Intergroup relationships with people who use drugs: A personal network approach

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\section*{ABSTRACT}

Positive and meaningful intergroup contact between people who use drugs and those with the potential to provide positive social interactions has been identified as an important pathway to address the burden of drug use by reducing stigmatizing views and behaviors. Traditional approaches to intergroup contact typically rely on laboratory experiments or survey vignettes to examine the consequences of variation in contact conditions and relationships. Although seldom measured, contact occurs naturally through individuals’ personal social networks. Here, we apply this latter approach to examine how the characteristics of drug use and social roles are associated with positive and meaningful intergroup contact in daily life. We leverage unique data from a state representative sample of Indiana residents aged 18 or older (n = 926) that completed a personal network interview and separately reported people they know who have a drug use problem. We first identified the respondents who nominated a person who uses drugs as a member of their core personal network and then evaluated the relationship, disease, and individual characteristics that were associated with that person’s inclusion in the personal network. We find that primary relationships (e.g., having a spouse or child who uses drugs) are associated with meaningful contact with people who use drugs but that intense manifestations of disease characteristics (severe or problematic, danger to self) can limit the likelihood of contact. These findings demonstrate how the nature of intergroup contact can shape the types of relationships that have been shown to help reduce stigmatizing attitudes and the behavioral barriers to recovery, such as social isolation. Thus, core networks present a valuable approach to defining the factors that likely contribute to effective intergroup contact.

\section*{1. Introduction}

Drug overdose mortality has significantly increased in the United States in recent years. More than 100,000 deaths were reported between April 2020 to April 2021 (Ahmad et al., 2021). Stigma and social isolation represent significant barriers to addressing the drug crisis by preventing people with substance use disorders from seeking treatment and recovery services (Ahern et al., 2007; Corrigan et al., 2017; Cranpanzano et al., 2018; Hammarlund et al., 2018; Young et al., 2005). Promoting positive social (intergroup) contact with people who use drugs (PWUD) can help prevent the social isolation that promotes drug-taking (Zoorob and Salemi, 2017), motivate recovery (Timpson et al., 2016), and may be an effective way to reduce stigma towards substance dependence (Kennedy-HendricksBarry et al., 2017). However, despite the known benefits of positive social contact, considerably less research addresses the factors contributing to the establishment of such relationships (Manago and Krendl, 2022).

Whether two individuals will share a relationship that challenges stigmatizing views and promotes positive contact behaviors is likely influenced by the characteristics of the disease (e.g., severe or problematic nature, dangerousness to self or others) and the type of social roles connecting ingroup and outgroup member (e.g., family, friend, neighbor) (Corrigan and Nieweglowski, 2019; Perry et al., 2020; Pescosolido and Martin, 2015). Compared to other stigmatized conditions,
non-medical drug use is viewed as dangerous and unmanageable, which
drives elevated desires for social distance and the overall marginaliza-
tion of PWUD (Perry et al., 2020). Social isolation of PWUD can similarly
occur to mitigate negative intergroup interactions that stem from
heightened drug use (Bowles et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2014).
Conversely, the intensity of the disease characteristics in the relation-
ship may change when individuals are socially, emotionally, or
economically obligated to maintain contact, such as connections to an
outgroup member through a kinship tie (e.g., immediate family mem-
ber) (Caetano et al., 2017; Corrigan and Niewegiowski, 2019). Kinship
ties can increase the durability of relationships with stigmatized indi-
viduals (Perry, 2011) but also come with additional responsibilities to
uphold the relationship (Fingerman et al., 2004), which may translate
into more exposure to negative experiences and the desires to distance
oneself from the stigmatized individual (Jorm and Oh, 2009; Mittal
et al., 2014). Understanding how the disease characteristics and social
roles surrounding non-medical drug use contribute to meaningful
intergroup contact can help define how to promote positive relation-
ships with people who use drugs to potentially reduce stigmatizing
views and socially isolating behaviors that can disrupt recovery.

