

Social Networks of University Students with a Mental Illness

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Background

Befriending someone with a mental illness is not seen as ideal in our society, yet **12-18% of students on college campuses in the United States have a diagnosable mental illness** (Cleary, et al., 2011). Friendship creates *companionship, intimacy, and support decreasing the risk factors for M.I.* (Demir & Davidson, 2013). Friendship can decrease patient delay (Pedersen & et al., 2011) and is a positive component of the recovery process (Pernice-Duca, 2010). **Friendship and positive mental health or happiness has a strong correlation**

(Forrester-Jones & et al., 2012). This research wished to look further into social networks of students with mental illness.



Research Questions

- Within the social networks of people with mental illness who do they go to for support?
- How do people with mental illness feel supported?
- Do people with or friends of people with mental illness feel that the illness affects the friendship?

Methods

Online Survey and In-Person Interview Questions



Demographics
M. I. Diagnoses
Interests/Activities
Relationships for Support
Friends:
Support Interpretation, Interests,
Demographics, M.I. Status

Data Collection

Online Survey

- Snowballing Effect starting with individuals with a known diagnosed M.I. to researcher
 - Included individuals with: ADD, ADHD, Depression, OCD, Anxiety, Eating Disorder
- Emailed (27 started, 11 completed)

In-Person Interviews

- Snowballing Effect (like above)
 - Included individuals with: , Anxiety, Depression, ADD, OCD
- 5 Friendships, 10 individuals (9 females, 1 male)

Evaluation

- Coded to evaluate similarity in friendship, positive friendship qualities, likelihood of sharing illness with others, & perceived affect of mental illness on friendship
- Social networks created, Linear Regression

Results

Friendships Provided Support

- Reciprocity – Being able to be a friend back
 - “I’m there for them when they need me and vice versa.”
- Seeking Professional M.I. Help
- Time Spent Together
 - “...She makes time for me.”
- Social Support and Acceptance
 - “She loves me for me.”
- Symptom Talk – Discuss symptoms over actual M.I.

