



Social Class Differences in University Students' Social Integration

Mark Rubin & Chrysalis Wright

The University of Newcastle, Australia & University of Central Florida



Background

Social integration at a university involves making close friendships, socializing, participating in university clubs, societies, and sports teams, and feeling a sense of belonging and community. Social integration is important because it predicts students’ academic development, outcomes, and retention. Given the value of social integration in higher education, it is important to identify groups of students that are less integrated than others with a view to improving their social integration. Working-class students constitute one such group (Rubin, 2012a).

Previous research has found that students’ age tends to be negatively related to their level of social integration in higher education institutions, with younger students integrating more than older students. But how do age differences in social integration help to explain social class differences in social integration? The potential link is that working-class students tend to be older than middle-class students. The present research consisted of two studies that provided the first quantitative tests of the age difference explanation.

Table 1: Zero-Order Correlation Coefficients for Study 1

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Social class	–							
2. Age	-.33**	–						
3. Number of friends	.14**	-.21**	–					
4. Relevance of friends	.18**	-.28**	.32**	–				
5. Ideal number of new friends ^a	.13*	-.23**	.32**	.18**	–			
6. Ideal number of new friends ^b	.14**	-.25**	.38**	.19**	.80**	–		
7. Openness to friendships	.10*	-.14**	.10	.14**	.46**	.31**	–	
8. New friends concern	.17**	-.31**	.15**	.22**	.34**	.26**	.53**	–
9. Social integration	.22**	-.36**	.58**	.57**	.71**	.60**	.69**	.69**

* p < .05. ** p < .01. a: at University. b: outside University

Method

Study 1: Australian University

Participants:

The sample consisted of 376 first year undergraduate students (72 men, 304 women).

The mean age was 22.11 years. Twenty eight percent of participants described themselves as poor or working-class, 10.64% as lower middle-class, 33.51% as middle-class, and 19.68% as upper middle-class. The remaining participants indicated that they were upper class (.80%) or that they did not know their social class (6.65%).

Study 2: American University

Participants:

The sample consisted of 416 students (137 men, 279 women). The mean age was 22.00 years. Seventeen percent of participants described themselves as working-class, 15.87% as lower middle-class, 33.17% as middle-class, and 16.83% as upper middle-class. The remaining participants indicated that they were upper class (1.44%) or that they did not know their social class or did not respond to this question (15.34%).

Measures:

Participants at both Universities answered questions to assess their (1) level of social integration, (2) quality of social integration, (3) desired level of social integration , (4) demographic characteristics (i.e., social class, gender, age). Social class was determined by considering parents’ education level, along with participants’ subjective rating of their own social class and family income while growing up.



Table 2: Study 1’s Results of Mediation Tests in Which Social Class is the Predictor Variable and Age is the Mediator Variable

Outcome variable	Indirect effect			Total effect		Direct effect	
	<i>B</i>	CI lower limit	CI upper limit	<i>B</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>
Number of friends important to identity	.033	.015	.060	.082	.005	.049	.101
p*Relevance of friends to identity	.123	.064	.207	.285	< .001	.162	.047
Ideal number of new friends at university	.040	.022	.067	.078	.011	.038	.234
Ideal number of new friends outside university	.044	.022	.075	.094	.003	.050	.121
Openness to friendships	.060	.012	.124	.142	.066	.082	.312
New friends concern	.177	.104	.277	.350	.001	.171	.092
p*Aggregate index of social integration	.093	.056	.143	.214	< .001	.121	.012

Note. Indirect effect = the mediation effect, with 95% confidence intervals. Total effect = the effect of social class on the social integration variable without controlling for age. Direct effect = the effect of social class on the social integration variable when controlling for age. p A partial mediation effect was obtained in which the effect of social class on social integration remained significant after controlling for age. * A reverse mediation effect was also significant (ps < .05) in which age mediated the effect of social class on social integration.

Results

Correlations and mediational results of social class, age, and social integration of both studies can be found in tables 1-4.