In the present study, we capture intergroup contact through a per-
sonal network approach by assessing the probability that respondents
identify people they know who use drugs as occupying central roles in
their core personal networks. Our approach focuses on intergroup con-
tact with PWUD that extends beyond superficial, infrequent interactions
to include positive, meaningful, and sustained relationships to align
with recent research on improving the effectiveness of intergroup con-
tact to reduce stigma (Perry et al., 2022; Pettigrew et al., 2011a). We
extend traditional approaches that elicit attitudes toward socializing
with a hypothetical PWUD by leveraging a unique survey where
meaningful intergroup contact is observed across a large sample. The
survey contains data on respondents’ core networks (i.e., a small group
of people with whom the respondent shares meaningful social ties) and a
separate roster of people whom the respondent shares a history of
non-medical drug use (i.e., person who uses drugs or ‘PWUD’ roster).
These data allow us to define the social context in which respondents
engage in intergroup relationships in their daily lives. We hypothesize
that social roles and drug use characteristics separately and jointly
interact to influence the probability of including a PWUD in one’s core
network. Our findings contribute to the understanding of social re-
lationships surrounding drug use, which are important to reduce stig-
matizing views and behaviors.

2. Personal network approach to intergroup contact

Intergroup contact theory posits that social contact between ingroup
and outgroup members provides opportunities to correct inaccurate
stereotypes and subsequently reduce stigma towards the outgroup
(Allport, 1954). Contemporary research caveats this assertion by noting
that beyond casual contact, positive contact (Pettigrew et al., 2011b;
Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006a) and relationships that foster intimate ex-
changes between parties are effective to counter the negative emotions
that can result in prejudice and discriminatory, socially isolating be-
haviors (Link et al., 1987; Perry et al., 2022; Pettigrew et al., 2011a;
Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006b). Building on this body of research, we
argue that meaningful social relationships—those characterizing per-
sonal social networks—serve as a platform for the type of intergroup
contact which has been theorized to reduce stigmatizing beliefs and
discrimination.

The personal network approach to studying social relationships
captures a respondent’s direct social connections and has the potential
to define the probability of contact with outgroup members. Personal
networks include the ties (i.e., relationships) between a focal individu-
al (i.e., ego) and a specified set of their immediate contacts (i.e., alters),
along with detailed information about each alter and relationship.
Although there are numerous ways to delineate a personal network
(Perry and Roth, 2021), network analysts often focus on a core group of
alters with whom ego shares a meaningful relationship or exchange (e.
ge., individuals with whom respondents “discuss important matters”)
(Burt, 1984; Fischer, 1982; Perry and Pescosolido, 2010). Core networks
consist of a relatively dense yet functionally broad group of people
composed mainly of immediate family and close friends (Marin, 2004;
Marsden, 1987; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Analyzing these types of
networks—and whether respondents name any PWUDs within their core
networks—allows us to determine the prevalence of intergroup relations-
ships.

The inclusion of a PWUD in one’s core network is contingent on two
factors: (1) whether ego knows a PWUD (and knows about their drug
use), and (2) whether the ego has a meaningful relationship with the
PWUD. An ego who has no previous interactions with or knowledge of a
PWUD would be unable to report their presence within their core
network even if they were open to having that individual in their
network. In this scenario, the lack of inclusion of a PWUD should not be
interpreted as social exclusion (i.e., desire for social distance) since there
were no PWUDs to exclude. Properly addressing this issue of opportu-
nity would therefore require the researcher to have data on ego’s core
network and a roster of PWUD who ego knows. Upon obtaining these
data, the researcher could assess whether the ego shares a meaningful
relationship with a PWUD given the opportunity in their daily lives. An
ego who knows a PWUD but does not include them in their core
network, meanwhile, can be interpreted as indirectly revealing their
desire for social distance.

Our proposed network approach follows a small body of intergroup
contact research that assesses people’s tendencies for social contact
through observed actions in everyday natural environments (Marmaros
and Sacerdote, 2006; Moody, 2001). This approach allows for the
assessment of revealed behavior while building generalizability through
a large, diverse sample. Most closely aligned with economic traditions of
revealed preferences, assessing people’s real-world choices has consid-
erable advantage when studying sensitive issues because it reduces hy-
pothetical biases, particularly from social desirability reporting
(Kahneman and Knetsch, 1992; Taylor and Brown, 1994), has strong
predictive validity (Whitehead, 2005), and closely aligns with people’s
potential behaviors and support for public policy (List and Gallet, 2001;
Murphy et al., 2005). Thus, capturing the real-world consequences of
interacting with an outgroup member accounts for the potential chal-
lenges of intergroup contact and reveals the conditions in which those
challenges may be overcome (Amir, 1969; Dixon et al., 2005).

