

Factors Affecting Perceived Economic Well-being Of College Students: A Gender Perspective

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A gender analysis of factors influencing perceptions of economic well-being can help financial counselors understand their clients' needs. The effects of selected perceptual and objective information variables on perceived economic well-being are mediated by comparison of economic outcomes and level of financial strain. The subjects of the study were 427 college students over age 18 who attended one of five state-sponsored universities. Male and female students differ in the significance of factors affecting the mediators and perceived economic well-being. These differences need to be understood to tailor advice and teaching of skills in order to optimize well-being.

Key Words: *Gender differences, Perceived economic well-being, College students*

Introduction

Today's college students consist of traditional students continuing their education immediately after high school and nontraditional students returning to school. This population has been overlooked when it comes to how they perceive their economic well-being in the present and future. Perceived economic well-being is defined as perception of one's economic situation compared to one's necessary and desired economic situation (Hayhoe & Wilhelm, 1998). A considerable percentage of young adults are enrolled in college – in 1994, 60% of 18 and 19 year olds, 44% of 20 and 21 year olds, and 23% of 22 to 24 year olds attended college (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1998a). Most college students are at the age where they are developing the skills with which they will build their present and future economic well-being.

College students may be considered a high-risk group when it comes to economic stability and thus well-being, given their propensity to borrow to fund their college education. Recent college graduates carry a considerable debt load at a time when they are just beginning to work in careers at beginning salaries. In 1992-93, 46% of graduating seniors had borrowed money to finance college education, at a mean amount of \$9,300 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1998b). Besides student loan debt, college students also may be accumulating considerable credit card debt. According to several surveys, 70-80% of college students have at least one credit card with the majority having an average of three cards (Hayhoe, 1994; Hayhoe & Leach, 1997; Jover &

Allen, 1996; Xiao, Noring & Anderson, 1995). An analysis of college students applying for Nellie Mae loans revealed that undergraduate students have an average card balance of \$2,226. Upon graduation from college, students are under pressure to find a job and earn enough to repay their college loans, meet credit card debts, and cover normal living expenses (Blair, 1997). The combination of high debt and low income may adversely affect college students' perceived economic well-being, not only for the present, but in the future. This indebtedness may spur students to seek assistance from financial counselors or planners.

In working with college students on the effects of indebtedness on their perceived economic well-being, financial counselors and planners may need to understand the effect of gender on these perceptions. Men's and women's perceptions differ, in part due to socialization (Bristor & Fischer, 1993). Feminist theorists state a need to pursue research in which perceptions of both men and women are examined (Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Ferber & Nelson, 1993). Studies have been done on gender differences in behaviors that may relate to perceived economic well-being such as credit card use (Armstrong & Craven, 1993; Churaman, 1988) and spending habits and credit use (Hayhoe, Leach, Turner, Bruin & Lawrence, 2000). One study has been done on perceived economic well-being by gender in a general population (Hayhoe & Wilhelm, 1998). However, the perception of economic well-being by gender in a college-attending population has not been studied. Because the college population may bring its heavy debt

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and financial insecurity into adulthood, understanding economic well-being among college students as a whole and by gender can help financial counselors and planners understand their current and future clientele's financial burdens and needs.

Literature Review

The model utilized in this study proposes that the effects of selected objective and perceptual information variables on perceived economic well-being are mediated by two perceptual variables, comparison of economic outcomes and level of financial strain. (See Figure 1 for a complete listing of variables.) Use of social comparisons as mediating variables between individual demographics and perceived economic well-being is recommended by Porter and Garman (1993) and utilized in Hayhoe and Wilhelm (1998).

Mediators

In the model used in this study, the mediators were hypothesized to affect how individuals view the objective and perceptual information in forming perceptions of their economic well-being. As stated before, the mediators are lenses through which individuals view economic factors and interpret perceived economic well-being in terms of comparison to external standards. Two mediators, comparison of economic outcomes and level of financial strain, were employed.

