

Social Networks, Accessed and Mobilised Social Capital and the Employment Status of Older Workers: A Case Study

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Abstract

Purpose: To demonstrate the importance of social networks, and the social capital embedded in them, to secure employment if someone had become unemployed after the age of 50 years, and to reveal the process of accessing and mobilising that social capital.

Design: A case study of a Scottish labour market was undertaken which involved an interview-based survey of those who became unemployed in their early 50's and tried to regain employment. The interview had structured and unstructured parts which allowed both quantitative and qualitative analysis to compare those who were successful in regaining work with those who were not. The uniqueness of the paper is the use of social network components while controlling for other socio-economic and demographic variables in job search of older workers.

Findings: Compared to those older people who were unemployed, those who returned to employment had a higher proportion of contacts with higher prestige jobs, their job searching methods were mainly interpersonal and the rate of finding their last job *via* their social networks was higher than those who remained unemployed. Both groups mobilised social capital, but those reemployed accessed higher 'quality' social capital. 'Strong ties', rather than 'weak ties', were found to be important in accessing and mobilising social capital for the older workers who returned to employment.

Research limitations/implications: This work is limited to a local labour market and is based on a small but informative sample. However, it does show that policy is required to allow older people to enhance their social networks by strengthening the social capital embedded in the networks. The results support the use of intermediaries as bridges to help compensate for

older people who have weak social networks. Besides the policy implications, the paper also has two distinct research implications. First, the use of social network component to the existing literature of older workers' job search. Second, exploring the type and relational strength with network members to explain older workers' re-employment.

Social implications: As population age, this work points to an approach to support older people to re-enter employment and to include them in society.

Originality/Value: The paper extends social network and employment literature to fill gaps on how older people require to both access and mobilise social capital. The importance of 'strong ties' in the reemployment of older workers contrasts with much of the literature on younger workers where 'strength of weak ties' so far has been regarded as essential for successful job search in literature. Measures are forwarded to reveal the relevance of social capital. The policy value of the work is in suggesting ways to facilitate older people re-enter or remain in work and hence sustain their wellbeing.

Key words: Older workers, Social networks, accessed social capital, mobilised social capital, employment.

Introduction

Worldwide populations are ageing with the UN (2017) estimating that more than 962 million people are over 60 years old, and the number aged more than 60 years is expected to grow to over 2.1 billion by 2050. Ageing is most advanced in the more developed countries (such as Japan, Italy and Germany 33%, 29% and 28% were respectively 60 years or older in 2017, (UN 2017). This is, however, a worldwide phenomenon and all regions, except Africa, will be around 25% or more by 2050 (UN 2017; He *et al.*, 2016). Identification of the effects of ageing prompted the OECD in 2006 to make the recommendation to employment ministers of developed countries that 'living longer must mean working longer'. The governmental response to population ageing has changed from one where older workers were encouraged to leave the labour market to make way for younger workers to a policy advocating continued labour market participation (Eurofound 2016; CIPD 2016; IES 2016; Loretto and Kickerstaff 2015; Phillipson *et al.* 2016; Talyor and Earll 2016; Walter *et al.* 2016). After falling in the latter part of the 20th century, Eurostat data illustrates that in the EU employment rates of older

people (those aged 55 to 64 years) have risen from 42.2% in 2005 to 57.1% in 2017, and for the UK the older employment rates have changed from 56.8% to 64.1% over this period (Eurostat 2018). There have been similar rises among other developed countries (OECD, 2016).

Yet research by Loretto and White (2006); Fuertes *et al.* (2013); Nicholson *et al.* (2016); Wanberg *et al.* (2016), Egdell *et al.* (2018) and Van Dalen, *et al.*, (2009) shows that older workers, generally defined as those over 50 years, face a range of barriers to remaining in or reentering employment after a period of unemployment. Porstuma and Campion (2009), Dordoni and Argentero (2015), Kroon *et al.* (2018) and Nicholoso *et al.* (2016) argue that these barriers are often unfounded and based on inaccurate stereotypes held by some managers and employees about older workers being slow, lacking commitment to the organisation, lacking flexibility especially with information technology, being reluctant to change and in conflict with younger colleagues. There are also positive views about older workers such as being reliable, experienced and having a more positive attitude, especially with customers (Ng and Feldman 2012; Zheltoukhova and Braczor 2016). However, negative perceptions seem to dominate (Axelrad and James 2016; Kroon *et al.* 2016) and older workers have been associated with relatively high labour costs and low productivity (Conen *et al.* 2012).

Factors that help explain unemployment among older workers include the effects of benefit and pension systems, labour market opportunities, skill gaps, expectations, feelings of inadequacy, lack of strategic planning and age management by employers, job flexibilities and age-related discrimination, particularly for older women (Moore, 2009; Fuertes *et al.*, 2013; and Loretto and Vickerstaff 2015). Anti-age discrimination laws were enacted across the European Union and elsewhere, partly to facilitate later age working, and the Default Retirement Age was abolished in the UK in 2011. However, Adams (2004) found age discrimination legislation helps older workers to be retained in work rather than getting jobs with new employers.

Social networks have been found to be influential in job searching and eventual labour market outcomes by researchers, such as Granovetter (1973, 1995), Kramarz and Skans (2014), Mowbray *et al.* (2018) and Brown *et al.* (2018). Lin (2001) suggested a positive influence of networks in that they allow the social capital of others to be accessed, which can be mobilised to supply job related information or more actively help in securing employment by providing

references or advocating to employers. However, from analysing the Detroit labour market Mouw (2003) suggest that the importance of social capital in networks might be overstated as he failed to find evidence of causal relationships. In contrast, Van Hove, *et al.* (2009) demonstrated that engaging with job search networks leads to more job offers and quicker reemployment for those who were made redundant.

