

# Magical Contagion Effects on Comfort with Disabilities

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## Inspiration-Why We Did This...

- According to the Law of Contagion, things that have once been in contact with each other may continue to influence each other even after physical contact has ceased.
- Magical contagion refers to the belief that things which are not physiologically contagious, such as personality traits or morals, can still be passed from one thing to another as if they were biologically transmittable.



# What Is Seen As Contagious?

- Transmissible qualities may be...
  - Physical
    - Ex. bacteria
  - Mental
    - Ex. Intelligence
  - Moral
    - Ex. Evil intentions
  - Could be positive or negative

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- Previous research has examined the concept of magical contagion in the context of an individual's morality or “essence.”
  - Findings indicate that people view physical, psychological, and moral characteristics of contagion similarly in that they do not make distinctions between the transmissibility of each quality.
  - The objective of the present study is to determine if magical contagion comes into play regarding a person's level of comfort with individuals who have mental and physical disabilities.



## What Did We Do?

- Participants over the age of 18 were recruited through social networking websites, and email communication with psychology professors and community colleges.
- Participants were given a link to an online survey.
- The survey was designed to be completed in approximately 10-15 minutes.

# What Did We Ask?

- The survey was meant to assess each subject's comfort level and familiarity with mental and physical disabilities.
- One set of questions measured each subject's comfort level with everyday objects (ex. hairbrush, sweater, coffee mug) that had been either previously owned or used by different individuals.
- These individuals included:
  - A lover
  - Someone with schizophrenia
  - A blind person
  - Someone with dyslexia
  - Someone with anorexia



- **Sample Questions:**

- How would you feel about wearing a particular brand-new sweater of a style you find very attractive, that is thoroughly cleaned and has never been worn? (select between '1' - least pleasant and '9' - most pleasant; '5' meaning neutral)
- Consider another instance of a similar sweater, that is thoroughly cleaned and that once belonged to each of the persons listed below. In each case, rate how you would feel about wearing the sweater. (select between '1' - least pleasant and '9' - most pleasant; '5' meaning neutral)

- We also included someone with a made-up disorder, “Jenner’s syndrome,” in order to assess comfort with the unknown.

- The remaining questions assessed:
  - physical comfort based on a social distance scale
    - Sample Question:

How would you feel about renting a room in your home to someone who has been diagnosed with a mental illness? (With '1'-most willing to '4'-least willing)
  - Attitudes toward a person described as having a “significant mental illness.”
    - Sample question:

Harry is a 30 year old single man with significant mental illness. Sometimes he becomes upset for no apparent reason. He lives alone in an apartment and works as a clerk at a large law firm. He had been hospitalized six times because of his illness.

I think **most** people would...

