

Using qualitative approaches to develop a complex construct: Measuring socioeconomic position

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Abstract

Socioeconomic position (SEP) is a complex construct to define and measure in the health context. In the present study, the multidimensionality, complexity, and the dynamicity of the construct 'socioeconomic position' were addressed. These three characteristics of the construct were interrelated to each other. This made the process of measuring SEP more difficult. Qualitative approaches were used to overcome the methodological challenges of measuring this construct.

KEY WORDS: Qualitative, socioeconomic position, sequential, construct

Introduction

The socioeconomic position (SEP) of an individual represents an important characteristic of the individual, one that is very relevant to determine the health status at a point in time. It has been seen as distinct from socioeconomic status (SES) which represents access to collectively desired resources. SEP is defined as one's access to collectively desired resources and control over the resources which are decided by their own life experiences.^[1] SEP builds into its construct an understanding that emerges from life experiences and ability to utilize for one's own benefit, which is absent from the former. SEP therefore is a dynamic concept whereas the latter is more static in conceptualization.^[2,3]

Need to Capture an Individual SEP vs SES

SES is often implicitly or explicitly equated with income, education and occupation. It is using as a single socioeconomic variable measured at a single period and level. But SEP is always considered as a socioeconomic variable capturing the cumulative and dynamic aspects of the socioeconomic conditions in an individual's life.^[1,18] Most of the Research

works from developed countries used the term SES to represent the socioeconomic nature of the society. The existing nature of the society of the developed country is more static (very less degree of social mobility). They have more transparent economy. Hence it is sufficient to use a few number of indicators to measure the socioeconomic background of an individual. SEP is the more comprehensive socioeconomic measure used in a society with an upward mobility. Both these concepts, SEP and SES are multi-dimensional constructs, which take into account income, education, occupation, and the social valuation attached to each of these. In addition to being multi-dimensional, SEP also builds into it experiences of the life time of individuals and societies and the changes in social valuations attached to each of the variables used to capture SEP.^[1-3,21] SEP encompasses the material and social resources that influence the position that people hold in societies. It is this individual and collective change in status and valuation of these changes that render SEP dynamic and difficult to measure. Consideration to the valuation placed on the changes in SES is indicative of its context specificity. Valuations ascribed to the components of SEP vary from individual to individual and across collection of individuals with a group identity.^[4-5,18] Thus SEP of an individual at a point in time is not only dependent on income, education and occupation and the valuation placed on those attributes by that individual, but on the meanings attached to these attributes by the society collectively. This is what makes SEP a very richly context specific construct.^[6]

Thus, SEP is a multi-dimensional, dynamic and context specific construct. Measuring it is difficult as it has to capture all these three qualities within it at the same time. Multi-dimensionality can be captured by using composite indices

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that include the specific variables and weighing them appropriately to build the composite structure. But such a multi-dimensional measure would not necessarily capture its dynamic nature or its context specificity. The dynamic nature has to be captured by measures that include its transient states such as differences or distance functions or transient probabilities given by jacobians that represent change over time.^[6,7] Capturing the context specificity of the construct is also very difficult as it can vary from one context to another. If contexts for measurement vary, then the dimensions used and the valuations attached to the various dimensions can also vary.

It is increasingly recognized that health is a human right; everyone has the right to experience the highest attainable standard of health in their society. Variations in health occur systematically across the socioeconomic groups. Better health is more closely associated with social advantage than disadvantage. In the light of World Health Organization – Commission for Social Determinants of Health^[8-10] report, there has been a resurgence of interest in the relation between SEP and health. SEP is an integrated concept that includes both resource-based characteristics such as income-, wealth-, education-, and prestige-based rank in the social hierarchy measures. SEP is the powerful determinant of the likelihood of health damaging exposures and of the possession of particular health-enhancing resources. This is the most basic principle in understanding how and why SEP is linked to health. An individual SEP can either change or stable from his birth to death.^[13-15,18]

