Job loss and social capital: The role of family, friends and wider support networks

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Non-technical summary

The recession that began in the UK in 2008 was accompanied by relatively lower rates of unemployment than previous recessions. Nonetheless the UK unemployment rate hovered around approximately 7% or 8% during the period from January 2009 to April 2013 (ONS, 2013). Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that this time period has been associated with a squeeze in living standards and pressure on household budgets. In times of difficulty individuals and households might be expected to lean on those around them for support but the extent to which this happens is likely to depend on the strength and scope of support available and whether differing support options are seen as attractive or viable. Linked to a wider quantitative ESRC-funded project on understanding the effects of recession, this paper explores the role social capital and networks in times of hardship but one which seeks to understand the importance of social connectedness for jobseekers in the context of 21st century labour market conditions at a time of economic uncertainty.

Drawing on 30 qualitative interviews with couple members across 17 households sampled from the *Understanding Society* Innovation Panel, the findings indicate that family, friends and wider networks are important mainstays in helping jobseekers back into work but in different ways and for different reasons. Family financial support allows people time to find a new job and re-establish themselves in the labour market while wider contacts open up job opportunities jobseekers might not otherwise have heard about. Family ties can help with job searching but in a more tailored way given the privileged knowledge they have about the jobseeker. As the widest network, social security is not typically experienced as either respectable or, in the case of employment services, effective. Overall the findings suggest that 'who you know' matters to 21st century jobseekers on at least three grounds: what they can impart, what they know about you and what you know about them.

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Abstract

Finding a new job is not the only problem the unemployed face. How to manage the loss of income, status and identity can also be a serious consideration for those in between jobs. In-depth qualitative interviews reveal that family, friends and wider networks are important mainstays in helping jobseekers back into work but in different ways and for a variety of reasons. By examining the job seeking strategies in terms of drawing on (a) family connections and (b) friends and wider social networks this investigation sheds some light on the extent to which social connectedness matters for jobseekers in contemporary Britain.

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<u>Background</u>

Finding a new job is not the only problem the unemployed face. How to manage the loss of income, status and identity in the meantime can also be a serious consideration for those in between jobs. This paper explores the kinds of support mechanisms that couples draw on to navigate through the experience of redundancy or job loss and aims to understand the importance of social capital in the context of 21st century labour market conditions at a time of economic uncertainty. One of the key structural labour market changes in the last few decades is the growing acknowledgement that jobs for life have become much less prevalent (Gregg and Wadsworth, 1995, 2002). The ways in which people draw on their social connections may be different if one cannot expect to keep the same job or employer across a working career. The increasing importance of online networks and social media has also changed the contemporary landscape of job seeking and how people cope with unemployment (Feuls et al, 2014). Given these changes in the nature of the UK labour market coupled with the substantial pressure on household budgets associated with the Great Recession and slow economic recovery (Jenkins, 2015; Joyce and Sibieta, 2013), the main contribution of this paper is to provide a re-examination of the ways in which job seekers draw on their social networks to cope with job loss.

Theories of social capital and individualization

Different theories of social capital rest on different premises as to what social capital actually is and also what it means, rendering the concept somewhat nebulous and pluralistic (Adam and Rončević, 2003). Perhaps the most established conceptual dichotomy is that which focuses on social capital either as a feature of individuals (social networks) or as a feature of communities (civic spirit) (Portes, 2000). As an investigation of how couples use their social connections to cope with job loss, this paper adopts the perspective of social capital as an individual resource arising from the value of being embedded in a social network. This approach is most commonly associated with the ground-breaking work of Bourdieu (1983) and Coleman (1988); with Bourdieu applying a neo-Marxist analysis to the value of interpersonal connections and Coleman emphasising the personal dimensions of social capital as complimentary to the development of human capital. This view of social capital as an asset held by individuals has been further developed by social network theorists emphasising the rational choice perspective that individuals are incentivised to invest in social networks, given the expected returns they are likely to yield (Lin et al, 2001), or from the notion of affective relationships where family and friendship bonds draw people together (Crow, 2004; Spencer and Pahl, 2006).

