Young people’s entry into the labour market - opportunities, strategies and gatekeepers
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Background

This article is based on results from a qualitative study of recruitment processes and job searches. The focus lies on the saliens of interpersonal processes that create potential value in social networks. As is well established, most job vacancies are filled via social networks or informal recruitment procedures. However, social network recruitment also contributes to the reproduction of inequality structures in society. Whether a social network creates opportunities or not means more than having contacts in the labour market. According to Zhou and Bankston (2002:286), the value of social relations is relative, i.e. a social network can function as social capital in one context but lack value in another. In other words, the value of social capital is context-bound and open to negotiation.

This article discusses the significance of these relations and their link to society’s structural conditions based on different network studies and an interactional perspective. The empirical data is based on interviews with young people who work in a fast-food chain, and their managers. Three young persons describe their entry into the labour market and their social networks. How do they feel about referring, or being referred to a workplace by their friends and relatives? Are their choices and perceived horizons of action influenced by society’s preconceptions and prejudices? Are their opportunities affected by their parents’ position and social networks? Do they feel that their social networks create opportunities or limitations?

The significance of social networks for finding work has been well documented in the United States and Europe (Marsden & Gorman 2001). Around 60-85 percent of all job vacancies in the Swedish labour market are filled via informal contacts (Ekström 2001; Okeke 2001). Employers recruit via informal channels. They find suitable job
applicants via recommendations from their families, relatives, friends and acquaintances or employees. Formal recruitment also includes cases where employers are contacted by jobseekers, where this later leads to employment. But recruitment via social networks contributes, to a major extent, to the reproduction of structural flaws in the labour market (Braddock & McPartlands 1987, Feuchtwangs 1982, Schierup & Paulsson 1994). Some groups, such as young people and immigrants, have more to lose than others when recruitment is carried out via social networks (Behtoui 2006, Knocke, Wuokko, Drejhammar, Gonäs, Isaksson 2003). One important reason why young people are negatively affected by informal recruitment is that they have not had time to build up their own work-related contacts in the labour market (Granovetter 1974).

Studies of differences between native-born and foreign-born individuals in American and British labour markets have shown that network recruitment practices create two parallel processes. People with immigrant backgrounds are referred via their networks to the labour market’s low status jobs while the ethnic majority are referred via their networks to more qualified employment (Braddock & McPartland 1987). Similar patterns occur in the Swedish labour market: recruitment through social networks leads to lower-paid jobs for foreign-born Swedes (Behtoui 2006). This process is called social network segregation. Different groups are referred to different niches of the labour market, which reproduces the ethnic division of the labour market. Augustsson (1996) claims that if “Swedishness” constitutes the norm when screening jobseekers – or prospective employees in general – competition arises between the different networks. The network that lies closest to the norm, i.e. the Swedish network, will be preferred to an immigrant network.

The Swedish labour market is characterised by unequal conditions, and the social and financial exclusion of people with foreign backgrounds and young people. Unemployment is higher for immigrants, and this group is also overrepresented in segments with a high percentage of low-skilled jobs (Schierup 2006). Neergaard (2006) calls this phenomenon “subordinate inclusion”. Instead of excluding people with immigrant backgrounds from the Swedish labour market, these people are delegated to working class jobs. What frameworks does the social context create for an individual’s opportunities to enter the labour market via their own social network? What including and excluding effects does network recruitment have on working life?

I use an interactional perspective (Blumer 1969) to reveal the processes of how contacts and social networks generate different opportunities for different individuals and groups. This perspective emphasises the significance of interpersonal interaction in the action of individuals, the acceptance of these actions in a social context and the role of personal and social experiences when shaping choice of action strategies (Goffman 1963; Prus 1996). The individual’s awareness of her horizon of action and structures of opportunity is central. But emphasising the individual’s active and strategic actions does not mean that she is considered completely free in relation to the norms that exist in the surrounding society. Interactionism emphasizes how individuals – consciously or unconsciously – internalise and reproduce society’s norms and values through con-
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Scious actions and choices. Goffman (1963) underlines how the individual’s perceived horizon of action is influenced by the status she has in the given context and the extent to which she is considered “normal” or “deviating.” The question of how an individual negotiates her own and other values is therefore central. The perception of scope that individuals or others have to negotiate is influenced by their position in the social order (Strauss 1978).

