveröffentlichtes Manuskript (Unpublished manuscript).

Torney-Purta, J., Lehmann, R., Oswald, H., & Schulz, W. (2001). *Citizenship and education in twenty-eight countries: Civic knowledge and engagement at age fourteen*. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.