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# LOOKING FOR WEAK TIES: USING A MIXED METHODS APPROACH TO CAPTURE ELUSIVE CONNECTIONS

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Abstract:

Since Granovetter's path breaking work in the 1970s, there has been much discussion about the relevance of weak ties in finding new jobs and generally getting ahead in society. Subsequent research has found evidence to both support and challenge his original theory. However, concerns have also been expressed about the meaning of this concept. What exactly are 'weak ties', how are they created and what resources flow through them? In my previous work, I have distinguished between horizontal and vertical ties and the relationships and resources available within them. This paper goes further, drawing on new, mixed methods research with Polish migrants, I explore what types of social ties are useful in contexts of deskilling and finding jobs commensurate with qualifications. Interrogating the concept of 'weak ties', I argue that tie strength and ethnic composition are less important than relative social distance and willingness to share valuable resources. I propose that 'strong ties' can also act as vertical bridges (or ladders), while ties which are too 'weak' may lack necessary trust to share latent resources. I consider the importance of a temporal perspective to explore the dynamism and life cycle of ties over time – as some lapse while others strengthen.

Key words: migrant networks, tie strength, bridging social distance, narratives, visualisation tools

Introduction

There have been calls for more research on how migrants access and create new relationships in new places (Gill and Bialski, 2011; Eve, 2010). While there has been much discussion and research on the value of networks for migrants (Boyd, 1998; Sanders et al, 2002; Haug, 2008), there have also been concerns that over-reliance on dense, strong ties largely made up of family members and co-ethnics may limit network 'reach' and resources (Kelly and Lusia, 2006; Anthias, 2007) and result in a downward levelling among migrant groups (Portes, 1998). Hence, there is growing interest in how migrants can forge more advantageous social connections to form bridges (Patulny, 2015) or weak ties (Lancee, 2010) or vertical connections (Ryan, 2011) as a mean of accessing wider resources in destination societies.

However, the distinction between these social connections is often assumed to be self-evident. Migration researchers have largely drawn on Putnam's work to differentiate bonding social capital which is necessary for getting by from bridging social capital which is necessary for

getting ahead (2000: 23). There is often an implied overlap between tie strength (strong or weak), content (intra-ethnic or inter-ethnic) and direction (bonding or bridging) (Geys and Murdoch, 2010; Patulny and Svendsen, 2007). My work seeks to challenge the simplistic dichotomy between strong, intra-ethnic, bonding ties versus weak, inter-ethnic, bridging ties (Ryan, 2011; Ryan et al, 2015).

In addition, there has also been criticism that the social capital inhering in different networks has been simply assumed (Fine, 2010). More research is needed to understand precisely what resources are accessed and shared within different kinds of social relationships (Ryan, 2011). Thus, social capital and social networks are not coterminous and we should not confuse potential sources of capital (networks) with actual capital (resources) (Reimer et al, 2008).

This paper aims to disentangle tie strength, content and direction by using rich qualitative data drawn from interviews and network visualisation with migrants. In so doing, I build on my previous body of work. Over the last decade or so, I have considered firstly, how migrants access and maintain various kinds of social *relationships*, paying due attention to opportunities but also obstacles they may face (Ryan, 2007). Secondly, I have sought to understand different *resources*, not only potentially available (latent) but also willingly shared (realisable) through specific social ties (Ryan et al, 2008). Thirdly, drawing on Bourdieu and Granovetter, I highlighted the significance of social distance, so that the value of a particular social connection may depend more on the *relative location* of the actors (horizontal or vertical) rather than simply on their ethnic identity (Ryan, 2011).

This paper further develops that argument; suggesting the importance of tie ‘weakness’ may have been over-simplified. Ties that are too weak may lack the necessary trust to be truly useful. Drawing on Sanders et al, (2002), I propose that bridging connections, which span social distance, do not necessarily have to be weak. On the contrary, bridging ties may be most useful if, as well as spanning social distance, they also involve strong levels of trust, mutuality and reciprocity. However, I go further and, adopting a temporal perspective, suggest that we need to pay attention to the life cycle of social ties. Thus, I argue that a rigid distinction between static strong and weak ties is unhelpful because these ties form part of a dynamic continuum of relationships, ebbing and flowing over time.