Interactionist literature advocates methods that focus on interpersonal interaction, such as participation observation (Prus 1996). In my study, however, I have applied interview methodology. The empirical evidence consists of interviews with staff and managers who work at a fast-food chain. Interviews were conducted with eighteen young people aged between 17-30 years, and six managers at six different restaurants. The informants were both male and female and included Swedish-born, foreign-born Swedes and Swedes with foreign-born parents. They answered questions about their previous work experience, how they usually looked for work and what their social networks look like. They were asked to fill in a network map (Borell & Johansson 1996), where they described who they would contact if they needed to find a new job. When they drew a person, they were asked whether this person was male or female, and had a Swedish or foreign background. The managers were asked what methods they used to recruit and how these methods affected staff groups, productivity and leadership.

This article is based on the informants’ stories about how they entered working life. These stories describe not only who provided links to the labour market, but also how resources in their own social network influenced their perceived horizon of action. Three themes appeared in the informants’ stories: 1) the significance of the family as a social resource, 2) the significance of friends and neighbours as a social resource, and 3) the significance of the social context for entering working life. These three themes are interwoven, both in reality and in the three informants’ stories. The three informants, Eva, Chalak and Hawa, were chosen because their stories describe three different ways that social networks create opportunities or limitations in the labour market. Swedish-born Eva experiences more opportunities for entering working life because of the strong and resourceful network in the area where she grew up and that her family belongs to. Chalak’s strategies for overcoming the structural limitations that reduce his opportunities in the labour market lead him to an upper secondary school in inner Stockholm where most students are Swedish-born and middle class. Hawa’s strategy is to work her way up in the company where she works, because the links in her network only provide contact with in niches that offer low-skilled jobs.

**Family as a resource**

People who are established in the labour market tend to utilise the parts of their networks that are directly related to working life when they look for work (Granovetters 1974). Young and unemployed people tend to use their families and personal acquaintances to a far greater extent. This pattern is also confirmed by my study, where parents
help young people enter working life. The parents’ establishment and position in the labour market is thus highly significant for the opportunities available to young people. This is shown clearly by the interviews. The following section shows how young people’s perceived horizons of actions are influenced by their parent’s social networks and position in the Swedish labour market. The section begins with Eva’s story about how she entered working life.

The Eva example

Eva is 19 years old. She was born and grew up in Sweden with Swedish-born parents. Her mother is a compulsory school teacher at an independent school, and her father is an engineer who runs his own business. Her parents live together and she has a younger brother. The family lives in a terraced house in a suburb of Stockholm. Her social life revolves mainly around friends that she has known since compulsory school who also live in the same housing area. The fact that they have similar backgrounds and know each other’s families creates a feeling of security, she says. “Everyone lives in similar houses with similar families, and we’ve had a similar childhood and upbringing. So it feels like you are part of a big family. We’ve known each other’s parents since we were small and went to day care together.” When she draws her network, she draws relatives, friends from compulsory and upper secondary school and colleagues. She says that several of her relatives have good contacts in working life. She also mentions how there is a distinct ethnic pattern in her network. Everyone that she socialises with from compulsory and upper secondary school has a Swedish background, and everyone that she meets at her current workplace has a foreign background. She says that her childhood friends usually ask what these people with immigrant backgrounds are like. “There’s no difference when you get to know them. There are differences in what their parents are called and where they live. Lots of them live around Fittja and Alby, which my friends from compulsory school don’t. But they are kind and funny and care about each other...so it doesn’t really matter where they come from.”