3. Intergroup contact in the context of drug use

PWUD are often viewed significantly more negatively compared to
people with mental illnesses or other psychiatric disorders (Barry et al.,
2014; Link and Phelan, 1999). For example, people tend to believe that
PWUD are unable to manage their disease or lead productive lives (Perry
et al., 2020). As a result, PWUD disproportionately face social isolation
and marginalization (Day and Rosenthal, 2019; Zoorob and Salemi,
2017). Similar to other stigmatized conditions, the robust and wide-
spread bias associated with drug use can hinder the development of
social relationships and, ultimately, reduce one’s life chances (Ane-
hsen et al., 2013; Corrigan, 2004; Pescosolido et al., 1999; Pescosolido
and Martin, 2015). In what follows, we consider the social processes that
are likely to drive meaningful intergroup contact in the context of drug
use.

3.1. Social roles

The majority of the general population maintains close relationships
with multiple people (Fischer, 1982; Marsden, 1987; Perry et al., 2018).
These relationships are often classified according to well recognized
social roles (e.g., family member, friend, co-worker, neighbor), each of
which is governed by a distinct normative expectation. Family members
are socially and emotionally obligated to support each other, even in the presence of difficult behaviors (Offer and Fischer, 2018; Silverstein et al., 2006). Yet even within the family, there exists a hierarchy of support such that certain, primary relationships (e.g., spousal ties, parent-child ties) are considerably more intimate than others (e.g., extended kin) and therefore more likely to endure unpredictable, unconventional or otherwise negative behaviors (Cantor, 1979). Non-kin relationships, meanwhile, tend to be viewed as voluntary and are thus more likely to dissolve or weaken in the presence of difficult behaviors (Fischer and Offer, 2020). Given the normative expectations surrounding different social roles, we formulate our first hypothesis as it relates to intergroup relationships with PWUD:

**H1. Primary kinship ties (e.g., spouse, parent, child) will be more strongly associated with inclusion of PWUD in core networks compared to other types of ties.**

### 3.2. Disease characteristics

Although it is well established that the general public holds negative views towards drug use (Barry et al., 2014; Link and Phelan, 1999), there is further reason to expect considerable variation when it comes to the degree to which drug use influences intergroup relationships. More intense or heightened disease manifestations and how the disease manifests within social interactions may be met with less desire to establish meaningful relationships. This may occur due to the stigmatized individual’s inability to meet expectations for seeking treatment or achieving recovery (Parsons, 1951) or stem from uncertainty regarding the PWUD’s ability to uphold familial and work responsibilities (Pescosolido et al., 1999). Heightened perceptions of the disease characteristics may then appear to affirm widespread portrayal of PWUDs as dangerous or problematic, and, thus, deserving of punishment, blame, or social isolation (Kennedy-Hendricks et al., 2017; Link and Phelan, 1999; McGinty et al., 2016). Indeed, perceived dangerousness among network members with a mental illness inhibits positive interactions (Pullen et al., 2022) and can be tied to the desire for social distance (Perry et al., 2022). The strain of maintaining these types of relationships may further be detrimental to one’s own psychological health (Offer, 2020). Thus, considering how the disease characteristics (i.e., severity, problematic behavior, danger to others or self) manifest in meaningful intergroup contact may help define the extent to which drug use defies expectations for social exchange. We formalize this claim in our second hypothesis:

**H2. PWUDs with more intense disease characteristics will have a lower probability of being included in a respondent’s core network compared to PWUDs with less intense disease characteristics.**

### 3.3. Interaction of social roles and disease characteristics

As certain social relationships are more durable than others, it is worth considering how the type of social role that characterizes the intergroup relationship interacts with the characteristics of drug use. Whereas more peripheral social relationships (e.g., neighbors, coworkers, casual acquaintances) are likely to dissolve in the presence of a deviant behavior such as drug use, primary relationships are more likely to persist (Wellman, 2000). Yet there may exist a point where the problematic nature of the tie outweighs the benefits (Carpentier and Ducharme, 2005). Given the varying levels of obligation that accompany different social roles and the variation in the perception of drug use characteristics, we formulate our final hypothesis:

**H3. The association between social roles and the probability of including a PWUD in one’s core network will be modified by the disease characteristics.**

### 4. Methods and materials

Data for the analysis come from the Person-to-Person Health Interview Study (P2P), a state representative survey that contains data on the demographics, health, and health attitudes of Indiana residents. The P2P uses a stratified probability sample to the block level with household quota sampling on sex, age, and employment status to reduce not-at-home bias of households in Indiana with an oversample of economically depressed, rural counties. In our study, we use a sub-sample, which includes 1663 respondents who participated in face-to-face interviews from October 2018 to March 2020, with 90% of observations collected between January 2019 and February 2020. From this sample, we use only respondents who currently know someone who uses drugs in a way not prescribed (n = 968). We apply a complete case analysis, using only the respondents who responded to all the questions in the analysis, to limit the final sample to 926 respondents.