The first mediator, comparison of economic outcomes, consisted of individuals' comparisons of their past financial situation to their present (Porter & Garman, 1993), their expected future financial situation to their present, and comparisons of own financial status to those of a reference group (Porter & Garman, 1993; Hayhoe, 1990). Comparison of self to the standard of a reference group has been included in the economic literature for years (Duesenberry, 1949; Easterlin, 1973). Porter and Garman (1993) suggested that comparison to a reference group and comparisons of past to present together are necessary to understand perceived economic well-being.

Comparison of one's financial status to that of friends and neighbors was a significant predictor of perceived economic well-being in prior studies (Porter & Garman, 1993; Hayhoe 1990). Comparisons of present with past financial status also have been found to be significant predictors of perceived economic well-being (Porter & Garman, 1993; Hayhoe 1990). Wives placed a greater emphasis on comparison to friends and neighbors than did husbands, while husbands placed a greater emphasis on comparison of past five years to the present than did

wives (Hayhoe, 1990). These differences in comparison groups suggest that males and females may differ in their perceptions of economic well-being even given similar objective financial situations. In a previous study using comparison of economic outcomes as a mediator, both women and men in a married sample were found to use comparison of outcomes as a mediator between information variables and economic well-being. However, in the same study, wives were more likely than husbands to use direct measures of perceived economic well-being as well as comparing outcomes (Hayhoe & Wilhelm, 1998).

Level of financial strain is the other variable hypothesized to mediate between the information variables and perceived economic well-being. Because the sample in the current study consists of college students who have not had a long period of relative economic independence, level of financial strain represented economic stressors that the students had experienced over the past year. In a study of husbands' and wives' perceptions of economic well-being, husbands but not wives were found to use level of financial strain as a mediator between informational variables and perceived economic well-being (Hayhoe & Wilhelm, 1998).

Information Variables

Researchers have found that most of the information variables employed in this model have a direct effect on perceived economic well-being. Other variables are used because of their conceptual interest. The information variables have been grouped into two main categories: objective and perceptual. Each of these categories was further grouped into three subcategories. The three categories of objective variables, individual demographics, student demographics, and socioeconomic, will be discussed first. These will be followed by the three perceptual categories: money attitudes, credit attitudes, and money issues.

Objective Information Individual demographic variables used in the literature include age and number of years married. Age can be used as an indicator for the life-cycle stage of the individual. Age has been found to be a significant predictor of perceived economic well-being (Hayhoe, 1990) and of both male and female expectations of their financial situation in five years (Fitzsimmons & Wakita, 1993). Because most respondents (85%) were not married, marital status represented important distinctions among the sample in family life cycle stage. That is, the 15% who were

married were distinctively different in character than those not married because of societal expectations of marriage.

Figure 1
Model of Perceived Economic Well-Being for College Students

The information variables under student demographics included whether the student was an undergraduate, whether the student attended school full-time, and number of semesters completed. These variables were included for their conceptual interest, as college students represent a unique sample in perceived economic well-being studies. Because this is a little-understood segment, it is important to know if aspects of student status may affect perceptions of economic well-being.

Socioeconomic status has been used in most studies of perceived economic well-being (e.g., Hayhoe, 1990, 1991; Schramm & Dunning, 1986). Three objective variables represented socioeconomic status: total income, number of credit cards, and number of credit cards carrying maximum credit limit. The latter two were included because these variables are seldom available in data sets, and because they represent potential or actual drains on one's income. Drains on income due to credit card use require paying back at least a minimum payment of principal with interest charges. These interest charges may be significant in the case of credit cards, especially with cards carrying maximum credit limits. These drains on income may lower socioeconomic status and possibly perceptions of economic well-being.