Given its potential to capture accumulation of attributes and changes in these over time, SEP is an important determinant of the health status of any individual, particularly with respect to risks to chronic disease conditions.^[5,10] The experience of any chronic disease condition represents the accumulated effect of risks over a life time.^[6] Understanding who is at risk and how they are rendered at risk is a very important aspect of epi-demiology. Usually, very specific one-dimensional attributes as risk factors were identified. These are easy to describe and measure to determine their contribution to any condition. However, the import of the risk imbedded in the lived experiences of individuals and collection of individuals is also relevant to their health outcomes, particularly chronic conditions.^[11] This is what SEP represents. Therefore as a concept, no matter how complex, it needs to be decanted into a measurable entity, an entity that captures its multi-dimensionality, dynamic nature and its context specificity.

The scope of this study is largely in epidemiological research. SEP at only one stage of life is inadequate to explain fully the contributions of SEP to health status and how these change over time. Different measures of SEP in a life course will describe the social and economic stratification of population and have specific direct effect on health outcome. Multiple indicators at different time intervals of an individual's life course will reduce the measurement error.^[11] A number of life course studies were done in developed countries using a single indicator of SEP in each life epochs. A country like

India has complex social system and influence of caste is very important to decide the socioeconomic background of an individual. This methodological description helped other researchers to apply in measuring other social constructs which have the similar characteristics.

At present there are few valid and reliable SEP questionnaires devised for use in India. Most studies use SES index developed based on income, occupation and education. In our knowledge, there are no measurement tools to measure SEP in India. Developing a questionnaire which addresses the various dimensions of SEP is a challenge.

Objective

The main objective of the present study was to make an attempt to describe a methodology to measure SEP of an individual.

Methodology

The premise has been set clearly that SEP is a measure that is multi-dimensional, dynamic and context specific. Each of these qualities imposes specific challenges to its measurement.

Challenge of multi-dimensionality of SEP: A concept that is multi-dimensional is more difficult to measure when compared to one that is uni-dimensional. This is because there are two problems with the use of more than one dimension. One is the problem of identifying the dimensions, and the second is the specification of the relationship between the multiple dimensions. Identifying and listing the dimensions involved can be done by reviewing literature to list out the various variables that have been uniformly considered across various sites and building one that is appropriate for use. This will provide one with a generic list of variables that might fit most circumstances. This generic list then needs to be reviewed for its applicability to specific contexts which are being studied. This calls for moving from the general that emerges from the literature to the particular that emerges from local discourses. The second problem of the relationship between the list of variables, but a host of statistical methods is present, including regression techniques to deal with this problem.^[12-18]

Challenges of dynamic nature of SEP: Capturing dynamic nature of a concept is usually done by measuring its transient probabilities (it assumes that one can identify all the stages and accurately measure its occurrence in these stages) or identifying some key positions along its trajectory and measuring differences at each of these points. The first is fraught with a specification problem, one of specifying infinity of stages in the trajectory SEP. Identifying the stages is not only specific to different contexts but will also vary across experiences. For this reason, one can either list a universally acceptable set of stages (states that an individual

passes through) or attempt to identify these stages through an engaged approach with people who passed through those experiences. One of course presupposes that those passing through those experiences are able to identify the stages that they are transiting through. However, the specification problem is not one that is inherent to the trajectory, it is a problem emerging from the need to measure. Therefore, participants may not be able to identify these distinct stages. For this reason it seems best to identify stages of transition through the lens of distance from the phenomenon – one of a researcher informed by available theories to identify most commonly identified stages of transition.^[19-21]

The second problem is one of measuring the transition from one identified stage to another. While recognizing its dynamic nature, one can capture this aspect by examining differences in outcomes at two or more points in time and combining these experiences meaningfully.

Challenges of context specificity: The context imposes its meaning to both the dimensions and the parameters of dynamism. For this reason, one needs to test the measurement criteria across contexts before accepting the measure of SEP unconditionally. However, simultaneous measurement across contexts is difficult and could result identifying a limited set of dimensions or a non-representational identification of the stages of mobility. For this reason, it is best to specify both the dimensions and the changes within them in a specific context and then replicate the same across contexts.^[19,20]

Developing a Measure of SEP

The need to measure SEP was required which varies across contexts. For this reason, it was proposed to first measure it in a specific context that obtains in a situation of high prevalence of chronic diseases like diabetes mellitus or cardio-vascular diseases. The dynamic component of its conceptualization can be captured through changes that are wrought in the life time of a person in terms of a set of dimensions across specific life course events that are universally identifiable such as childhood, adulthood and old age.

