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Endemic infections are always possible on regular networks

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We study the dependence of the largest component in regular networks on the clustering coefficient, showing that its size changes smoothly without undergoing a phase transition. We explain this behaviour via an analytical approach based on the network structure, and provide an exact equation describing the numerical results. Our work indicates that intrinsic structural properties always allow the spread of epidemics on regular networks.

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Many natural and engineered systems can be easily represented as networks, where discrete elements, the nodes, interact via a set of links. The use of a network paradigm has proved particularly helpful in mathematical epidemiology, allowing substantial advances in our understanding of the spread of diseases [1–4]. A common approach, especially in ecological or spatially-embedded epidemiological models, is to use regular networks, in which all the nodes have the same number of links k [5–10]. Specific examples of disease applications include systems as diverse as bubonic plague [11], foot-and-mouth disease [12], and citrus tristeza virus [13], each of which requires a different regular network topology. As k is fixed, the number of links in a regular network is proportional to the number of nodes and regular networks belong to the group of sparse networks, which encompass several systems of general interest [14]. An important feature of networks that influences their structure as well as the dynamics of the processes they support is the clustering coefficient c , defined as the number of closed triplets divided by the total number of triplets. Multiple experimental studies have evidenced how real-world networks often have large values of c , and specific random graph models have been formulated to reproduce the observed clustering properties [15–19]. The recognized importance of the clustering coefficient in epidemiological dynamics has caused it to be used as a control parameter in many works [20, 21], including on regular networks [22]. However, despite much recent progress, there is still no unified understanding of the full impact of clustering on networks. For large enough clustering coefficients, sparse networks such as the regular ones fragment into several disconnected components. In epidemic modelling, the largest component of a network corresponds to the maximum number of individuals who can contract an infection during the outbreak of a disease. In this article, we show

that the size of the largest component in regular networks is always directly proportional to the number of nodes, regardless of the clustering coefficient.

A recurrent method in epidemiological studies is the application of moment closure techniques to obtain results that are intended to hold approximately and to be independent of a specific graph model [8, 23–25]. Moment closure methods have been frequently applied to many models of real-life situations, including those mapped on lattices [7, 26–31], where other analytical methods such as mapping to percolation are also often used [32, 33]. The results given by closure approximations suggest the existence of a phase transition in the size of the largest component of a regular network at a critical value of the clustering coefficient $c^* = (k - 2)/(k - 1)$: for $c < c^*$, the number of nodes in the largest component grows linearly with the total number of nodes N ; conversely, for $c \geq c^*$, the size of the largest component grows sublinearly with N . This would imply the impossibility of an endemic state of a disease for $c > c^*$, as the fraction of nodes in the largest component would vanish for $N \rightarrow \infty$. Below, we show numerically the absence of such a transition in the largest component size. This indicates that the use of moment closure is not warranted for the study of clustering-driven fragmentation. Instead, we introduce an analytical approach that explains exactly how clustering affects the largest component size of the networks.

To study the dependence of the largest component size on the clustering coefficient, we performed extensive numerical simulations, generating ensembles of networks of degree $k = 3, 4, 5$ and 8 . To create the networks, we used the direct construction procedure described in [34]. We measured the clustering coefficient of each network generated, and computed the relative largest component size

$$s = \frac{S}{N},$$

where S is the number of nodes found in the largest component. The results, in Fig. 1, show that s varies

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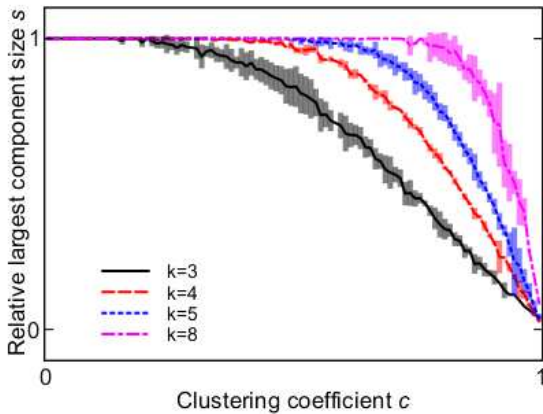


Figure 1: (Color online) Smooth variation of the largest component size. The plots of relative largest component size s (\pm one standard deviation) vs. clustering coefficient c show that s does not undergo any phase transition.

smoothly with c in all cases. It is important to note that the degree-based graph construction used guarantees that means and standard deviations shown represent a combinatorially accurate weighting over all k -regular graphs of a given c , without biases that may be induced by a given random graph model [34, 35].