Perceptual Information Two sets of scales measuring attitudes toward money and credit were used as perceptual information variables in this category. Underlying values may influence attitudes toward money and credit. Feminist theory (Bristor & Fischer, 1993) suggests that personal economic values differ by gender as well as other characteristics such as culture and social class. From this, it may be hypothesized that attitudes differ by gender, and these attitudes may in turn affect perceptions of economic well-being. Because of these recommendations of feminist economists, these variables were included for perceptual interest.

Two perceptual variables represented the category money issues: whether parents argued about money and whether the students felt that there was not enough money to buy something they wanted (as worded in the original scale developed by Furnham [1984]). These variables were included for their conceptual interest to see if they influenced either the mediating variables or perceived economic well-being. These variables reflect formative experiences with money – the former in childhood, the latter in early economic independence – which might affect perceived economic well-being.

Model

In the model shown in Figure 1, objective information variables have been grouped into individual demographics, student demographics, and socioeconomic status. Perceptual information variables have been grouped into money attitudes, credit attitudes, and money issues. The variables have been grouped into these categories to assist with the discussion. Males and females may differ in these variables and in the effectiveness of the mediator variables; level of financial strain and comparison of economic outcomes (Hayhoe & Wilhelm, 1998). Therefore, separate analyses will be run for males and females. The mediators will be discussed first, followed by the three groups of objective and three groups of perceptual variables. Coding for all variables can be found in the Appendix.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were college students over the age of 18 who attended one of five state-sponsored universities: State University of New York College at Oneonta, University of Kentucky, University of Northern Iowa, Kansas State University, and University of Rhode Island. Five hundred students at each university were selected randomly to receive the 30-minute questionnaire. During the Spring 1997 semester a total of 2,500 surveys were mailed. All surveys were anonymous due to the sensitive nature of the information. The surveys were mailed only once since there was no way to know who had returned them. However, a reminder postcard was sent out two weeks later. Responses were received from 426 students, a response rate of 17%. This is considered a low response rate. Possible reasons for this response rate are given in the *Discussion and Implications* section under *Limitations*. Sample characteristics are in the Appendix.

Measurement of Variables

The outcome measure, perceived economic well-being, will be discussed first. This will be followed by a discussion of the two mediators and, finally, with the information variables.

Perceived Economic Well-Being A scale was calculated for the outcome measure of perceived economic well-being. The score was calculated by summing the answers to seven questions. The responses to six questions were based on a 5-point Likert scale from "terrible" (scored as one) and "being delighted" (scored as five). These six questions described how the student felt about:

1. Level of income.
2. Money for necessities.
3. Ability to handle financial emergencies.
4. Level of debt.
5. Level of saving.
6. Money for future needs.

The last was a more global question that addressed the student's feelings about his/her economic and financial security and was based on a 6-point scale with one being extremely insecure and six being extremely secure. Scores could range from a low of 7 to a high of 36 with a high score representing satisfaction with one's economic well-being.

Comparison of Economic Outcomes The scale for the mediating variable comparison of economic outcomes was scored using the sum of responses from four variables. These variables were the participants' answers to four questions measured on a 5-point Likert scale from "much worse" (scored as one) to "much better" (scored as five). One question asked respondents to contrast their families' financial situation five years ago to their families' current financial situation. The second question asked respondents to contrast their current situation to their expected situation in five years. The third question asked respondents to contrast their income with the income of their friends and associates. Although students depend on loans, grants, and parental income as well as income from their own jobs, it was assumed in this question that students would take all sources of income into account when answering this question. The fourth question asked respondents to contrast their ability to purchase goods and services with that of their friends and associates. Again, although students have varied sources of income, it was assumed that students nonetheless compared their ability to purchase items with that of their friends and associates.

Level of Financial Strain In general, level of strain refers not to a single event but to an accumulation of tensions (Lavee, McCubbin & Olson, 1987). A low level of strain only affects one's judgement of areas related to the character of the strain itself. For example, economic strain would only affect perceptions of economic

well-being, not perceptions of health. However, an accumulation of stress, as described by McCubbin and Patterson (1983) in their Double ABCX model, results in a perception that any additional stressor is unmanageable. Thus, a high level of stress may affect individuals' assessments of well-being in general, including perceived economic well-being.