The P2P elicits data on the respondents’ core personal networks and a separate roster of persons the respondent knows who use drugs. Respondents first completed the network module using questions adapted from the PhenX Networks Battery toolkit (PhenX Toolkit, 1991). Respondents were provided with four name generating prompts which asked about the people with whom they interacted over the past six months to: (1) discuss personal matters, (2) discuss health matters, (3) influence health behaviors, and (4) spend leisure time. There was no limit to the number of alters those respondents could name in response to any of the name generators. Alters were considered part of the core network if they were mentioned in at least one of the four generators.

After answering several other survey modules, respondents were asked to name up to five people they know who have a drug use problem (i.e., PWUD roster). For each person in the PWUD roster, the respondent reported their relationship to the PWUD, the severity of the drug use problem, whether the drug use ‘causes you problems, creates stress, or makes your life difficult’, and whether the PWUD was a ‘danger to self’ or ‘danger to others’. The inclusion of the PWUD roster occurred after several survey modules. See Table A1 for specific question used in the network module and PWUD roster (Supplementary Material).

#### 4.1. Dependent variable

Our unit of analysis is at the tie level (i.e., ego-alter relationship). The primary outcome is a dichotomous variable that indicates whether each PWUD was also mentioned in the respondent’s core network (1 = core, 0 = non-core). Fig. 1 shows a hypothetical example of a respondent’s PWUD roster and core network (1 = PWUD in core, 0 = PWUD in non-core). The P2P elicits data on the respondents’ core personal networks and a separate roster of persons the respondent knows who use drugs. Respondents first completed the network module using questions adapted from the PhenX Networks Battery toolkit (PhenX Toolkit, 1991). Respondents were provided with four name generating prompts which asked about the people with whom they interacted over the past six months to: (1) discuss personal matters, (2) discuss health matters, (3) influence health behaviors, and (4) spend leisure time. There was no limit to the number of alters those respondents could name in response to any of the name generators. Alters were considered part of the core network if they were mentioned in at least one of the four generators.

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![Fig. 1. Hypothetical example of a P2P respondent’s PWUD roster and core network.](image-url)
relationship type followed by matching the strength of the tie to verify the match. We include whether the ego is still in contact with the PWUD. It is worth noting that some respondents may be unaware that they knew a PWUD (e.g., one of their friends has a history of drug use without their knowledge). We argue that in such a scenario a respondent’s failure to mention the PWUD as part of their core network should not be taken as an indicator of desire for social distance because they would not be aware of the role that the alter’s drug use played in the first place.

4.2. Independent variables

Upon enumerating the PWUD roster, respondents were asked a series of name interpreting questions about the disease characteristics for each PWUD. Respondents first reported how much each PWUD’s drug use “causes you problems, creates stress or makes your life difficult” with responses ranging from 1 (not at all) to 10 (very much). Respondents were next asked about the severity of the drug problem and the dangerousness of the alter to others and self. These also ranged from 1 (not at all) to 10 (very much). See Figure A1 (Supplementary Materials) for visual distributions of these variables. Finally, we categorized the relationship between respondent and PWUD as either ‘spouse/partner,’ ‘child,’ ‘parent,’ ‘sibling,’ ‘relative’ (e.g., grandparent and other kin), ‘friend,’ or ‘non-kin’ (e.g., neighbor, coworker).

4.3. Covariates

At the respondent level, we include the following variables: age, gender (woman or man), race (white or non-white), education (less than college, some college, completed college), core network size, and proportion kin in core network. We adjust for self-reported personal experience with non-medical opioid, other illicit opioids, or heroin (‘have you ever used prescription opiates in a way that was not prescribed to you?’, ‘have you ever, even once, used heroin or other illicit opioids such as fentanyl or carfentanil?’) 1 = yes to either question, 0 = no.

