

Family functioning in South African families: The role of socioeconomic status

Ferdi Botha,^{*} Frikkie Booysen[†] and Edwin Wouters[‡]

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Abstract

The importance of healthy family relationships for individual well-being is widely accepted. Improvements in the ways that families function thus serve to positively enhance the lives of individuals within such families. The principal focus of this paper is on the concept of family functioning, which is broadly defined as a multidimensional relational process by which family members interact and provide emotional support. One important element for family functioning is socioeconomic status (SES). Ecological theory states that a family's socioeconomic context is determined by macro-systemic factors, thereby influencing individuals' perceptions of family functioning. Within this context, there are two perspectives at play regarding the association between family functioning and SES, namely the social causation perspective and the social selection perspective. The former asserts that social conditions influence family well-being and functioning, while the latter assumes that individual personality traits and characters influence the family's SES. This paper uses data from the 2012 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). The Family Attachment and Changeability Index (FACI-8) is used as measure of family functioning, whereas SES is viewed as multidimensional and in this paper includes education, income, and occupational status. Using structural equation modelling (SEM), the paper examines the social causation perspective on the association between family functioning and SES.

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^{*} Rhodes University, South Africa & University of Antwerp, Belgium.

[†] University of the Free State, South Africa.

[‡] University of Antwerp, Belgium.

1. Introduction

The study of family functioning has increased in popularity during the past decades. However, there is little consensus regarding the dimensions of family functioning and it has also been stressed that factors such as socioeconomic status (SES) are likely to influence perceptions of family functioning mechanisms, thereby rendering inconclusive results regarding family functioning across culturally diverse populations (McCreary and Dancy, 2004; Tiffen *et al.*, 2007). Thus, consideration of social context and SES are essential when analysing family functioning, especially among relatively poor minority ethnic groups (Gorman-Smith *et al.*, 2000).

Family functioning is a multidimensional concept that refers to how family members interact with each other and work together to achieve common family goals and outcomes (Morris and Blanton, 1998). Since family functioning, according to Patterson (2002), in general denotes relational processes, family functioning is concerned with the processes by which a family attains its various functions such as emotional and economic support, and protection of vulnerable members. Families and family relationships are important predictors of human development, health, and well-being (Botha and Booysen, 2014) and as such understanding family functioning is highly important. Apart from cultural differences within and across South African families, South Africa also faces large differences in SES across the population and especially across racial groups. Given such differences, South Africa provides an interesting case study to examine how SES explains family functioning. The aim of this paper is therefore to examine the role of SES in explaining self-reported family functioning in South African families.

2. Theoretical background

Tiffen *et al.* (2007) argue that an understanding of economic influences on perceptions of family functioning is essential in the case of providing support to families facing financial adversity. SES, primarily in terms of income and education, directly influences family functioning patterns. This argument is primarily based on ecological theory, which states that a family's socio-economic context is determined by macro-systemic factors, thereby influencing individuals' perceptions of family functioning (Meyers *et al.*, 2002; Tiffen *et al.*, 2007). Within this context, there are two perspectives on the association between family functioning and SES, namely the

social causation perspective and the social selection perspective. The former, and currently most dominant view, asserts that social conditions influence family well-being and functioning, while the latter assumes that individual personality traits and characters influence the family's SES (Tiffen *et al.*, 2007; Conger *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, Conger *et al.* (2010:688) note that the social causation and social selection perspectives are underlying principles upon which theories are based rather than individual theories. It is therefore possible that causality may run in both directions, and such a possibility is contained in the interactionist perspective, which takes both the social causation and social selection perspectives into account (Conger *et al.*, 2010).

Since education and income are positively correlated, a lack of sufficient education or income may lead to negative psychological and health outcomes (Wilhelm *et al.*, 2000; Seccombe, 2002). In addition, since low levels of income expose families to greater levels of stress and internal conflict (Conger and Conger, 2002; Orthner *et al.*, 2004), low SES may negatively influence family functioning. Thus, as the socio-economic environment of a family influences individual members' perceptions of the family (Tiffen *et al.*, 2007) and since low SES is related to increased levels of stress within the family, lower levels of SES is expected to negatively influence perceived family functioning.

3. Empirical findings

While the study of family functioning dynamics has expanded rapidly over the past few decades, few studies focus on associations between family functioning and economic factors, particularly SES. Nevertheless, the bulk of the existing literature suggests the existence of a relationship between SES and perceived family functioning, and also highlights the importance of considering gender differences in the association between family functioning and SES as men and women tend to respond differently to the influences of various degrees of SES on family functioning domains.