      - Feel pity for Harry
      - Feel Harry was dangerous

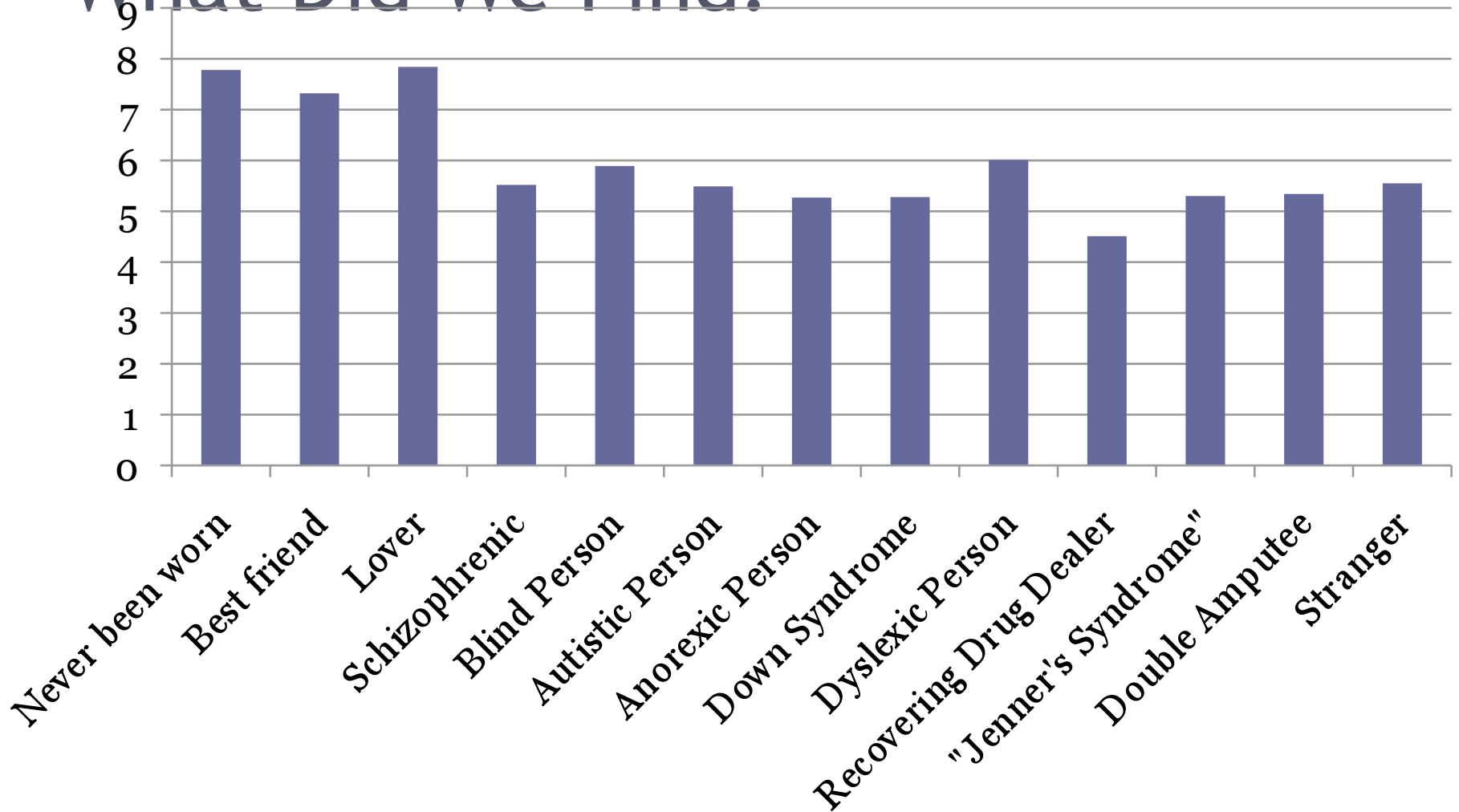
Participants were then asked would if **they** would...

      - Feel pity for Harry
      - Feel Harry was dangerous
- Participants were also asked to report their basic demographics.