Three questions asked the respondents if during the past year they had: (a) received a past-due notice, (b) experienced a loss of income, and (c) faced any unexpected expenses. The fourth question asked the respondents if they were currently behind on rent or utility payments. The scale for the mediating variable level of financial strain was calculated by summing the responses to four questions. The questions were scored one for a response of yes and zero for a response of no.

Information Variables Ten of the information variables (age, length of marriage (scored 0 if not married), full- or part-time student status, undergraduate or graduate student status, number of semesters attended for current degree, income, number of credit cards, number of credit cards at the maximum credit limit, how often their parents argued about money, and how often they ever wanted something but felt there was not enough money) were measured using responses to single questions. Three of the information variables were credit attitude scale scores and five were money attitude scale scores.

Credit attitudes Credit attitudes were measured by a modified version of the credit attitude scale (J. J. Xiao, personal communication, 1996) based on the scale presented in Xiao, et al. (1995). The scales were formed from 12 questions rated with a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). Credit attitudes were measured on three dimensions: affective (feeling), cognitive (knowledge), and behavioral (usage). Each scale consisted of four questions with a maximum score of 20. The reliability of this scale was tested using Cronbach's coefficient alpha, with a level of 0.91, showing high internal reliability of the scale (Xiao, et al., 1995).

Money Attitudes Money attitudes were measured using a modified version of Furnham's (1984) Money Beliefs and Behavior Scale (Hayhoe & Leach, 1997). The scales were formed from 30 questions rated with a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). Five of Furnham's six original scales were employed in the study: obsession, retention, effort/ability, security, and inadequacy. When the scales were tested

during the pilot (Hayhoe & Leach, 1997) the sixth scale, power, was not significant and was not employed in this study. The obsession scale represents an emphasis on thinking about different aspects of money. This scale contained 12 items for a maximum score of 60. The Cronbach's alpha for the obsession scale was .91, which means there was high internal reliability of the scale. The retention scale represents not wanting to spend money even when it is available. This scale consisted of three items for a maximum score of 15. The Cronbach's alpha for the retention scale was .72, which reflects an adequate level of internal reliability for this scale.

The effort/ability scale represents the concept that one does not receive adequate compensation for work effort. This scale consisted of two items for a maximum score of 10. A high score on this money attitude implies that the respondents felt they should be paid more for their labor. The Cronbach's alpha for the effort/ability scale was .62. Although this is a relatively low alpha coefficient, this scale was retained because it was similar to the original Furnham scale. The security scale represents being knowledgeable about one's exact financial position and being willing to make difficult decisions where money is concerned. Questions about one's reluctance to use credit were included in the security scale. This scale consisted of five items for a maximum of 25. The Cronbach's alpha for the security scale was .86, which shows an adequate internal reliability. The final scale, inadequacy, represents worrying about not having enough money. The higher the score on this scale, the lower a person's feeling of inadequacy. This scale consisted of eight items, for a maximum score of 40. The Cronbach's alpha for the inadequacy scale was .83, which shows an adequate internal reliability.

Analysis

It was hypothesized that the scales of comparison of economic outcomes and level of financial strain would act as mediating variables between the individual objective and perceptual information variables and perceived economic well-being. Similar mediating variables were found to act as mediators for husbands and wives in a previous study (Hayhoe & Wilhelm, 1998). It was expected that most of the effect of the individual variables would be mediated. The individual variables, other than student demographic variables such as full-time status, graduate student status, and number of semesters attended, have been found in previous research to be directly related to perceived economic well-being. A model using path analysis was employed to show the strength of individual variables and the mediating

variables. Three regression analyses were run for both males and females. The first two for each gender used the eighteen information variables with comparison of economic outcomes and level of strain as the outcome measures. The third analysis for each gender used the 18 information variables and the two mediating variables, comparison of economic outcomes and level of strain, with perceived economic well-being as the outcome measure. By running separate analyses for male and female students, path analysis allows researchers to observe differences in importance of individual and mediating variables on perceived economic well-being.