Byles *et al.* (1988), using data from 1 869 families interviewed as part of the Ontario Health Study in Canada, employ the FAD and report that higher household income is significantly associated with better family functioning. Similarly, Roelofse and Middleton (1985) found that, in an analysis of 413 Australian college students, individuals from high-income families reported

healthier levels of family functioning relative to students from lower income families. In contrast, insignificant relationships between family functioning and income and education have been reported in a study of 197 mothers using the Family Evaluation Measure (FEM) in the state of Georgia, US (Meyers *et al.*, 2002).

Morris and Blanton (1998) investigated the determinants of family functioning among 136 couples from six denominations in the US using the Clergy Family Life Inventory and the Self Report Family Functioning Scale. The effect of increased financial stress regarding financial compensation was not a significant predictor of family functioning among women, whereas financial compensation stress did significantly influence two family functioning dimensions among men. In particular, greater stress due to income uncertainty and financial compensation lead to worse perceptions of enmeshment and organisation for men.

Latham *et al.* (2001) study the family functioning dynamics of 275 HIV-infected women in three US states using the Family Apgar Scale (FAS).[§] Although the majority of women were single and earned low levels of income, the respondents reported relatively high levels of family functioning, attributed partly to the generally high levels of education reported by the female respondents. Regression results suggest that education is significantly positively associated with family functioning. However, household income and family functioning are not significantly related.

Clark *et al.* (2000) analysed data from 143 families in the inner city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Among others, two main hypotheses were that dependence upon social welfare (which links to SES since social welfare dependence implies financial need) and parental lack of education would be negatively associated with family functioning. Using the Family Assessment Device (FAD)** and by means of correlation analysis, Clark *et al.* (2000) found that dependence on

[§] The Family Apgar Scale (FAS) is a five-item scale (*adaptation, partnership, growth, affection, and resolve*) measuring satisfaction with family functioning on a 3-point ordinal scale, where a higher score suggests improved family functioning. Latham *et al.* (2001) revise the FAS to a 4-point scale [(1) *hardly ever* to (4) *always*] to be consistent with other similar study measures.

** The Family Assessment Device (FAD) is a 60-item questionnaire measuring self-reported levels of family functioning, with each question based on a four-point Likert scale, i.e. *strongly agree/agree/disagree/strongly disagree*. The FAD comprises seven sub-scales: (i) *problem solving*; (ii) *communication*; (iii) *roles*; (iv) *affective*

social welfare exhibits the strongest relationship with family functioning, with greater dependence on social welfare being associated with an increase in family dysfunction. Moreover, educational disadvantage had no significant relationship with any of the family functioning subscales, which is roughly in accordance with Tiffen *et al.* (2007).

Philbrick and Fitzgerald (2007) study the determinants of family functioning among 589 women involved in family businesses from the 1997 National Family Business Survey in the US. The results show no significant relationships between household income, the highest level of education of these women, and reported levels of family functioning.

Tiffen *et al.* (2007) consider the impact of SES on perceived family functioning, analysing responses of questionnaires completed between October 1996 and December 1998 by 483 respondents originally part of a cohort from the Newcastle Thousand Families Study initiated in 1947 in Northeast England. Tiffen *et al.* (2007) employ the McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD) to analyse the relationships of household income, educational status, and social mobility with perceived family functioning. The study focused specifically on gender differences in self-reported levels of family functioning and, in general, finds stronger relationships between SES and family functioning among men compared to women. Greater levels of household income were found to be significantly associated with improved perceptions of family functioning among men, although this finding was not that pronounced for women. When controlling for educational attainment, the effect of family income was reduced, although the relationship between family functioning and educational attainment is much weaker than with household income for both sexes.

Li *et al.* (2009) analyse the relationship between quality of life and family functioning in Chinese families with parents living with HIV/AIDS. Based on questionnaires completed by 116 parents, the authors employ Bloom's (1985) self-report measures of family functioning using the family conflict, family cohesion, and family sociability subscales from the original 15 scales. Parents with higher levels of education reported greater levels of family sociability, but the association

responsiveness; (v) *affective involvement*; (vi) *behaviour control*; and (vii) *general functioning*. Average scores are obtained for each sub-scale, ranging from 1 (*healthy*) to 4 (*unhealthy*).

between education, family conflict, and family cohesion were not significant. In addition, family income was not a significant predictor of any family functioning domain. Ma *et al.* (2009a) analyse perceived family functioning of 1 010 Hong Kong residents using the FAD as measurement scale. The results indicate a positive association between household income and family functioning, while family functioning is better among parents with higher levels of education. Using the same data on Hong Kong families, Ma *et al.* (2009b) investigate gender differences in reported family functioning and find no significant gender differences in the contribution of household income to perceived family functioning, as household income is positively related to improved family functioning for men and women. In a similar study, Ma *et al.* (2011) investigated perceived family functioning among 1 002 Hong Kong parents. There were no significant gender differences in family functioning. Education and income were both positively related to perceived family functioning, as higher education and higher levels of income were associated with better levels of family functioning.