4.4. Analytical approach

Our analysis examines the probability that respondents mention a PWUD in their core networks, given they first know and are in contact with a PWUD. Limiting the focus to only those who know a PWUD leverages the presence of any relationship with a stigmatized person to promote intergroup contact. This is achieved by estimating a series of multilevel models with fixed effects for the respondent characteristics and random intercepts for the characteristics of the relationship with the alter (Perry et al., 2018). Specifically, a random-intercept model is used with Level-1 alters nested inLevel-2 ego respondents where the random intercept applies to each ego and adjusts for the lack of independence between observations from the PWUD roster. Formally, the probability \( p \) of ego \( i \) mentioning a PWUD alter \( j \) in their core network is modeled as:

\[
\log \left( \frac{p_{ij}}{1 - p_{ij}} \right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1ij} + \beta_2 X_{2ij} + \epsilon_i
\]

where \( \epsilon_i \) represents the random component of the model while the other components are fixed. In this notation, \( X_{1ij} \) captures the hypothesized relationships of the social roles in the respondent-PWUD relationship (H1), the PWUD disease characteristics (H2), and the intralevel interaction terms between disease characteristics and relationship type (H3). The ego characteristics are captured in \( X_{1ij} \). Survey weights are included in each model estimation. The results are reported as marginal effects where continuous variables are interpreted as the average probability change in the outcome for a one-unit change in the independent variable and categorical variables are interpreted as a discrete change from the reference level.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive characteristics

The descriptive characteristics of the respondent (ego), alter’s drug use, and the relationship between respondent and alter appear in Table 1. The average age of the respondents who know a PWUD was around 50 years old, ranging from 19 to 95 years old. The majority of respondents were female (62%) and identified as White (83%) whereas a plurality of respondents held a college degree (40%). A minority of respondents who know a PWUD reported personal experience with non-medical drug use at least once in their lifetimes (18%). Bivariate comparisons of the average network size show that those who included a PWUD in their core network had larger networks (6.27 alters vs. 5.35 alters, \( p < 0.001 \)) and named a greater number of people in the PWUD roster (2.91 alters vs. 2.06 alters, \( p < 0.001 \)).

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of ego, alter and relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall n (%)</th>
<th>Non-core n (%)</th>
<th>Core n (%)</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ego characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age, m (sd)</td>
<td>49.6 (17.3)</td>
<td>49.9 (17.3)</td>
<td>48.2 (17.1)</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>346 (38.1)</td>
<td>293 (39.4)</td>
<td>53.0 (32.7)</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>756 (83.4)</td>
<td>623 (83.7)</td>
<td>133 (82.0)</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No college</td>
<td>314 (34.7)</td>
<td>252 (33.9)</td>
<td>62.0 (38.2)</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>226 (24.9)</td>
<td>185 (24.9)</td>
<td>41.0 (25.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>366 (40.4)</td>
<td>307 (41.3)</td>
<td>59.0 (36.4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal non-medical drug use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>165 (18.2)</td>
<td>121 (16.3)</td>
<td>44.0 (27.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core network size, m (sd)</td>
<td>5.51 (2.84)</td>
<td>5.35 (2.74)</td>
<td>6.27 (3.14)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of kin in network, m (sd)</td>
<td>0.62 (0.28)</td>
<td>0.61 (0.28)</td>
<td>0.66 (0.25)</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of PWUD alters, m (sd)</td>
<td>2.21 (1.37)</td>
<td>2.06 (1.29)</td>
<td>2.91 (1.49)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PWUD characteristics (n = 2079)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug disorder is severe (1–10), m (sd)</td>
<td>7.43 (3.01)</td>
<td>7.46 (2.97)</td>
<td>7.26 (3.13)</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug disorder is problematic (1–10), m (sd)</td>
<td>4.36 (3.52)</td>
<td>4.15 (3.46)</td>
<td>5.00 (3.64)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerous to others (1–10), m (sd)</td>
<td>3.98 (3.27)</td>
<td>4.01 (3.24)</td>
<td>3.91 (3.37)</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerous to self (1–10), m (sd)</td>
<td>5.77 (3.60)</td>
<td>5.83 (3.58)</td>
<td>5.59 (3.69)</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship characteristics (n = 2079)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse/partner</td>
<td>75.0 (3.75)</td>
<td>36.0 (2.35)</td>
<td>39.0 (8.28)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>112 (5.59)</td>
<td>61.0 (3.98)</td>
<td>51.0 (10.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>183 (9.14)</td>
<td>125 (8.16)</td>
<td>58.0 (12.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling</td>
<td>139 (6.94)</td>
<td>88 (5.75)</td>
<td>51.0 (10.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>503 (25.1)</td>
<td>414 (27.0)</td>
<td>89.0 (18.9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>659 (32.9)</td>
<td>528 (34.5)</td>
<td>131 (27.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-kin</td>
<td>331 (16.5)</td>
<td>279 (18.2)</td>
<td>52.0 (11.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Descriptive statistics of raw data. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. m = mean; sd = standard deviation.
The 926 respondents in our sample listed ties to a total of 2079 PWUD. On a scale of 1–10, across both core and non-core PWUD ties, substance use is ranked as relatively severe (mean = 7.26 and 7.46, p = 0.21). Problematic behavior was significantly worse for PWUD core ties compared to PWUD non-core ties (5.00 vs. 4.15, p < 0.001). Approximately half of the alters from the PWUD roster fulfill friendship or other non-kin roles. As shown in the bottom of Table 1, spouses or partners make up the smallest group of PWUD followed by children, parents, and then siblings. Relatives account for the remaining quarter of the relationships.

