Social Lives of College Students: An Exploration of Possible Social Identities

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Introduction

The transition from high school to college marks a moment in students' lives when they have the rare opportunity to actively control their social lives. The students' possible selves, which Markus and Nurius (1986) describe as the hoped-for and feared future selves, have great potential to become reality in terms of social life and social interactions during the college transition, yet no study to date has examined the social transition from high school to college.

The move to college uproots young adults from their familiar social environment, forcing them to begin anew in a variety of situations that they have never experienced before. The students will feel driven to create a sense of belonging in their new environment, a drive that compels them to interact with their fellow classmates (Baumeister and Leary 1995). The stakes are high: integration into a new group will positively influence students' self-esteem, and their overall psychological well-being will be enhanced (Cameron 1999); those who fail to bond into groups risk feeling severe negative mental and physical effects (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

College students seek to feel a sense of "belongingness" that comes from relationships, but it is not clear from prior studies how earlier high school social life influences that desire (Baumeister and Leary 1995). The literature is silent as to whether students who felt left out in high school seek more actively to join groups than previously satisfied students. Much student social activity is in pursuit of long-term, pleasant relationships that involve frequent interactions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, it is not clear whether students' social life hopes predict their social achievements, or whether a correlation exists between students' high school and their college social lives.

College relationships for students are based on their previous experiences with relationships—namely, high school interactions. In those interactions they learned that belonging to the "crowd" increases positive feelings, an assumption that students carry with them into their college social lives (Brown & Lohr, 1987). Membership in high school peer groups provides students with a means to facilitate the shift from relying on their parents for social gratification to relying on friendships that they create (Newman & Newman, 1976). Thus in high school, with the first steps towards self-reliance, students begin to tie their self-esteem into group membership, a belief that is likely to follow students as they form college relationships (Brown & Lohr, 1987). The component lacking in the results of the studies conducted by Brown and Lohr (1987) and Newman and Newman (1976) is what students hoped for in their high school interactions. The parameters of observation limited these studies, leaving a need to examine high school graduates' reactions to their high school interactions.

Success in college social interactions is closely related to what students learned in their high school social lives. Sanitioso (1998) noted that students' beliefs regarding what produced greater social success influenced their beliefs about their own abilities, which would induce students to form and maintain relationships with other students who confirm their self-concepts (Sanitioso, 1998). High school experiences lead students to realize the value of group membership, which, according to Cinnirella (1998), increases the importance of membership in the student's self-concept. These group interactions influence the student's forming sense of self-identity, which in turn influences their behavior and hopes towards future social interactions (Erikson, 1968). A gap in the literature exists regarding the effect of students' prior, high school social lives to their college social lives.

A college student's social interactions will depend on his ability to enact what Cinnirella (1998) terms *possible social identities,* which are created during the student's formative high school years. Possible social identity works in tandem with possible selves, acting as the group-oriented

component that college students try to enact; possible identity complements the individuality of possible selves (Cinnirella, 1998). The effect of realizing hoped-for or feared possible social identities, and the influence of students' possible selves on that social identity, has yet to be determined. Certainly students feel an internal drive to form close, lasting, positive relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) as well as the desire to rely increasingly on the self in social lives (Newman & Newman, 1976). The importance of success—which varies based on the student's hoped-for possible social identity as well as their possible selves—is likely to depend on the student's prior success in high school social interactions and the self-esteem they gained from those interactions (Cameron, 1999).