By contrast, in his highly influential book about declines in civic participation and political engagement in America since 1950, Putnam (2000) drew attention to the idea of social capital as a public good. Putnam maintains that a crucial part of a vibrant democracy is civic engagement and declines in group associative behaviour and the rise of an individualised style of living is harmful to

the very fabric of American society. Critiques of the empirical basis of Putnam's conclusions point out that social capital in the US may not be in decline but simply that the measures used in his analysis, formally organised activities, are less relevant today in an age of ad hoc civic participation and non-organised sociality (Fischer, 2005). Others have noted that even if any real decline exists this may be contextually-dependent on the nature of American society and institutions and have little relevance in other cultures (Forrest et al, 2002). The point here is that, aside from any controversy about what social capital is and what it means, any empirical identification of social capital is likely to be sensitive to issues of measurement and context to the extent that cultural variation across time and space matters.

Speaking about Western societies and the industrialised world of the late 20th century, Beck (1992) has also suggested that a process of individualisation has taken place. In contrast to Putnam who understood this move towards individualised living as an outcome of lifestyle choices, Beck suggests that changes in societal forces compel a more privatised existence '…people have lost their traditional support networks and have had to rely on themselves and their own individual (labor market) fate' (Beck, 1992: 92). On entering the labour market individuals gain a certain amount of financial independence from their traditional ties and this affords the scope for personal autonomy but the latter requires that individuals take charge of their own lives (Beck, 1992). This may mean that individuals have even greater need for social bonds and connections in order to write their own biographies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In the context of increasingly insecure and flexible labour markets the motivation to develop and maintain job-related networks may be rather limited (Bauman, 2000; Sennett, 1998). This suggests that whilst the possession of social connections may be important for job seekers, the quality of the information and opportunities they represent may be as important.

The supportiveness of jobseekers' connections

The importance of social tie quality in relation to job seeking is not new. Differentiating between the *strong* ties that bind us to close friends or family and the *weak* ties that connect us with acquaintances, Granovetter (1973) posited that weak ties are crucial in providing the broadest range of job information as it is these sorts of ties that enable jobseekers to tap into information that would otherwise be out of reach. Those closest to us are likely to be privy to similar sorts of information given the likely overlap in more dense sets of connections. By contrast, weak ties will have their own personal 'clump' of strong and weak ties and consequently be party to a more diverse chain of information (Granovetter, 1983: 202) . Furthermore, compared to strong ties, weak ties tend to require less effort to acquire and maintain so it is both possible and advantageous to possess relatively more of them at any given time (Boorman, 1975) though their effectiveness may depend on the specific composition of the network (Ioannides and Loury, 2004; Russell, 1999).

Recognising that weak ties can generate more job-search information, Murray et al (1981) point out that to be effective it needs to be the right information. 'Long lists of undesirable unobtainable positions are of little interest. Thus, it is more efficient to rely on a few intimate colleagues (strong ties) in seeking employment' (Murray et al, 1981: 119). Securing a new job is not only about having access to job information but also about any appetite to pursue particular vacancies. Ethnographic research on the experience of unemployment suggests that the fragmentation of identity that can accompany redundancy can lead to a period of exile, self-imposed or otherwise, from even the most fertile networks (Gabriel et al, 2013; Parry, 2003). Furthermore, studies have found that strong ties can operate as highly effective job-agents where they are able to exert influence over the hiring process either by providing advance information about likely hires or giving personal recommendations to potential employers (Bian, 1997; Wegener, 1991; Yakubovich, 2005). Nonetheless, close interpersonal links have been found to have their limits in this respect. In a study of redundant Hartlepool steelworkers in the 1980s, Morris (1992) found that close family and friends had operated as a key source of information about potential job opportunities in prosperous earlier times. As job losses mounted in the context of serious industrial decline, job opportunities evaporated and tip-offs about what jobs there were dried up as family and friends were themselves made redundant and could no longer provide useful information.

Finding a new job is only one of the problems facing those who lose their job because there is also the question of how to survive until the next job comes along. Studies of support networks find mixed results when analysing whom people turn to when they need help. Studies of 1980s UK unemployment suggest that the social exclusion that tends to accompany job loss both weakens ties with those outside the close circle and increases the reliance on the core ties (Harris et al, 1985; Jackson, 1988; McKee and Bell, 1985; Morris, 1992). For intensive support measures such as financial aid or large services, immediate kin are found to be very important (Morris and Irwin, 1992; Wellman and Wortley, 1990), but close friends can be as important where blood ties have fragmented or weakened (Uehara, 1990). Family support has been found to have limits where those viewed as having drawn too much from the family collective can be judged unworthy of further help (Finch and Mason, 1993). In a study of Glaswegian unemployment Binns and Mars (1984) found that the fear of becoming too indebted to or imposing on close family could deter couples from asking for significant amounts of support. Moreover, whilst immediate kin typically constitute a key set of dependable supportive relationships, the complexity of social and familial relationships can often blur the distinction between friend-ties and family-ties (Spencer and Pahl, 2006).