Eva graduated from upper secondary school just a few weeks before the interview. She intends to continue studying, but is not sure whether she wants to start in autumn or wait for a few years. She was recently offered a full-time job in the restaurant where she works. But she does not want to take the job until she knows whether she has been accepted into university or not. She started working at the restaurant last spring - her last term at upper secondary school, and found the job through the Public Employment Service’s website. “We logged into the website and started looking around. My mother said I should keep my ears and eyes open because people would be looking for summer staff soon. So I started looking last spring.” Her mother suggested looking for a part-time job when Eva was only 15. Eva didn’t want to start work, but she did want more money. “I wanted money. I’d always been given lots of money, but I wanted more. So I talked to my mother and father about what I could do. Finally, my mother said, ‘Well,
you’d better get a job if you want to buy all of those things. ‘Then we decided that my father would see if there was anything that I could do at his job. And there was.’”

After a while, Eva and her father fell out and she didn’t want to work for him anymore. She found another job selling ice-cream in a kiosk during summer. “It was my father who said I should ask them whether they needed anyone. Because we kind of knew them. And they said they would think about it and let me know. And they called me and said I could work a few hours here and there.” But she doesn’t feel indebted to her father for helping her find the job: “My father? No, I didn’t feel like I owe him anything. That’s what families are for, isn’t it? If I started working for another relative, like my uncle or someone, I would probably feel more…. because they are not as close. At least I think so.” If she lost her current job, she would not hesitate to ask her father for help again and she thinks that would make him happy. “I’d probably consider asking my father if I could work for him again. Because he still says: ‘Can’t you come and help me with the invoicing?’ He still thinks that I should be working for him... He’s a bit disappointed, I think. Even though he doesn’t say so.”

Eva tells how one of her friend’s fathers asked her to fix a job for his daughter because he thought she should start working. “She lives with her boyfriend in a flat, but her boyfriend is studying and she is unemployed. She never finished school and her father has to pay for everything. He was tired of paying, and thought that she was lazy. // He said “Can you try and fix something because I am sick of Hilda hanging around at home all day.” Eva had already arranged jobs at the restaurant for three other friends “by mentioning their names” (more in the next section). When asked who she should turn to if she was desperate for work, she says her father, her brother and her two uncles who also run their own businesses. Then she would ask the parents of her childhood friends. If she does not start studying and takes the job at the restaurant, she’s thinking about travelling to southern Europe with her friends to pick grapes. She says she wants to feel more motivated before she starts studying. Her plans for the future focus on study. “My only strategy is that I want to study (laughing) and get some kind of education. Work hard. So that I am... So that I get a good education.”

Established and unestablished

Several of the informants with established, Swedish-born parents tell similar stories about how their mothers or fathers helped them find part-time jobs while they were still at upper secondary school. The parents’ incentives for helping their children find holiday jobs were not only financial. Most of all, they wanted their children to have something to do. If the parents themselves couldn’t help, they contacted people in their network who could. One interviewee said that his parents could not arrange a job for him at their own workplaces but that they helped by asking people they knew. “Well I can’t work where they do, but ... you could say that they are looking for me.” Like Eva’s mother who reminded her when to look for a summer job, parents “teach” their children how to navigate their working life. Their friends recommended suitable work-
places and encouraged their children to look for summer jobs with the municipality and/or landlords - for example.

**Reciprocity and reproduction within the family**

It is obvious that parents who are established in working life play an important role in young people’s labour market entrance. They inspire young people to start working, and help them by fixing part-time jobs at their own workplaces and asking people in their networks. These parents help their children, but the children do not feel that their parents expect anything in return. Reciprocity is a gift rather than credit; the parents’ loan to their children is interest-free, and the payback period is indefinite. According to Bourdieu (1995:162-163), converting debt to gratitude and love in relationships between generations is common. Parents do not expect to profit in terms of return favours when they invest in their child’s labour market entrance. Their support is partly a strategy for developing emotional reciprocity within the family even when their children are adults. But also for increasing opportunities for their child to become equally as established as they are in working life. At the same time, involvement by parents is taken for granted, and as Eva says - she feels she is doing her father a favour by helping him run his business.