Although the significance of social networks in explaining labour market identity is well documented, research on the association of social networks and the employment status of older workers is lacking as it is for most demographic sub-groups (Hällsten and Rydgren, 2017). In this article, the results of a case study into an urban labour market in Scotland are presented. The social network characteristics of older workers (those over 50 years to the then state pension age, 60 for women and 65 for men)¹ who had regained employment were compared with those of similar age who remained unemployed. Emphasis is given to three interrelated aspects of social networks to understand their utility in obtaining work. These are: the nature of social capital embedded in personal networks; the degree of access to that social capital; and the ability to mobilise it.

Therefore, this article aims to:

1. Explore the nature of the networks the older people used when undertaking job search;
2. Ascertain what characteristics of networks made securing a job more likely; and
3. Evaluate the functioning of mechanisms to access and mobilise social capital embedded in social networks in the pursuit of securing a job.

Before reporting on this, a brief overview of related literature on social network and employment is given.

Social Networks and Employment

Granovetter (1973, 1995) identified the major role of social networks in job search and labour market outcomes. He proposed the ground-breaking concept of 'strength of weak ties' for successful job search in which he mentioned that rather than strong ties of immediate networks, weak ties (friend's friend or acquaintances) are more important to get diverse job information and thus to secure a job. The value of social contacts in gaining employment was

¹ The data were collected before the UK abolished compulsory retirement ages.

supported by Snijders *et al.* (2010), Wong (2008), Calvo-Armengol and Jackson (2004), Yakubovich (2005) and Hällsten and Rydgren (2017) who demonstrated that an increase in the proportion of weak ties in a network decreases inequality and increases the employment rate. Similarly, Varekamp *et al.* (2015) found that those with more social capital, particularly in terms of multi-dimensional social resources (including higher education levels) and job search advice were more active in searching for jobs. Cingano and Rosolia (2012) also found that a displaced worker's unemployment duration fell when their personal network contained more contacts who were employed and who provided information on jobs.

The social networks of weak ties tend to be less dense than those formed from strong ties. They, therefore, offer job seekers a wider and more diverse range of contacts with potentially positive consequences for the dissemination of information about job opportunities, compared to a person who primarily relies on close or strong ties where their information and influences is restricted to fewer people who often hold similar views and experiences. This may be especially important where people's social or employment worlds are restricted, or their behaviour is influenced by social homophily, whereby people form relations with others who are similar to themselves (McPherson, *et al.*, 2001). However, Franzen and Hangartner (2006) suggested that strong ties might be more useful for those seeking employment where this involves a move between industry sectors rather than within an industry. This applies to those who worked in declining industries, who need a 'bridge' to other industrial sectors, which they have little knowledge of, and contact with the workplace. Hence, for older workers, who had long tenure in declining industries, strong ties may be more important for successful job search than weak ties (McQuaid and Lindsay 2002).

Different groups use social networks to differing degrees. Unemployed job seekers who have experienced repeated or long-term unemployment, as well as unskilled and young people, are significantly less likely to use social networks, whereas rural dwellers are more likely to use them (Lindsay *et al.* 2005). Gayen *et al.* (2010) found that older people relied more on their associates' social capital, whereas younger people relied more on human capital. McDonald (2011) reported from analysis of the USA Social Capital Survey that younger workers received more job leads through their networks than older workers and that those in high status jobs heard about more jobs than those in low status jobs. He also found that younger workers were more likely to report that a job contact vouched for them than older workers and women and those from a racial minority derived less benefit from their networks.

Zikic and Richardson (2007) found, from a qualitative study of older managers, that their professional and social contacts were instrumental in regaining employment.

The socioeconomic resources of network members are important components of social networks when explaining a person's job status. If job seekers can utilise the information and the influence of knowledgeable, powerful, wealthy and/or prestigious individuals they are more likely to find jobs and better jobs, than those who do not have such connections. Stolloff, et al., (1999) found that the higher the occupational status of the network contacts, the higher the occupational status the job seeker obtained. In Finland Nyqvist, *et al.* (2013) found access to high social capital was greater for those in work and helped them remain in work when compared to those who were forced into early retirement. Gericke *et al.* (2018) in a qualitative study found that social capital was important for high-qualified refugees in Germany securing adequate jobs and those with access to low social capital tended to end up in low quality work. Smith (2010) stressed that networks and access to social capital have become more important in turbulent labour markets and effective networking can help to compensate for skills obsolescence and lack of qualifications. She pointed out that networks of disadvantaged groups tend to be shallower and narrower than those of professional groups and this results in difficulties in obtaining employment and when they do so, the jobs are often of poor quality. Gonzales and Nowell (2017), from a longitudinal investigation of the Florida Health and Retirement Study, found that social bridging, as defined by informal volunteering and social linking, were strong predictors of older people's return to work. McDonald and Mair (2010) found the social capital embedded in networks tend to accumulate over people's careers but general sociability declines. Grey (2009) identified that the social capital of older people was weaker than younger people, and that those whose main social capital was working class benefited less in terms of wellbeing support than those whose social capital was typified by professional and managerial occupational groups. Therefore, from the existing literature it is evident that higher social capital among older workers helps to facilitate reemployment.

Lin (2001) distinguishes two modes of social capital activation - accessed social capital and mobilised social capital. He (2001: 92) observed, 'Not all persons accessed with rich social capital are expected to take advantage of or be able to mobilise social capital for the purpose of obtaining better socioeconomic status'. Smith (2005) pointed out that an element of action and choice is important in determining whether social capital is mobilised. Pena-L'opez and S'anchez-Santos (2017) further note the need to distinguish different dimensions of mobilising

social capital, particularly instrumental-expertise (e.g. the ego's human capital, social status of contacts) and expressive mobilization (linked to strong bonds such as marital status and family ties). Thus, different components of mobilised social capital partly explain status attainment as a function of the status of the job contacts who provided support.

In this paper the association of both accessed and mobilized social capital have been examined to explain older workers' employability in a Scottish labour market, while controlling for other socio-economic and demographic components. Although literature on social network and job search is not new, using this component for explaining older workers' employability is rare, as are studies on the activation process of different network components through which older workers' secure employment.