Of course, it should be stated that migrants do not find employment simply through social networks. Migrants are located in specific socio-economic and structural contexts that afford varied labour market opportunities through formal and informal processes. Nonetheless, within these contexts, social relationships may provide information, know-how and advice pertaining to employment (Brown and Konrad, 2001). The paper draws on interview and visualisation data with Polish migrants to consider access to and use of different social contacts in the labour market to find jobs and develop career trajectories. I attempt to go beyond some of the vagueness around weak ties (Clark, 2007) by focusing on realised resources in networks (Antcliff, et al, 2007) – e.g. getting a job through a particular social connections. Attempting to unravel the specific sources and flows through these networks raises methodological challenges (Sanders et al, 2002). Hence, an additional aim of this

paper is to consider how data may be collected using mixed method – biographical narratives and network visualisation techniques. I begin by considering the concept of weak ties.

### **Conceptualising and Operationalising weak ties**

In his pioneering work, Granovetter differentiates between a weak and strong tie on the basis of: ‘a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding) and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie’ (1973: 1361). Strong ties not only involve more frequency, intensity and intimacy but also include people who are more similar to each other ‘in various ways’ (p. 1362). Thus, actors in strong ties are more likely to know similar sorts of information about opportunities in a social system, e.g. job vacancies. Granovetter acknowledges that while people connected through strong ties may be more motivated to help each other, ‘those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we receive’ (1973:1371). Thus, such ties are important for ‘mobility opportunities’ (p.1373). These individuals are likely to be ‘only marginally included in [our] current network of contacts’ and may include a former colleague or employer with whom we have only ‘sporadic contact’ (1973: 1371). Using the concept of ‘bridge’ to mean ‘a line in a network which provides the only path between two points’ (1973: 1364), he argued that while all bridges are weak ties, not all weak ties are bridges (1973: 1364).

In later work, Granovetter (1983) argued that not all weak ties were equally valuable. He emphasised that weak ties are most useful when they bridge ‘substantial social distance’ (1983: 209). In other words, when the person to whom we are tied weakly is well placed in the ‘occupational structure’ (1983: 209) and has access to relevant and reliable information about opportunities within that structure.

Since Granovetter’s original thesis there has been a plethora of research on the application and usefulness of ‘weak ties’ (e.g. Sanders et al, 2002; Lancee, 2010; Patulny and Svendsen, 2007). Although employment seeking is taking place within changing socio-economic structures framed by new technologies, Brown and Konrad argue that personal contacts still matter: ‘in practice, networking remains a valued tool for finding jobs’ (2001: 436). However, they argue that ‘more research is needed to link the theory to the practice’ (2001: 437). I consider how data on network use in finding jobs may help in developing network theory. In so doing, I wish to draw upon and re-assess Granovetter’s initial theorisation.

Firstly, in terms of tie direction, the differentiation between weak ties based on degrees of structural distance, suggests the need to distinguish between horizontal - connecting people who occupy a relatively similar social position - and vertical weak ties - connecting people who occupy very different positions in a social hierarchy (Ryan, 2011). Thus, the most advantageous ties are vertical, bridging substantial distance, connecting an actor to someone who has more resources (information, know-how, etc). From a purely semantic view point a vertical bridge is meaningless, I now suggest the notion of *ladders*, instead of bridges, to describe vertical ties.

Secondly, regarding tie strength, I wish to re-visit Granovetter's assertion that all bridging ties are necessarily weak. Indeed, some researchers (Uzzi, 1999; Burt, 1992) suggest that tie strength may be of less significance than its bridging qualities. In researching migrants networks in the USA, Sanders et al (2002), found that job-related information flows across multiple social contacts, including weak and strong ties. They suggest that a strong tie could be a bridge, for example, if it connects to a different and more advantageous sector of employment. Interestingly, Sanders et al, also observed that a co-ethnic can be a bridge, something I also observed in my previous data (Ryan, 2011) and discuss further below.

Thirdly, in relation to tie content, I wish to consider Granovetter's argument that what flows between weak ties should have a demonstrable impact in the life of the social actors (1983: 229). Thus, we need to ascertain if a 'weak' social connection really does involve the flow of useful resources. In my view this points to the need to differentiate between 'latent' and realised resources. We cannot simply assume that just because I am acquainted with someone who has useful information that I necessarily benefit from this connection. Indeed, the nature of resources flowing through social connections may vary enormously from a direct job offer, to passing on information about a particular sector of employment to providing general advice or know how. This points to the need to pay more attention to networks 'consequences' (Antcliff et al, 2007) or 'effects' of particular relationships (Goulbourne et al, 2010).

Disentangling tie direction, strength and content requires a focus on: (a) relative social location of actors in a network, (b) dynamic relationships between alters, and (c) actual resources flowing (rather than merely inherent) between ties.