Eva does not feel she owes anything to her family: “That’s what families are for, isn’t it?” And neither does the fact that Eva and her father “fell out” seem to influence his desire to recommend Eva to his friends and acquaintances. Her parents let her share the family’s collective social resources, which establishes a clear horizon of action in the labour market. This scope plus the conditions that she is white, Swedish-born and has grown up in a middle-class family, free her from the need to develop strategies for overcoming structural hinders. She repays her “debt” to her parents by adapting her choices and ambitions to the behaviour that they expect from a young middle-class woman. She finishes school and has good work experience by the time she turns 19. Her hesitation about taking the permanent job that is offered is not problematic because the experience she stands to gain from working in another country is probably more suited to the future she envisages for herself. Her horizon of action also enables her to recommend her friends at her workplace. That this workplace is located in a mostly immigrant suburb, and that most people who work there have immigrant backgrounds also – I believe – increases her chances of finding jobs for her white, Swedish-born middle-class friends.

**Friends and neighbours as a resource**

The interviewees whose parents were born in other countries and are not established in the labour market have different experiences to Eva. Bethou (2006), who studied the connection between young people’s labour market entrance and their social networks, has found that young people with parents who were born in other countries are disad-
vantaged compared to young people who have grown up in Sweden with Swedish-born parents. Hawa and Chalak, who are described in the following two sections, have both grown up in Sweden but their parents were born in other countries. Except for Chalak’s father who is an underground train driver, the other parents are excluded from the labour market. In their stories, Hawa and Chalak include their parents when they describe their networks, but not when they describe their strategies for entering the labour market. Same-aged friends and relatives help them enter the labour market.

The Chalak example

Chalak is 18 years old and immigrated to Sweden with his parents when he was four years old. His father worked as an engineer in their home country and his mother was a housewife. His father is now an underground train driver and his mother studies at komvux (the municipal adult education scheme). His older sister is studying medicine and his younger brother goes to compulsory school. Chalak grew up and lives in a mainly immigrant suburb in Stockholm, but now goes to an upper secondary school in the inner city with high admission requirements. He applied to this school because he wanted to meet different people and see how that would benefit him. Even though Chalak does not go the same school as his childhood friends, they are still important people in his life.

“Your teenage years are the most formative years of your life,” he says. “You stop listening to your parents and move closer towards your friends.” He thinks that his friends from upper secondary school will be the contacts that create opportunities for him in the labour market. “The school that I go to in the city is different. The students that go there… their parents work. They have lots of contacts through their parents. And because I know them, it feels like I have contact with other people too.” Chalak believes that the school he has chosen will have a positive effect on his future, but the costs have been high. “It’s been hard actually (he laughs). It wasn’t what I expected. I thought it would be better. But to change schools, from a school in a suburb with lots of immigrant students, and start at a school with only Swedes. It’s like walking on water and then on land. It is a complete change. And...yeah it’s different!”

Chalak got his first job when he was 15, with an older cousin who runs a pizzeria. His second job was in a café in the area where he lives. He used to spend a lot of time there, and when he was 16 they asked him if he wanted to work there part-time. “I used to go there all the time. Even when I was young. So they know me really well. They thought I would be good for the job because I spent so much time there. I knew all their routines, I knew everything, so they let me try working there.” He got his job at a fast-food restaurant through his childhood friends. “It was through my friends actually. They recommended me. ‘OK, come and work here. They need staff and we can help them. Fix a job for you. They trust us. The staff trust us.’ So I filled out an application. Wrote that I knew this person and that person at the restaurant. And they gave me the job. I was asked to come in for an interview and they liked me.” Even though
his friends helped him, he doesn’t feel he owes them anything. “Because we are really close friends and I was chosen from all the others. You know. That way I don’t feel any pressure about returning a favour. Just…. well, to say thank you. It was nice of them. But that’s what friends are for. They look after each other.”