Identifying the Parameters of Dynamism

It was required to capture the accumulation of experience across a person's life course, especially those that have implications for their health. Identifying persons to provide universal experiences is not an option because individual experiences could vary. On the other hand, narratives of individual experiences lack the potential of substantiation except through collective memories and their documentation such as photographs, written texts, movies and the like. What was needed is a process that captured the specifics of lived experiences and then extracted a common trajectory from it. This is a process of grounded theory with its inherent constant comparison approach. For this reason, qualitative methods were used to identify both the dimensions and the parameters of dynamism within it.^[20]

The Process

A review of literature was started to identify the concepts associated with SEP and listed the variables that emerged as those measuring these concepts. It was followed up with an iterative process of qualitative methods each one serving to pare down the concept into a measurable entity. This process is represented in Figure 1.

Step 1: Literature Review

The systematic search of the literature was conducted in the PubMed database and the google scholar, using a combination of the search terms “socioeconomic position,” “social position” and “socioeconomic status”. The search was limited to articles published in English. The literature was restricted to the study that clearly explains the term to represent the socioeconomic background and its underlying theoretical underpinnings. Instruments administered to assess the above terms were not considered. Titles and abstracts were evaluated as a first step and then full-text articles were read for their relevance to this review. The literature search was conducted between September 2012 and April 2013, and a total of 26 separate articles/chapters identified. The search procedure is summarized in Figure 2, following the “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses” (PRISMA).

SEP's multi-dimensionality was clearly established through the literature search. Most of the articles used many indicators to capture the concept, usually related aspects of socioeconomic stratification – identifying those related to specific health outcomes that were being studied. Each of these health outcomes could be represented along different stages of the life course. The emerging understanding was that the choice of an SEP measure should be informed by the specific research question and the hypothesized pathways linking the health outcome to SEP.

The various indicators of SEP identified through the literature search are listed in Table 1.

Step 2: Search for Additional Dimensions

Two free wheeling interviews guided by the insights developed from the literature review were conducted. These interviews enabled to identify the vocabulary and syntax surrounding the perceptions of SEP and the possible sequences in the thought processes around it.

The author, UVS undertook these interviews with one male and one female informant, both of whom were in govt service. The interviews were undertaken at their place of work and extended up to more than 90 min. These were transcribed to carefully scrutinize the ease with which responses were possible, the questions which needed repeating, the questions that were not understood and needed clarification and those that had the potential to elicit extensive descriptions. These interviews enabled us to identify key words which served as pointer of status and position in Malayali society. Aided by

