



Working from Behind: First-Year Dorm Residents' Self-Reported Depression During the Transition to College

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BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

- Emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 27) carries the possibility for individual change, and a number of significant and potentially stressful transitions.
- Literature suggests that 9.1% of adolescents (prior to entering college) suffer from a major depressive episode.
- Multiple protective factors have been suggested to help mitigate stress during transitions including warm and supportive relationships with parents and friends, and individual coping strategies.
- This means, educators, mental health workers, administrators, and dorm leadership most work from behind in addressing at-risk students' mental health needs.

We explored:

- Q1** – How self-reported symptoms of depression prior to the college transition predict social network integration within the dorms after one academic quarter (3 months).
- Q2** – How protective factors (e.g., coping strategies, family support, reciprocated friendships) buffer students against continuing symptoms of depression during their first academic quarter.

METHOD

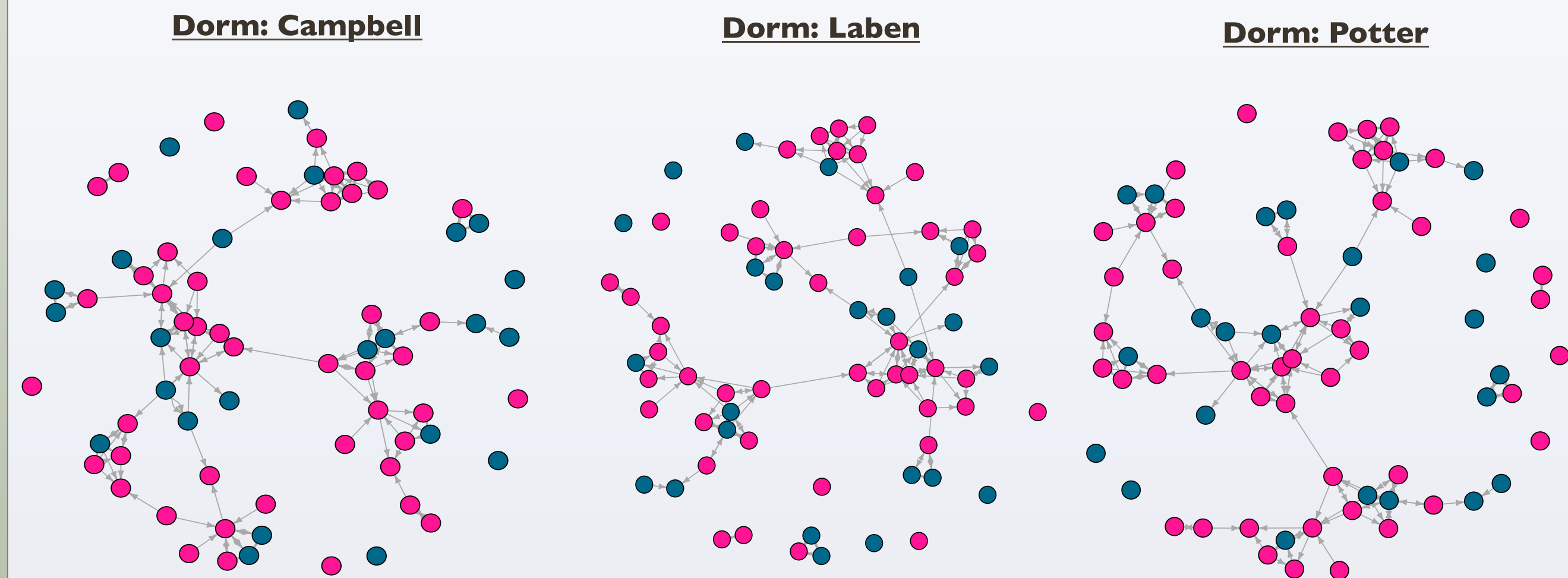
Participants

- Sample:** ($N = 1369$) incoming first-year dorm resident college students completed Survey 1 at the beginning of the academic year ($T1$).
- Subsample:** ($N = 269$) students across three dorms completed Survey 2, approximately 3 months later ($T2$).