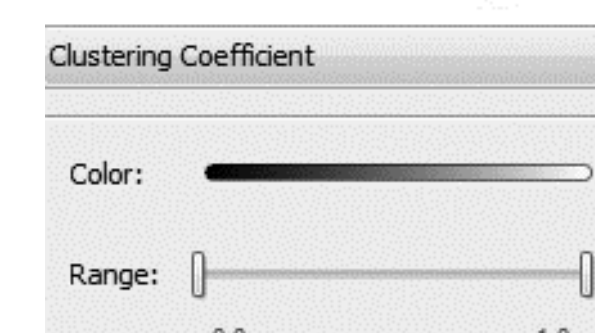
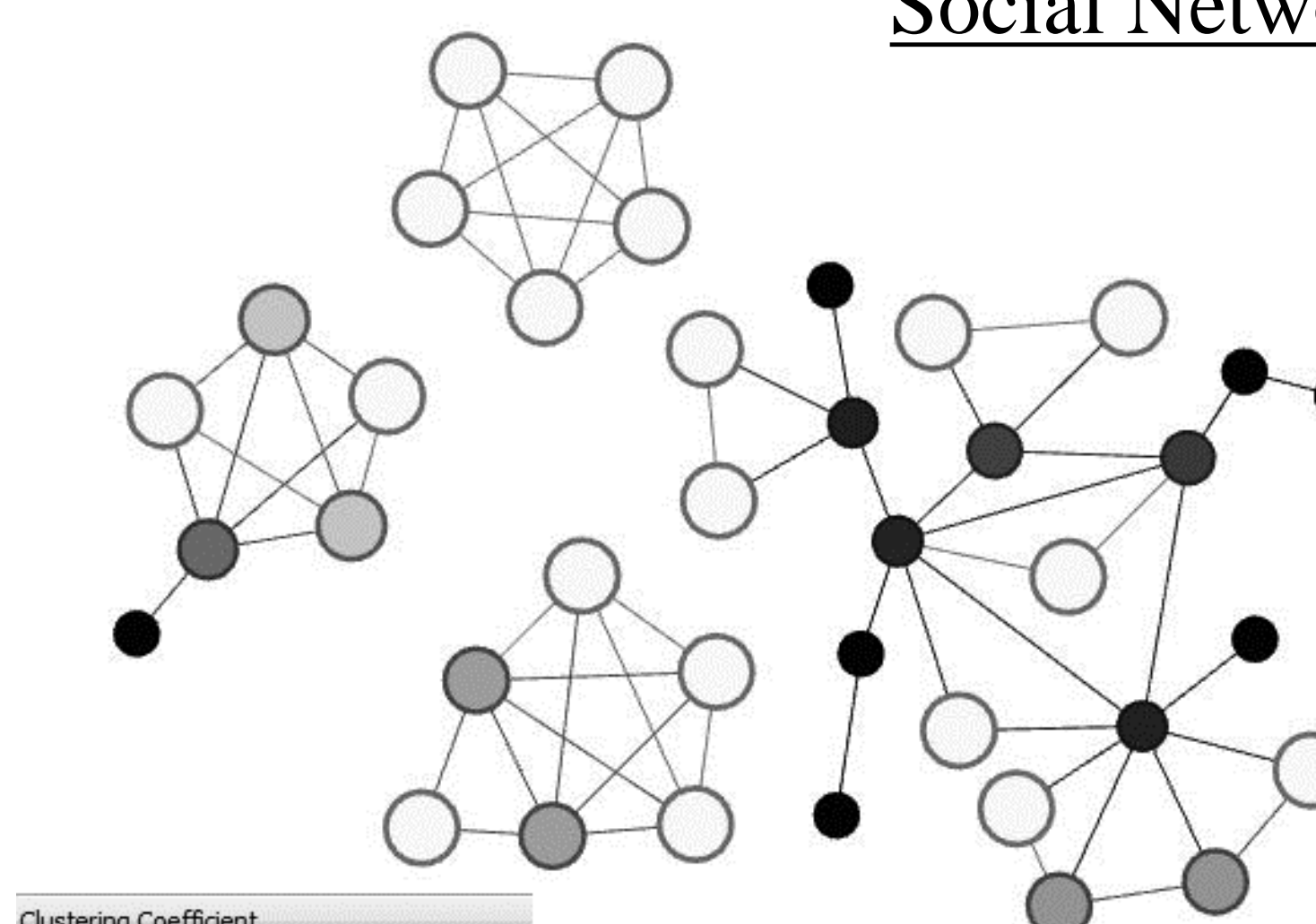
Survey Responses to: How does your most supportive person in your life show support in life and with your M.I.

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Encouragement to receive mental health help from a professional	6	55%
2	Answering messages/calls when needed on short notice	4	36%
3	Not knowing about or discussing your mental illness	1	9%
4	Spending regular amounts of time together	7	64%
5	Helping with chores, homework, other activities	2	18%
6	They tell you what is troubling themselves	6	55%
7	Never mentioning your illness, even though they know about it	3	27%
8	Other	1	9%
9	Other	1	9%

Connectedness of Friends In Social Networks

- Compared to individuals with no M.I., participants with a M.I. had less people in social networks connected to one another

Social Network of Connectedness of Friends in Survey Results



	B	Significance
Mental Illness (1)	-.408	.013*
Age (2)	-.058	.315
Gender (3)	-.281	.057
R Square =	.187	

1: Reference group: No mental illness or mental illness of friend is unknown, controlling for age and gender
2: Not significant, Controlling for mental illness and gender
3: Not significant, Controlling for mental illness and age
*p<.05, Linear Regression
Source: Brandy Kopa – Social Network of Mental Illness at UW-Stout

- Less triadic connections
- ^ Levels of white = ^ CC
- R Square = .187, 18.7% of variation in DV can be explained by IV's, significant at 0.1 alpha levels