When I later asked who he had recommended, he changed his strategy. He has only ever recommended his girlfriend and one restaurant-trained cousin, even though he spends a lot of time with young people who need work: “A lot of people where I live have unemployed parents. So the kids look for work and there I am.” […] “But there are friends and friends. There are some you can trust, and some you can’t. And yeah, there’s a difference. If you really, really like the restaurant and want to protect your workplace, you have to be careful.” If he lost his job, he would go to the Public Employment Service “it feels like the first thing to do” and then he would ask friends, relatives and previous employees. Chalak’s plans for the future are to follow his sister’s footsteps and study medicine. Many of his childhood friends have not finished secondary school: “That’s what my friends do. They can’t handle school. And when I ask “What about your future if you leave school now?” and they say that they can’t be bothered thinking about it. Or ‘One of my relatives owns a restaurant, I’ll work there… OK…”

**Ambivalence and responsibility**

Like Chalak, several of the other informants did not consider the fact that their friends recommended them for a job as problematic. They were not worried about feeling indebted to the people who had helped them – that’s what friends are for they said. At the same time, all except two informants expressed reservations about recommending someone themselves. They were afraid that “things would fall back on them” if they recommended someone who did not do the right thing. So they were careful about making recommendations, and only chose people who were close to them who they really trusted (compeare, Jenkins 1986). The question is whether their hesitation to recommend is justified from an employer’s perspective?

All managers that I interviewed relied on informal recruitment processes. One advantage of employing via their employees’ social networks, they claimed, was that you knew what you were getting (Tovatt 2006). Another was that the new employee would find it easier to fit into the workplace’s social environment if they already had a friend in the group. A third advantage that was mentioned was that employees actually took responsibility for the behaviour of the friends they had recommended. One of the managers said, “I have one guy, John that I couldn’t get hold of. We kept missing each other’s calls and I couldn’t pin him down. So I rang Tom who had recommended him. ‘Hi, what’s the problem?’ ‘I can’t find him, he doesn’t answer my calls. Do you know where he is?’ John called after five minutes. I don’t know what Tom said but he was extremely embarrassed that I had to call him to ask where John was. They feel responsible. ‘They are very concerned that their friends and family members do the right
thing." Even though the manager says that these young people are concerned about their friends and family doing the right thing, this story shows how informants are right when they say they are responsible for the people that they recommend. Tom would not otherwise have taken responsibility for the manager not being able to find John.

Norms and social reproduction

MacDonald, Shildrick, Webster, Simpson (2005) have studied social networks in disadvantaged areas. They point to the importance of distinguishing between networks that help individuals “get by” and networks that help them “get on.” According to them, some networks or contacts function mainly as emotional and practical support and help individuals survive, while other networks create openings and opportunities in (working) life. The Eva and Chalak cases show similar patterns. Eva’s friends provide emotional and social support, and help each other enter working life. Chalak feels, however, that his friends from the suburbs provide emotional and practical support but that his friends from school will help him advance in everyday and working life. The inner city students have parents who work and “lots of contacts through their parents.” It’s not so easy for his friends in the suburbs: “A lot of people have unemployed parents. So the kids look for work and there I am.”

On the surface, Chalak’s life is similar to Eva’s. Both of them have had several different jobs. And both of them are willing to explore the world beyond their own social spheres. Eva works at an “immigrant restaurant” and Chalak goes to an inner city “Swedish” school. Both Eva and Chalak have friends in both worlds, but while Eva brings her childhood friends into the restaurant, Chalak does not mention any meeting point between his friends from the suburbs and his inner city friends. Eva says that her colleagues with immigrant backgrounds are “kind and funny and care about each other” and that it “doesn’t really matter where they come from.” Chalak describes his experience “like walking on water and then on land.”