Data Collection, Analysis Procedures and Measures

The data set used in this paper has both quantitative and qualitative components and is extracted from a larger data set which was collected in 2004/5 to undertake a comparative study of the effect of social networks on the labour participation of younger and older workers (Gayen *et al.* 2010). Re-examining this unique data set, which remains relevant, gives the opportunity to expose the importance of social networks and how older people activate them and so help address gaps in the literature.

The study was undertaken in Edinburgh, Scotland. This labour market was typified by a growing service sector business and has a buoyant economy with low levels of unemployment. Scotland is an appropriate choice for this study as it was one of the first nations to experience deindustrialisation and its population is at the forefront of European populations exhibiting ageing which is very likely to impact on the labour market (Brown and Danson 2003; Lisenkova *et al.* 2009). In the current study, 103 people aged between 50 and the then state retirement age were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire. The sample consisted of two groups of people who had lost their jobs at the age of 50 or older: those who had successfully regained employment and those who were seeking jobs.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained three sections: 1) questions on the socio-economic background of participants and their job search procedures; 2) social network questions; and 3) an open

question to allow the respondents to verbally elaborate on their job search and help received from social networks.

Socio-Economic Questions

The socio-economic questions allowed the following variables to be measured: Gender (0 = female, 1 = male); Annual income; Household composition (0 = single, 1 = with partner); Number of children; Academic qualification (0 = none, 1 = school, 2 = university); Vocational qualifications (0 = none, 1 = semi-skilled/manual, 2 = professional/managerial); Accommodation type (0 = rented, 1 = owner occupied); Employment history (1 = mainly stable employment, 0 = otherwise); Employment status of spouse (0 = no spouse or spouse not in employment, 1 = spouse in employment); Access to private transport (0 = no, 1 = yes). Those interviewed were also asked to identify their main job search strategy.

Descriptive statistics, χ^2 tests and independent samples t-tests were applied to investigate the data and assess significance of differences between groups.

Social Network Questions

Respondents (egos) were asked to name up to five friends (alters) who in some way had helped in the ego's job search. These data were structured into matrices in which the absence of a contact was counted as zero. These matrices were the input data to the social network analysis package UCINET-6 (Borgatti et al. 2002). A variable 'tie strength' (S) for each person was computed from the first principal component derived from the following network questions:

- Duration of relationship - a 6-point scale, one year or less = 1 to most of your life = 6;
- Frequency of contacts - a 4-point scale, daily = 3, weekly = 2, monthly = 1, other = 0;
- Living distance - a 7-point scale, from greater than one hour away = 1 to the same dwelling = 7;
- Frequency of seeking advice on mundane problems - a 4-point scale, never = 1 to often = 4;
- Frequency of discussion on job related issues - a 4-point scale, never = 1 to often = 4;

The principal component for each contact respectively explained 42.1, 64.7, 76.3, 81.5 and 82.0 per cent of the variances across the five questions. The principal component score for

each contact was then adjusted to a non-negative scale and used to represent the tie strength of the respondent using the arbitrary transformation. The tie strength was then formed into a valued diagraph matrix and entered into UCINET-6.

Respondents were asked to identify the occupation that best matched their contacts from unemployed or one of the nine Standard Occupation Codes (SOC 2000). These were recoded into the variable SOC, where 1 = unemployed, 2 = unskilled, 3 = semi-skilled, 4 = skilled, 5 = professional/managerial. The identified positions were given values one to five, representing the prestige of the contact, and were used to form another matrix. This matrix is termed the position matrix and was also entered into UCINET-6.

Five social network variables were created: *number of contacts* (out-degree centrality obtained from UCINET-6), *proportion of contacts who were employed*, *accessed social capital*, *mobilised social capital*, and *comparative job status of network members*.

Accessed social capital (ASC) was calculated from the position matrix. First, the sum of the prestige of all accessed positions the respondents cited, weighted by the tie strength for each mentioned position, was calculated. This accessed prestige was then divided by the number of accessed positions (n) to give a proxy for average *accessed social capital* (\overline{ASC}) i.e.:

$$\overline{ASC} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^5 (S_i \times SOC)$$

Where S = tie strength, i = contacts 1 to 5.

Mobilised social capital (MSC) was computed by calculating a contact's help score (CHS) and then multiplying this by the average ASC. The CHS was derived from answers to five questions asking the degree of help provided on a four-point scale from 0 = never to 3 = always. The questions were if their contacts helped them by: 'recommending personally', 'writing references', 'helping with application forms and covering letters', 'providing job information' and 'other'. Thus, the *contact help score (CHS)* is:

$$CHS = \sum_{i=1}^5 \sum_{j=1}^5 h_{ij}$$

Where, h_{ij} is the degree of help provided by the i^{th} contact in help category j .

Hence the *mobilised social capital* (MSC) is:

$$MSC = CHS \times \overline{ASC}$$

The *comparative job status of the contacts* was measured for each contact as -1 for lower status than the ego, 0 for similar and 1 for greater status and was summed across all the contacts. In this comparative analysis, there is a need to control for the previous work experience and qualifications of the ego. Ideally, we would use multivariate statistical methods to do this but as the sample size is small, we indicate the relative importance of key variables by using a binary logistic regression and add insights from qualitative cases.

The Sample

Sixty-one of those interviewed had regained employment and 42 were still seeking employment. Voluntary early retirees and those out of work on health grounds were excluded from the sample frame.

For the reemployed, data were collected from various workplaces including banks, the national health sector, business organisations, retailers and a university. Attempts were made to include interviews with people from a range of occupational groups roughly reflecting the local working population. However, semi-skilled and manual work was slightly under-represented as was employment in distribution, hotels and restaurants. Managerial and manufacturing jobs were over-represented in the sample. In the sample of those reemployed, 67 per cent were in full time employment and 33 per cent were in part-time employment; this compared closely with the respective levels of 69 per cent and 31 per cent for the City as a whole (NOMIS 2010).

For people who were unemployed but actively seeking jobs, data were collected from the client bases of local employment initiatives involved providing training and job information and helping with job applications. Data were also collected from social and sporting clubs in order to reflect the more affluent unemployed.