Results

The results for female students will be reported first, followed by the results for male students. For each gender, the results of the regression for comparison of economic outcomes will be reported first, followed by the regression for level of strain and perceived economic well-being. Because of the unique nature of the data, we consider this an exploratory study, and report results at the $p < .10$ level of significance.

Female Students

Comparison of Economic Outcomes Five of the 18 information variables were significant in the regression of comparison of economic outcomes for female students: age, full- or part-time student status, number of semesters spent working on their current degree, the money attitude of inadequacy, and how often they wanted something but there was not enough money (Table 1). When examining the objective information variables, female students who had more positive comparison of economic outcomes were younger, full-time students who had been in school for a while. For the perceptual information variables, female students who had more positive comparison of economic outcomes did not spend much time worrying about money and had money most of the time for the things they wanted.

Level of Financial Strain Three information variables were significant in the regression of level of financial strain for female students: undergraduate or graduate student status, the money attitude of inadequacy, and how often they wanted something but there was not enough money (Table 1). When examining the individual objective variables, female students who scored high on the level of financial strain were undergraduates. For the perceptual information variables, female students who scored high on the level of financial strain worried a lot about money and often did not have enough money for

the things they wanted.

Table 1
Path Analysis Results for Female Students

	Comparison of Economic Outcomes (n=185)	Level of Financial Strain (n=180)	Perceived Economic Well-Being (n=178)
Objective Information			
Age	-0.08*	0.02	-0.09
# of years married	0.02	0.01	0.17*
Full-time student	-1.62‡	-0.22	0.44
Graduate student	-0.09	-0.51†	-0.81
# of semesters attended	0.16†	0.01	0.01
Total 1996 income	0.07	0.01	0.03
# of credit cards	0.04	-0.01	-0.07
# of credit cards with maximum balance	-0.18	0.04	-1.11‡
Perceptual Information			
Credit attitudes			
Affective	-0.02	-0.01	0.18†
Behavior	0.08	0.01	-0.14
Cognitive	0.02	0.03	0.02
Money attitudes			
Obsession	0.01	-0.01	-0.05
Effort/ability	-0.05	-0.05	-0.16
Inadequacy	0.19‡	-0.07‡	0.57‡
Security	-0.04	-0.01	0.21
Retention	-0.02	0.02	-0.01
Money issues			
Parents argue about money	-0.28	0.03	0.76†
Not enough money for wants	-0.61‡	0.27‡	-1.23‡
Mediators			
Comparison of economic outcomes	n/a	n/a	0.47‡
Level of financial strain	n/a	n/a	-0.56†
Intercept	14.06‡	1.69	2.67
F	5.46‡	3.78‡	17.78‡
degrees of freedom	(18,167)	(18,162)	(20,158)
R ²	0.37	0.30	0.69

*P<0.10 †P<0.05 ‡P<0.01

n/a= variable was not used as a mediating variable in this analysis.

Perceived Economic Well-being Six information variables (length of time married, number of credit cards with maximum balance, the affective credit attitude, the inadequacy money attitude, how often their parents argued about money, and how often they wanted

something but there was not enough money) and both mediators (comparison of economic outcomes and level of financial strain) were significant predictors of perceived economic well-being (Table 1). Only two variables, the inadequacy money attitude and how often they wanted something but there was not enough money, had significant direct paths to perceived economic well-being and also to the mediating variables. When looking at the individual objective variables, female students who scored high on perceived economic well-being were married longer and had fewer credit cards with a maximum balance. When looking at the perceptual information variables, female students who scored high on perceived economic well-being scored high on the affective credit attitude, had parents who argued about money, and had the money for most of the things they wanted. When looking at the mediating variables, female students who scored high on perceived economic well-being had favorable comparisons of economic outcomes and low levels of strain.