Unlike Eva, Chalak is aware of society’s limiting structures. He has also developed strategies for overcoming the limitations he meets because he was born in another country and lives in an immigrant suburb. For Eva, being part of the team in the “immigrant restaurant” is easy and so is introducing her friends. But Chalak found adapting to Swedish inner city norms more difficult. And he does not take his immigrant friends to the city. He makes this journey on his own. The paradox is that Chalak’s perceived horizon of action in what should be his own social sphere is narrower than Eva’s. She recommended three of her girlfriends, but he only dared to recommend his own girlfriend and one restaurant-trained cousin. The interviews show that the managers would hardly demand more responsibility from Chalak than from Eva. Even if they “decentralised” control further down in the organisation by letting employees bring in their friends or relatives, the managers’ rhetoric on foreign-born and Swedish-born employees was not that different. Chalak, Eva and the other informants’ understanding of their own horizons of action is more structural than personal. The structural framework
is concretised by the fact that networks lying closer to the “Swedish” norm are more favoured than the networks of foreign-born individuals (cp Augustson 1996).

Networks with limited resources

The Eva example shows how the value of social relations is negotiable – that what is valuable for one group in one specific situation may be less valuable in another context or for another group. She experienced a greater horizon of action than “immigrant” Chalak when she recommended her childhood friends to the restaurant. It is obvious, as Goffman (1963) points out, that horizons of action for individuals and groups are influenced by the social norms for normality or non-conformance. What social norms or preconceptions influence perceived horizons of action? Hawa’s story introduces the next section.

Trust and restriction

Hawa is 25 years old and born in Sweden, but both of her parents were born in another country. They came to Sweden as foreign labour during the 1970s. Today her father is unemployed, her mother receives an early retirement pension. They have been separated for most of Hawa’s life. Hawa has an older brother who is unemployed and a younger sister who works as a home-help assistant. Hawa grew up and went to school in a mainly immigrant suburb of Stockholm. She lives still there with her husband, who works in a warehouse, and their 4-year old child. When Hawa draws her social network, she includes a large number of people who are family, relatives, friends from compulsory school, neighbours and present colleagues. Everyone has an immigrant background and works in low-skilled sectors: retail, cleaning and services. Hawa has had a number of jobs since she left upper secondary school before finishing her first year - in the services sector, trainee positions, unemployment and parental leave. One of her longest jobs was a cleaner in living-assisted housing where her sister-in-law worked. “She has worked there for 15 years. And she’d had the same boss for 15 years. She got on well with her boss. So I asked, ‘Can you ask whether they need anyone?’ And she did. And they said they would give me an interview. It went well and I got the job.”

She worked there until she had a baby, then she stayed at home for three years. When she wanted to start working again, she had no job and was not entitled to unemployment benefits. She went to the Public Employment Service first, but says that they could not help her. “I went to the Public Employment Service but there were too many rules. I had to have this many hours and that many days to be eligible for unemployment benefits. And I didn’t have enough hours or days. So I didn’t get any benefits and I had to start looking for a job on my own.” Hawa wonders how immigrants who have only lived in Sweden for two or three years can survive in the Swedish system. “I was born and grew up here in Sweden and if I don’t know the rules and how everything
works, how can anybody else work them out?” Her impression was that the Public Employment Service could only help her if she was entitled to unemployment benefits. Which was why she turned to friends and relatives. She got an interview at a restaurant where her brother-in-law worked, and that is where she works today.