Ethics permission was granted from the Research Integrity Committee of Edinburgh Napier University, and interviews were piloted on work colleagues and friends of work colleagues. Those in the pilot did not take part in the main study and no incentives were given to participants.

As the structured part of the questionnaire was rather long, taking between thirty to forty-five minutes to complete, only seven of those reemployed and nine of those seeking employment participated in giving accounts of their job search and the role of their social networks, which added worthwhile information to the structured part. These were formed into case vignettes to explore the context within which the network operates and to illustrate their job search experiences. Case vignettes have gained credence in areas of health research where the approach has been found to effectively corroborate findings by other methods (Fitzpatrick and Boulton 1994; Ferrer-i-Carboell, *et al.*, 2011). We analysed the qualitative responses and developed six representative vignettes of respondents' situations.

Results and Analysis

Respondents' Backgrounds and Descriptive Data

Socio-economic conditions

The mean age of those unemployed was 54.7 years, and those reemployed was 56.3 years. The overall self-reported health of the sample was good (on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very good health), with those reemployed having slightly better health score (2.04) than those unemployed and seeking work (2.32), but the difference was not statistically significant. Respondents, who were married or had a partner, were statistically significantly associated with being employed at the 1 per cent level. Having children was also associated with being in employment. As expected, those reemployed had higher qualifications. This may point to a limitation of this comparative analysis, as those with higher human capital in terms of qualification and accumulated assets were more likely to be employed regardless of their networks. However, this human capital variable was controlled for in statistical modelling.

TABLE 1

The reemployed had had more stable job histories with 79 per cent having been mainly in stable employment over their working lives, compared to 53 per cent of those still seeking employment ($P = 0.001$). The reemployed were mainly owner-occupiers (95%) and unemployed were mainly rented from the local authority (50.0 per cent). Similarly, for access to private transport, some 86 per cent of reemployed people had access to private transport compared to only 14 per cent of those seeking employment ($P < 0.001$). As expected, reemployed people were generally at an advantageous socioeconomic position.

As per job search, the common methods for those reemployed were interpersonal channels: ex-work colleagues (59%), friends and relatives (58 per cent), employers (58 per cent), associates (53%) and then local newspapers (14%); whereas unemployed job-seekers relied mostly on the media and Job Centres: Job Centres (84 per cent), local newspapers (73 per cent), and websites (54%). Reemployed people cited interpersonal channels 3.7 times more than those who were seeking employment.

Unemployed job-seekers showed a relatively high degree of flexibility in terms of job status, pay and work times. Eighty-seven per cent of them would accept a job that was less skilled, 91 per cent would accept a job with less responsibility and 70 per cent would accept a job with less pay than their previous job. They would also accept working in shifts – 74 per cent would accept evening shifts, 60 per cent would accept night shifts and 78 per cent would accept weekend shifts. This finding contrasts with existing literature that older people are unwilling to accept the flexibility, which is often perceived to be the characteristics of new service sector economy (Lindsay and McQuaid 2004; Nixon 2009).

Social Network Data

In total 276 relations to friends who in some way assisted their job search were reported. The unemployed people seeking employment had 1.8 ties on average, compared to 3.3 for those who were reemployed. The social networks were well established. For those reemployed, around 80 per cent of their contacts had been known for more than five years, whereas for those unemployed only around 68 per cent of contacts had been known for at least five years. The mean 'proportion of contacts who were in employment' was also higher among those who were reemployed (0.89) compared to those seeking employment (0.74).

The mean 'strength of ties' was higher among the reemployed, 9.3; compared to 5.9 for those seeking employment (the difference is significant at the one per cent level). Thus, one can observe that having stronger relationships with social contacts was associated with an increased likelihood of being reemployed.

Reemployed people spoke more frequently (mean 4.4) about employment and active job searching with their network members than who were unemployed (mean 3.7). Although the score for help received from network members while searching for work was not very frequent, unemployed group reported getting more help from their network members than those who were reemployed. The disaggregated scores of help received respectively for those

seeking employment and those reemployed were getting a personal recommendation (1.43 compared to 0.87), written references (1.5 compared to 0.69), help in applications (1.05 compared to 0.44) and job information (2.2 compared to 0.59) (Table 2).

TABLE 2

Job advice seemed to be circulated horizontally across specific occupational levels. As shown in Table 2, most help was both given and received by professional/managerial groups. In addition, many unskilled people provided and received help from their peers, more so than peer support in the semi-skilled and skilled groups.

A comparison of the social network variables between those seeking employment and those reemployed appears in Table 3. The mean accessed social capital amongst those reemployed was more than three times that of those seeking employment (significant at less than one per cent level). It is notable that the 'contact help score' of those seeking employment was 5.8 compared to 2.8 for those reemployed (but not a statistically significant difference). People seeking employment sought job related help from their social networks more than those reemployed. However, because of the lower accessed social capital in the seeking employment group, there was no significant difference between the groups' mean mobilised social capital. The mean mobilised social capital score decreased with age, for those 55 years and over their MSC was significantly less than the 50 to 54 years age group, which may reflect a lessening of the value placed on the future employment related benefits of social networks.

TABLE 3

As discussed above, the differences in securing employment between the two groups might be attributable to the capabilities of the individuals rather than the impact of their social networks. To examine this, we fitted two binary logistic regression, the first to illustrate the association between employment status and the variables representing academic and professional qualifications as a proxy for socioeconomic variables, gender and accessed social capital in one model. The second was to test the effect of mobilised social capital scores the model was refitted using this variable to replace ASC, as ASC is a constituent part of MSC. The model with ASC showed that the variable was positively associated with reemployment and was statistically significant ($P = 0.001$) correctly predicting 81 per cent of employment status. The model is reported in Table 4. For MSC, the variable was only marginally significant ($P =$

0.490) and the model only predicted 73 per cent of employment status. Surprisingly, although slight, the MSC had a negative association with the likelihood of being reemployed.