Male Students

Comparison of Economic Outcomes Two of the 18 information variables were significant in the regression of comparison of economic outcomes for male students: income and the money attitude of inadequacy (Table 2). When looking at the objective information variables, male students who had more positive comparison of economic outcomes had higher incomes. For the perceptual information variables, male students who had more positive comparison of economic outcomes did not spend much time worrying about money.

Level of Financial Strain Only three information variables were significant in the regression of level of financial strain for male students: how often they wanted something but there was not enough money and the money attitudes of inadequacy and security (Table 2). For these perceptual information variables, male students who scored high on the level of financial strain had difficulty making money decisions, worried a lot about money, and often did not have enough money for the things they wanted.

Perceived Economic Well-being Seven information variables (age; length of time married; income; the money attitudes of inadequacy, security, and effort/ability; and how often they ever wanted something but there was not enough money) and both mediators (comparison of economic outcomes and level of financial strain) were significant predictors of perceived economic well-being (Table 2). Several variables had significant

direct paths to perceived economic well-being and the mediators: income, the money attitudes of inadequacy and security, and how often they ever wanted something but there was not enough money. This indicates that the mediators did not work as well for male students as they did for female students. Considering the objective information variables, male students who scored high on perceived economic well-being were younger, married longer, and had higher incomes. Regarding the perceptual information variables, male students who scored high on perceived economic well-being did not spend much time worrying about money, did not like to make difficult money decisions, felt they deserved the income they received, and had money for most of the things they wanted. For the mediating variables, male students who scored high on perceived economic well-being had favorable comparisons of economic outcomes and had low levels of financial strain.

Discussion and Implications

Limitations

Caution must be used when interpreting and generalizing these results. The sample used in this study consisted of college students, the majority of whom were unmarried and under age 25. In addition, the sample represents a 17% response rate, and it is not known how those students who responded differ from those who did not. However, no other study has explored these issues in such depth among college students, so these results are worthy of note. There may be several reasons for this low response rate. The primary reason may have been the sensitive nature of the data being collected. In addition, students move and do not always send change of address forms to the Registrar's office. A few students e-mailed the researchers with comments stating either that they did not have the time to complete the survey or that they felt they were inappropriate subjects since they were international students. Because the surveys were completely anonymous and not numbered until returned, the researchers had no way of knowing which students did not return surveys. Due to the sensitive nature of the data, human subjects approval was based on complete anonymity of the students. Therefore, students could not be given surveys in class nor given any inducement such as extra credit, cash, or gift to complete the surveys, which might have resulted in a higher response rate.

Discussion

To address the discussion and implications of this study, it helps to note that there were both similarities and differences between college men and women in this sample. Both report a concern with income inadequacy

that negatively affects their comparison of economic outcomes, positively affects their level of financial strain, and negatively affects their perceived economic well-being. This feeling of inadequacy appears to affect both college men's and women's comparison of economic outcomes negatively, affects their level of financial strain positively, and affects their perceived economic well-being negatively.

*P<0.10 †P<0.05 ‡P<0.01

n/a= variable was not used as a mediating variable in this analysis.