A 21st century experience of job loss in the UK?

3

Against a backdrop of industrial decline, mass redundancies and limited job opportunities in the 1970/80s, the role of the household, family and social networks in providing support resources at times of high unemployment proved a rich area of UK research (Pinch and Storey, 1992). Given the relative prosperity of much of the 1990s and 2000s it is perhaps unsurprising that comparatively little work on this topic has been conducted since. While the UK unemployment rates during the Great Recession did not rise to the heights experienced in the 1980s, the recent woes of the UK economy and squeeze on household budgets over a number of years bring the theme of job loss sharply back into focus. Times have changed since the 1980s but very little is known about how these changes have influenced peoples coping mechanisms in relation to unemployment, if indeed they have. By examining job seeking strategies in terms of drawing on strong and weak ties from (a) family connections and (b) friends and wider social networks this investigation sheds some light on the extent to which 'who you know' matters for jobseekers in contemporary Britain.

Methodology

This paper is based on in-depth interviews conducted as part of a larger quantitative ESRC-funded project looking at labour market behaviour in recessionary Britain. Focussing on couple-households to investigate the ways in which spouses co-ordinate their strategies to deal with unemployment, semi-structured interviewing techniques were used to explore the processes and mechanisms behind the responses to job loss. A purposively selected sample was identified from the *Understanding Society* Innovation Panel where someone had either lost their job or was working reduced hours in the period 2008 to 2011. The *Understanding Society* Innovation Panel is an annual panel survey which offers the ability to adopt both quantitative and qualitative approaches through the Associated Studies programme (https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/get-involved/associated-studies). This programme offers the ability to collect information about participants that has not already been asked in the survey. This heralds the opportunity for combined analysis of the qualitative and quantitative material which, although beyond the remit of this research, should warrant future attention.

The data yielded a sampling frame of approximately 150 households of which 17 were followed up and face-to-face interviews were conducted with the couple-member who had experienced job loss and, where possible, their partner. Overall this led to 30 interviews, each of about 45 minutes in length. The selection process was designed to assemble a sample reflecting a diverse range of household and family profiles; namely, couples with and without children, older and younger children; the pre-retirement phase; a range of incomes; and labour market areas more and less affected by the recession (see Table 1). All respondents were White British as, though every attempt was made to secure interviews with participants from other ethnic groups, the latter either declined to participate or could not be contacted.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

Couple #	Name	Mode of job-acquisition	Current Job	Previous Job(s)	Age	Age(s) of children	County
1	Lynn	Newspapers	Teaching Asst (Part-time)	Office Asst/Nursery Nurse	40s	18+ moved out	Essex
	Andy	n/a	Plumber	n/a	40s		
2	Roger	CV mailshot	Technical Manager	n/a	40s	5<10	Surrey
	Sarah	n/a	Nursery Worker (Part-time)	n/a	40s		
3	Wendy	Friends	Teacher (Part-time)	n/a	40s	10<16	London
	Ed	n/a	Music Industry Executive	n/a	40s		
4	Ian	n/a	IT Specialist	n/a	50s	10<16	Berks
	Jo	n/a	Shop Asst (Part-time)	n/a	40s		
5	Michael	n/a	Retired	Logistics Manager	60s	18+ moved out	Middx
	Pam	n/a	Retired	Sales Manager	60s		
6	Alan	n/a	Retired	Senior Production Manager/Gardener/ Shelf-stacker	60s	18+ moved out	S Yorks
	Marjorie	n/a	School Finance Manager (Part-time)	n/a	60s		
7	Lesley	Work colleague	Nurse (Part-time)	n/a	50s	18+ moved out	Staffs
	Bill	Friends	Paint Engineer	n/a	50s		
8	Peter	Work colleague	Engineering Consultant	Engineering Consultant	60s	18+ moved out	Notts
	Pat	n/a	Retired	Local Govt. Worker	60s		
9	Richard	Self-start-up (Family business)	Property Developer (Business Owner)	Construction Industry Exec.	40s	18+ moved out	Worcs
	Gail	Newspaper	Catering Asst (Part-time)	Homemaker	40s		
10	Janet	n/a	Retired (Full-Time Carer)	Bar Manager	50s	18+ moved out	Warwicks
	Jim	n/a	Delivery Driver	n/a	60s		
11	John	n/a	IT Specialist	n/a	50s	18+ moved out	Northants
	Carol	Ex-work colleague	Quality Manager	n/a	50s		
12	Paul	Self-start-up	Engineer (Business Owner)	Sheet Metal Worker	30s	<5	Cumbria
	Kayleigh	n/a	Catering Asst (Part-time)	n/a	30s		
13	Kevin	n/a	Printer	n/a	30s	<5	Devon
	Claire	n/a	Homemaker	Retail Manager	30s		
14	Maria	Newspapers	Medical Secretary (Part-time)	Admin Asst	50s	18+ moved out	Essex
15	Brenda	n/a	Long term sick (Not employed)	Catering Asst	40s	n/a	W Yorks
16	Tim	Self-start-up	Pub landlord	Call Centre Worker	20s	n/a	Lancs
17	Dave	Websites	Health Care Asst	Car Assembly Line Worker	50s	18+ moved out	Worcs