TABLE 4

From Table 4, it seems that having academic qualifications, especially a university degree is only slightly associated with the likelihood of being reemployed but being male and having semi-skilled professional qualifications seem to be associated with unemployment. Although there is a need for caution in interpreting the logistic model, there is an indication that even in the presence of academic qualifications the accessed social capital does appear to be significant. However, a positive effect of mobilised social capital is not supported.

Generally, network members mentioned by reemployed people were mainly engaged in managerial and/or professional positions, whereas network members mentioned by those seeking employment were mainly involved in manual and semi-skilled jobs or were unemployed. This is illustrated in Figure 1, in which sociograms of the egocentric networks of those who were reemployed and those unemployed are presented.

FIGURE 1

The egos were at the centre of each star shaped ego network. Open circles represent people who were unemployed, black circles represent people who were in managerial and professional positions and grey circles represent those who were in manual or semi-skilled jobs. Comparing figures for those who were reemployed and those seeking employment, one can observe that egos who were reemployed were mainly surrounded by people in managerial/professional positions, whereas most of those unemployed were surrounded by network members who were either also not employed or employed in manual/unskilled jobs.

The sociograms further suggest the association of social capital in one's social network in explaining their employment status. Among those who were seeking employment, only 25 per cent of their network members were in managerial/professional positions compared to 81 per cent for those reemployed. One would suspect that this reflects the last job the ego had, but it is not convincing as 40 per cent of those unemployed had a previous job classed as skilled or professional, and several had academic degrees.

Vignettes

Here we give summaries of six representative case study vignettes of respondents' typical situations. These vignettes give the perspective of older workers (names are pseudonyms') describing their job searching experience, particularly the importance of social networks in their job searching.

Case: 1

Bruce (58 years) was currently unemployed, having previously worked as a fitter in a coal mine. The mine was closed and there was large scale of redundancies. Bruce had tried to find work through various agencies and local newspapers. He had little success in finding regular employment, his perception reflected macro-economic factors and the difficulty in shifting from declining sectors to those with more opportunities (also described by Brown and Konrad 2001 and Lindsay and McQuaid 2004):

'There are no jobs for me – who wants an old miner?'

In line with Cingano and Rosolia (2012), when asked about help received from his social network he replied that it did not provide access to relevant contacts:

'They can't help me find a job – they are the same as me – these days it's all about who you know and we don't know anybody'.

Case: 2

Mary (55 years) had been visiting a centre, which helped long-term unemployed workers to find work. Her previous job was as a secretary in a small joinery firm, which closed down. Mary lived on her own. Her children migrated to Canada several years ago and her husband had died. She found difficulty in even securing a job interview and was losing confidence:

'It seems to me that once you're over fifty that's it – can't even get interviews – what's the point in applying'.

Of the three contacts she quoted, one of them was also unemployed, another worked as a cleaner and the third was a nurse. Mary did help her unemployed friend by discussing job

applications, proof reading and writing covering letters, but she never got any job related help from them. Illustrating a lack of relevant, accessed social capital, she remarked:

'They can't help me – my pals are not the bosses- how will they help me?'

Case: 3

Brian (56 years) formerly worked in a secretarial/clerical position and had been out of work for almost one year. He mentioned two friends, one of whom was in a semi-skilled job and was now out of work and the other is in a professional/managerial position. However, Brian felt he could not mobilise the social capital this later contact offered:

'Jamie (his semi-skilled friend) often helps by telling me about jobs, writing references and helping with the application forms, but we have had no success yet. I'd like to ask Alistair (who works at director level) [for] help but he's really busy and I don't want to bother him'.

These cases reinforce that the unemployed job seekers with low skills do consider using friends, but either their friends are in a similar position as themselves or are ones with high social capital that they find it difficult to access and mobilise into effective help. However, there are some positive examples of the action of social networks as we outline in the case of Valerie.

Case: 4

Valerie (58 years) had recently secured a customer advisor post with a leading retailer. She was a primary school teacher and when the school closed a few years ago, she did not take up the offer of redeployment to another school and took voluntary redundancy. After a year or so, she wished to get back into work. Valerie applied for posts via newspapers but found no success and attributed her new appointment to her twenty-year friendship with a senior staff supervisor in the retailer. Margaret, Valerie's friend, approached the local manager

directly to recruit Valerie, a clear example of her social network giving relevant access and the contact in it being mobilised to help her:

'I owe my job completely to Margaret, she has a really good job with superstore X – she let me know about the vacancy and put in a good word for me'.

Case: 5

John (54 years) returned to the UK after working overseas as a construction project manager and was unemployed for around seven months. He applied for posts advertised on the internet and in newspapers and trade journals. He had no difficulty obtaining references from his friends who also passed on job information. All but one of his contacts were in professional/managerial positions. Although John applied independently to the firm, he was currently employed. One of his network contacts worked at the firm in a senior capacity and briefed him on how the firm operated and the nature of the selection criteria, hence showing the importance of the mobilisation of his social network:

'Although I was getting interviews, the inside info from Andrew really helped, especially as I had been out of the country for so long'.

Case: 6

Mike (59 years) was a financial advisor with a major city insurance company who accepted a severance package at age 53. After a few years, he tried to re-enter employment. Because of his lack of professional qualifications and his experience being confined to selling financial products, he found it difficult to secure a job. Eventually, he got into work in a city DIY store primarily due to knowing the manager who was a former client:

'Though not really what I was after, I'm glad of the work – I sold Jack his pension – he got me a job'.

This illustrates the operation not just of accessed and mobilised social capital, but also a form of multi-rational social networking (Mouw 2006) where different types of network can cross over. In this case, from a former business relationship to friendship supporting their job seeking.

Discussion

The results appear consistent across the descriptive statistics and modelling, social network analysis and vignettes, suggesting robustness of the results and demonstrating the importance of social networks in successful job search for older workers.