Table 2
Path Analysis Results for Male Students

	Comparison of Economic Outcomes (n=137)	Level of Financial Strain (n=138)	Perceived Economic Well-Being (n=134)
Objective Information			
Age	-0.05	-0.01	-0.28‡
# of years married	-0.04	0.03	0.25‡
Full-time student	-0.57	0.12	0.70
Graduate student	0.74	-0.04	1.50
# of semesters attended	0.05	0.04	-0.07
Total 1996 income	0.10†	0.03	0.15*
# of credit cards	0.07	0.04	-0.10
# of credit cards with maximum balance	-0.30	-0.01	-0.69
Perceptual Information			
Credit attitudes			
Affective	0.01	0.01	0.08
Behavior	0.06	-0.02	-0.16
Cognitive	0.01	0.01	-0.03
Money attitudes			
Obsession	0.02	0.01	0.05
Effort/ability	0.15	0.01	-0.27*
Inadequacy	0.27‡	-0.05†	0.40‡
Security	0.01	-0.07†	-0.31†
Retention	0.12	0.01	0.11
Money issues			
Parents argue about money	-0.01	0.05	-0.22
Not enough money for wants	-0.34	0.23†	-1.81‡
Mediators			
Comparison of economic outcomes	n/a	n/a	0.59‡
Level of financial strain	n/a	n/a	-0.53*
Intercept	8.14‡	1.74	14.46‡
F	3.69‡	1.68†	9.59‡
degrees of freedom	(18,119)	(18,120)	(20,114)
R ²	0.36	0.20	0.63

Another commonality between college women and men is their report that comparison of economic outcomes and level of financial strain affect their perceived economic well-being. These findings have been supported for years as evidenced in the literature review, but it is important to know that both college men and women report this relationship.

In addition to the similarities between college men and women, there are several informative differences. In comparison of economic outcomes, women show many more significant and different relationships between variables than do men. Women are less likely to compare their outcomes favorably with age, but more likely to compare outcomes favorably with full-time student status and number of semesters toward degree. Men report no such significant relationships. Women may assess more positively their chances of getting a well-paying job with full-time status and as graduation nears. The negative relationship between age and comparison of outcomes may not make sense in light of earlier studies. However, it is important to note that this is a student sample, and female students attending school at an older age may be nontraditional students returning to school after a divorce, death of a spouse, unemployment, or other event negatively affecting family income.

As for relationships between perceptual information variables and level of financial strain, college men and women both report similar results in that worries of financial inadequacy and not having enough money for wants both affect level of financial strain. An exception is that the men report concerns with economic security, while women report that they feel a significant level of financial strain as undergraduates. The Double ABCX model of stress indicates that an accumulation of stress results in additional stressors being perceived as unmanageable (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). By this reasoning, it may be that women report more stress in other areas of their lives, such as academics, than do men, and that this additional stress spills over into stress about finances.

Many of the relationships between the mediators, information variables, and perceived economic well-being are similar between college women and men. Both college men and women report that feeling there was not enough money to buy something and level of

financial strain negatively affect perceived economic well-being. They report that number of years married and comparison of outcomes positively affect perceived economic well-being. Beyond these similarities, however, there are many differences. College women report negative effects of credit cards at maximum balance on their perceived economic well-being, and a positive relationship between feelings about using credit (affective credit attitude variable) and perceived economic well-being. College men report a positive relationship of time married and security to perceived economic well-being, and a negative relationship of both effort and ability and age to perceived economic well-being.

There is an interesting, but seemingly contradictory, set of findings about perceptual information effects on college men's perceived economic well-being. While college men who reported greater perceived economic well-being did not like to make difficult decisions, this same low security was related to higher levels of stress, which in itself reduces perceived economic well-being. One reason for this may be that college men with higher perceived economic well-being and low security did not care about their exact financial position, thus reducing its potential to generate stress. However, further research is needed to explore this possibility.

Another interesting finding is that college women who reported high perceived economic well-being had parents who argued about money. It is possible that college women's experience of parental arguments about money resulted in their putting much higher priority on money management, and that this resulted in the higher perceived economic well-being.

The differences between college men and women in influences on perceived economic well-being may be due to gender role socialization. The significance of men's perception of "deserving" a high income (effort/ability) may reflect traditional male socialization toward the provider role and high income as a measure of success. On the other hand, some differences may represent gender differences in financial opportunity. The negative relationship between number of credit cards at the maximum limit and perceived economic well-being for college women and not for college men may reflect women's inability to meet financial expenses, forcing them to carry higher debt loads. Summary statistics of the sample show that women had more credit cards and more cards at the maximum balance (Appendix). Women in the sample also were more likely to have experienced financial difficulty in the form of loss of income in 1996,

the previous year (Appendix). As women do report a higher likelihood of income loss, it is important to determine what factors contribute to this gender difference.

