

Social & Economic Independence of College Students

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Introduction

Differences between teenagers, college students, and adults have been reported in both social and economic independence (MacFarlane & Partridge, 2015), but factors predicting levels of these constructs have not yet been established. One factor that may influence these constructs among college students is first-generation college status. First-generation students tend to face difficulties in adapting to the new academic and social surroundings, are more poorly prepared academically, have family responsibilities, work more hours, and receive less support from their families and less information about the educational experience itself compared to their peers (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009; London, 1989; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). A meta-analysis found socioeconomic status did not play a factor in the success of first-generation students (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Thus, even when SES increased, the disadvantages of being first-generation students were not eliminated.

Depression may also influence the development of these constructs. Depressive symptoms may limit students' ability to engage in activities that would promote social and economic independence, while also decreasing students' self-efficacy in these areas.

Our hypotheses were:

1. First-generation college students would display lower levels of social and economic independence
2. Higher levels of depression symptoms would be associated with lower levels of social and economic independence
3. The present sample's levels of social and economic independence would be similar to a previous sample of similar college students while being higher than a sample of teenage mothers and lower than a sample of working adults.

Method

Participants

Participants were 49 students enrolled in a small, private, liberal arts college in a rural setting. All participants were enrolled in a lower division psychology course. The sample was 85.7% White, 30.6% first-generation college students (representative for the institution), and 79.6% female.

Instruments

First-generation college student was defined for this study as neither parent having graduated from college. Participants completed an online survey containing demographic questions, the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9; Spitzer, 1999), and the Social and Economic Independence Scale (SEIS; MacFarlane & Partridge, 2015).

Procedure

Participants completed the online survey through SurveyMonkey during Fall semester 2018. For the purpose of this survey, depression levels rated as moderate or higher on the PHQ-9 were considered clinically significant and used as the cut-off for group comparisons. PHQ-9 raw scores were used for the regression analyses.

Results

Participants reported a mean PHQ-9 score of 7.06 ($SD = 6.04$), which reflects a mild level of depression, though scores ranged from 0 to 24. Moderate or higher levels of depression symptomatology were reported by 22.4% of the sample.

Results (cont.)

Demographic differences in independence scores are displayed in Figure 1. For the current sample there were no differences in social or economic independence for racial minority status ($p = .16$ and $.67$), gender ($p = .08$ and $.14$), or first-generation status ($p = .59$ and $.24$). In-state students reported higher levels of social independence ($p = .02$), but not economic independence ($p = .36$), than out-of-state students. Students who endorsed moderate levels of depression or higher reported significantly higher levels of social and economic independence ($p < .001$ and $.02$) than students endorsing minimal or mild levels.