Fieldwork took place in from October 2012 to February 2013 and all interviews took place in participants' homes. Wherever feasible, partners were interviewed separately to allow each participant the opportunity to express their personal views most freely but two couples necessitated joint interviewing owing to the design of their home. All participants were offered a gift voucher for participating and interviews were audiotaped and fully transcribed. Using conventional techniques, the qualitative data was thematically analysed to identify key themes arising from the data. The identification and coding of dominant narratives was discussed and reviewed by all researchers to minimise bias and ensure consistency wherever possible. All transcripts were anonymised.

Family ties

Previous research has indicated the importance of supportive kin relationships during tough times (Binns and Mars, 1984; Morris, 1992; Wellman and Wortley, 1990) but the research question addressed here is the extent to which family members support 21st century jobseekers. Analysing networks of friends and families, Spencer and Pahl (2006) note that the distinction between blood ties and friendship bonds is not always clear as non-kin can be treated and regarded as 'family' while blood relationships can be displaced and viewed as extrinsic to the family unit. This suggests it is problematic to assume that family are always closer than friends but consistent with earlier research, the four couples who reported substantial amounts of informal financial support in this research received it from kin.

Post-redundancy, Roger needed a new car to travel to work once he had secured new employment and described how his immediate family provided the support he needed.

> [Previously] I had a company car so that went... we only had one car and I had to go down to Southampton [for the new job] and they didn't give me a company car...I remember phoning up my bank...and I said, "Look, I need to buy a car." I said, "I need some money for a short time,"...they said no...I phoned my parents up and my dad said, "How much do you need?" and so I said, "Well, £8,000." And sure enough, he gave me £8,000 and I paid it off over a year [Roger, 40s, Couple #9]

Unable to take up his new job without acquiring a car, Roger experienced difficulties in accessing formal credit. Newly employed individuals present as a financial risk for lending institutions as they typically have little in the way of demonstrable job security (Avery et al, 2004). The 'bank of mum and dad' appeared crucial in Roger's ability to get back into paid work. Roger also spoke about how he could have had a financial security blanket of £1,000 per month from his brother but did not take up the offer. Family support can prove vital, particularly when more formal lines of credit dry up, but Roger's experience demonstrates a disinclination to draw on kinship ties unless really needed; applying for a bank loan before going to parents, and declining his brother's offer. The complex

interplay of family loyalties and obligations has been found to have limitations with regard to the offering and acceptance of support. Families tend to operate on 'generalised reciprocity' where support is given to the family collective rather than a dyadic form of exchange (Finch and Mason, 1993). Previously, Roger's brother had received financial help from their parents and the offer of a monthly £1,000 to Roger was seen by the family as a form of payback. Despite the willingness of family members to offer substantial support, Roger displayed reluctance to accept describing the offer with sarcastic humour as 'kind of kept it in the family. But it was going to come from my brother which was nice, my little brother!' his inference being that it was anything but 'nice' to receive help from a younger sibling. The moral reputations of 'takers' and 'givers' within families can shape the degree of support on offer to particular members (Finch and Mason, 1993), but Roger's story tells of how needing support affected his self-identity within his family with dependency and indebtedness being something to be avoided.

Perhaps in recognition of the undesirability of borrowing from others, participants restructured their household finances through a variety of mechanisms including altering consumption patterns, renegotiating mortgage payment schedules and postponing large purchases (see Gush et al, 2015). Despite noting that she could have gone to her family for financial support, Lynne says that a combination of credit card debt, overdraft and welfare benefits were preferable sources of income smoothing. This further suggests that there may be limits to the extent to which people are comfortable with relying on their family.