To understand the absence of a transition, we look at the emergence of a component of size proportional to N (giant component) as a percolative process. For $N \gg 1$ and $\varepsilon \ll 1$, the ensemble of networks corresponding to $c = 1 - \varepsilon$ can be generated as follows: start from a network with clustering coefficient $c = 1$, consisting entirely of disconnected cliques of size $k + 1$. Then, systematically consider all pairs of cliques. With probability ε , pick two nodes X and Y from the first clique, and two nodes L and M from the second, erase the links X - Y and L - M , and create the links X - L and Y - M (see Fig. 2). These new connections establish “external” links between local clustered neighbourhoods that were formerly isolated. Then, we can use the Molloy-Reed criterion [36] to determine the existence conditions of a giant component. Applied to our case, the criterion states that a giant component exists if $\Sigma \equiv \langle \sigma^2 \rangle - 2 \langle \sigma \rangle > 0$, where σ is the number of external links of a local neighbourhood. As ε is small, the probability $P(0)$ of finding a neighbourhood with $\sigma = 0$ is of order $O(1)$. Similarly, $P(2) = O(\varepsilon)$ and $P(4) = O(\varepsilon^2)$. Notice that $P(1) = P(3) = 0$, as every connection between two neighbourhoods requires the rewiring of two nodes. Thus $\Sigma = O(\varepsilon^2) > 0$ and a giant component is always found for any value of c .

To find a functional form for $s(c)$, note that the clustering coefficient c is the probability that any two nodes which share a common neighbour are linked. Then, if we were to build a network by randomly linking its nodes, the probability for a node and its k neighbours to form

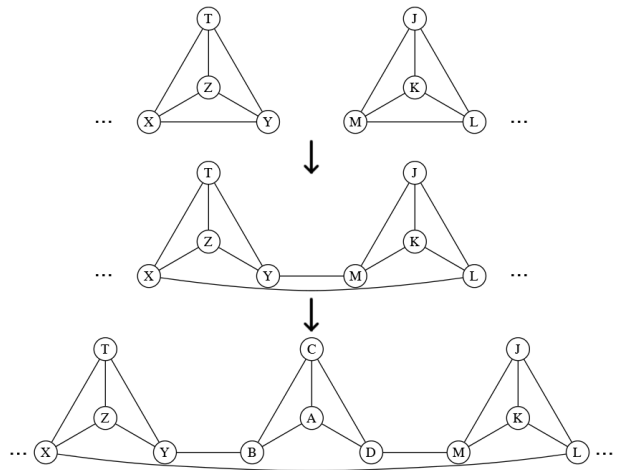


Figure 2: Example of clique joining for $k = 3$. When $c = 1$ the network consists entirely of isolated cliques (top row). The next highest value of c less than 1 corresponds to networks in which only two cliques have been joined by rewiring two pairs of nodes (middle row). The procedure can be repeated to find networks with the next highest value of c (bottom row).

a clique of size $k + 1$ would be

$$p = c^{\frac{k(k-1)}{2}}.$$

To find the total number of cliques n_c , multiply p by N and divide by $k + 1$, to account for the fact that the neighbours of all the nodes in a clique are linked amongst each other:

$$n_c = \frac{N}{k+1} c^{\frac{k(k-1)}{2}}.$$

As each clique decreases the fraction of nodes in the largest component by $(k + 1)/N$, it is

$$s(c) = 1 - c^{\frac{k(k-1)}{2}}. \quad (1)$$

Then, Eq. 1 provides a simple analytical expression describing the behaviour of s when c is small enough.

A complete description of $s(c)$ can be obtained using combinatorial arguments. First, it is straightforward to see that, for $k \geq 3$,

$$\begin{aligned} s(0) &= 1, \\ s(1) &= 0 \end{aligned}$$

and

$$\left. \frac{ds}{dc} \right|_{c=0^+} = 0. \quad (2)$$

Then, we can estimate the derivative of s close to $c = 1$ using the ratio of the small finite changes in s and c . To do so, consider a network with the highest possible value of $c < 1$. This can be obtained by starting from a network with $c = 1$ and joining only two cliques using