Coming to college and using the opportunity to make the hoped-for possible social identities reality allows students to facilitate positive possible selves and to create increasingly positive future social identities. However, the type of college relationship formed is determined by students' prior experiences and depends on the student's maturity level (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000). Ability to adjust to college social life predicates upon the student's maturity as measured by what Berzonsky and Kuk (2000) describe as "personal identity development" (p. 92). Procrastinating students or those who came from high school with low self-esteem—people classified as "diffuse/avoidant students" (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000, p. 95)—and intolerant and needy students will find achieving hoped-for possible social selves difficult. It is not clear whether these people actually fail to achieve hoped-for social identities, or whether they are only expected to fail. But Berzonsky and Kuk (2000) indicated that more secure students who developed a firm sense of self earlier in life exhibit greater ability to successfully achieve their desired social lives, suggesting that socially successful high school students will be socially successful in college. Students who successfully join groups are and happier and have higher self-esteem overall than loner students, so even diffuse/avoidant or socially inept high school students will seek to integrate into groups in college (Hoyle and Crawford, 1994; Cameron,1999). Yet no study has attempted to determine the relationship among students' possible social identities,

self-esteem, and success in social life. Clearly, students have high *motivation* to achieve their hoped-for possible social selves, and they have prior experience—of successful *or* unsuccessful social interactions—that would encourage group membership. The current study will measure the change in students' college social lives based on their satisfaction with their social interactions in high school. The hypothesis thus states:

> Students unhappy with their high school social interactions will use the transition to college to remedy those unsatisfactory interactions, while students satisfied with their high school lives will remain satisfied with their social lives in college.

Students with low social life satisfaction in high school will increase their social life satisfaction more than students with high social life satisfaction in high school. High-satisfaction students in high school are expected to remain the same in college, while students with low satisfaction are expected to try to implement their positive potential social selves. Considering the dearth of research on the interaction between high school and college social lives, the significance of this study's results will contribute to the literature on possible social identities and the difficult social life transition from high school to college.

Methods

Subjects

Subjects were 48 undergraduate students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute (Worcester, MA) who voluntarily responded to a survey. Five subjects provided incomplete surveys and their answers were omitted from the results, leaving a total of 43 surveys included in the analysis. Subjects' ages ranged approximately from 17 to 22. Thirty-five of the surveys were completed on paper; thirteen were completed via email.

Survey

A survey was designed to explore satisfaction with current social life, self-esteem, and possible social selves. The original surveys were all available through the public domain and included analysis scales. The survey created for this study was divided into three sections, with one section addressing each variable: social life, self-esteem, and possible social selves.

Satisfaction with social lives was measured with a modified Satisfaction With Life Scale, SWLS, that was obtained online. The scale asked students to rate aspects of their social lives based on statements such as "I am satisfied with my social life" on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The original survey, which asked questions regarding life, was altered to refer to social life whenever relevant. Respondents filled out an SWLS for both high school and college social life interactions. Raw score suggests the respondent's overall satisfaction.

Self-esteem was measured with a Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), a ten-question scale that asks respondents to rate statements about themselves ("At times, I think I am no good at all") from strongly agree to strongly disagree. This was included in the overall survey to determine the effect of respondents' social lives on their self-esteem. Each response was accorded a numerical value such that a sum of those values produces the measure of the student's self-esteem:

higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. The original scale only classified self esteem into three categories, but this study broke those categories into a five-category scheme.

The Possible Selves Questionnaire developed by Daphna Oyserman (2004) was modified to measure possible social lives. Four questions addressed current and hoped-for college social life information from respondents. These questions elicited information based on statements such as "list three things you hoped for in your college social life" and "list three things you did not want to happen in your college social life." In order to determine the importance of the possible social selves listed, respondents were asked to mark the response with which they associated the greatest hope or fear.

Procedure

Fifty print surveys were distributed by researchers in areas frequented by all levels of undergraduates, primarily within the WPI Campus Center, as well as near the Fountain at the middle of campus. Researchers approached students and requested that they fill out a survey, offering candy in return for participation. Students received small chocolates as a reward for completing the survey. Students standing or sitting alone were often targeted. The survey was also emailed to one club on campus, the Christian Bible Fellowship (CBF). Thirteen CBF members emailed responses, which were integrated into the results.