Perceived Influence of M.I. On Friendships

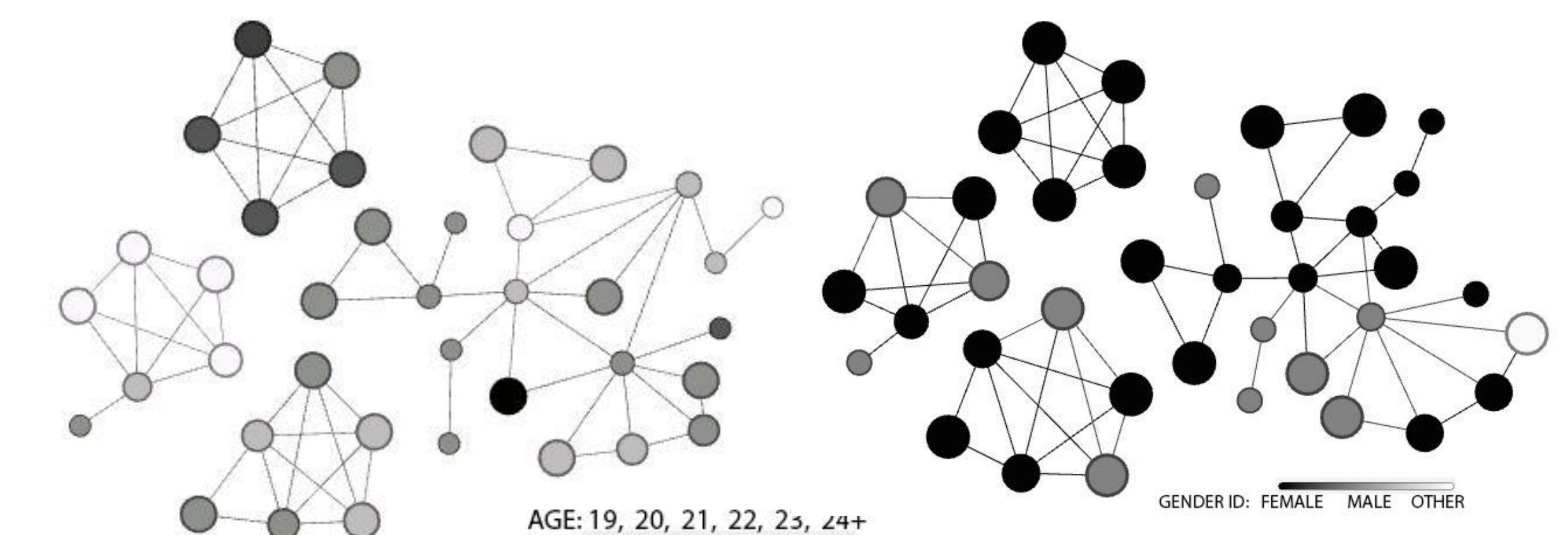
Illness not seen as significant factor in friendship for any of the friendships in this study.

- Moodiness is natural, may increase with medication
- Some never knew of/forgot the illness
- M.I. to M.I. conversations found to be easier
- Symptoms seen as positive:

“Now that I know what it is, he has described his symptoms to me. I am shocked that some people may see it as an illness. I always was actually inspired by his drive that may be part of his ‘illness.’ I love him for him. I don’t think he is controlled by his illness. It doesn’t define him or our friendship. He’s just himself and he’s great.”