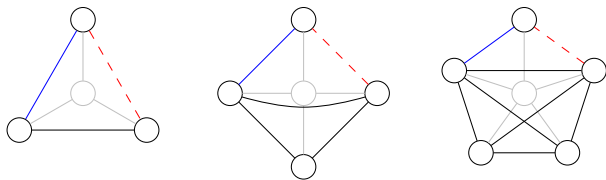


Figure 3: (Color online) Keeping a leaf node free from triangles with other leaves, for $k = 3, 4$ and 5 (from left to right). Each local neighbourhood consists of a central hub node connected to k leaves (grey links). To have the most links while avoiding triangles between the top node and other leaves, place all the possible links between the other leaves (black links), then add one link with the top node (blue link). If any other link is added, for instance the red one, the top node is no longer free from triangles with other leaves.

the rewiring described above and in Fig. 2. To construct a network with the next possible highest value of the clustering coefficient, repeat the rewiring, adding a third clique to the group. Every time a new clique is added, decreasing c , $k + 1$ nodes join the largest component. Thus, the change $\Delta s = -(k + 1)/N$. To compute Δc , we express c as the mean of the local clustering coefficients, defined for each node as the number of triangles it belongs to divided by the maximum number of possible links amongst its neighbours, which in a regular network is $k(k - 1)/2$. Then, notice that the rewiring procedure breaks 1 triangle for each node that does not take part in the rewiring. The rewired nodes, instead, lose an “internal” link, and so are left with only $k - 1$ neighbours that form triangles. Thus, if i cliques are joined, then there are $i(k - 1)$ nodes with $k(k - 1)/2 - 1$ triangles each, and $2i$ nodes with $(k - 1)(k - 2)/2$ triangles each. Therefore, the contribution to c coming from the joined cliques is

$$c_1 = \frac{2i}{Nk(k - 1)} \left\{ (k - 1) \left[\frac{k(k - 1)}{2} - 1 \right] + 2 \frac{(k - 1)(k - 2)}{2} \right\}. \quad (3)$$

Also, the remaining $N - i(k + 1)$ nodes in the networks are still maximally clustered, and so they contribute

$$c_2 = 1 - \frac{i(k + 1)}{N}. \quad (4)$$

Summing Eqs. 3 and 4 gives

$$c = 1 - \frac{6i}{kN}. \quad (5)$$

Eq. 5 implies that every time a clique is added, c decreases of the same amount $\Delta c = 6/(kN)$. Therefore, we have