Results
Demographics

Figure 1. Demographics	
Gender	Raw number
Males	34
Females	8
Unspecified	1
Class	
2009	17
2008	7
2007	8
2006	4
Unspecified	7

A greater number of freshmen participated in the survey than any other class. Because this study strives to assess the change in satisfaction from high school to university, the large proportion of freshmen involved coupled with significant satisfaction change suggests that any effects will begin occurring within two months of coming to university. We infer this because the survey was distributed in late September. The possible social selves freshmen hoped for in college are fresh in new students' minds, while upperclassmen may have forgotten their high school selves. Thus having a large number of freshmen participate in the study adds to the significance of the results.

Self-Esteem

Figure 2 indicates that the subjects displayed approximately normal self-esteem ratings. The average


Figure 2. Self Esteem Curve
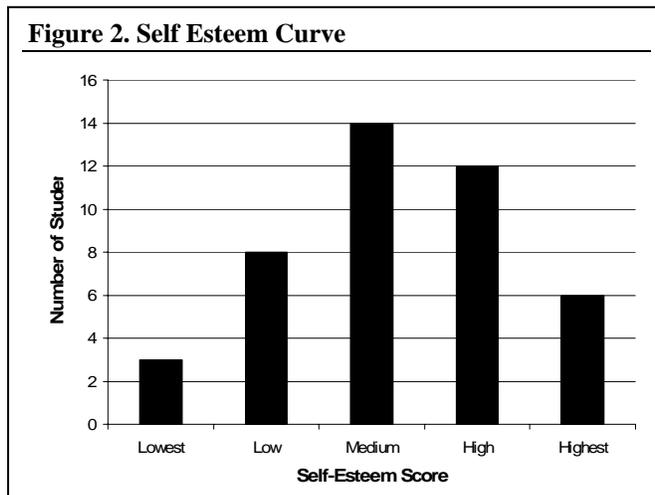
bell-shaped curve of the subjects' self esteem suggests that they represent a normal population of college students, no happier or more depressed than average. As the graph above shows, the population is distributed in an approximately normal manner, with the vast majority of the population lying within the middle three categories. Highly deviant self-esteem results, which contained a disproportionately large number of people with very low or very high self esteem, could invalidate other results. As it is,

however, the sample shows no real tendency in either direction, suggesting that other results will be also normal and representative of a larger group.

      Figure 3 indicates self-esteem and satisfaction before and after matriculating at college.

Figure 3. Self-Esteem vs. Satisfaction
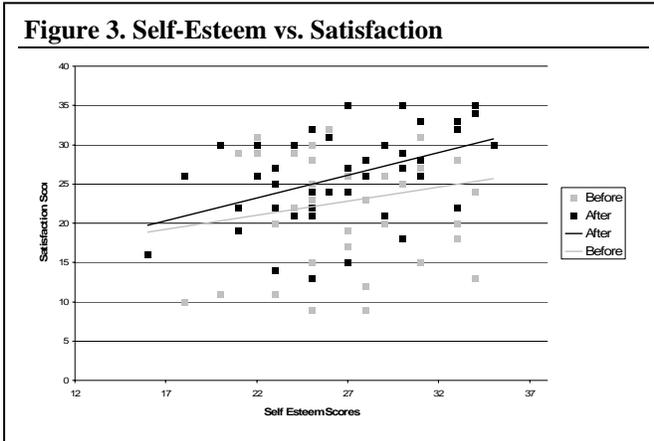
The correlation between self-esteem and satisfaction scores in high school (r = 0.21) as compared to subjects' self-esteem in college (r = 0.45) increases. In confirmation of Cameron's (1999) findings, Figure 4 suggests that a slight positive correlation between self esteem and satisfaction with social life exists in university students.

Figure 4. Satisfaction Changes	
Increases	Raw number
Number of increases	22
Avg. increase	9.5
Avg. self-esteem	27.4
Avg. H.S. satisfaction	18.8
Decreases	
Number of decreases	13
Avg. decrease	-5.5
Avg. self-esteem	26.2
Avg. H.S. satisfaction	27.2
No Change	
Number of no change	8
Avg. self-esteem	24.5
Avg. H.S. satisfaction	25.6

Subjects reported an average increase (+3.7 points) in the transition from high school to university, and the lowest score increased four points. It is interesting to note that two students who reported low high school satisfaction scores (9 points) also reported dramatic increases in university (22 and 26 points). The low university satisfaction score (13 points) represented a decrease from a high school satisfaction score (25 points).

