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Assessing the use of the Family Affluence Scale (FAS) among Irish Schoolchildren

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Abstract

The objective of this analysis was to examine the answering rates, internal reliability and external validity of the Family Affluence Scale (FAS) employing data from the 2002 Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study HBSC; a cross-sectional survey of 8,424 Irish schoolchildren aged 10-18. Father’s occupation was reported by 80.6% of the schoolchildren and 60.6% reported on mother’s occupation, while over 96% reported on the FAS items. Lower answering rates on parental occupation were found among younger schoolchildren and among those with poorer material circumstances. Analysis of the FAS revealed a moderate internal reliability and FAS scores were significantly associated with reported parental occupation. The traditional SES measures suffer from poor answering rates that pose a serious methodological threat. The FAS has moderate internal reliability and does not capture the SES status in full, but it has high completion rates, and can be used as an additional measure of SES in late childhood and adolescence.

Introduction

The associations between socioeconomic (SES) status and health are well established among adults1 and children2, but not among adolescents3-4. SES is most commonly determined by three measures: occupation, education and income2, measures that do not easily apply to adolescents. Studies tend to classify adolescents’ SES according to the head of the household’s status5, but the appropriateness of this is unclear. Whereas some studies suggest that adolescents are able to provide valid data on their parents’ occupational status6-8, others suggest otherwise9-10.

One way of overcoming these difficulties is measuring the material affluence of the family. The Family Affluence Scale (FAS) is a composite of four self-report questions: family car ownership, number of holidays, number of computers and having one’s own bedroom11-12, based on Townsend’s work on material deprivation13. The FAS was found to be a good predictor of poor self-rated health in 22 European and North American countries14.

Some aspects of the FAS were previously validated internationally15, but not in the Irish context. The current study aims to assess the internal and the external validity of the FAS in Ireland, based on data collected in 2002 HBSC survey.

Methods

Sample

This study employs data from the 2002 Irish Health Behaviours in School-aged Children study, a part of the WHO collaborative study (WHO-HBSC)16. Schools were randomly selected from Department of Education and Science lists and individual classrooms within these schools were randomly selected for inclusion. Data were collected using a self-completion questionnaire in April-June, and September-October 2002, from 8,424 10-18 year old schoolchildren. The response rate in this study was 51% of schools and 83% of schoolchildren. A full description of the methods employed can be found elsewhere17,18.

Measurement

Participants were asked to report where their father and mother work, and what exactly their job was. These open-ended questions were coded into a 7 category SES scale: 1 - professional; 2 - managerial/technical; 3 - skilled non-manual; 4 - skilled manual; 5 - partly skilled; 6 - unskilled; 7 - unknown or unclassifiable. The latter category was re-coded as missing.

The Family Affluence Scale was calculated as a sum score of the following: Does your family own a car, van or truck? 0 - no; 1 - yes, one; 2 - yes, two or more; Do you have your own bedroom? 0 - no; 1 - yes; During the past 12 months, how many times did you travel away on holiday with your family? 0 - not at all; 1 - once; 3 - more than twice; and How many computers does your family own? 0 - none; 1 - one; 2 - two; 3 - more than two. The sum score created an 8-point scale that was later collapsed into low FAS (FAS 0,1,2,3); medium FAS (FAS 4,5); and high FAS (FAS 6,7).

Statistical Analyses

The internal and external reliability characteristics of the FAS as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Answering rates for parental occupation and FAS items by gender and age group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% (n)</td>
<td>% (n)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>80.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own bedroom</td>
<td>99.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family vacations</td>
<td>99.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of computers</td>
<td>99.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Spearman correlations: FAS items</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own Bedroom</td>
<td>0.102**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>8111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family vacations</td>
<td>0.200**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>8113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Out of the 8,424 schoolchildren sampled, 80.6% reported father’s occupation and 60.8% reported mother’s occupation. In contrast, 96.4% reported on having a family car, 99.4% own bedroom; 99.4% computers; and 99.2% holidays. No gender differences were found in likelihood of reporting on any of the measures, however, younger children were less likely to report parental occupations. This trend was not found with regard to the material affluence items (Table 1).

Prior to computing the FAS, intercorrelations between the four items used to compose the scale were examined and revealed modest but statistically significant associations (Table 2). The Cronbach's alpha of the final scale was moderate (α=0.401).

Table 3 Percentages of adolescents reporting on parental occupation, by FAS categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Managerial/technical</th>
<th>Skilled non-manual</th>
<th>Skilled manual</th>
<th>Partly skilled</th>
<th>Unskilled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% (n)</td>
<td>% (n)</td>
<td>% (n)</td>
<td>% (n)</td>
<td>% (n)</td>
<td>% (n)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Father’s occupation
- Total: 7.2 (486), 31.0 (2106), 10.9 (739), 33.4 (2269), 13.0 (882), 4.6 (309)
- FAS low: 1.8 (22), 27.3 (329), 7.0 (84), 40.2 (484), 16.6 (200), 7.1 (86)
- FAS medium: 5.1 (160), 28.6 (893), 11.2 (350), 36.0 (1121), 14.1 (441), 4.9 (153)
- FAS high: 12.3 (274), 35.5 (792), 12.4 (276), 27.3 (610), 9.6 (214), 3.0 (66)