In summary, the literature in most cases suggests a significant positive relationship between SES and levels of perceived family functioning, with poorer family functioning being associated with lower SES. In addition, there is some evidence of gender differences in the response of reported family functioning to SES, as men tend to view economic stressors as more important in determining family functioning compared to women (Beiser *et al.*, 1998; Amarapurkar and Danes, 2005). Despite evidence of an association between SES and family functioning, there is, however, no clear consensus on the existence of such a relationship (Tiffen *et al.*, 2007), which warrants future research that includes additional measures, methods, and populations.

4. Data

This paper uses data from the 2012 version of the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). The 2012 SASAS is used as it contains the relevant family functioning instrument employed, namely the Family Attachment and Changeability Index (FACI-8) originally developed McCubbin *et al.* (1995). The FACI8 instrument contains 16 questions on a 5-point Likert-type scale examining the overall functioning of a family (see Table 1). Responses consist of never, sometimes, half the time, more than half, and always. These 16 questions are disaggregated into two sub-scales of

eight items each, namely Attachment and Changeability. While the attachment scale measures the strength of family members' attachment to each other, the changeability scale measures the degree of family members' flexibility in their relationships with each other. The higher the FACI8 score, the better the functioning of the family. The FACI-8 has been employed in previous research on South African data (Greeff and de Villiers, 2008; Botha and Booyesen, 2014) and its factor structure within the 2012 SASAS data has been examined (Botha *et al.*, 2015). Summary statistics are shown in Table 2.

Table 1: The Family Attachment and Changeability (FACI8) items

In my family...		Never	Sometimes	Half the time	More than half	Always
1	In my family it is easy for everyone to express his/her opinion	1	2	3	4	5
2	It is easier to discuss problems with people outside the family than with other family members.	1	2	3	4	5
3	Each family member has input in major family decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
4	Family members discuss problems and feel good about the solutions.	1	2	3	4	5
5	In my family everyone goes his/her own way.	1	2	3	4	5
6	Family members consult other family members on their decisions.	1	2	3	4	5
7	We have difficulty thinking of things to do as family.	1	2	3	4	5
8	Discipline is fair in our family.	1	2	3	4	5
9	Family members feel closer to people outside the family than to other family members.	1	2	3	4	5
10	My family tries new ways of dealing with problems.	1	2	3	4	5
11	In my family, everyone shares responsibilities.	1	2	3	4	5
12	It is difficult to get a rule changed in my family.	1	2	3	4	5
13	Family members avoid each other at home.	1	2	3	4	5
14	When problems arise, we compromise.	1	2	3	4	5
15	Family members are afraid to say what is on their minds.	1	2	3	4	5
16	Family members pair up rather than do things as a total family.	1	2	3	4	5

Source: SASAS 2012. Note: Questions related to the attachment sub-scale are 2, 5, 7, 9, 12, 13, 15, and 16. Questions related to the changeability sub-scale are 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, and 14. To obtain the aggregate FACI8 scale, responses within the Attachment sub-scale are first reversed (5 = Never, 4 = Sometimes, 3 = Half the time, 2 = Sometimes, 1 = Always) and then summed together with the Changeability sub-scale. Reversal of the Attachment scale ensures positive scores for both sub-scales.