Like Chalak, Hawa was also ambivalent about recommending someone. She does not feel indebted to the people who helped her find a job. But she is careful about recommending other people. If anyone ever asks, she usually says that she does not know whether staff are needed and suggests they make their own enquiries. The only person she has ever helped is a young cousin; someone she trusts and knows has the right type of personality. The reason why she is careful about making recommendations is that she does not know whether people in her own social sphere can do the job well enough. “Everything has to go fast, hygiene is really important, and lots of other things. I don’t want to feel responsible, I can’t trust…// My boss can trust me but I don’t know whether I can trust my friend. I would worry. What if she doesn’t do her job properly? Or doesn’t keep track of her shifts? Comes late. All kinds of things. Because I know I have to follow the rules, be on time and keep track of my shifts ... I know what has to be done. I’ve learnt that here.” If Hawa lost her job, she would ask her brothers and sisters, and two friends who work in a supermarket chain. She does not trust the Public Employment Service because “they have too many rules and don’t explain what the conditions are.” Now Hawa has a permanent position and no plans to leave her job. She has done some internal training and in the future she would like more responsibility in the restaurant. But being a supervisor means that she would have to work early and late shifts, and also that she would need a car. Her immediate goal is to get her driver’s license.

**Stratification and reproduction**

Hawa’s story is both similar and different to Eva’s and Chalak’s stories. The similarities are that like Eva and Chalak, she has experience of several different low-skilled jobs. Her entry into working life is somewhat like Chalak’s in relation to the significance of same-aged friends and relatives. She does not mention her parents when she describes her entrance to working life. And neither does she mention that they protested when she decided to leave school early; they are not important people in her search for work. In contrast to Eva and Chalak though, Hawa is not interested in further studies. For Eva and Chalak, working in a restaurant is a way to make money; for Hawa, it’s a future. There is also an educational, nationality and gender dimension in Hawa’s experiences. Temporary jobs in sectors with poor pay and employment conditions can function as springboards for academics, males and Swedish citizens. Other people run the risk of staying there (Håkansson 2001).
Adaptation and gatekeepers

Like Hawa, there were several informants who did not plan to continue their studies. Their stories repeatedly mention how you can work your way up in an organisation like a fast-food chain by taking part in the company’s internal training courses. Like Hawa, people who want to stay in an organisation are concerned about making a “bad” recommendation. Hawa is worried that her friends, all of whom have immigrant backgrounds, will not be able to meet demands for hygiene, punctuality and following the rules. According to the managers in the study, adapting to the conditions that apply at a workplace is a general problem, regardless of background. They feel that when you run a workplace with young staff, you have to teach them how working life functions. “You have to remember that. This could be their first job. So we’re like a doorway to working life. ‘Go and iron your shirt. ’It’s a little bit like that. ‘Clean the table after you’ve eaten’. Things that other workplaces don’t have to deal with.” Previous research has described this phenomenon, how young people in general - and young people with immigrant backgrounds in particular – need to be socialised into working life (Knocke & Hertzberg 2000).

Networks can have both facilitating and limiting functions, depending on how and if they can be used. According to Vasta (2004), opportunities are created when individuals can utilise a network’s resources and benefit from its information, resources and connections. The limitations appear when structural factors or members of the network act as “gatekeepers” and limit the flow of resources. The resources in Hawa’s network are linked to the low-skilled services sector. Her friends and relatives work in retail, cleaning and services, and all of the opportunities created by these people are in these sectors. The limited range of her network because she never finished school means that Hawa’s opportunities for entering other niches of the labour market are remote. The paradox in Hawa’s story is that she herself is the “gatekeeper”. She limits the flow of information and avoids referring people from her network to her workplace. She explains her reluctance to recommend people who are close to her by saying that she does not think they can handle the job’s demands. She assigns relatively stereotyped “immigrant” characteristics to the people in her social circle, such as not being able to follow rules, be punctual or care about hygiene. These characteristics contrast and deviate from “Swedish” norms, which – according to earlier studies of ethnicity markers in working life (Hertzberg 2003) – are punctuality, a desire for consensus and orderliness.