> I mean I've always got family there if need be definitely. But no…fortunately for us we've always had an overdraft for £2,500 which is a lot of money. I've always kept it because it's handy. And I think at the time we probably had a credit card that we used if I'm honest ... [Lynn, 40s, Couple #1]

Seemingly, using the support of family can be seen as a last resort – or certainly not the first, but not everyone's parents and/or siblings are in a position to be able to lend significant amounts of money and thus support mechanisms have to work within tighter boundaries. Tim was made redundant from his call centre job and having always wanted to run a pub borrowed money from various sources to move into a career in pub management.

> To get the pub, I borrowed some money off my mum and my uncle, … and some off my credit cards…which mostly it's paid back now...worked out about £5000...buy the lease on the pub. And then obviously you need to buy your stock. [Tim, 20s, Couple #16]

To create a job for himself post-redundancy he borrowed money not just from his mother but from an uncle as well, alongside accruing some credit card debt. Unable to work through disability and having previously been declared bankrupt, Tim's mother was living with them. Family disputes amongst

Tim's siblings had meant that Tim was now his mother's primary carer. It is not clear whether this was seen as reciprocity for the vital part that his mother had played in securing the pub in the first place but her own precarious financial situation had not dinted her resolve to contribute to her son's pathway out of unemployment.

Clearly, immediate kin can be an integral part of income smoothing for households experiencing job loss and intergenerational support transfers can prove transformative. Two couples had received sizeable inheritances from their recently deceased parents and while devastated at their loss, the monies involved had provided a much needed financial cushion. It is questionable as to whether without parental support Roger would have been able to take on his new job or whether Tim would have his pub.

Family connections could also prove influential in the process of finding new jobs but not in the conventional informal sense of putting jobseekers in touch with employers. After a long succession of jobs in the automotive industry, work he did not particularly like, Dave used his most recent period of unemployment to re-evaluate his work preferences. Exploring other career options, Dave took inspiration from his daughter who was studying to be a pharmacist and strategically pursued a career in the health sector. Having secured employment as a health-care assistant in his local hospital, he was enjoying a much more satisfying career even though some aspects of the work were unpleasant.

> Some of the things I have to do you wouldn't believe….I work on A&E at [the local hospital] and I have to do, well, things you wouldn't want hear about (Laughter). From the deceased through to doing ECGs, taking blood and I just enjoy my job…. I suppose it is a bit about job satisfaction because you're helping people. [Dave, 50s, Couple #17]

While Dave's interest in his daughter's studies provided the spur behind his career change, Dave's wife was a key ally in his job seeking.

> We just talk about it in general. Would I fancy doing that? And if I said no, that was the end of discussion. We'd move on to something else. We'll look for something else in a different area. [My wife] must have spent more time on the computer looking at different websites than I did. [Dave, 50s, Couple #17]

Job seeking on the internet may have moved the discussion on from debates about the effectiveness of either strong or weak ties. Dave's account of him and his wife trawling various websites for jobs that might suit him suggests that anyone with access to a computer has a plethora of information about a whole range of job opportunities regardless of whether they operate as a strong or weak tie. The point made by Murray et al (1981) about information needing to be of the right sort still holds, but this may be more about knowing what to type into a search engine and knowing the most relevant websites

rather than being personally connected to particular individuals. Nonetheless it was only through knowing Dave very well that his wife and daughter were able to suggest opportunities that he might enjoy and their knowledge of him proved instrumental in his striking a new, more rewarding work/life balance. In this case the strong ties of immediate family were critical to a successful outcome.

Half of the 30 participants interviewed for this research were not looking for a new job, either because it was their partner who was unemployed and they were happy with their own job or because redundancy proved a turning point in their life and they opted for economic inactivity by starting a family, becoming involved in charity work or taking early retirement. Of the 15 that did want another job, three entered self-employment, five drew on acquaintances or industry contacts to find their new job, four went through formal channels (newspaper adverts, online job searches, sending out CVs and so on), two were still looking and one, Dave, drew on a combination of strong ties and formal information sources. Dave's case indicates that close family networks can provide guidance and support with regard to job seeking through the shared personal information that typically characterises close connections. However, a third of participants looking for a job found one through wider informal networks so these continue to be important to some job seekers.