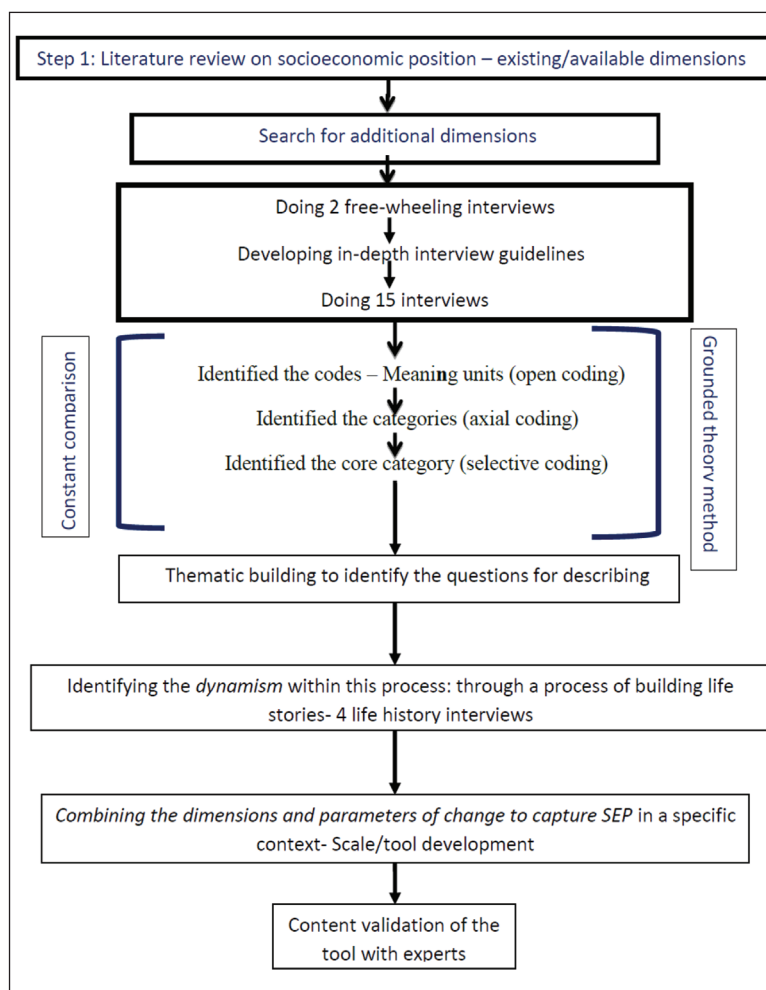


Figure 1: Methodological process

these freewheeling interviews, an interview guide was developed with a set of opened ended questions to interview a select group of informants.

A retrospective qualitative interview was used as it enables one to explore the past and describe a complex social phenomenon with multiple causes in a real world setting. Individuals were asked about their opinions, understandings, material backgrounds, and interpretations about life course socioeconomic transition, position at childhood and the changes brought about in it during adulthood. The questions related to (i) the participants understanding of SEP, (ii) how to recognize change in the SEP (transition) of an individual, (iii) reasons for change in SEP at adulthood, and (iv) indicators of childhood SEP. This in-depth interview guideline is given in Table 2.

The interview guide started with asking about the ideas of classifications that existed in a society in terms of the SES. The

emerging categories of status were carefully explored to delineate the meanings attached to each category and the identity markers for each group. This helped to clarify the number of categories of SES that were distinct. In addition the funnel shaped architecture used in the guidelines helped to carefully separate each of the identified categories into what rendered them distinct. A list of attributes was required to be identified for each of the status categories and examine the variations in them across the distinct categories. This process of delineating the SES category and the attributes that identified each are described in Table 3.

Step 3: Capturing the Dynamic Nature of SEP through the Qualitative Interview Process

In the interviews, UVS also attempted to capture the dynamic nature of changes that had been wrought in the