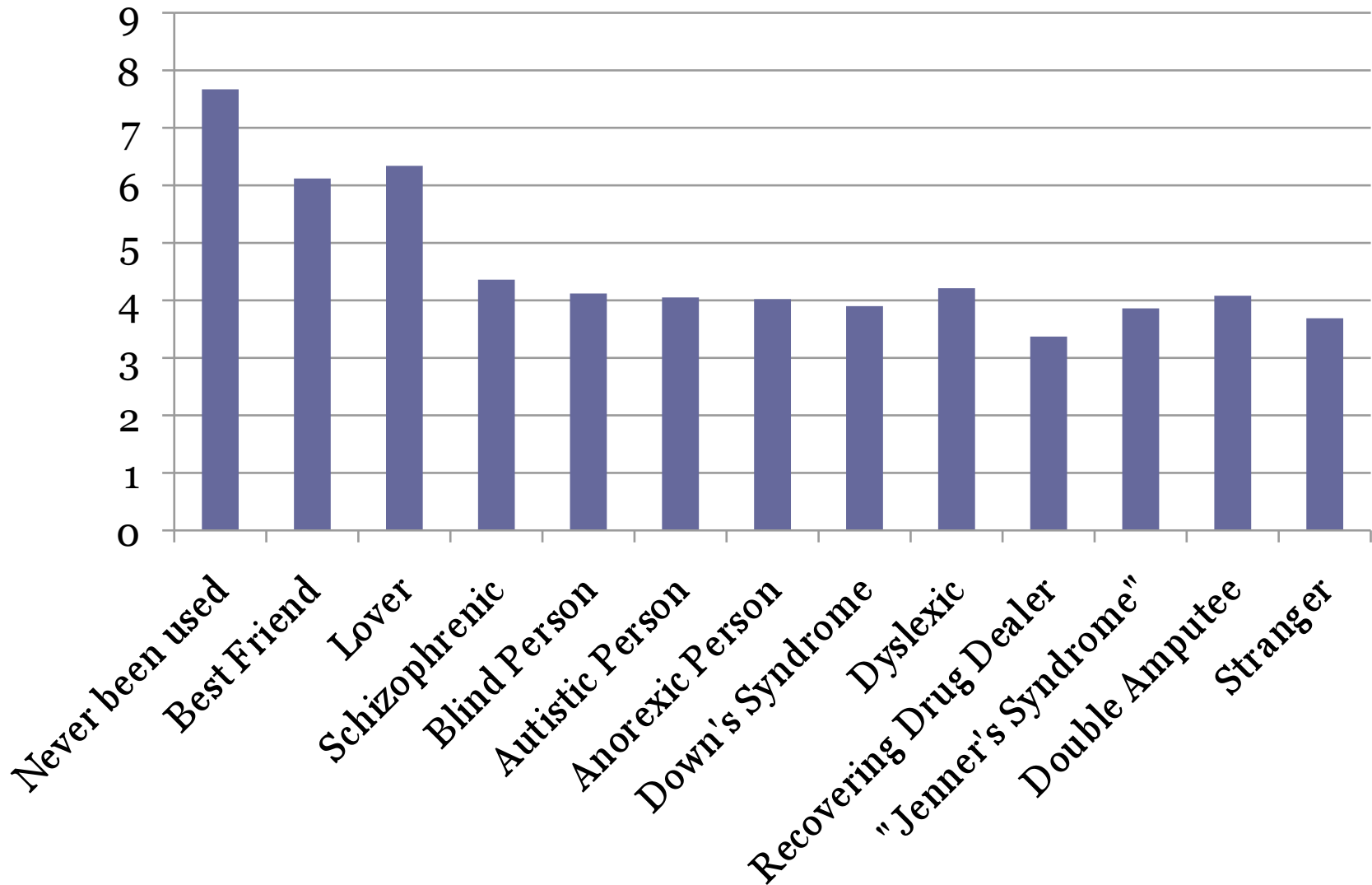


# What Did We Find?

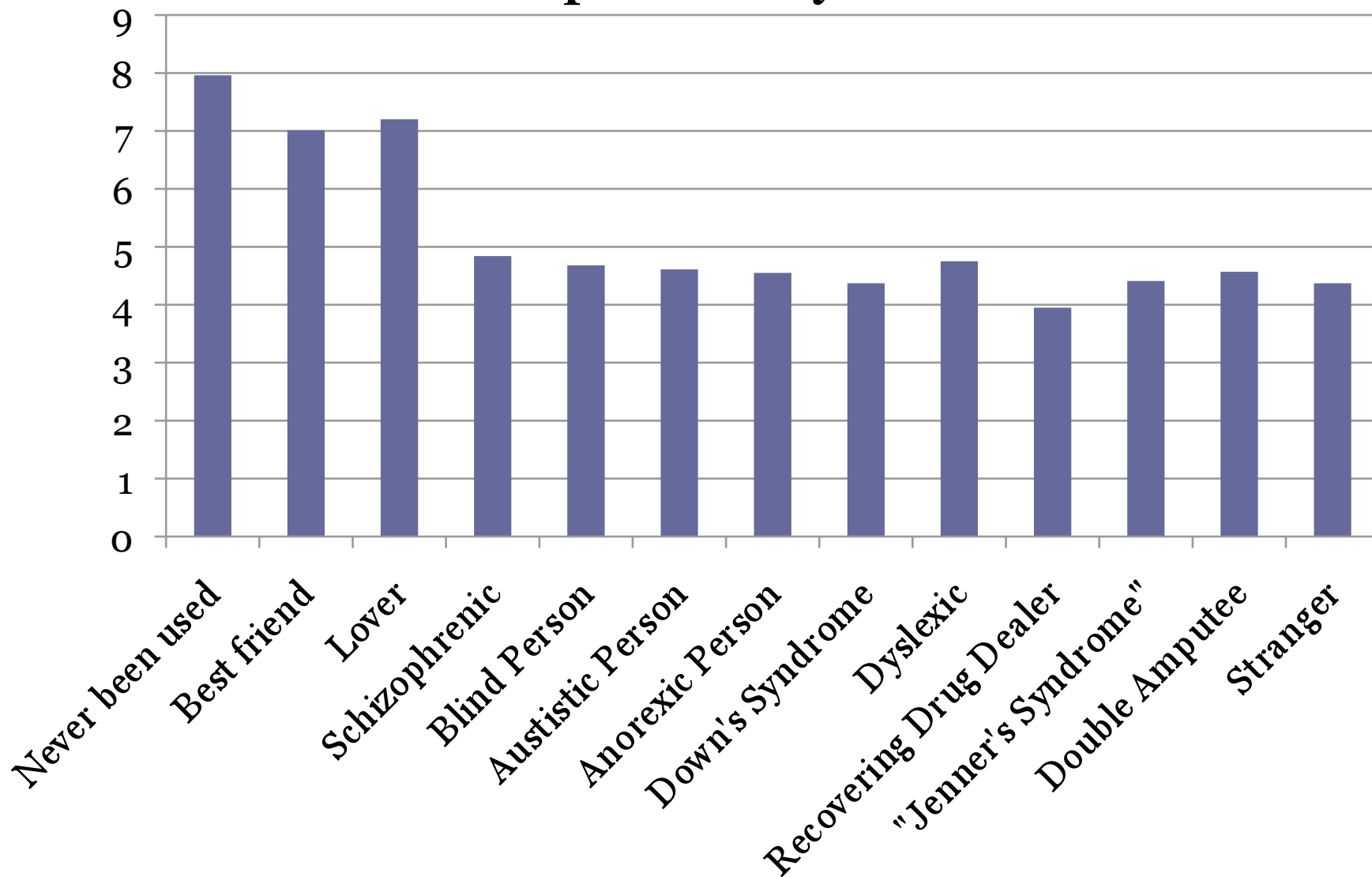