Friends and wider social networks

The second research question addressed by this paper is to explore the extra-familial connections that jobseekers draw on to find work. Accessing what Granovetter (1973) calls 'weak ties' (generally acquaintances and co-workers) is thought to be advantageous to job search as it provides access to more diverse job-related information and these people act as a source of information and form of social capital that participants drew upon.

> We'd meet [dog-walking] … I've known him for years; I went to college with him years and
> years ago … he said, "If anything goes comes up, do you want me to let you know?" And he
> did … and they gave me the job...there's not jobs in the paper or anything like that, and you
> look online and it's qualifications, of course age is another concern because I'm 58 years
> old...I know there's not supposed to be, no discrimination for age but there is...I think people
> find more jobs by word of mouth or whatever than anything that is advertised in the paper
> because it's who you know. [Bill, 50s, Couple #7]

Bill noted what he perceived as his lack of options vis-à-vis his lack of qualifications and his age, suggesting that the job opportunities he finds online or in the local newspaper require the former (which he cannot provide) and discriminate against the latter. Chancing upon a contact from many years earlier, Bill was able to side-step the formal channels that he felt were operating against him by rekindling an old friendship and trading on the reputation his old friend could provide him. Employer

incentives to recruit informally tend to increase during times of high unemployment as this typically lowers the cost and time taken to fill vacancies (Fevre, 1989); which only underlines Bill's reflection that 'it's who you know' that counts. In a similar vein, Wendy, who lost her job when the school she worked at closed down, spoke about a friend in her social network who helped her to find work.

> A friend of mine who had worked in the area for a very long time so a lot of people know me and [had] worked with me… So, that worked out quite nicely and meant that I...you know, I wasn't sort of scratching around and trying to find a job in a school I didn't know about ... so it did work out very well [Wendy, 40s, Couple #3]

Rather than 'scratching around' for work, Wendy's utilisation of her social capital and concomitant informal networks not only provided her with employment but sped up the process of leaving one job and starting another (she started in the new post 'pretty much straight away') as noted, for instance, by Pellizzari (2010). Wendy's experience of job seeking indicates that having the right connections can expedite the job seeking process not only because 'who you know' counts but also because of what you know about your new employer.

In Carol's case there was yet a further dimension. Speaking about an ex-employer, Jim, that she had lost contact with for a time and having him offer her a job just as she was embarking upon a somewhat reluctant job search process of sending out CVs and seeing 'what's around' was a relief as it saved her having to do things that she is not especially comfortable with.

> I would've found it very difficult if I'd been knocking on people's door and said, "Give me a job." I couldn't have done that, I'd found it difficult. But people [and agencies] I've worked with before that knew me, that knew what I was capable of, I was quite happy to approach …
> I phoned [Jim] for a reference and he said to me, "What do you need that for? Come and work for me. [Carol, 50s, Couple #11]

She spoke about how she would have found the process of finding work difficult if she didn't go through people she knew and who knew her capabilities and skill set because she knew that she was good at her job but lacked the confidence to showcase her skills formally. So social networks can be important for the information they provide but also for the personal connection they symbolise. Carol knew she was good but crucially she *knew* that her new employer *knew* that she was good.

Bill, Wendy and Carol's experiences suggest that 'who you know' can be important for at least three reasons: what they can tell you, what they know about you and what you know about them. These accounts also emphasise the value of dormant connections. Both Carol and Bill re-connected with people who had dropped out of their circle of everyday contacts. Historical relationships are relationships nonetheless and, for Bill and Carol, proved to be a key resource in finding a new job.

Of course, the value of any contact is on having serviceable information to pass on. Ian had so far managed to avoid redundancy but was under a great deal pressure to work harder and for longer hours. He spoke about how, having foreseen redundancies at his previous workplace, he decided to 'jump ship' using his professional social networks at the time to find alternative employment in his field.

> It was more knowing people than sort of advertised positions, so it's people I've knew in the past who said that there might be an opportunity somewhere else ... [but] people who I had been working with are now out of work as well, because they're are out of work, they don't have the sort of the opportunities to offer, you know...I think networking, it's great if everyone is in work and everyone is working on things that are growing because there obviously is a need for more people. But if you're working on areas that are sort of in decline, it's not great [Ian, 40s, Couple #4]

Ian suggested that his area of expertise is now somewhat in decline and thus the networks he once successfully drew upon to find new employment now represented a less fertile source of employment opportunities. In a sense, his networks remained unchanged – he still knew the same people - but the power of his network, of his social capital, was perceived by him as diminished due to the 'decline' in his area of expertise. In a study of Hartlepool steel workers, Morris (1992) notes that strong ties could provide important job tip-offs but not if they were also unemployed. This may reflect a story about industry decline or change rather than tie-strength. The dominance of shipbuilding and heavy industry in certain regional labour markets of 1980s Britain meant that whole families could be connected to and reliant on these industries. Ian's account of opportunities in the IT sector tells a similar story about a drying up of opportunities but one that refers to the weak ties he has across the industry and their decreasing ability to provide useful job information given changes within the IT industry and the new skills required.