From the descriptive statistics, we found that the age of reemployed people was 1.6 years higher on average than those who were unemployed, also the unemployed group showed higher flexibility in terms of job status, pay and work shifts, which is contrary to the existing literature that many older people are not willing to accept flexible employment. However, it was the job searching methods that first point to the importance of social networks in securing reemployment. Those who were reemployed mainly used interpersonal channels for job search, whereas the unemployed group used primarily impersonal channels like Job Centres, websites, and local newspapers. The case study vignettes explicitly show the importance of social networks. Bruce (case 1), Mary (case 2) and Brian (case 3) think they are old and they do not 'know anybody' who could help, so they do not expect to get a job. On the contrary, Valerie (case 4), John (case 5) and Mike (case 6) cite their friends' names whom they think directly helped their reemployment. This result then leads to the question, what is the composition of the social networks in each group, which might explain the difference in successful job hunting?

In terms of composition of their social networks, the number of contacts and the duration of relationship both were higher in the reemployed group compared to the unemployed group. The 'strength of ties' was almost double for the reemployed compared to the unemployed. Also, social capital embedded in their networks was much higher among the reemployed group. Their social networks were composed of higher positioned people, mainly of managerial and professional positions. In contrast, the unemployed group had fragmented social networks, their network members tended to have lower status jobs or were unemployed.

The sociograms in Figure 1 strengthen the finding of embedded social capital in the respective networks from the descriptive analysis. This indicates that the reemployed people were in advantageous positions in terms of social networks. This, we argue, establishes the importance of social networks and the quality of social capital contained within them. The case study vignettes further confirm the characteristics of social networks in terms of employment status. Unemployed Bruce, Mary and Brian described their network members' positions as the same as their own or lower, ('they can't help me- my pals are not bosses, how

will they help me?" - Mary), whereas Valerie, John and Mike mentioned their friends who had higher prestige jobs. This result supports the proposition forwarded that social capital embedded in social networks is a good predictor of being able to re-enter employment. However, having strong ties with higher status network members may not guarantee the positive association with employment unless that social capital is accessed and mobilised for one's job search (Guyen *et al.* 2010).

When examining the *access to network members' social capital*, it was found that the mean accessed social capital among the reemployed group was almost double of those unemployed. Reemployed people spoke more frequently about work and actively sought work using their network members compared to the unemployed group. The findings are consistent across the descriptive summaries, the analysis of the network characteristics and the vignettes.

But when the *mobilisation of social capital*, which is the combination of 'access to social capital' and 'help used' is considered, the unemployed group was found to get more help from their network members than the reemployed group. The unemployed could mobilise help in terms of getting recommendation, written references, job information and help with applications. One reason for having higher help scores for this group might be they needed more help as they were still seeking jobs. However, the contradictory point was if they could mobilise the social capital in their networks, why then had they not be successful in obtaining jobs?

The answer appears to be in the comparative job status of the contacts. The reemployed people had strong ties with high positioned people, whereas the unemployed were connected mainly with those who were also either unemployed or employed in low positioned jobs whose help did not facilitate the egos' successful job searching. The direct association of social capital is stressed by Valerie (case 4), John (case 5) and Mike (case 6) in their reemployment ('I owe my job completely to Margaret'- Valerie). Conversely, the lack of social capital is stressed by Mary (case 2) and Bruce (case 1). The latter two found themselves in rather dire positions, attributing this to their lack of social capital. As their social capital was poor, even the higher mobilisation of that capital did not secure them jobs. However, Brian (case 3) could not access the social capital of his higher positioned friend ('...he is really busy, and I don't want to bother him'), which further indicates the importance of mobilisation of social capital.

From Table 1, it is clear that human capital is also important. Those unemployed had significantly lower academic qualifications than reemployed group, had less stable job

histories and less accumulated assets. Finally, a logistic regression model was used to confirm if the network variables, i.e. accessed and mobilised social capital scores affected the likelihood of reemployment in the presence of gender and qualifications. Although the sample size was small, the model did confirm the positive association of *accessed social capital* and academic qualifications with reemployment. While there were not significant health differences between the groups, those still unemployed were more likely to have lower qualifications and hence arguably more likely to be seeking manual type jobs where age may be seen as a more negative factor.

The suggestion from the findings is that being strongly connected to higher social capital in terms of employment status increased one's likelihood of reemployment. *Accessed social capital* emerges as important for those who were reemployed. The sources of information for their last successive job were generally a former work colleague, friends and associates. It is likely that as these network members were employed in high positions, they could supply better job information and appropriate advice. John's (case 5) report showed it was not just access to information about jobs that was important, but rather knowledgeable advice on the specific way that interviews should be dealt with that made the difference. The report by Valerie (case 4) illustrates how her high prestige friend gave access to relevant information which was effectively mobilised to help her. The report of Mike (case 6) indicated a type of multi-rational social networking where different types of networks crossed over (as suggested by Mouw 2006), such as former business relationships turning to a friendship relationship, which helped access employment opportunities.

In most of the cases for those reemployed, the duration of their tie relationships were long standing (more than five years). Hence, although the data is cross sectional, the account of relationships mentioned were not of a specific time but rather represented a long-term relationship and helps explain the significance of social network in determining the employment status of older workers. This suggests that, contrary to the literature (Granovetter, 1973, 1995; Yakubovich 2005; Hällsten and Rydgren 2017), strong ties are important, more so than weak ties for older workers regaining employment.

These results point to the need to develop policies to introduce methods to develop work identity and human and social capital by incorporating people into supportive networks and providing training. Smith (2010) pointed out that unpaid and marginal work, such as voluntary

work, can be a route to maintaining and building social capital. We consider that there is a need to support and enhance the weak networks of some older people and this might be a role for market intermediaries. The need for labour market intermediaries to support those with low levels of social connectedness was noted by Benner *et al.*, (2007) and we argue that this role is increasingly important in an ageing society. Similarly, Ulrich and Brott (2011) found that career counsellors were effective in getting older unemployed back into work and in Israel Sharabi and Simonovich (2017) found that using labour market intermediaries to compensate for the weak networks of chronically unemployed was effective.