Results indicated:

- 1) Both studies showed a significant positive relation between students’ social class and their social integration at their university.
- 2) Both studies showed a significant negative relation between students’ age and their social integration.
- 3) Both studies showed a significant negative relation between social class and age.
- 4) The present research makes a unique contribution to the literature in this area by demonstrating that age differences statistically accounted for social class differences in students’ social integration. Hence, in both studies, working-class students were less integrated than middle-class students partly because they were older than middle-class students.

Table 3. Zero-Order Correlation Coefficients for Study 2

Social Integration Measure	Social Class	Age
Number of university friends important to identity	.20**	-.31**
Relevance of university friends to identity	.18**	-.25**
Ideal number of new friends at university	.05	-.15**
Ideal number of new friends outside university	.04	.04
New friends concern	.14**	-.29**
Communication with university friends	.19**	-.22**
Communication with non-university friends	.04	.14**
Membership of university groups	.14**	-.13**
Sense of belonging at university	.16**	-.14**
University friendship	.14**	-.03
Satisfaction with university relationships	.07	-.07
Satisfaction with non-university relationships	-.06	.05
Closeness to university friends	.10*	-.14**
Closeness to non-university friends	-.04	.07
Time spent socializing with university friends	.22**	-.39**
Time spent socializing with non-university friends	<.01	.08
Community participation at university	.10*	-.19**
Aggregate index of social integration	.21**	-.30**

Note. Ns ranged from 411 to 416 due to missing data.
* p < .05. ** p < .01.

Discussion

Study 1 provided some evidence that social class differences in social integration at a university may be part of a broader effect in which working-class students are less integrated into society at large. However, using a clearer delineation between university friends and non-university friends, Study 2 showed that although working-class students were significantly less integrated than middle-class students, they were not significantly less integrated outside of their university. Hence, Study 2 demonstrated that social class differences in social integration at the university do not depend on similar differences in society in general.

In Study 1, age differences tended to fully mediate the relation between social class and social integration, and in Study 2, they tended to partially mediate this relation. This discrepancy may be related to the different measures and/or institutional contexts that we used in each study. Regardless of whether the mediation effects were full or partial, the general conclusion remains the same: age differences explain social class differences in students’ social integration at their university. However, further research is required in order to investigate whether other variables also mediate the relation between social class and social integration at a university.

Finally, we also found some evidence of a reverse mediation effect in which social class mediated the effect of age on social integration. This result indicates that older students tended to be less integrated at their university than younger students because they tended to be working-class, and it points to a complex relation between social class and age in which both variables contribute to and account for differences in social integration.

Table 4. Study 2’s Results of Mediation Tests in Which Social Class is the Predictor Variable and Age is the Mediator Variable

Outcome variable	Indirect effect			Total effect		Direct effect	
	<i>B</i>	CI lower limit	CI upper limit	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>
p*Number of university friends important to identity	.038	.021	.058	.129	< .001	.091	.004
New friends concern	.121	.062	.210	.302	.005	.180	.089
p*Relevance of university friends to identity	.114	.055	.191	.434	< .001	.319	.007
p*Communication with university friends	.017	.007	.032	.081	< .001	.064	.003
p*Membership of university groups	.005	.001	.011	.034	.006	.028	.022
p*Sense of belonging at university	.046	.011	.096	.326	.001	.281	.006
Closeness to university friends	.059	.0161	.124	.229	.047	.169	.148
p*Time spent socializing with university friends	.056	.031	.086	.162	< .001	.106	.002
Community participation at university	.079	.039	.137	.231	.034	.151	.166
p*Aggregate index of social integration	.052	.028	.086	.21	< .001	.155	.001

Note. Indirect effect = the mediation effect, with 95% confidence intervals. Total effect = the effect of social class on the social integration variable without controlling for age. Direct effect = the effect of social class on the social integration variable when controlling for age. p A partial mediation effect was obtained in which the effect of social class on social integration remained significant after controlling for age. * A reverse mediation effect was also significant (ps < .05) in which age mediated the effect of social class on social integration.



For further information, please e-mail Mark.Rubin@newcastle.edu.au