      A greater number of subjects (n = 22) reported increased social life satisfaction in the transition from high school to college than reported decreased satisfaction (n = 13). Students who reported an increase in satisfaction also reported higher self-esteem scores (avg. = 27.4 points) than

those who decreased satisfaction (avg. = 26.2). Subjects reporting no change (n = 8) had an average self-esteem of 24.5—lowest of all three groups.
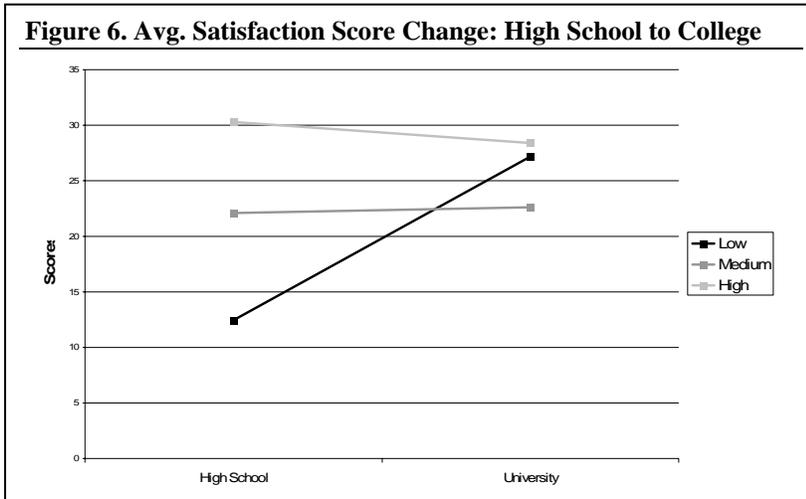
Change in Satisfaction

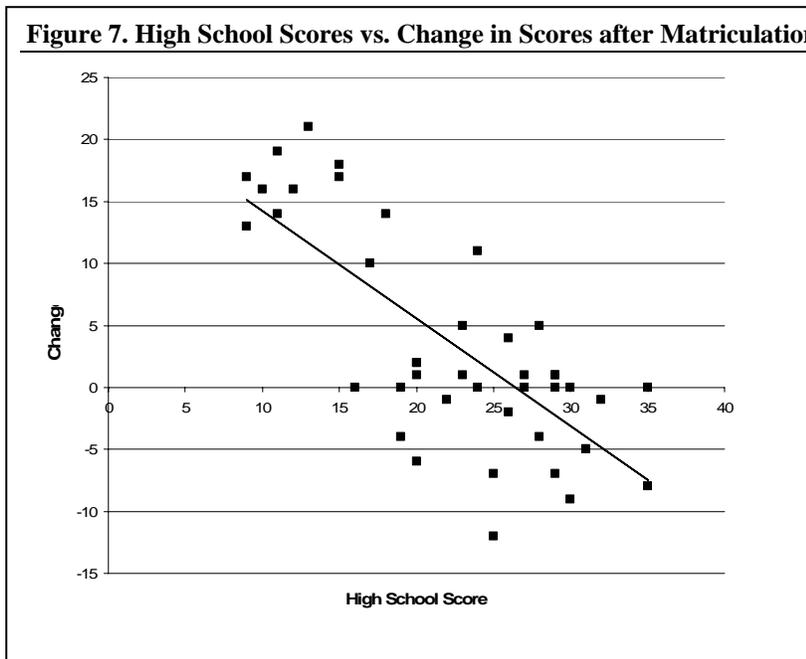Figure 5 shows the categories created to compare average student satisfaction change from high school to college. When plotted (Figure 6), it is clear that those with low high school satisfaction saw a dramatic increase in their satisfaction when going to university, while those with high high school satisfaction reported a slight decrease, but not nearly of the same magnitude as the other group's increase. The subjects with medium high school satisfaction scores stayed virtually the same in college. This significant increase suggests that the results are not due to a regression to the mean.