Before our conclusions, we stress some limitations to our work. The sample size is rather small, a larger sample might give more control for demographic and economic factors and more detail on health factors affecting the people would be useful, especially given the age of the participants. As discussed above, it would be useful to seek greater controls related to the correlation between those with higher social capital and human capital, who are more likely to find employment. The work is cross sectional; a longitudinal study would allow understanding of the longer-term consequences of weak networks. Also, the study has only been conducted in one geographical area and time, so generalising from the work must be done with care. Older people are fairly difficult population to access, so caution is required as to the representativeness of our sample.

Conclusions

Two distinct objectives of this paper were to better understand job searching procedures of older people seeking to re-enter the job market and the relation of their social networks in that process. While doing so, we found that rather than Granovetter's (1973; 1995) 'strength of weak ties' being crucial for successful job hunting by young people, for the older people the 'strong ties' with higher positioned people in their networks were more effective. Their requirements were not only job information, but also direct help with applications, gaining 'rich' advice on how to undertake job search, including employer specific information on handling interviews, and references to employers.

We conclude that there is a strong association between social networks and explaining older people's reemployment with 'the number of contacts', 'proportion of contacts employed' and the 'employment status of the contacts' acting as a proxy for high social capital. People who

were unemployed, even though they reported getting, or mobilising, more help from their network members, had less useful support as their network members' referrals had limited effectiveness. These findings stress that both access to and mobilisation of higher social capital are important for the reemployment of older people (over 50 years old). The weaker nature of the social capital of unemployed older people helps to explain their reliance on institutional contacts, while those who were reemployed tended to use more personal networks. However other factors, including human capital in the form of qualifications and work experience, also remain important in securing reemployment.

As the network size of the unemployed was smaller, and the social capital embedded in those networks was lower, there is a need for job support agencies and other institutions to help fill the roles of social networks. From the findings in this paper we suggest that agencies should actively disseminate job information and provide individualised social support in the forms of writing references, helping with applications and in-depth preparation of job seekers for interviews and identifying the specific needs of individual employers to whom the unemployed are applying for work. This could be carried out by market intermediaries. As societies continue to become older, in order to keep people in work it is important that policies are developed to strengthen people's networks and find ways of compensating in cases where networks which are weak in terms of social capital.

There is a clear socio-economic gradient in terms of the strength of social networks; those who were poorer in society had weaker and less connected networks than the more affluent members of the society. While it is difficult to alter these, agencies should consider tackling the aspect of social exclusion through encouraging work experience for older people, allowing them to extend and deepen their social networks with those who are employed.

These findings give a theoretical contribution to the literature regarding the relation between social networks and employment and challenge the narrowness of the theory of the strength of weak ties. Further a methodological contribution is made to social network research by showing how a combined approach of quantitative and qualitative methods can be used to address research goals and how weighted sociograms of ego-centric networks can be used to visualise and compare social capital of both egos and their contacts in different networks.

Besides policy recommendations, and the need to generalise the findings into other labour markets there is considerable scope for future research into how networks develop over time, especially before and after older workers change status from employed to unemployed, and how those with weak networks can be better supported to re-enter employment

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Table 1: Socio- economic characteristics

Characteristic		Unemployed	Reemployed	P value
Mean Age		54.71	56.30	0.896
Health Score out of 10 (1= good)		2.32	2.04	0.543
Academic Qualifications	None	47.5%	23.0%	<0.001
	School	37.5%	37.6%	
	University	15.0%	39.4%	
Vocational Qualifications	None	34.1%	42.6%	0.014
	Manual & Semi-skilled	56.1%	18.0%	
	Skilled and Professional	9.8%	39.4%	
Stable Employment History		52.5%	78.7%	0.001
Proportion who are married or have a partner		62.8%	20.7%	<0.001
Proportion who have children		65.1%	34.5%	0.010
Proportion who own their house		20.5%	92.1%	<0.001
Proportion who have access to own transport		13.8%	86.0%	<0.001
Proportion whose spouse works		93.1%	83.7%	0.210

Table 2: Help received from people in different job status

Type of Help	Contact	Economic status of contact					Total
		Out of work	Un-skilled	Semi-Skilled	Skilled	Professional	
Recommend	Seeking Employment	0.6	0.8	0.5	0.7	1.1	3.7
	Reemployed	0.6	0.3	0.0	0.1	0.2	1.1
References	Seeking Employment	0.4	0.8	0.5	0.9	1.6	4.2
	Reemployed	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	1.0
Applications	Seeking Employment	0.7	0.1	0.3	1.4	4.0	6.6
	Reemployed	0.6	0.0	0.5	0.4	1.3	2.8
Job Information	Seeking Employment	1.2	1.0	1.1	1.3	1.6	6.1
	Reemployed	0.4	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.8
Other	Seeking Employment	0.6	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.3	1.3
	Reemployed	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3
Total	Seeking Employment	3.1	2.9	2.4	3.7	6.1	18.1
	Reemployed	1.8	0.7	0.3	0.3	0.6	3.8
Number of Contacts	Seeking Employment	16	10	11	16	18	71
	Reemployed	24	15	29	70	144	282

Table 3: Social network variables and employment status

Social Network Variable	Reemployed	Unemployed	P value
Number of Contacts	3.279	1.345	<0.001
Proportion of Contacts who are in Work	0.914	0.705	0.038
Tie Strength	9.421	3.604	<0.001
Mean Accessed Social Capital	3.229	7.025	<0.001
Contact Help Score	2.841	5.864	0.024
Mobilised Social Capital Score	3.935	8.629	0.163
Mean relative job status	0.023	0.448	0.189
Proportion who are married	0.628	0.207	<0.001

Table 4: Logistic regression model of the likelihood of being in employment
Model 1: With Accessed Social Capital

Variable		Coefficient	Standard Error	Odds Ratio	P value
	Constant	-0.451	0.510	0.637	0.377
Gender	Baseline female				
	Male	-0.687	0.512	0.503	0.180
Academic Qualification	<i>Baseline = none</i>				
	School	0.790	0.742	2.203	0.157
	University	0.861	0.742	2.367	0.245
Professional Qualification	<i>Baseline = none</i>				
	Skilled	-1.363	0.560	0.256	0.015
	Professional	0.278	0.739	1.321	0.706
Mean accessed social capital		0.240	0.0.74	1.875	0.001