The discussion of social networks in job seeking has so far focussed on personal connections with particular individuals but if social capital is the value that arises from our connections with others, the welfare state might be considered as the ultimate social network. One of the pillars of the Welfare State is a system of social protection that supports those without gainful employment (Beveridge, 1942). One theme that emerged from participant's accounts was the way in which the traditional hub of job search activity, the job centre, seems to be devalued as a source of employment opportunity.

> I just went to the job centre, in Halesowen and signed on. They talk to you about what's available and I had to go on a couple of, what would you call like, seminars, what they hold down there to try and talk, you know, coach you how to get a job, sort of thing...they do try to help but I think you can do more yourself, to be honest...you're better off going on to the computer, having a look what's available, e-mailing people [Dave, 50s, Couple #17]

Dave notes how government and company websites, jobsites and emailing people seem more effective as a means of sourcing employment opportunities than going to the job centre. This sentiment is echoed by Lynn.

> Well, I saw the job in a local newspaper and it was also online. I did go down to the local job centre and I did sign on. And there were some jobs down there but nothing that really suited … And so I just saw the job in the local newspaper, had to look at it online and then applied [Lynn, 40s, Couple #1]

Lynne does not mention using her social networks as a job search tool but notes the lack of anything 'suitable' available at the job centre, preferring to use local newspapers and the internet. In general, respondents tended to focus their job search activities on newspapers, websites and employment agencies (sometimes alongside social networks) as means with which to find suitable employment, rather than any opportunities available through their local job centre.

Although couples show a tendency to employ income smoothing techniques where necessary (see Gush et al, 2015), seeking recourse to unemployment benefits was considered a measure of last resort by a number of participants. Often this was due to feelings about prior claims and notions of what it means to be unemployed.

> I've never been unemployed before so very new experience to me going down there. I found that quite intimidating to be honest....I felt of bit of a failure with it all...the stigma of it to be honest, to actually be unemployed and to be going for unemployment benefit...It wasn't a nice experience. [Lynn, 40s, Couple #1]

> I think it's just degrading; I really do…you can't believe at how many people are just there. You ... just feel so … you feel you're not worth anything ... you just feel embarrassed … that you're going to have to claim [Brenda, 40s, Couple #15]

> I didn't want to be out of work. It's just the way I am. I just don't like not having a job. There's no way I want to be claiming dole money. Not that you get that much anyway, but it's just me, the way I am. I think work gives you a sense of purpose [Dave, 50s, Couple #17]

> I have to admit I'd be very reluctant to sign on [now] because I think that's like admitting defeat that you can't get a job, yeah. Work ethic! (Laughter) [Lesley, 50s, Couple #7]

These negative experiences speak of identity and of not wanting to be seen (by the self or others) as the sort of person who claims unemployment benefit. This is almost undoubtedly tied up with popular discourses around irresponsible 'scroungers' and cultures of worklessness which frame sections of society as a lazy, work-resistant 'underclass' who are excessive and ungovernable (see for example

Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 2005) and who lack the moral imperative to work. A reluctance to claim unemployment benefits can be seen as a form of resistance against these kinds of stereotypes, a way of not being 'contaminated' by them.

Ultimately, when it comes to looking for work, participants tended to utilise their social networks and/or adopt more singular strategies to their job search such as the internet or locals newspapers rather than their local job centre. Respondents who engaged with Jobcentre Plus found the experience to be unsatisfactory not only due to the stigma of becoming a benefit claimant but also because the employment support they provide was perceived as ineffective. This last point may reflect a spill-over of negativity and if so this might provide the case for disassociating the employment services strand of job centre operations from the JSA claims processing.