## Mean Comfort Level for a Sweater Worn By...



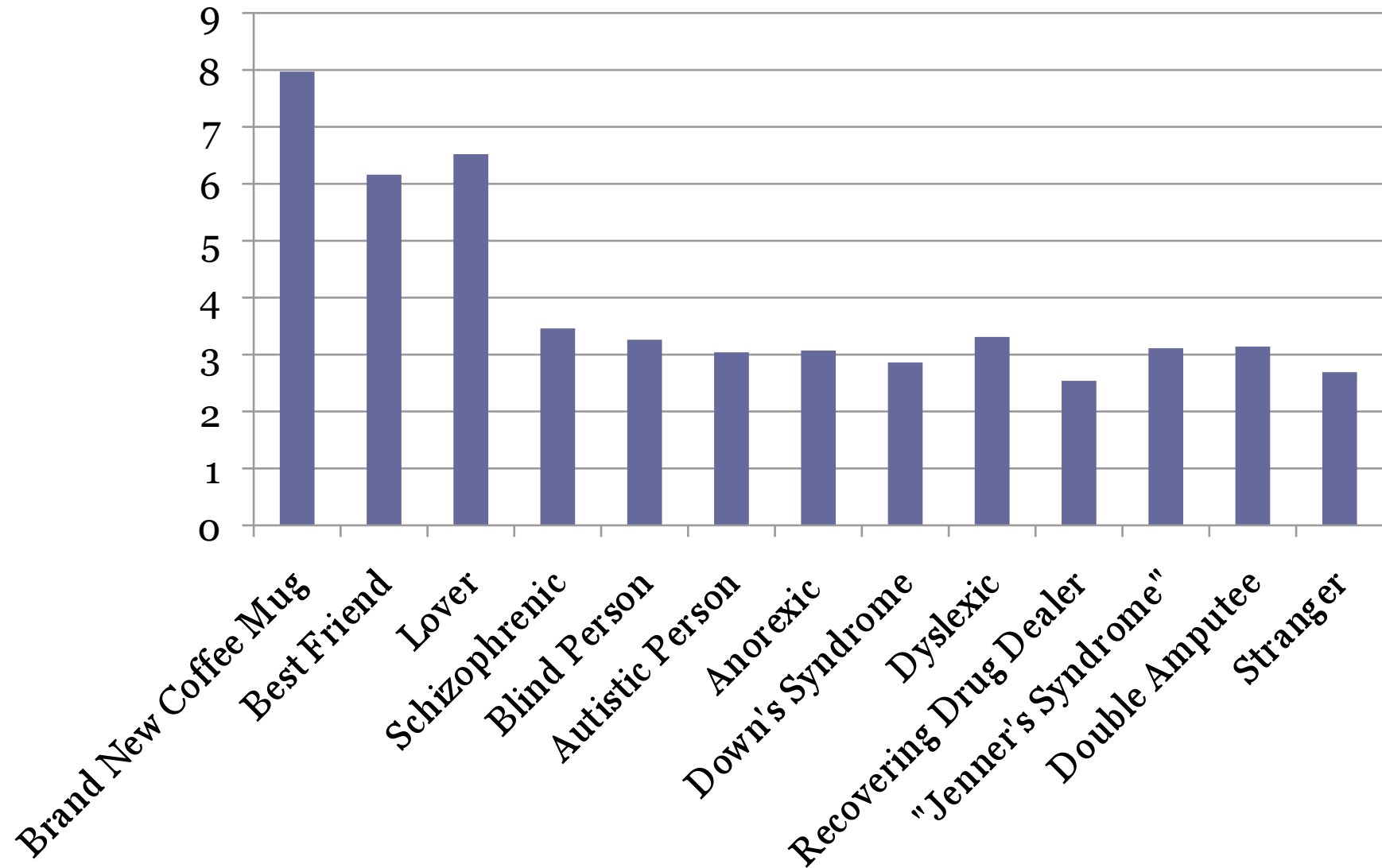
# Mean Comfort Level for a Hairbrush Used By...



