



A Longitudinal Study of the Relations Between Students' Socioeconomic Status, Social Integration at University, and Mental Health

Mark Rubin
Ross Wilkinson



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA



centre of
excellence
for **equity**
in higher
education

This project was funded by a Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme (HEPPP) National Priorities Pool grant.

Project description:

The aim of this project was to provide a better understanding of the empirical links between university students' socioeconomic status (SES), their social integration at university, and their mental health and well-being. This research was timely given that Australia universities are currently going through a period of increasing enrolments by low SES students. The intention of the research was for the results to inform policies and approaches that promote the social inclusion of two key minority groups: low SES students and students with mental health problems. In addition, it was designed to inform policies and approaches that reduce mental health problems among university students, increase their satisfaction at university, and reduce their attrition rates.

Conceptual and/or methodological framework:

This project used a cross-lagged two-wave longitudinal design and quantitative self-report measures using an online survey. 1063 domestic first-year undergraduate students from a range of disciplines took part in both waves of data collection: 749 students in Wave 1 and 314 students in Wave 2. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 62 years, with a mean age of 23.4 (SD=7.86). Based on a measure of self-reported social class identity, 11.8% of participants described themselves as working class, 13.7% as lower middle class, 40.8% as middle class, 22.6% as upper middle class, 1.9% as upper class, and 2.88% selected "don't know."

Key findings:

Consistent with previous work, the findings indicated that students' subjective appraisal of their social class was negatively related to levels of depression and positively related to their satisfaction with life. These relationships were mediated by social contact at university. This means that subjective social class predicted the amount of social contact that students had with other students at university, which in turn predicted their levels of depression and satisfaction with life. These relations were tested longitudinally, meaning that we can infer that social contact is the mechanism through which social class and mental health are linked. Therefore, social class determines the level of social contact that students have at university, and social contact, or lack thereof, determines the level of mental health that students experience.

Implications for the future:

These results can lead to implementable outcomes. Developing targeted programs to increase the social contact that low SES student have at university may help to buffer the effects of SES on mental health, for example: subsidising the financial costs of (a) travel to university campuses, (b) on-campus and close-to-campus accommodation, (c) campus childcare, and (d) university-based social events. Online social networking may also serve as an effective form of social contact for time-and-money poor low SES students.

A third wave of data collection has recently been completed with PhD student Olivia Evans. This third wave of data should provide a more comprehensive analysis of the relations between SES, social integration, and mental health.

For more information on this line of work, please visit: <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/profile/mark-rubin#projects>