One observation made by Goffman in his interactionist studies is that individuals who belong to groups that have been ascribed undesirable or deviating character traits by the surrounding society develop strategies for normalising themselves. One strategy is that the individual, like Hawa, describes her failings in a manner that shows how she herself has overcome and is free from these traits (Goffman 1963:122). When Hawa says, “I know that I have to follow the rules, be on time and keep track of my shifts. I’ve learnt that here.” she is indirectly saying that she used to find it difficult to manage these allegedly Swedish norms which she believes her workplace demands. Although unlikely, Hawa’s friends may be unpunctual, unhygienic and unable to follow rules.
But her horizon of action and opportunities to take risks is more likely limited by her uncertain position in the workforce – unfinished schooling, immigrant background and mother of a small child. She cannot “afford” to risk her job by recommending these people who, because of their immigrant backgrounds, are already suspected of these character traits by the majority society. Hawa knows that she herself can handle these workplace demands. But how can she know that she isn’t just the exception that proves the rule?

**Value and complexity of networks**

The issue of social networks and the opportunities created by and in them is complex. The interpersonal interaction and the individual’s strategies for internalising society’s norms and values while reproducing them via their own actions and choices is central. Depending on how individuals understand their starting point, they adapt their strategies in order to overcome the structural limitations constituted by their own networks and position. Individuals thus develop strategies based on their own perceived structures of opportunity. The circumstances that limit opportunities are perhaps the most obvious. They are effects of the position that people in the individual’s network have in the labour market. But they can also be more subtle and elusive, such as preconceptions and prejudices towards certain social groups. In other words, the value and capacity of networks to constitute a social resource are affected by society’s power relationships, such as social ranking on the basis of class and ethnic identity. Individual actors in networks negotiate personal benefits based on preconceptions of the positions that they and others hold in the social space.

As a white Swedish middle-class woman, Eva is not negatively affected by society’s power and status ranking. The social networks of Eva and her parents, by virtue of their position, provide a social resource and capital that can be turned over in the labour market. The parents arrange jobs for Eva, and she arranges job for her childhood friends who all have the same background. Because of her position, she does not have to judge whether the prejudices and preconceptions of “deviants” are legitimate or not. Compared to Eva, the opportunity structures for Chalak and Hawa contain limitations and we can see when, where and how these two people have to develop strategies for overcoming the structural limitations that influence conditions in their working life. The issue is not whether the networks of Chalak and Hawa are smaller than Eva’s. These limitations go hand in hand with the subordinating position that people with foreign backgrounds hold in the Swedish labour market.

Both Chalak and Hawa have immigrant backgrounds. They live in an immigrant suburb and their parents are not as well-established in the labour market. Compared to Eva’s parents, their family networks are neither as extensive, nor – especially in Hawa’s case – as socially or ethnically differential. Hawa’s network leads mostly to low-skilled employment. Chalak realised early that his first network – “immigrant young people” with unemployed parents who live in a disadvantaged area in a so-
cially and geographically segregated city – would limit his opportunities in the labour market. He has developed strategies for overcoming these limitations and tries to claim a position in a part of the social space that concretely and symbolically links resourceful networks. He has chosen an inner city upper secondary school “where there are only Swedes” and people who are high achievers. Hawa never finished school and her strategy is to advance in the niche of the labour market where she is now permanently employed, a typical workplace for young people (Arnell Gustafsson 2003). Because of her life situation, she holds a relatively disadvantaged position in the labour market; one that limits her horizon of action, especially opportunities for initiating reciprocal relations in (or related to) working life.

How then does recruitment via social networks affect young people’s entry into the labour market? And what consequences does network recruitment have for the reproduction of inclusion and exclusion in working life? It is obvious that network recruitment has different consequences for the careers of individuals. Resourceful social networks create not only opportunities in the labour market but also a horizon of action that allows risk taking and continues to reinforce the individual’s social position. Weaker social networks create fewer opportunities, and limit the horizon of action for taking risks and acting reciprocally. But the potential strengths and weaknesses of networks cannot only be explained in terms of network differentiation. Equally central are the values that are ascribed to the actors in networks. This is influenced by an ascription process, where ethnic preconceptions and prejudices acquire scope and effect. Network recruitment contributes not only to recreating society’s inequality structures, it can also reinforce inequality.

**Reference list**


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