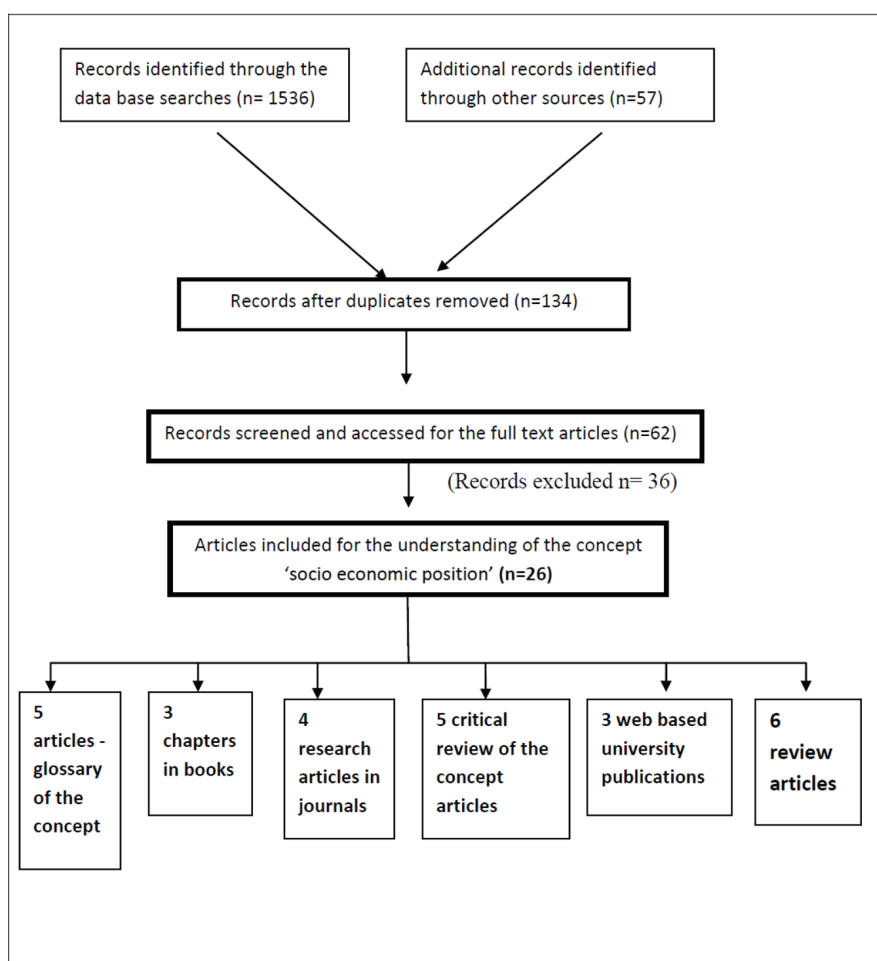


Figure 2: Flow diagram of the literature review

Table 1: Types of SEP measures and their components

Occupation/work-based indicators	For specific population groups	Area-level measures of SEP
Education	Women – Husband’s/partner’s occupational SEP	Broken window index
Income	Elderly – Financial assets, income, housing tenure	Social deprivation index
Wealth		Literacy rate
Housing characteristics		

Table 2: Questions used for the in-depth interview

1. In your place, how do you differentiate people according to their economic and social conditions? How will you find out what is the condition of a person – (name the conditions mentioned earlier)?
2. Are people born into a condition or does it change over time? How will it change? For the better ? For worse? (probe – marriage, migration – to where? Natural disasters - wind falls? Nashtapariharam? Better jobs, education?)
3. How will it come down? (loss of work/sickness/marriage/education/migration/death of breadwinner/death ceremonies/greha nirmanam, etc.)
4. Are there phases in the life time of a person when changes for the better are more common? Changes for the worse are more common?
5. In your school days or child hood days, how would you know that a house was or a person was a rich/poor.... whatever categories they mentioned) household/person? How would know a house/person rich/poor.... is in that category now?

society over time with regard to the categorization of SES by asking the informants to describe how these specific categories had changed in their own life time. By focusing on the changes, a list of attributes that characterize change in

SES over time for an individual was obtained. The changes that happen to SES over a time period for an individual captures their SEP. Thus the in-depth interviews helped to list the dimensions of SEP and also the parameters of dynamism.