5.2. Multilevel regression models

Table 2 presents the marginal effects from the multilevel models assessing co-presence in one’s core network and PWUD roster. Respondents with larger core networks had a greater probability of including a PWUD in their core network compared to respondents with smaller networks. The probability of co-presence also differed depending on a respondent’s relationship to PWUD. As shown in Models 2 and 3, respondents were significantly less likely to include a PWUD in their network if the PWUD was their child, parent, sibling, relative, friend, or non-kin than if the PWUD was their spouse/partner. Fig. 2 plots the predicted probabilities of the PWUD in the core network by relationship type as estimated from Model 3. As shown in this figure, PWUD spouses/partners had a 0.46 probability of being in the core network (95% CI: 0.29, 0.63). Finally, Model 3 shows that none of the PWUD disease characteristics were independently associated with PWUD co-presence in the core network.

Fig. 3 plots the predicted probability of naming the PWUD in the core network based on the interaction between PWUD disease characteristics and relationship social roles. The figure showing the association between severity of disease (top-left panel) and PWUD co-presence in the core network indicates substantial variation across relationship type. Specifically, as the disease goes from ‘not’ severe (i.e., severity = 1) to ‘very’ severe (=10), the probability of a spouse/partner being in the core-network dramatically decreases. Respondents who had a PWUD spouse/partner with low severity (i.e., severity = 1) had a 0.91 (95% CI: 0.74, 1.07) probability of naming them in their core network whereas respondents who had a PWUD spouse/partner with high severity (i.e., severity = 10) had significantly lower probability of co-presence (0.27, 95% CI: 0.07, 0.47). A similar negative association between the PWUD disease characteristic and co-presence of the spouse/partner in the core network was also found across ‘causes me problems’ and ‘danger to self,’ but not ‘danger to others.’ In contrast, there were no detectable associations between the PWUD disease characteristics and co-presence in the core-network among any of the other social roles. The probability of including a non-spouse PWUD in one’s core network is relatively low regardless of the disease characteristics. See Table A2 in the Supplementary Material for corresponding models with the interaction terms shown in Fig. 3.

5.3. Sensitivity analyses

The underlying assumption motivating this study was that respondents shared a meaningful relationship with the alters named in the core network—an assumption that is supported by previous research on these types of networks (Marsden, 1987; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Yet it is possible that respondents are not equally close with all members of their core network (Small, 2013). To test this, we first compared the mean values of emotional closeness and frequency of contact (each measured as continuous variables from 1 to 10) for core PWUD against non-core PWUD (see Table A3 in Supplementary Material). Respondents were emotionally closer to the core PWUDs than non-core PWUDs (7.83 vs. 6.07, p < 0.001) and interacted with the former group more often than the latter group (7.50 vs. 5.31, p < 0.001). Second, we re-estimated the multilevel logistic regression models from the main analysis, this time including emotional closeness and frequency of contact as predictor variables (see Table A4 in supplementary material). Important for our study, the key findings from the main analysis (e.g., interaction terms between relationship type and disease characteristics) held consistent in these latter supplementary models.