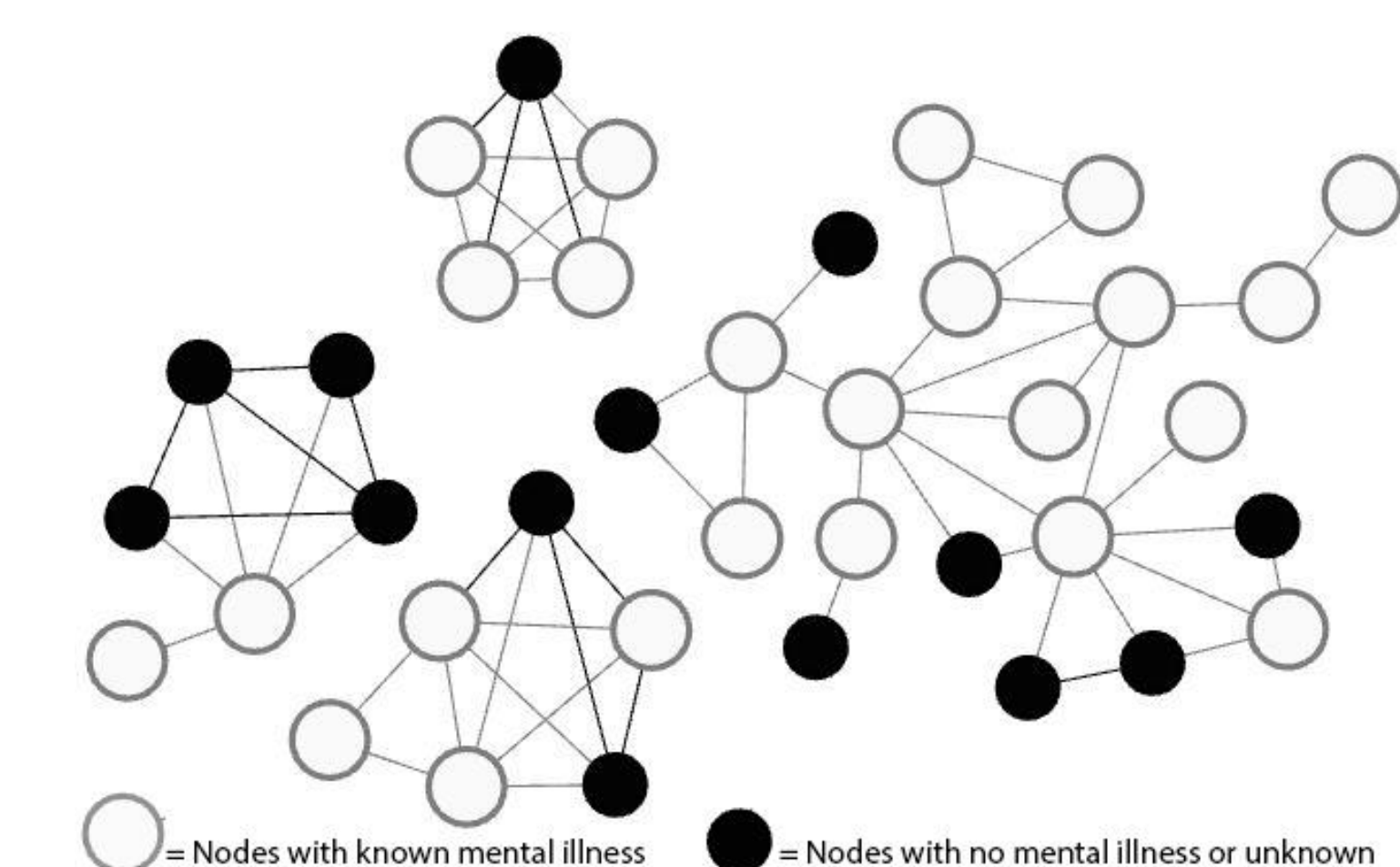
Similarity Within Friendships

- Interests
 - “He loves NPR. I love NPR. We just liked outdoor activities and hanging out so we started doing those kinds of things together and still do.”
- Values
 - “We share the same values, morals, and beliefs. It’s important for us to not judge others and just be accepting.”
- Age / Gender
 - Tended to be of similar ages and genders depending on the survey taker
 - Significant others were often the outlier



- M.I. within Friendships of Survey Takers

- Survey takers tended to have connections with others who also had a known M.I.



Discussion

Friendships were created based on:

- Similarity
- Provided Support: *Time spent, reciprocity, encourage professional assistance, acceptance*

Individuals in this study with a M.I. had lower connectedness within social networks.

M.I. in friendships was not perceived as negative.

Regardless of a M.I. or no M.I., in this study, friendships are a voluntary tie involving affection, companionship, trust, and reciprocity with people that simply enjoy and accept each other.