It is clear from the results, however, that college women and men do not perceive influences on economic well-being similarly and that models of perceived economic well-being may differ by gender. This is an important implication to financial counselors and planners, who will see both individuals and couples of this age group in their office. Understanding the influences on economic well-being that are unique to gender will help the practitioner tailor advice and planning to the differing needs of male and female college students. Helping clients develop budgeting skills should be effective in increasing perceived economic well-being of both genders by reducing level of economic strain. On the other hand, college women's economic status may be improved through early intervention programs on prudent credit card use. This would, in turn, not only decrease credit card overuse but also increase perceived economic well-being. For men, increasing their feelings of financial security through helping them develop information search and decision-making skills will increase comfort with decision-making and thus increase their perceptions of economic well-being.

It also will help counselors understand potential conflicts of husbands and wives in their financial values and goals. If college women and men differ in the perceptual factors that affect perceived economic well-being, then there is a good possibility that partners will interpret the same objective information about their finances differently. This is likely to lead to fights about finances. Understanding their differences in perception may allow financial counselors to better mediate spousal arguments and help partners understand each others' values and perceptions about their financial situation.

More research is needed to develop greater understanding on this important aspect of perceived economic well-being. As women do report a higher likelihood of economic adversity, it is important to determine what factors contribute to this gender difference. It also is important to study economic adversity's role in affecting perceived economic well-being and to determine if economic adversity, rather than differences in gender values, is the underlying factor affecting perceptions of economic well-being.

Finally, this study should be replicated with a larger

number of college student respondents. Precautions need to be taken to ensure a higher response rate, given the sensitive nature of the data. A follow-up mailing of a second questionnaire may improve the response rate of a study. An unnumbered card could be included to be returned with the survey to be used in a drawing for incentive prizes.

Another interesting replication could involve a non-college population of young adults. This would allow researchers to understand whether age or college attendance make a difference in the generalizability of the results.

Appendix

Sample Description

N=488:208 males, 272 females, 8 did not answer gender.

Age: mean=22.6, minimum=18, maximum=52.

Marital status: 77.8% never married, 14.0% currently married, 5.9% cohabiting, 2.9% not currently married.

Number of credit cards, overall and by gender

	none	1-3 cards	4 or more
All	100 (20.7%)	239(49.4%)	145 (30.0%)
Males	60 (29.4%)	94 (46.1%)	50 (24.5%)
Females	37 (13.6%)	141 (51.8%)	94 (34.6%)

Ethnicity: 389 White non-Hispanic, 52 Asian/Pacific Islander, 17 African-American, 9 Hispanic, 21 Other.

Student status: 448 full-time, 36 part-time.

Undergraduate/graduate: 397 undergraduate, 88 graduate

Resident of state where university located: 356 resident, 129 not.

College in university: 23 in Human Ecology or similar, 65 in Business, 397 in other.

Employment: 364 employed, 109 not employed.

Experienced loss of income in 1996: Females = 29% Males 19%

Variable Coding

Full-time student: 1=part-time, 2=full-time.

Student status: 1=undergraduate, 2=graduate.

Total 1996 Income level:

1 = Less than \$1,0002 = \$1,000 - \$1,9993 = \$2,000 - \$2,999

4 = \$3,000 - \$3,9995 = \$4,000 - \$4,9996 = \$5,000 - \$5,999

7 = \$6,000 - \$8,999 8 = \$9,000 - \$11,999

9 = \$12,000 - \$14,99910 = \$15,000 - \$19,999

11 = \$20,000 - \$29,00012 = \$30,000 - \$39,000

14 = \$50,000 - \$59,99915 = \$60,000 and over

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