

Understanding SES variation in family lives using semi-structured interviews

Megan Kanaby¹, Arynn Byrd¹, Yi Ting Huang¹

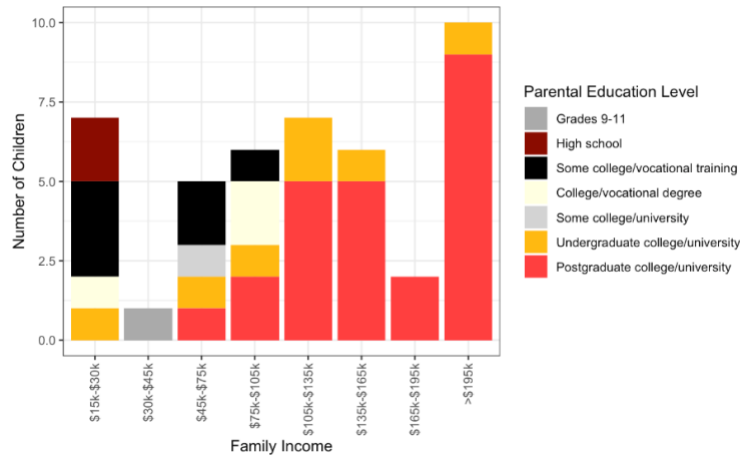
¹University of Maryland, College Park

The 30-million word gap refers to the magnitude of SES effects on parent input during development (Hart & Risley, 1995; Golinkoff et al., 2019), but questions remain about which aspects of family lives drive SES differences and how research methods impact these estimates (Ellwood-Lowe et al., 2022; Bergelson et al., 2023; Dailey & Bergelson, 2021). Despite their ubiquity in research, word counts as a convenience measure provide an impoverished window into the richness of family communication. Since parents use language to satisfy family-specific goals, it is important to situate accounts of parental input within the texture of family lives and draw on methods that are sensitive to the diversity of experiences, both within and across SES background. These multidimensional factors are difficult to study with quantitative metrics alone, which assume that families vary along a unidirectional scale. To isolate which aspects of family lives might plausibly drive SES differences in parental input, we turned to a mixed-methods approach and community-engaged research to describe parental roles, routines, and responsibilities across families with school-aged children.

44 families with children ages 4-7 were recruited from a larger project examining SES effects on language development. 17 of these families were recruited from a local non-profit, which organizes Head Start centers and wrap-around services to families with incomes at or below 100% of the federal poverty level. Household income and parental education varied across families (Fig. 1). Each parent was interviewed in a 1-on-1 semi-structured format containing two parts: a time-diary survey (10-15 minutes) and questions that focused on a family's routine, responsibilities and well-being (15-30 minutes). Trained research assistants conducted reflexive thematic analysis on formatted interviews, which generated codes that reflect patterns in parents' flexibility, time, and physical and emotional resources. From these codes, four major themes emerged (Table 1). Within each theme, utterances were categorized based on whether they: 1) reflected positive or negative sentiments, 2) were produced by a lower- or higher-SES parent. Codes were aggregated at the parent level, and positivity scores were calculated as the number of parents producing positive minus negative statements, divided by the total number of parents who expressed thoughts about that theme. This metric tracked changes in sentiment across themes, and the extent to which aspects of family lives vary across SES background.

Parents generally produced positive utterances across themes (Table 1, most scores above 0%). SES similarities were found in theme 1 (time spent with family) and theme 2 (familial and personal support), whereby all parents expressed gratitude for extended family's assistance, enjoyment of time spent nurturing children, and structured family activities (scores > 53%). SES differences emerged in theme 3 (childcare), with less-positive utterances overall (high-SES: 46%, lower-SES: 23%). While all parents emphasized the necessity of childcare, higher-SES parents discussed access to private services (e.g., babysitting, summer camps) and lower-SES parents mentioned reliance on publicly available services (e.g., free school programs). Theme 4 (finances) produced the largest SES difference, with higher-SES parents positively discussing using income as they pleased (64%) and lower-SES parents negatively expressing a desire to be financially stable (-20%). Our study illustrates the benefits of mixed-methods approaches in deriving contextualized metrics to describe multidimensional aspects of family lives. In relation to language development, themes 1-2, which directly relate to parent-child interactions, produced minimal SES differences, while themes 3-4, which relate to financial status, produced the largest effects. Taking a mixed-methods approach to characterize home environments can reveal nuances in family-level processes across SES that impact language development and parental input. Utilizing such measures to understand differences in family interactions is a necessary step in unpacking complexities in language development amongst groups.

Fig.1. Parental education across family income levels



References

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 Ellwood-Lowe, Foushee, & Srinivasan. (2022). *Developmental Science*.
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Table 1. Parental roles, responsibilities, routines. Higher-SES, Lower-SES; SES demarcations based on median family income in DC metro.

Theme	SES	Positive Sentiments		Negative Sentiments		Positivity Bias
		#		#		
Theme 1: Time Spent w/ Family	Higher	13	"I got a chance to spend more time with him [my child], and more like, you know, I would say quality time with him. That's the exact word I would use, it's a quality time, like, you know, I'm happy." - 206_KS	4	"We're really busy; I wish that we were slightly less busy. Because you know, the kids do a lot of activities so every sort of sports season..." - 95_MY	53%
	Lower	7		2		56%
Theme 2: Familial & Personal	Higher	16	"...I do feel like I'm very lucky, and that I have a partner who's really willing to do a lot of things around the house..." - 28_MR	4	"I would love for a lot of the [family] responsibilities to not be mine. I don't like to have to be the brains of the operation. I don't like having to think for everybody." - 277_MF	60%
	Lower	10		3		54%
Theme 3: Childcare	Higher	19	"We have an au pair that lives with us...She will watch the kids, you know, Monday through Friday...so we have a lot of flexibility in being able to pick them up..." - 27_TM	7	"I would love to have have a ...regular babysitter...I don't think that we can afford that." -115_EK	46%
	Lower	8	"Once I found out about [childcare vouchers] back when my oldest was, you know, two, I was very excited about it...it is definitely a big help." - 291_TN	5	"...we can't afford it...sometimes I might have to pull my kids back from school." -212_KP	23%
Theme 4: Finances	Higher	9	"...my husband brings home like 300k a year on his own, so I don't - there's nothing that I necessarily have to worry about with not having a job." - 19_AP	2	"If I could change in a perfect world, prices wouldn't be this high for everything, cost of living would be better, it'd be easier, you know?" - 278_MF	64%
	Lower	4		6		-20%