$$\left. \frac{ds}{dc} \right|_{c=1} = -\frac{k(k + 1)}{6}. \quad (6)$$

Eqs. 2 and 6 show that, for high values of c , it is

$$s(c) = 1 - c \frac{k(k + 1)}{6}. \quad (7)$$

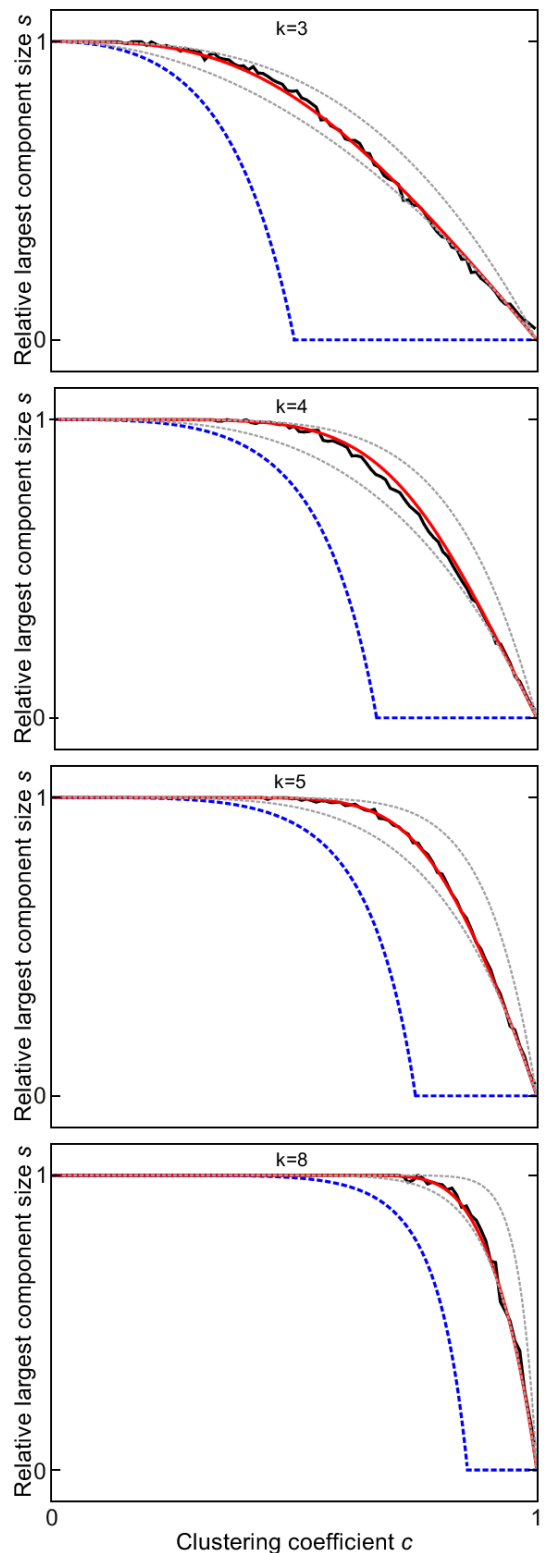


Figure 4: (Color online) Permanence of giant component in regular networks. The plots of relative largest component s vs. clustering c show that s always remains directly proportional to the size of the network N . The numerical results (solid black line) are shown together with the prediction based on moment closure (dashed blue line), the analytical solution (solid red line) and the asymptotic regimes (dotted grey lines).

These results indicate the existence of two regimes, one for low and one for high values of c , given by Eq. 1 and Eq. 7, respectively. Then, the general form of $s(c)$ is given by the crossover behaviour between these two regimes.

To obtain an explicit form for the crossover, we first note that every regular network is locally a k -star, that is, a hub node (or ‘ego’ in sociological terminology) connected to k outer leaves (or ‘alters’). We argue that such a local neighbourhood is highly clustered if it has enough links to guarantee that each leaf node belongs to at least one triangle made entirely of leaves. To find how many links are needed to satisfy this constraint, consider the leaves of a k -star and compute the maximum number of links that can be placed while keeping one leaf triangle-free. This is found by placing all possible links between $k - 1$ leaves, and then adding one further single link (Fig. 3). At the end of this procedure, one leaf is left with only a single link to other leaves. Thus, it does not participate in any triangle with the other leaves, condition that would be broken by the addition of even just one other connection. So, for a local neighbourhood to be little clustered, the links between its leaves can be at most $M \equiv (k - 1)(k - 2)/2 + 1$. As each link between two leaves exists with probability c , then the probability W that a neighbourhood is not highly clustered is

$$W(k, c) = \sum_{x=0}^M \text{Binom} \left(x \mid \frac{k(k-1)}{2}, c \right),$$

where $\text{Binom}(x|y, z)$ is the binomial distribution for x successes over y trials with probability z . The equation above can be rewritten as [37]

$$W(k, c) = 1 - I_c \left(\frac{(k-1)(k-2)}{2} + 2, k-2 \right), \quad (8)$$

where $I_t(\alpha, \beta)$ is the regularized incomplete beta function

$$I_t(\alpha, \beta) = \frac{\Gamma(\alpha + \beta)}{\Gamma(\alpha)\Gamma(\beta)} \int_0^t s^{\alpha-1} (1-s)^{\beta-1} ds.$$

We can now express the full crossover behaviour of $s(c)$ as an average of Eqs. 1 and 7, weighted with the correct probabilities given by Eq. 8:

$$s(c) = 1 - c^{\frac{k(k+1)}{6}} + W(k, c) \left[c^{\frac{k(k+1)}{6}} - c^{\frac{k(k-1)}{2}} \right]. \quad (9)$$

A comparison with the numerical results shows that the analytical solution closely matches the simulated values, confirming the correctness of our approach (Fig. 4).

In conclusion, we have demonstrated that the size of the largest component in regular networks changes smoothly with the clustering coefficient c , and always remains directly proportional to the network size. Thus, regular networks always have a giant component, even for large values of c . We stress that this novel result is the direct consequence of intrinsic structural properties of the networks, and it is not based on a particular approximation used for the calculations. Also, it is to be noted that the conclusions hold regardless of the transmissivity of a particular disease. Thus, no structural factor precludes disease transmission, and an endemic state in an epidemic is therefore always possible in regular networks, as the maximum fraction of infected individuals does not vanish in the limit of a large population. Many populations of significant economic and scientific interest consist of individuals who are sessile or have a limited epidemiological connectivity. The network topology mostly used in their study is that of regular graphs. Thus, our results offer new insight into current epidemiological questions, such as whether structural agricultural factors can explain the absence of a recent foot-and-mouth outbreak in the USA [38]. In particular, they suggest that enhanced control and strong active measures should be undertaken to prevent the spread of a disease to a substantial part of the population even when the infected system is highly clustered.

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