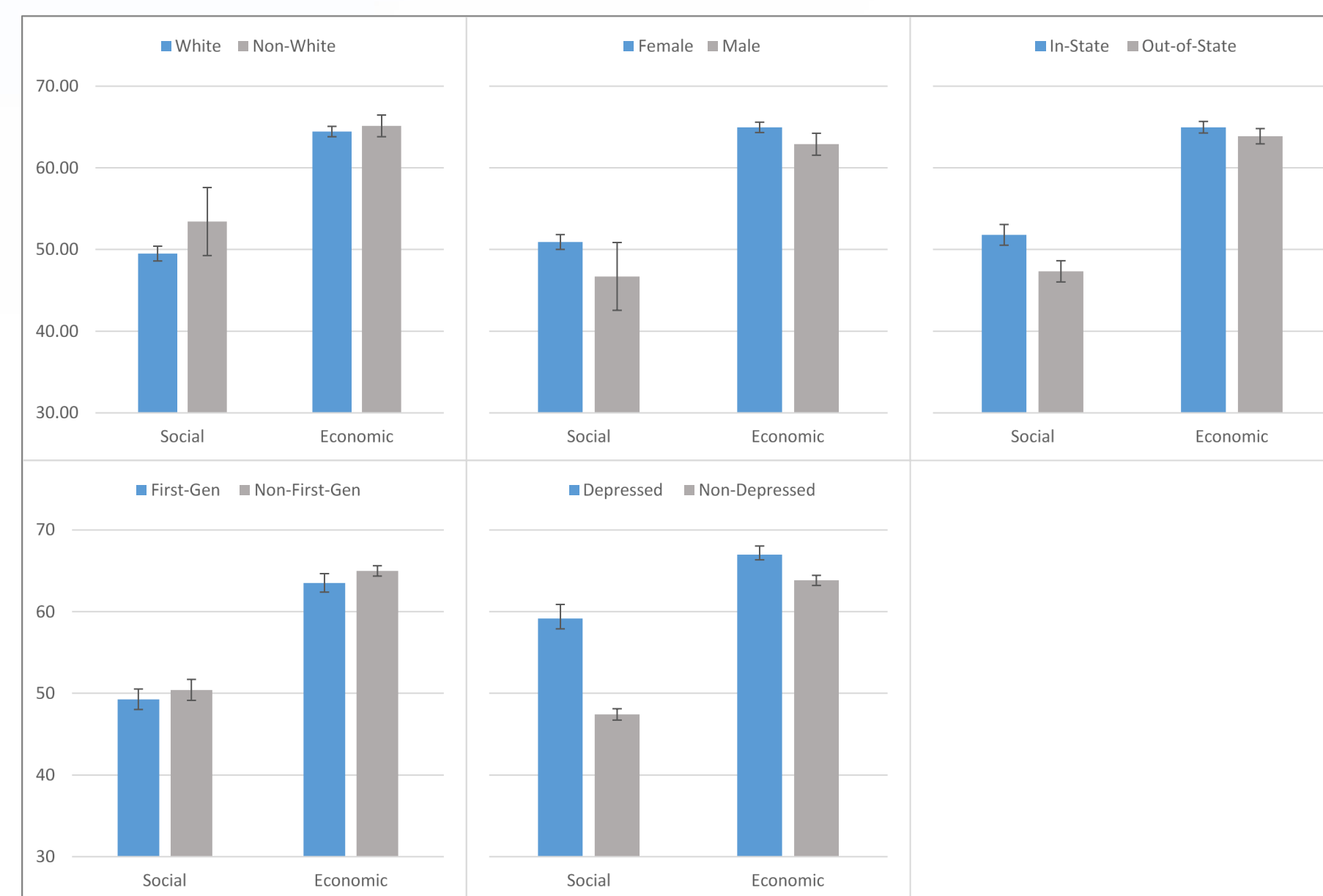


Figure 1. Demographic differences in social and economic independence.

The mean social independence score was significantly lower than previous samples of adults ($p < .001$) but not significantly different than previous samples of college students ($p = .59$) or teenage mothers ($p = .90$). The mean economic independence score was significantly lower than previous samples of adults ($p < .001$) and college students ($p < .001$), but significantly higher than previous samples of teenage mothers ($p < .001$; see Figure 2).