Table 3: Changes in the attributes across various categories of SES

Attributes	SES Category 1	SES Category 2	SES Category 3	SES Category 4	SES Category 5
Income	No permanent income	Low permanent income/temporary income	permanent income will be satisfied their needs/searching for the additional income source	Have permanent income at a high rate; savings will be there	Cannot calculate
Occupation	Type of wage/income; nature of occupation; low waged contract-based occupations	Medium waged (low skilled) contract/permanent occupations	Semi-skilled wage earners and or permanent at lower rungs of the ladder	Skilled workers/ professionals and permanent employee in the public and private sector	Entrepreneurs/ corporate sector businessmen with more than 50 employees
Types of education for children	Educating the children is not a priority/will send to the Government schools for getting up to the high school level education	Will send to Government/English medium schools	Will send to the Private/ aided or management English medium schools following either State syllabus or Central syllabus	Will send to the established famous English Medium schools following central syllabus	Studying in abroad or famous international schools
Type of housing	A house with less than 500 sq feet; and tarpaya or thatched roof	Concrete house with a range of 1000–1200 sq feet	Concrete 2 stored house with 1500–2000 sq feet; first floor for the purpose of rent	Concrete mutistored houses with 2000–4000 sq feet; one room for each family member	Big house with all facilities; many number of own homes/flats
Vehicles owned/ used by the household	Two wheeler (pre-owned vehicles); depending the public transport	Two wheeler with paying its EMI for the vehicle loans; depending the public transport also	Two wheeler and four wheeler; two wheeler for the regular use; depending to the public transport	2–4 vehicles; depend to the number of family members; four wheeler for the regular use; official vehicles are also using for the regular travel	
Type of vehicle	Local brands	Indian brands	Indian and foreign brands	Only foreign brands	Only foreign brands
Household assets	Minimum number of household appliance	Have most of the unbranded/budget level household appliance	Branded/budget household; appliance	All branded household appliance in addition to electronic water filter/air conditioner/ microwave oven	All international branded household appliance
Place of residence (rural/urban)	Rural, urban slums	Rural, semi urban area	Rural, urban/semi urban area	Rural, urban settlement	Urban area only
Planning for health events	No planning	Trying to plan	Planned investments in health insurance with low premiums	Planned investments to cover both acute and chronic conditions	Have comprehensive health insurance coverage for all the family members
Reaction to increase in income	Investment in conspicuous consumption	Investment in conspicuous consumption as a prestige marker	Investment in long term welfare	Investment in long term welfare, particularly own health and provide for health insurance	
Lifestyle-related physical activity	Not conscious about the physical activity	Job/occupation related physical activity – as a manual labourer	Try to do walking regularly by the male family member – head of the household	Regular walking or using the available household physical exercise equipment	Information not available

* The dynamic nature of change across different categories is captured by shading.

These attributes and their dynamic nature were carefully identified by using inductive coding of the interviews. A process of constant comparison was used to situate each emerging code within the already delineated categories so that it fitted in its carefully marked place in the hierarchy of social and economic status. Table 3 describes these dimensions and the dynamism across them.

This process of doing the in-depth interviews enabled a listing of the various dimensions of SES across time and also the changes that are said to happen in them across the life course. Identifying this through mere observation is not possible because it not only reflects what is observed in terms of occupation or wages earned but also the meanings attributed by society to that form of occupation and wages. In addition, it was also possible to identify those parameters that have the potential to change across stages in the life course.

Step 4: Capturing the Context Specificity

Contexts do vary and therefore the meanings attached to SEP across different societies may not be the same. It was aimed to measure SEP in Malayali society. For this reason it was restricted to the population being covered and only included those who had been born and had some experience with living in Kerala.

Step 4.1: Study setting:

This study was conducted in the Trivandrum district of Kerala, Located at the Southernmost tip of the state. As a state capital, many of employees from the neighboring districts of Trivandrum are working in various sectors including both government and private firms. This district is highly urbanized with 33.8% living in urban as against the State average of 26%.^[22] Most of the participants had spent their childhood in various other parts of Kerala.

Step 4.2: The key informants:

The informants had to be born in Kerala and be current residents of Kerala for at least a period of 20 years for us to be able to capture the changes in their life course within this geographical as well as socioeconomic milieu. People within the ages 25–55 were included in order to incorporate a range of experiences and life course trajectories.

Step 4.3: The interviews:

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions, allowing respondents to fully explain their own experiences. It was structured by combining a 'funnel shaped' (the interviewer may also begin with more general questions and gradually ask more specific questions) structure and itinerary method. The funnel shaped structure was adopted to ensure the inductive comprehension of the social phenomenon like socioeconomic transition. The 'Itinerary' method of data collection was used during the interview. By constantly going back to the objects being listed (itinerary), it was focused on the socioeconomic meanings of various objects and its interpretation in the

society at various time periods. As the process of moving from the general to particular is gradual and punctuated with explanations, the mean time for such interviews was 1.20 hours.

Step 4.4: Analysis of interviews:

Step 4.4.1: Transcription: The conversations were recorded digitally, transcribed into Malayalam. The Malayalam interviews were then translated into English and analysed by UVS who is a native speaker of Malayalam.