## Mean Comfort Level for Using a Clean Coffee Cup Owned By...



## Mean Comfort Level for Having a Sip of Coffee from...





## What Did We Find?

- Overall, it was evident in each of the hypothetical situations that moral contagion had the most significant effect on an individual's comfort level. In every hypothetical situation, participants were least likely to consider using an object previously owned/used by a drug dealer. After the drug dealer, participants were least likely to use objects previously owned by a stranger, except in the sweater situation. This might be explained by the commonality of used clothing stores.

# What Did We Find?

- For the sweater scenario, there was a median negative correlation of  $r = -.41$  between the comfort level and the social distance score.
- For the hairbrush scenario, there was a median negative correlation of  $r = -.27$  between comfort level and social distance for all the types of individuals included except for the lover and friend.
- For both coffee mug scenarios, there was a median negative correlation of  $r = -.31$  between comfort level and social distance for all types of individuals included except for lover in the “usage” question and lover and best friend in the “drinking” question.



# What Does It Mean?

- The present research suggests that moral qualities are perceived as more transmissible than mental or physical qualities.
- However, there is still a significant difference in comfort levels when using objects associated with people considered to have mental and physical disabilities than with a neutral, brand new object.
- There was a significant negative correlation between comfort level and social distance – those who were more comfortable with the situation had a lower social distance score while those who were less comfortable had a higher social distance score.



## Reflections...

- One limitation included the use of a sample comprised of highly educated individuals. Not only is this not representative of society as a whole, but people may be more prone to answer in a socially desirable manner if they are more educated and better understand social norms.
- Another limitation included the composition of the sample itself. Out of 160 participants, only 35 were men.
- Future research could aim to obtain a sample more representative of the population. Potential sex differences in comfort level and social distance could also be examined.
- This indicates that the law of magical contagion has a significant influence on how people interact with their society.



# Primary References

- Hinshaw, S.P (2006). Evidence From Scientific Investigations, *The Mark of Shame: Stigma of Mental Illness and Agenda for Change* (pp. 93 - 114). Oxford University Press, USA.
- Rozin, P., Nemeroff, C., Wane, M. & Sherrod, A. (1989). Operation of the sympathetic magical law of contagion in interpersonal attitudes among Americans. *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society* 27 (4), 367-370.