High school satisfaction compared to satisfaction change

Figure 5. Satisfaction Change Categorizations

Category	Number	H.S. Avg.	College Avg.	p-value for H.S./college change:
Low	11	12.5	27.2	
Medium	16	22.1	22.6	
High	16	30.3	28.4	6.2×10^{-9}

Figure 6. Avg. Satisfaction Score Change: High School to College

Figure 7. High School Scores vs. Change in Scores after Matriculation

in university indicated a strongly negative (r = -0.75) linear relationship between high school satisfaction and college satisfaction (Figure 7). Those with low high school satisfaction scores saw the greatest increases in satisfaction upon entering university (p < 0.01), while those with the highest high school satisfaction scores saw decreases upon entering university. Additionally, although more subjects reported a "change" of zero points, this could be due to subjects' tendency to fill out exactly the same answers in both satisfaction assessments. This graph's significant negative correlation indicates that satisfaction with high school social life can be very predictive of satisfaction with university social life. Low high school satisfaction subjects reported significant increases, while high-satisfaction students reported slight decreases.

Discussion
Meaning

The results indicate that students of average self-esteem who felt low satisfaction with their social lives in high school exhibit an increase in social life satisfaction in college. This suggests that those students understood the value of the social relationships from which they were excluded in high school and took steps to remedy their dissatisfaction. The transition from high school to college provides students with the opportunity to change how they project themselves; entering an entirely new social arena, students may completely change their social behavior without attracting undue notice. Nearly all incoming freshmen begin with a clean social slate. But the students who felt unsatisfied with their relationships in high school have a higher motivation to seek group membership, form lasting relationships, and realize their possible social selves (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cinnirella, 1998). Those students probably worked harder to enact positive possible selves, both personal and social, than did their popular counterparts.

Additionally, it is conceivable that some of the students who were ostracized in high school may have experienced that rejection as a result of their maturity level relative to average high school

students. Students on both ends of the maturity spectrum, ranging from immature and those with adult maturity, would fail to fit in with their high school peers. The value of maturity in relationships increases upon arrival at college, so those students who experienced exclusion from groups because of their high maturity level would be more successful in their college social interactions (Berzonsky and Kuk 2000). They would thus report an increase in satisfaction due to actual increased success.

Students who failed in high school interactions as a result of their social ineptitude or immaturity would *also* benefit from college attendance because college students are significantly more mature than high school students. Even if immature students did not change in their ability to interact socially upon entering college, their peers' increased maturity level would mean that immature students are tolerated more. Compared to high school students, few mature college students will openly disparage a peer, even an immature one. Thus the immature students who felt unsatisfied with their high school interactions will also experience a positive increase in their college social lives as a result of increased maturity and considerateness of their peers.

Interestingly, students who rated their social lives as average or high in high school actually experienced a decreased in their satisfaction ratings while median students remained approximately the same. Conceivably the students in the median range felt no strong need to change from high school to college, but simultaneously did not feel strongly positive about their social lives. They would not change their tactics from high school to college, as the low-satisfaction group did, but they also would expect less. This would lead to ratings that did not vary significantly from the subjects' high school scores, but that were low compared to the other university satisfaction ratings.

One possible explanation for the satisfaction drop experienced by high-satisfaction students from high school to college is that those who succeeded well in high school social relationships would continue to utilize the same approach to social life in college—but college social life demands increased maturity compared to high school. Thus students could very well be attempting to employ

an "outdated" mode of interaction in college social interactions that produces results those students feel are unsatisfactory.