Step 4.4.2: Reading the data: In the second stage, language equivalency was assured through independent reviews by MR who is not a native speaker of Malayalam. In addition, ongoing debriefings among the authors (UVS, MR and VRK) and references to the original Malayalam transcripts were used to verify the translated text. All the transcripts were read twice to provide a sense of integrity and understand the meaning of the experiences from the participants' viewpoint; at this stage, the principle investigator independently determined the themes. An initial categorizing system was established on the basis of the interview guides. The first thematic index was modified, categories and subcategories added as they emerged from the analysis of data. The interviews and the codes were constantly compared to ensure that they had a common understanding of the categories generated.

Step 4.4.3: Division of data into parts and synthesis of data:

Data analyses were carried out on three levels: open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding, a line-by-line scrutiny of the data, was used to identify the codes expressed by the participants. Related codes were labeled and were grouped into categories. The categories were conceptualized by specifying the relationships between them during the axial coding. Codes emerging from the transcripts added to an initial start list of codes drawn from the study's research questions and background literature. The constant comparison method was used to identify recurrent patterns and major themes. Categories were systematically compared and grouped into themes as described previously. In line with qualitative research methodology, data collection and analysis were concurrent. After 15 interviews, data saturation was reached as no new themes emerged. The coding assignments were reviewed and differences were resolved through discussion and consensus by the authors UVS, MR and VRK.

Step 5: Verifying the Parameters of Dynamism in the Measure of SEP

Four 'life history interviews' were carried out focusing on the socioeconomic transition that happened to the individual during their life time. The life history technique was used to understand the social meanings of the childhood and adulthood SEP. It was preceded chronologically, asking the interviewees to describe their childhood and proceed to the present day. The informant was provided with some memory clues to recollect the socioeconomic meanings in their past life especially in the childhood period. These cues were culled from the earlier in-depth interviews and these enabled us to

provide markers or descriptors of each situation to prompt the informant.

The data collection process was continued until data saturation. Here, our cases are the narratives of lives as they were lived. The individuals identified their needs which required the economic resources and how they managed the financial constraints at specific points in their life trajectory. Life maps were also used to draw the life history of the informants and used line diagrams to distinguish their life trajectories. These life course narratives were collected by UVS. Each such interview took about an hour and a half and resulted in identifying process by which changes in SES are brought about in the life of an individual. It also enabled us to verify the parameters of dynamism in SEP recognized through the in-depth interviews. Table 4 provides an example of one of the informants.

At the end of the interview, they were asked to depict their socioeconomic states at different times from birth to now by means of a line diagram. The respondents need to choose a diagram from the line diagrams in a sheet and mark it in the corresponding box. If none of these apply, the respondent needs to draw a more representative pattern in the blank box. Figure 3 shows the line diagrams used to identify life trajectories.

Step 6: Combining the Dimensions and Parameters of Change to Measure SEP in Malayali society

Step 6.1: Identifying the stages of change in SEP: The various levels of each of the dimensions identified through interviews and the trajectories of life course and change in the stages of life course were listed. The specific questions that result in gauging the socioeconomic situation of a person and changes that it has gone through their life course were identified.

Careful identification of the distinct stages was required in the life course as markers that resulted in creating tangents. It was realized that these were not vital events that marked these turning points in a person's socio-economic trajectory. They were part of it, but did not represent the distinct stages. People identified these distinct states by the socio-economic events that initiated the change – such as starting higher education, completing education and getting a first job, the getting of a better job abroad, getting married and its accompaniment of getting a good dowry, death of a life partner/or occurrence of a life threatening condition such as cancer that resulted in declines in SES. Clearly the epochs that mark changes in SES in a life time are not those that are marked merely by vital events.