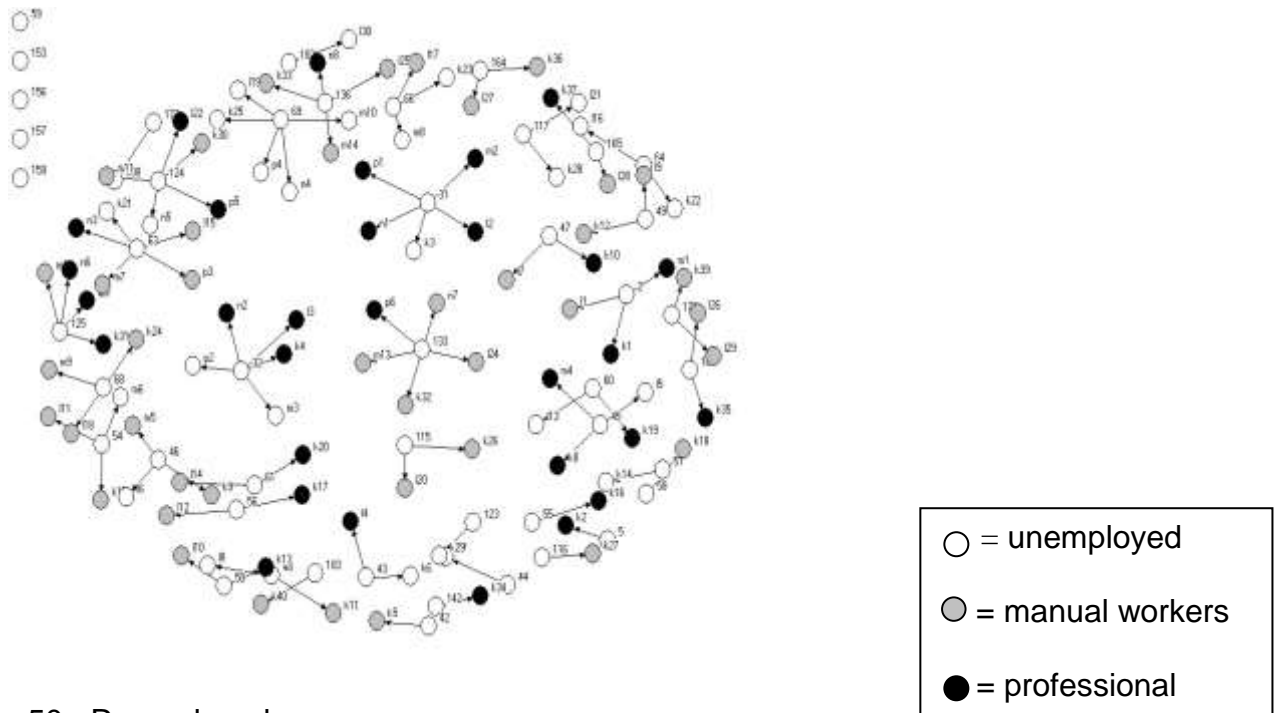
Per cent correctly predicted = 81.1 per cent

Model 2: With mobilised social capital

Variable		Coefficient	Standard Error	Odds Ratio	P value
	Constant	0.438	0.476	1.550	0.357
Gender	Baseline female				
	Male	-0.653	0.485	0.520	0.178
Academic Qualification	<i>Baseline = none</i>				
	School	0.992	0.541	2.697	0.066
	University	1.485	0.662	4.419	0.029
Professional Qualification	<i>Baseline = none</i>				
	Skilled	-1.114	0.521	0.328	0.033
	Professional	1.198	0.757	3.315	0.113
Mean accessed social capital		-0.065	0.033	0.049	0.937

Per cent correctly predicted = 72.6 per cent

50+ Unemployed



50+ Reemployed

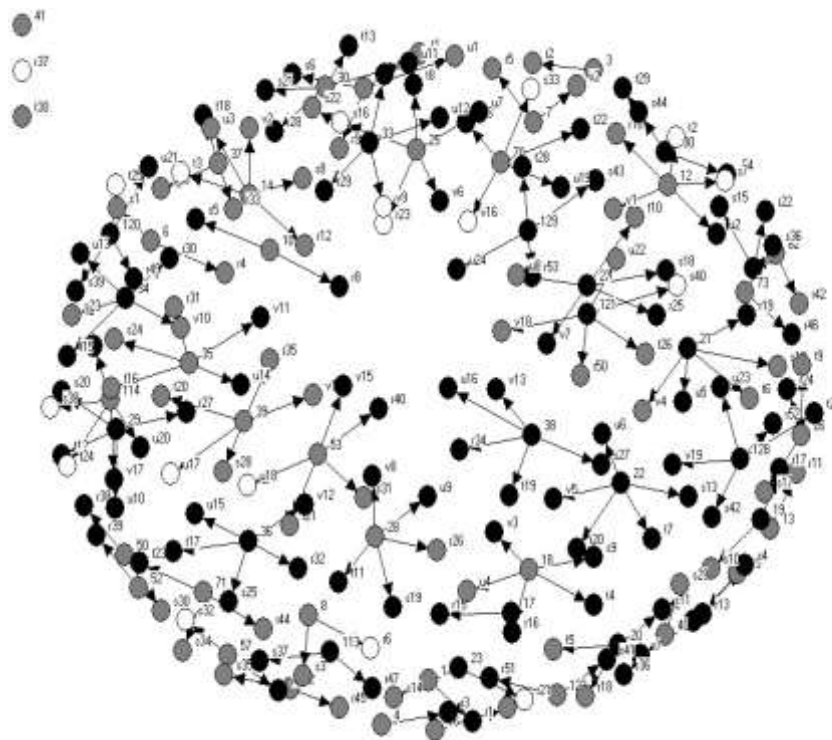


Figure 1: Job status of network members by respondent's employment status