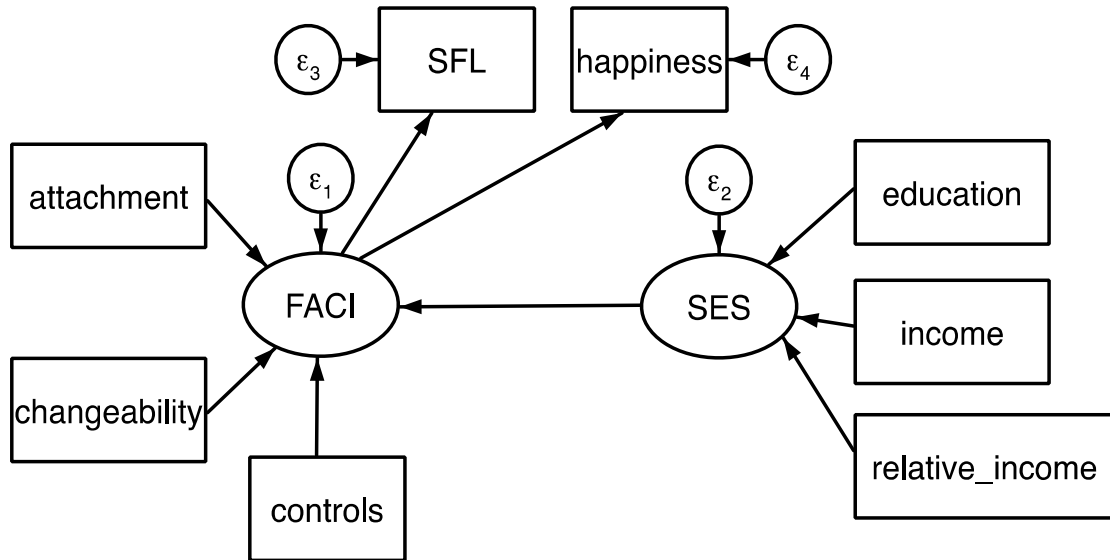
Table 2: Summary statistics

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Attachment	2428	5.16	1.06	1	6
Changeability	2444	5.62	0.81	1	6
Age	2546	42.65	17.38	16	95
Female	2547	0.61	0.49	0	1
Black	2547	0.62	0.48	0	1
Coloured	2547	0.16	0.37	0	1
Indian	2547	0.09	0.28	0	1
White	2547	0.13	0.34	0	1
No education	2547	0.16	0.37	0	1
Some secondary education	2362	0.40	0.49	0	1
Matric or equivalent	2362	0.31	0.46	0	1
Tertiary education	2362	0.11	0.32	0	1
Household income: R0 – R1000	2547	0.12	0.32	0	1
Household income: R1001 – R5000	1965	0.54	0.50	0	1
Household income: R5001 – R15000	1965	0.20	0.40	0	1
Household income: R15000+	1965	0.10	0.30	0	1
Relative income: below average	2547	0.40	0.49	0	1
Relative income: average	2308	0.44	0.50	0	1
Relative income: above average	2308	0.12	0.32	0	1

5. Methods

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to model the relationship between SES and family functioning. The use of SEM makes it possible to allow for more than one path between variables. The preliminary model is presented in Figure 1. In the proposed model, SES was assumed as latent variable, with level of education, household income, and relative household income acting as formative indicators of SES. Family functioning was assumed to be a latent variable, with the attachment and changeability scales being formative indicators of underlying family functioning. A path is allowed from SES to family functioning, the result of which may provide evidence as to the applicability of the social causation perspective. A number of covariates are included in the family functioning equation, which include age, age squared, gender, race, marital status, employment status, and SES. Reported happiness is also included in

the model as endogenous variable, with the same set of covariates as for family functioning. In addition, an equation is estimated for satisfaction with family life.



6. Results

Table 3 presents the standardized coefficients from the SEM depicted in Figure 1. Goodness-of-fit indicators are excellent, with the χ^2 statistic strongly favouring the current model over a saturated model ($p = 0.198$). The RMSEA of 0.013 falls well below the generally accepted maximum of 0.06, while the CFI is 0.996, higher than the accepted minimum of 0.9. Only the changeability sub-scales loads significantly on the overall FACI-8 scale. There is some evidence of the social causation perspective, in that higher SES is significantly associated with improved family functioning. This implies that families with higher SES function better on average compared to families with low SES. The results also indicate significant racial differences in family functioning, with Black individuals reporting lower family functioning when compared to all other racial groups. Not surprisingly, moreover, better family functioning is associated with greater satisfaction with family life as well as higher levels of reported happiness.

Table 3: SEM results

Structural					
FACI8 ←			SES ←		
	attachment	0.0156 (0.0248)	some secondary	0.1595 (0.0977)	
	changeability	0.1110*** (0.0251)	matric	0.0993 (0.1068)	
	SES	0.3620*** (0.0260)	tertiary education	0.0943 (0.0917)	
	log(age)	-1.4935*** (0.4739)	R1001-R5000	0.0483 (0.1031)	
	log(age ²)	1.5122*** (0.4770)	R5001-R15000	0.1505 (0.1093)	
	female	0.0472* (0.0256)	R15000+	0.0824 (0.1051)	
	indian	0.2070*** (0.0254)	average income	0.7935*** (0.0614)	
	coloured	0.0987*** (0.0270)	above average income	0.7447*** (0.0630)	
	white	0.1030*** (0.0298)			
Measurement					
satisfaction with family life ←	FACI8	0.7622*** (0.0192)			
happiness ←	FACI8	0.8350*** (0.0193)			
					$\chi^2(19) = 23.9$ ($p=0.198$) RMSEA = 0.013 CFI = 0.996

Note: $p < 0.01$ ***, $p < 0.10$ *. Standard errors in parentheses. Additional controls include employment status and marital status.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the social causation hypothesis in the relationship between family functioning and SES, namely that social conditions are related to family functioning and family relationships. Using SEM, the results suggest that higher SES is associated with an improvement in family functioning, thus providing support for the social causation perspective. Significant differences in family functioning are also prevalent across racial groups. The cross-sectional nature of the data set used is one limitation of this paper, with the implication that comments about causality cannot be made. Unfortunately, there is no existing South African panel data set that contains the FACI-8 instrument.

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