An inherent challenge with the network approach is dealing with respondents who failed to name any network members. Although the majority of respondents (n = 926) in our sample knew at least one PWUD, we had to omit 737 respondents from the analysis because they had no known contact with a PWUD and thus could not include them in Table 2 Multilevel logit model of the marginal effects of PWUD co-presence in the core network.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ME</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>ME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LEVEL 2 (n = 926)</strong></td>
<td><strong>LEVEL 2 (n = 926)</strong></td>
<td><strong>LEVEL 2 (n = 926)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respondent characteristics</strong></td>
<td><strong>Respondent characteristics</strong></td>
<td><strong>Respondent characteristics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White</strong></td>
<td>0.01 (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education (ref: No college)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Education (ref: No college)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Education (ref: No college)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Some college</strong></td>
<td>0.04 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.03 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College degree</strong></td>
<td>0.03 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drug misuse</strong></td>
<td>0.06 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.03 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**<strong>Core network characteristics</strong></td>
<td><strong>Core network characteristics</strong></td>
<td><strong>Core network characteristics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Size</strong></td>
<td>0.01** (0.03)</td>
<td>0.01*** (0.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prop Kin</strong></td>
<td>0.03 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LEVEL 1 (n = 2079)</strong></td>
<td><strong>LEVEL 1 (n = 2079)</strong></td>
<td><strong>LEVEL 1 (n = 2079)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship characteristics</strong></td>
<td><strong>Relationship characteristics</strong></td>
<td><strong>Relationship characteristics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spouse/partner</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reference</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reference</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong></td>
<td>-0.22 (0.11)</td>
<td>-0.23* (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent</strong></td>
<td>-0.29** (0.10)</td>
<td>-0.29** (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relative</strong></td>
<td>-0.48*** (0.10)</td>
<td>-0.47*** (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friend</strong></td>
<td>-0.46*** (0.10)</td>
<td>-0.44*** (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-kin</strong></td>
<td>-0.49*** (0.10)</td>
<td>-0.47*** (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PWUD disease characteristics</strong></td>
<td><strong>PWUD disease characteristics</strong></td>
<td><strong>PWUD disease characteristics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Severity of disease</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Causes me problems</strong></td>
<td>0.00 (0.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Danger to others</strong></td>
<td>0.00 (0.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Danger to self</strong></td>
<td>0.00 (0.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rho</strong></td>
<td>0.53*** 0.06 0.60*** 0.07 0.66*** 0.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Continuous variables interpreted as the average probability change in the outcome for a one-unit change in the independent variable. Categorical variables interpreted as discrete change from 0 to 1. P value: * p < 0.10; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01; **** p < 0.001.
our core network even if they wanted to. As part of a sensitivity analysis, we compared the descriptive statistics for respondents who know a PWUD (analytic sample) and respondents who do not know a PWUD to assess whether there were any clear differences between the two groups (see Table A5 in the Supplementary Material). There were no significant differences across gender, race, education, nor proportion of kin in the core network. There were, however, differences in age, personal non-medical drug use, and core network size. Respondents who knew a PWUD were significantly younger (49.6 years old vs 54.07 years old, \( p < 0.001 \)), more likely to have a history of personal non-medical drug use (18.2% vs 9%, \( p < 0.001 \)), and had larger networks (5.51 vs 4.97 alters, \( p < 0.001 \)) compared to respondents who did not know a PWUD.

6. Discussion

Our study contributes to a growing body of research on the association between people’s social network ties and intergroup contact by evaluating meaningful relationships with people who use drugs. Using a large, representative sample we assessed the probability that respondents named a PWUD in their core network, given that they first knew a PWUD. Adopting a network perspective allowed us to observe respondents’ propensity to form or maintain meaningful ties across groups in everyday life. Such an approach is particularly relevant given that past behavior of the respondent provides a relatively accurate prediction for the respondent’s future behavior (Ouellette and Wood, 1998). By focusing on the dyadic relationships (i.e., ego-alter) nested within each respondent’s personal network, we demonstrated how the nature of intergroup contact can shape the types of relationships that have been shown to help reduce stigmatizing attitudes and the behavioral barriers to recovery, such as social isolation. Two main points emerged from our analyses.