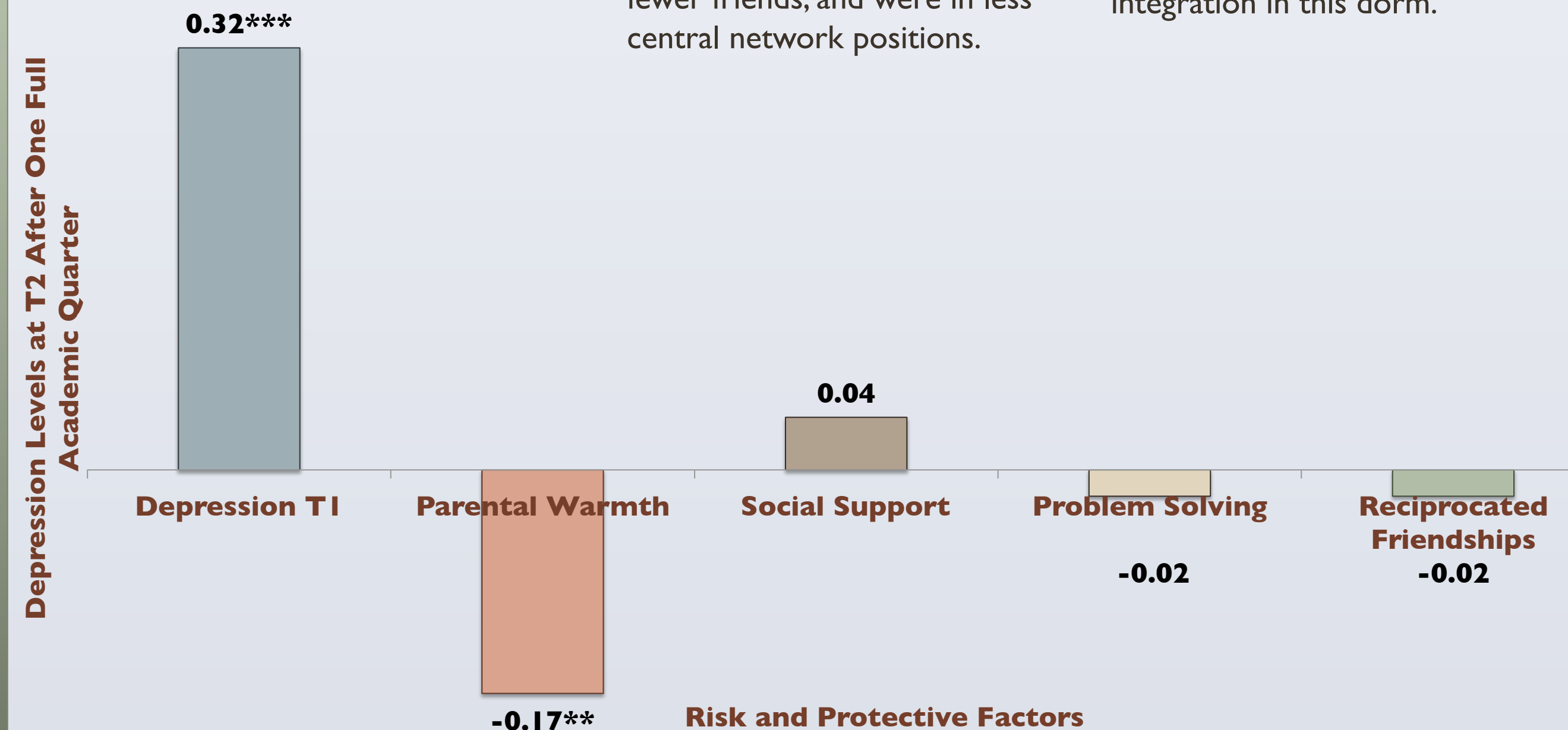
Measures

- Depression:** Students completed a 20-item depression symptom scale (e.g., "I felt sad today") [$\alpha = .85$].
- Parental warmth/support:** 5-items tapping mothers' and fathers' level of warm nurturing or demanding inflexible support.
- Coping:** Students' completed a 38-item measure indicating how they typically respond when problems arise, four sub-scales were extracted:
 - Social Support:** "get help from a friend" [$\alpha = .91$]
 - Problem Solving:** "try and think of different solutions to my problem" [$\alpha = .74$]
- Friend Network:** Students' nominated 20 close friends within their dorm, indicating their very best friend
 - Friendships were considered *reciprocal* if the student and his/her nominee both nominated each other as friends

DORM SOCIAL NETWORKS



- Initial self-reported symptoms of depression had no effect on social network integration in this dorm.
- Students with higher self-reported symptoms of depression prior to college, had fewer friends, and were in less central network positions.
- Initial self-reported symptoms of depression had marginally negative effects on social network integration in this dorm.



- There were no gender differences in reported levels of depression at $T1$ or $T2$ in these dorms.
- Students who report high levels of depression at $T1$ during the transition to college are associated with a 0.32 increase in self-reported symptoms of depression after their first academic quarter.
- Neither a students' typical coping response nor number of within-dorm reciprocated friendships affected depression during the first quarter.
- Students who report having warm and supportive parents have a 0.17 decrease in self-reported symptoms of depression after their first academic quarter.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Acknowledge**
 - Prevalence and early consequences of incoming students' depressive symptoms.
- Understand**
 - Social and behavioral buffers that can protect students as they transition into dorm life
- Consider**
 - How these findings might be integrated into roommate assignments as well as dorm composition for at-risk students

DISCUSSION

- Q1** – The stress of the college transition is undoubtedly felt by all. But, those students experiencing numerous symptoms of depression prior to campus emersion may face a *unique* risk of becoming isolated from new sources of social support (i.e., friends and dorm connections).
- However, this risk may be moderated by the composition of the dorm. We plan to test the associations between dorm composition (e.g., gender ratio,) and depressive symptoms.
- Q2** – Warm and supportive parents may aid students with successful transitions by helping alleviate symptoms of depression during the first academic quarter.
- We are continuing data collection this upcoming academic year with an emphasis on exploring how early experiences of ethnically diverse contexts influences identity and multicultural attitudes.

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