



The Forbidden Triad and Structural Holes in Youth's Confidant Networks:
Their Relevance to Depression and Academic Achievement

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ABSTRACT

Friendship networks among youth tend to overlap or intersect. As the vast majority of an adolescent's close friends come from the same school, it is particularly rare to find a friendship network in which two of an adolescent's closest friends are total strangers to each other. Such an "open network" has inspired two contrasting theories about how it is relevant to behaviors. On the one hand, an open network represents a "forbidden triad" because it usually involves awkward social interactions that either reflect or result in a tense and stressful social life (Granovetter 1973:1363). On the other hand, an open network contains a "structural hole" that opens up opportunities leading to better achievements for the individual (Burt 1992). In line with these arguments, this paper examines the kinds of social outcomes that accompany this unique form of friendship network among the adolescents.

The data were drawn from the Taiwan Youth Project. In a 2002 survey conducted in 40 middle schools (level-3 data in the multilevel analyses) in northern Taiwan, a total of 2619 students (level-2 data) ages 14 and 15 listed up to three best friends, along with background information for each friend (alter), the tie strength between the ego and each alter, and the tie strength among the alters. Each alter-to-alter tie was taken to construct a triadic network (level-1 data, $n = 7802$), consisting of the ego and two alters. Overall, 17.8% of these networks were open (i.e., two alters did not know each other), thus exemplifying a forbidden triad that contained a structural hole; 14.3% were partially open, and 67.9% were closed. Preliminary, multilevel analyses using HLM modeling indicated that an open friendship network reflects more depression symptoms and better academic achievement for the ego. The paper aims to examine and explain how such behavioral outcomes are associated with this unique network structure.