Step 6.2: Developing the construct: The items that were markers of SES change across different categories of SES were listed (these are identified in Table 3). The questions

Table 4: Life maps of one of the respondent

Name	Id no. 2	Date: 13/09/2014	Place: Palakkad, Kerala
Time line	Age/life phase	Segment	Source of information
1984	Infancy period (from the words of his grandmother)	We were living in a small house. My grandmother looked after me when my mother went for the household farm work	Respondent tried to quote from his memories and what he heard about from his mother

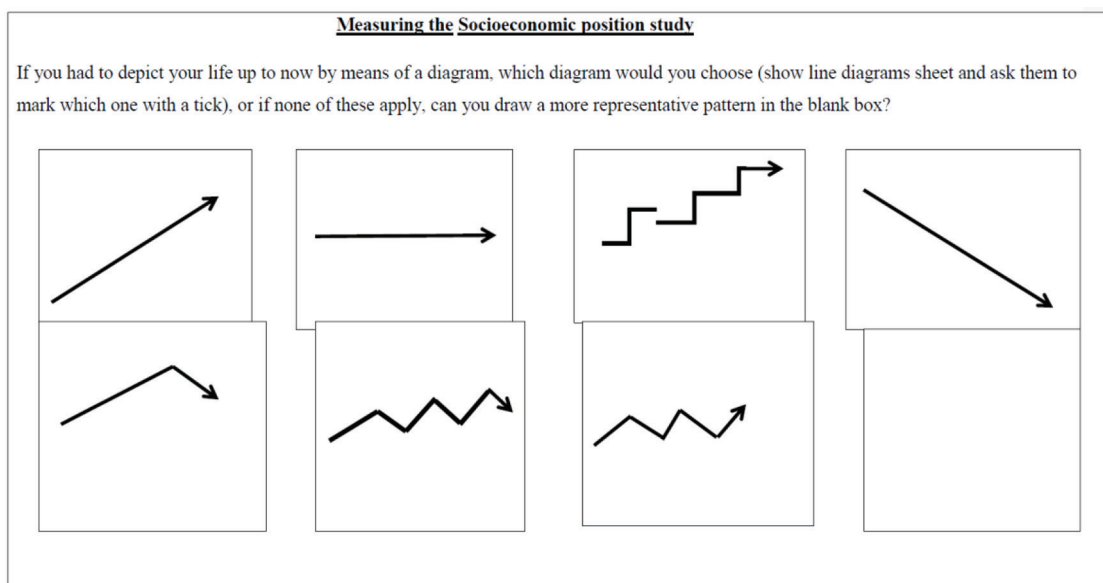


Figure 3: Line diagrams to draw the socioeconomic position

that needed to be asked to identify these items were listed in the emerging questionnaire. The potential answers to each of the questions were listed from the responses given during the in-depth interviews. Items and responses were grouped by the category of SES that they indicated and a set of experts were asked to check the tool for the following:

1. Adequacy of the questions being used to capture the item being measured.
2. Completeness of the potential responses to capture all points on the response spectrum.
3. Ethical neutrality of the responses listed – because SEP is about the value judgments being made about a particular marker of SES. Therefore should any of the items indicate a lowering of value in the eyes of individuals, it would not adequately capture the import of that item to SEP.

Step 7: The Validation Process

The constructed tool was distributed to 9 experts across a host of disciplines, including 1 ethicist, 4 demographers, 2 clinicians, 1 sociologist, 1 educationalist, and 1 economist. They reviewed the tool and evaluated it based on the above criteria. These inputs were then used to reduce the list of items and questions on the tool to measure SEP. Some of the questions required restricting, the responses needed to be delineated more carefully and some of the questions/items were eliminated entirely. The pared down item list with questions and potential responses can now be used to measure SEP in Malayali society.

Scope of this Study

This tool can apply in other epidemiological studies related to non-communicable diseases. The socioeconomic transition and its effect on early incidence of non-communicable diseases is major area to explore in public health research.

Conclusion

SEP is a very important determinant of health, but is often ignored because of the complexity in its definition and difficulties involved in measuring it. Qualitative approaches were used to identify clearly demarcated stages in the life course of individuals in a specific context. Each of the stages was then linked to markers that could be easily specified. Thus, the collective experiences of a life time could be captured to form a measure of SEP.

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