Discussion and conclusions

Social capital continues to be a contested concept. Debates continue as to whether it is something held by individuals or by collectives, whether it is in decline or simply evolving, or indeed whether it is even being measured appropriately. The primary purpose of this paper has not been to dwell on these epistemological and ontological arguments, rather the intention here has been to understand more deeply the experience of unemployment during the Great Recession and how couples job search behaviour draws on strong and weak social connections. Nonetheless, the narratives provided by participants in this research suggest that social capital can lay dormant. Social capital is unlike other forms of capital in that unless it is actively in use it is virtually impossible to empirically detect it, even if you are measuring the correct thing. Other types of capital have tangible holdings (money in the bank, share certificates, education qualifications and so on) which even if they are not being drawn upon can be identified. Things like trust, civic participation and social connections do not operate like this; if they are not in use, it's difficult to see them which can lead to the conclusion that it's in decline. We all have people we once knew and have lost contact with but when we happen across them again it's not a completely new relationship – we re-connect by drawing on the dormant social connection.

These qualitative interviews provide evidence that develops our understanding of the two core research questions. First, regarding the ways in which family members provide support in finding a new job, family financial support allows people the space to find their way out of difficult situations. It can take time to find a new job and re-establish labour market position but there can also be other obstacles along the way such transport-to-work issues, capital investments in new ventures and so on. When financial institutions are not inclined to lend, parents in particular can act as a vital keystone in shoring up funding gaps. Aside from financial support, the closeness of family relationships can help

jobseekers find a new direction in their life. Often considered a rather stressful life event, unemployment is fundamentally a dislocation of place in the labour market. The rebuilding process and getting back into work can be supported by family members via their deep knowledge of the jobseeker's personality and preferences. This all suggests the value social capital arising from close connections relates to the depth of those connections. In this research, family appeared prepared to take financial risks that formal credit providers will not, bestowed legacies rooted in kinship bonds and provided the guidance and counsel that comes from knowing each other very well. In other words, the value of social capital in networks relates to profundity as well as proximity.

The second research question focuses on the role of friends and wider social networks in supporting job seekers back into work. Granovetter's (1973) weak tie thesis highlights the importance of being connected to those with reach outside of one's normal purview. The evidence here supports the idea that acquaintances such as former work colleagues and long lost friends can prove instrumental in providing valuable job information but again it appears not to simply be the peripheral location of such contacts but also the quality of the connection. A jobseeker may draw on his/her connections to find a new job but this unlikely to represent a one-way flow of information. In passing on information, these connections use what they know about the jobseeker to offer what they perceive as useful information. Equally, a holistic exchange of reputational knowledge may be important for the jobseeker to evaluate precisely how useful such information is likely to be. In summary, 'who you know' appears to be important for *what they can tell you* in terms of the information they can provide; *what they know about you*, such as skills, capabilities and aptitudes; and *what you know about them* as mutual trust and reputation can ease anxieties about taking up new employment. Furthermore, compared to jobseekers of yesteryear, the advent of the internet means that a vast amount of information is literally at our fingertips and this may mean that weak ties are perhaps not as important as they might once have been. Additionally, regardless of tie strength, contacts in declining industries lose their value to the extent that they have decreasing job information to pass on.

As perhaps the widest social network, social security is designed to provide a basic safety-net for those in need. UK jobseekers meeting the eligibility criteria are entitled to support via financial transfers, careers guidance and skills training. Despite formal entitlement to this kind of help, all the participants in this research who had drawn on social insurance in this way regarded their position as undesirable. Part of the backdrop to this is likely to be the highly topical discourses around idleness and the rectitude of benefit claimants. It is interesting to note, however, that where monies were borrowed from close family members these debts were paid back as quickly as possible and being financially indebted to family was also seen as highly unwelcome. This suggests a broader narrative of the importance of self-reliance in personal identities.

Overall, family, friends and wider networks are important mainstays in helping jobseekers back into work but in different ways and for different reasons. Family financial support allows people time to find a new job and re-establish themselves in the labour market while wider contacts open up job opportunities jobseekers might not otherwise have heard about. Family ties can help with job searching but in a more tailored way given the privileged knowledge they have about the jobseeker. As the widest network, social security is not typically experienced as either respectable or, in the case of employment services, effective. This may reflect the notion of questionable integrity that abounds in public discourses about benefit claimants which suggests that to be a truly be supportive social welfare system the debates need to move on to a discussion of eligibility, rights and entitlements. Ultimately, be it family, friends or wider networks; all these forms of social capital have a role to play in supporting jobseekers but the complexity of social life means that having a plurality of support mechanisms can be important when faced with job loss and financial strain.

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