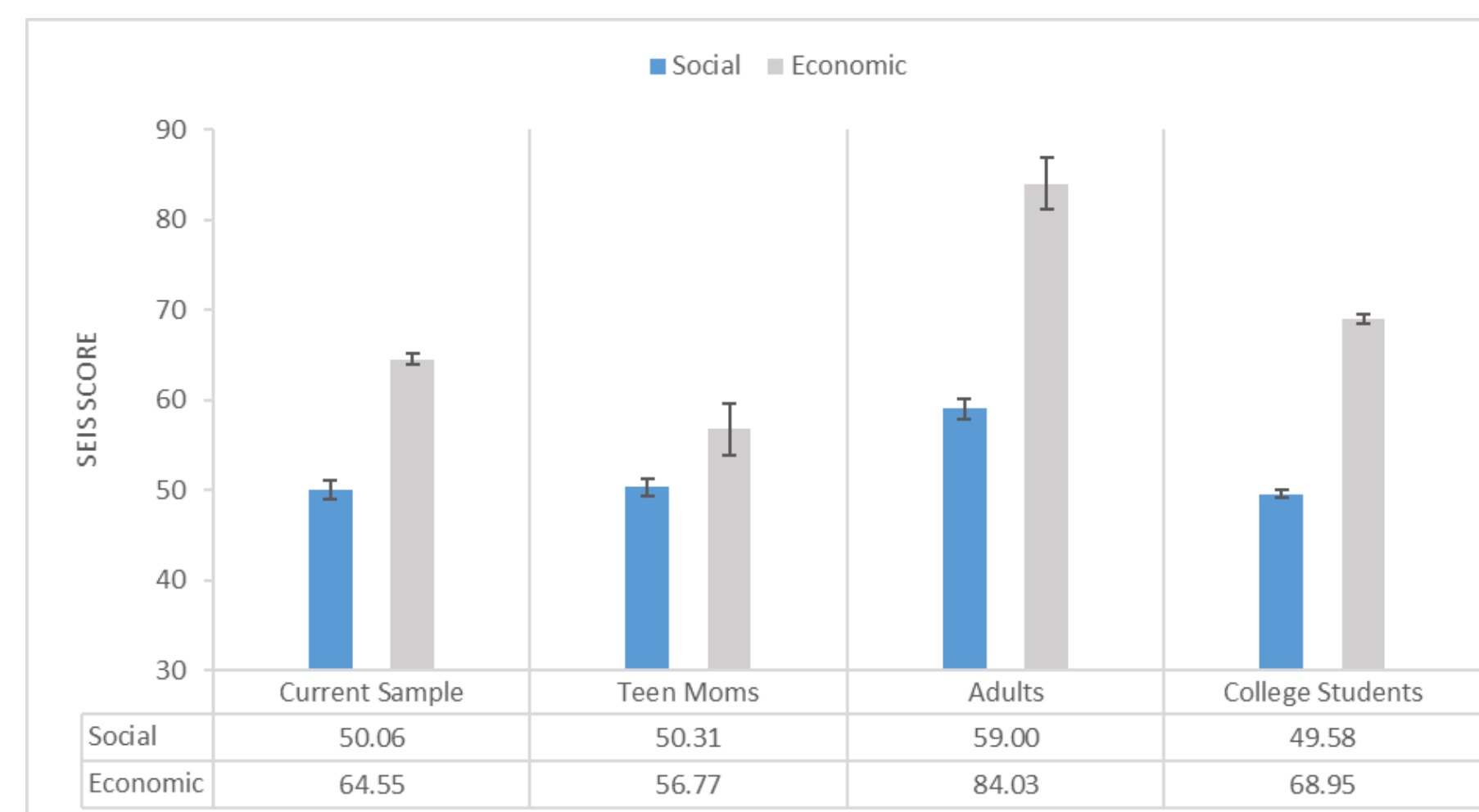


Figure 2. Comparison of the current sample to previously reported groups.

Multiple regression analysis using all demographic predictors and PHQ-9 scores showed the only significant predictor of increased social independence scores was higher PHQ-9 scores ($p < .001$). Multiple regression analysis for economic independence showed no significant predictors. See Table 1 for full results.

Results (cont.)

Table 1. Regression Analyses Predicting Social and Economic Independence Scores

Source	Social Independence ^a					Economic Independence ^b				
	B	SE	β	t	p	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant ^c	42.26	2.33	--	18.13	< .001	62.08	2.67	--	23.26	< .001
PHQ-9 Score	0.93	0.09	0.83	10.00	< .001	0.18	0.11	0.28	1.73	.09
White	-2.28	1.46	-0.12	-1.56	.13	0.27	1.68	0.02	0.16	.87
Female	1.96	1.22	0.12	1.61	.12	1.23	1.40	0.13	0.88	.38
Single	-0.16	1.01	-0.01	-0.16	.88	-1.36	1.16	-0.17	-10.18	.25
In-state student	0.80	1.08	0.06	0.74	.47	0.85	1.23	0.11	0.69	.50
First-generation student	-0.14	1.10	-0.01	-0.13	.90	-1.14	1.26	-0.14	-0.91	.37
Hours worked on campus per week	-0.02	0.18	-0.01	-0.09	.93	-0.26	0.20	-0.19	-1.26	.22
Hours worked off campus per week	0.15	0.09	0.14	1.68	.10	-0.07	0.10	-0.13	-0.83	.41
Live in the residence halls	1.06	1.56	0.06	0.68	.50	1.29	1.79	0.12	0.72	.48

Note: ^aModel $R^2 = .81$; ^bModel $R^2 = .27$; ^cReference category = male student of color who is in a relationship, comes from out of state, lives off campus, and is not a first-generation student.

Discussion

Findings

Our hypothesis regarding first-generation status was not supported by the current sample. Given the relatively high proportion of first-generation students at this institution, perhaps there is more support for these students (both formal and informal) than at other institutions. It could also be that coming from a family where the parents have not graduated college could require these students to demonstrate more independence because their parents are not familiar enough with the systems to be particularly useful in helping them navigate college systems.

Our second hypothesis regarding depression symptomatology was not supported. The social independence result is counterintuitive, but may be due to the social withdrawal commonly associated with depression symptoms or it could be as people become more socially independent, they are at higher risk for depression.

Our final hypothesis regarding comparisons to other populations was mostly supported. The significant difference between this sample's economic independence score and a previous sample of college students may be due to the higher prevalence of first-generation college students in the present sample than the previous sample, though the lack of significant differences based on first-generation status in the present sample calls this hypothesis into question. Other possible reasons for the difference include a smaller proportion of racial minorities in the present sample and geographic differences between samples (i.e., Northeastern vs. Southern US).

Limitations

Given the small sample size and numerous statistical tests, all results must be considered preliminary and in need of replication. Additional limitations include the homogenous nature of the sample, the self-report nature of the survey, and the lack of sufficient statistical power to investigate interaction effects.

Recommendations

Replication is needed in larger and more diverse populations, for example, a university with a larger and a racial/ethnic diverse student body. Further exploration of the role of mental health in the self-perception of independence is needed, especially given the tendency of people with depression to underestimate their abilities. Given the current calls for "adulting" training in colleges, measurements of social and economic independence may help track students' perceptions of their abilities to function as an adult.

References

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