It is also possible that students who rated their high school social lives very positively expected more out of college social lives than did those who did not find high school satisfying socially. Expectations would differ between the two groups. Students who rated their high school social scores very positively would project unrealistic possible social interaction scenarios for college, while students with low high school satisfaction would create more realistic possible selves and social lives. In short, the positive high school social interactors would be disappointed with their college social interactions, even if those interactions were actually equal with their high school social lives. Students with low high school life satisfaction, however, would probably fulfill their modest possible social lives, and rate their social lives as a great improvement over their high school ones. The possibility, then, is that students who rated their high-school social lives highly expected more than those who rated low; as a result, high scorers were disappointed with college, while low students found college equal to or better than their expectations.

Possible Problems

Several issues could skew the data to produce inaccurate results. It is possible that error was introduced in the self-reporting nature of the study. Student mood and perceptions could very well introduce error. The study's cross-sectional nature meant that the students' self-assessments could not be independently verified through third parties or observation. A longitudinal study that assessed social behavior coupled with reported satisfaction of students from high school through college could avoid this problem. Alternatively, a larger study could confirm the cross-sectional self-reports by consulting close friends, parents, or other sources intimate with the students. Group members' assessments of a subject could confirm or repudiate the accuracy of a student's self-report.

Another potential issue could arise from the alteration of the Satisfaction With Life Scale. The original scale measured satisfaction with life in general, while this study modified the scale to refer to social life. These modifications to an accepted, tested scale could have reduced the scale's validity in the context of this experiment. However, given the slightness of the alteration and the strength of the results, it is unlikely that the modifications reduced its efficacy.

Regression to the mean poses a particularly confounding challenge to dispute. The data do indicate slightly that high-satisfaction students moved down toward average, while low-satisfaction students moved up beyond the mean. It is conceivable that, instead of a significant change in behavior, the results indicate a strong regression to the mean. However, the extreme nature of the change reported by low-satisfaction students—an average increase of 9.5 raw points—as compared to the very slight decrease among high-satisfaction suggests that the data show a real phenomenon. Figure 6 supports the validity of the results by indicating the notable differences between high- and low-satisfaction groups. Additionally, the change experienced by high-satisfaction students does not deviate significantly from the average, which supports the hypothesis that low-satisfaction students actually did experience an increase in social life satisfaction.

The sample size (n = 43) or population (undergraduate students at a technical university) may also have influenced the results. It is possible that the students sampled were not indicative of the overall college student population, or even the Worcester Polytechnic Institute population. The proportion of males to females (about 4 to 1) in the study is approximately representative of the overall proportion at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, which has a ratio of 3 to 1. However, the large number of male subjects may reduce the data's validity when applied to heavily female college populations or those with equal male/female ratios. The institution itself, with its focus on technical fields, tends to attract students of a certain type, whose experiences may not accurately reflect the social life experiences of all college students across the United States. Repeat studies conducted on

campuses of colleges with different focuses—for instance, liberal arts—could account for this bias. Additional studies conducted with particular populations, such as fraternity students, all males, or all females, would also prove beneficial. The strong nature of the correlation and significance of this data suggest that these sample problems may not play too important a role. However, it is necessary to confirm this suggestion through repeat studies in different locations.

Implications

This study correlates student high school social satisfaction with college social satisfaction. Low-satisfaction students in high school were found to improve their social lives and increase their social satisfaction in college, while students who rated their high school social lives highly experienced a slight decrease in satisfaction after matriculation at university. These findings could affect the way in which admissions officers welcome freshmen to college: an explanation of the new social life expectations could benefit all students, encouraging and preparing them for future social interactions.

These findings do not apply solely to students, however. Post-college adults involved in collegiate social life could also benefit from understanding the effect of social satisfaction in high school if, for instance, a study investigated amount of group involvement for the high- and low-satisfaction groups. There is currently only limited information available regarding the effect of the high school/college transition on students' social lives. This study begins to fill in that gap in the field of social psychology. Of course, incoming freshman who aspire to fulfill positive possible social identities now have solid evidence that they can, indeed, improve their social lives in college should they chose to do so.

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