First, the nature of the relationship between respondent and PWUD (as measured by social role) was highly predictive of whether the respondent considered the PWUD as part of their core network. Partners—arguably the most intimate social role one can fulfill—were the most likely to be nominated as a core network member, followed by children, whereas the more peripheral social roles had a relatively low probability of appearing in the respondents’ core networks. This is expected given that the vast majority of the general population includes their partner and children (provided they have them) in their core networks or among those with whom they share important matters and socialize (Marsden, 1987; McPherson et al., 2006; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). It is worth emphasizing, however, that in the present study these partners and children were known to have a drug problem yet a majority of them were still included in the respondents’ core networks. This would align with the strength of family in intergroup contact (Corrigan and Nieweglowksi, 2019), the durability of primary relationships in the face of adverse health (Perry, 2011), and the complexity of core ties—especially family—as exhibiting multiple social, financial, cultural, and emotional obligations, such that a problematic relationship is also likely to be characterized by positive interactions (Fingerman et al., 2004). These findings suggest that primary relationships can be leveraged to broker positive and meaningful contact between PWUD and other network members by creating opportunities for social interactions that disconfirm negative stereotypes
Second, we found a significant moderating role of drug use characteristics on the association between relationships and the inclusion of PWUD in the core network. Although the probability of a PWUD being nominated as a core network member is consistently low among casual relationship types (e.g., neighbor, extended kin), it was equally low among the most primary relationships (i.e., partner, child) when the severity, problematic nature, and danger to self were intense. Only when the perceived burden of disease was relatively minor was there a significantly higher probability of sharing a meaningful relationship with a partner. This nuanced finding highlights the importance of primary, affinity-based relationships for empathetic views of disease characteristics (Perry et al., 2022) but also the limitations of improved attitudes in countering concerns for the safety of loved ones who use drugs. The lower likelihood of social contact at higher disease manifestations may signal perceived violations of the sick role (e.g., recovery) (Parsons, 1951). In other words, intense disease manifestations may counterbalance the benefits of affinity-based relationships such that motivation to maintain them becomes similar to casual, less intimate relationships that are more susceptible to socially distancing and marginalizing behavior towards PWUD.

Our main findings have broader implications for Allport’s conditions of intergroup contact and for sustaining positive, meaningful contact beyond brief social interactions. The results related to the moderation of the effects of social role by intense disease characteristics among partners supports the importance of stereotype disconfirming opportunities. Compared to other types of relationships, higher expectations and obligations define a partnership (Cantor, 1979), but also more intimate and consequential exposure to the stigmatized condition. In cases where drug use has negative implications for the relationship or is potentially harmful to network members, stereotypes are confirmed, negating the heightened sympathy and lower stigma typically afforded to close ties (Goffman, 1963; Pescosolido and Manago, 2018). The resulting disequilibrium in role expectations can be addressed by increasing engagement in activities and obligations that leverage the PWUD’s abilities while allowing the PWUD to make a positive impression. Practical examples that have been used in substance use interventions include adopting new family routines that are led by the PWUD and which strengthen their parenting abilities (Haggerty et al., 2008; Hogue et al., 2022) or engaging in recovery-oriented activities where the PWUD can excel (i.e., exercise programs) (Wang et al., 2014).

6.1. Strengths and limitations

Using a personal network approach to studying intergroup contact enabled us to identify real-world examples of revealed behaviors towards PWUD, which has direct implications for issues of social isolation and potential pathways towards recovery. However, this approach is susceptible to recall bias, respondent burden, and social desirability bias (Brewer, 2006; Fischer, 2009; Latkin et al., 2017). Respondent burden was partially mitigated by not collecting data on the ties between PWUDs and the core network (unless the PWUD was named in response to this module), though this limits our ability to determine whether PWUDs were more likely to be named as a core network member based on their shared ties to other non-PWUD core members. We do find some evidence in our sensitivity analyses that exposure to drug use (e.g., personal non-medical drug use) differentiates knowing a PWUD from not knowing a PWUD. Furthermore, longitudinal data would be needed to properly assess the potential cyclic nature of drug use and intergroup relationships. This includes capturing severed ties or changes in frequency of drug use in response to weakening relationship and the duration of drug use. Whether the PWUD in question is engaging in active drug use or is in recovery has implications for the social and instrumental burden of the relationship (Francis, 2020; Francis et al., 2020). Next steps would include assessing approaches to address drug use amongst primary relationships, measuring the relationship between PWUD co-presence and stigmatizing views or social isolation, and testing how Allport’s conditions for intergroup contact affect the establishment or maintenance of relationships surrounding drug use.

7. Conclusion

This study used a personal network approach to identify the social context under which people are likely to engage in meaningful relationships with a PWUD given the opportunity—an outcome that has been empirically linked to lower stigma and socially isolating behaviors. Through our unique approach, we advance the intergroup contact literature to show that primary kinship relationships are more likely to sustain meaningful and positive interactions with PWUD compared to other types of social roles, but they are not impervious to negative attitudes at intense disease manifestations, which can limit social contact and sympathy-building. Changing expectations about drug use, particularly within these primary relationships, represents an important step in efforts to promote positive intergroup contact.

Author contributions

Ashley F Railey: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing (original draft and revisions). Adam R Roth: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing (original draft and revisions). Anne C Krendl: data curation, writing (reviewing and editing), investigation, funding acquisition. Brea L Perry: data curation, writing (reviewing and editing), investigation, funding acquisition.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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