Mother’s occupation
- Total: 3.2 (164), 34.3 (1756), 29.2 (1495), 6.0 (307), 18.9 (967), 8.5 (437)
- FAS low: 1.9 (18), 26.3 (247), 24.9 (234), 6.9 (65), 24.3 (228), 15.7 (147)
- FAS medium: 2.9 (68), 33.8 (793), 29.8 (699), 6.4 (151), 19.3 (452), 7.7 (180)
- FAS high: 4.4 (75), 39.6 (674), 30.2 (515), 4.8 (81), 15.5 (264), 5.5 (94)

Table 4 Answering rates for parental occupation by FAS categories, gender and age group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>10-11yrs</th>
<th>12-13yrs</th>
<th>15-17yrs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% (n)</td>
<td>% (n)</td>
<td>% (n)</td>
<td>% (n)</td>
<td>% (n)</td>
<td>% (n)</td>
<td>% (n)</td>
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Father’s occupation
- FAS low: 70.8 (1205), 71.5 (542), 70.2 (663), 69.9 (179), 72.4 (534), 69.9 (463)
- FAS medium: 81.6 (3118), 80.6 (1331), 82.6 (1786), 78.2 (494), 81.3 (1446), 84.6 (1111)
- FAS high: 87.4 (2232), 85.2 (916), 89.2 (1316), 85.1 (338), 88.2 (1091), 88.0 (767)

Mother’s occupation
- FAS low: 55.1 (939), 56.1 (425), 54.4 (514), 59.8 (153), 53.0 (391), 55.4 (367)
- FAS medium: 61.4 (2343), 59.7 (985), 62.8 (1357), 56.3 (356), 60.8 (1082), 65.5 (861)
- FAS high: 66.7 (1703), 65.2 (701), 67.8 (1000), 58.2 (231), 68.1 (843), 68.5 (597)

proposed by Wardle et al18 were examined using SPSS, version 12.0.

To assess external validity, associations between parental occupation and FAS were examined. Data presented in Table 3 suggest that those with lower FAS scores were more likely to report partly skilled or unskilled parental occupations whereas those from the highest FAS group were more likely to report that their parents were in professional and managerial/technical occupations (Chi-square: 310.24, p<0.001 for father’s occupation and Chi-square: 159.40, p<0.001 for mother’s occupation).

Finally, we examined the percentages answering the parental occupation questions by FAS categories, gender and age group (Table 4). The percentages of respondents reporting on parental occupation from the low FAS groups were lower than that those from the higher FAS groups. In addition, within the higher FAS categories, girls and older schoolchildren were more likely than boys to report parental occupation (all statistically significant at p<0.001).
Discussion
The aim of this paper was to examine the internal reliability and the external validity of the Family Affluence Scale developed by Currie et al in the Irish context. The approach undertaken here follows the work of Wardle et al validating the Home Affluence Scale (HASC). Previous studies have highlighted the difficulty of obtaining valid information on parental occupation from children and adolescents using self-reports. Currie et al, for instance, reported a 20% non-response to these questions. The first step of our analysis was, therefore, to determine the non-response rate in this Irish sample. Approximately 20% of the schoolchildren did not report on father’s occupation and approximately 40% did not report on mother’s occupation. Whether this was due to questions unanswered or a reported occupation that was unclassifiable, the result is the same: SES information for a large proportion of the sample was not available, posing a potential bias to analyses using this measure. Examining the answering rates to the individual FAS items revealed that in excess of 96% of participants responded to each of the items. The intercorrelations between the FAS items were low but statistically significant and the Cronbach’s alpha was moderate. The low associations may be explained by the small number of items composing the scale and by the fact that they represent different aspects of material affluence.

The external validity of the FAS was examined by associations with parental occupation. The results suggest that statistically significant associations exist between FAS and parental occupation, with more schoolchildren from high FAS categories reporting on high parental occupation status and vice versa, however deviations from this trend do exist suggesting that the FAS and parental occupation do not overlap and should not be used as alternates.

Finally, we examined whether differences in response rate on parental occupation exist across the three FAS categories. This analysis revealed differential answering on parental occupation; those reporting lower FAS scores and younger children were less likely to provide sufficient information for classification. These findings coincide with previous studies and they suggest a bias toward higher SES and that low SES is under represented in data collected from adolescents in a self-report manner.

The Family Affluence Scale is not perfect in the sense that it does not capture the same concept as parental occupational status or socio-economic status. Neither does it assess the totality of the concept of material affluence and thus it cannot replace the classic SES measures; indeed the scale is continuously subject to examination and refinement. Nevertheless, the FAS represents a simple, short and reliable measure, comprised of questions that can easily be answered by schoolchildren in these age groups and that is associated with national level measures of wealth, and, that has demonstrated relationships various health outcomes.

In the Irish context FAS has moderate internal reliability, suggesting that it should not be used as the only measure for material status or as an alternative for the more traditional SES measures such as parental occupation. However the high answering rates achieved by the FAS items and the association between FAS and parental occupations suggest that the FAS should be used as a complimentary measure of material affluence.

Acknowledgement
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References