But how instrumental are social actors in forming and using particular social ties? Brown and Konrad argue that: 'job seekers make important choices regarding how to use their network of social resources so that they achieve desirable job search outcomes' (2001: 439). However, others are critical of this interpretation (Antcliff et al, 2007). Clark argues that, the idea of people 'utilising different ties for different purposes, as though attempting to achieve some kind of optimal output... seems oddly unrealistic' (2007: 21).

As a migration researcher, I am curious about how migrants build new connections. What factors enable that process? How do people describe that process, through narratives and visual tools? And how conscious do they seem about networking as a deliberate strategy?

In migration literature there is considerable interest in migrant networks and the levels of social capital accessed by varied migrant groups in different destination societies (Sanders et al, 2002; Haug, 2008). While many migration scholars draw upon Putnam to explore how migrants access bonding and bridging social capital (eg Nannerstad et al 2008), others turn to Bourdieu to consider how migrants generate social and cultural capital in new environments (Erel, 2010; Cederberg, 2015; Morosanu, 2015). Researching migrant networks in the Netherlands, Lancee (2010) returns to Granovetter to examine the role of bridging ties. In attempting to conceptualise bridging more systematically, Lancee distinguishes two types - identity bridging (going beyond one's ethnic group) and status bridging (connecting to people

of higher social status). While, this is potentially an important distinction, Lancee appears to mesh these two dimensions of bridging together by arguing that bridging ties to the 'native' population (identity bridging) are useful for migrants because most employers (status bridging) are 'natives'. However, I suggest that we cannot simply assume that all bridging ties to natives are advantageous or indeed that bridging ties with non-natives might not also be beneficial (Ryan et al, 2014).

In evidencing migrant bridging connections, many researchers tend to rely upon large, quantitative data sets often drawn from national surveys (e.g. Nannerstad et al, 2008; Lancee, 2010). While these are useful for showing wider trends, they cannot provide insights into the actual relationships and shared resources within specific ties. In-depth qualitative data often indicate more complex patterns of network formations and resource flows (Sanders, et al, 2002). Thus attempts to conceptualise social ties raise salient empirical questions about researching how migrants access and form relationships with different people, how trust is fostered, what benefits may be derived and how these ties change over time. In the following section I reflect on my experience of using in-depth interviewing as well as network visualisation to research migrant social relationships.

### **Oral and Visual Methods**

2014 was the tenth anniversary of EU enlargement when 10 countries – including 8 former soviet bloc countries - became new member states. Having previously carried out two studies with initial waves of Polish migrants in London (Ryan et al, 2008; Ryan, et al 2011), I wanted to see how migration trajectories and social network formations evolved during the decade since accession. This new study aimed to understand firstly, how migrants created, sustained and changed social relationships and secondly, the various resources that flowed through those ties. In the summer of 2014 I carried out a small, mixed methods study with 20 Polish migrants who had been in Britain for approximately 10 years. This was not intended to be a representative sample. Participants were recruited using a range of techniques including convenience sampling through Polish networks in London as well as snowballing through Polish contacts. The criteria for selection was that participants needed to have arrived in London approximately 10 years ago. The majority of the participants (17/ 20) were women. The average age was 36 years. The mean year of arrival was 2005, with the majority of participants moving to the UK between 2004 and 2007. 13 were married, 5 divorced and 2 were currently single. There was an even split between those with and without children (10/20). All but one of the interviewees were graduates. Most had arrived from Poland as graduates, though many also did some form of further study post-arrival in London (For more details see research report 2015).

Being especially interested in network composition, I decided to use network visualisation embedded in biographical interviews. Visualisation has been described as a means of making invisible social relationships visible (Conway, 2014). The use of sociograms to visualise networks can be traced back to the pioneering work of Moreno and Northway in the 1930s-40s (Freeman, 2000). I used a target sociogram, influenced by Northway, to map ego networks (Ryan et al, 2014). This followed a simple paper-based design adapted from

Hersberger (2003; see also Tapini forthcoming) and Wellman (1997). Participants wrote their contacts on a target diagram consisting of 3 concentric circles divided into 4 quadrants labelled as friends, family, work, neighbours/ hobbies/ others (see figures 1 and 2).

This type of visualisation, especially when drawn directly by the respondent and combined with interviews, has enormous potential to add valuable detail on network size, structure and interpersonal closeness (Hogan et al, 2007) while also prompting memories and stories about particular relationships (Carrasco et al, 2006). One of the criticisms of sociograms is that they offer a snap shot of network composition at a moment in time and therefore are not useful for capturing dynamism over time (Conway, 2014). In my experience, as discussed elsewhere (Ryan, et al 2014), combining a sociogram with a biographical interview enables that dynamism to unfold through the interaction between the visual tool and the interview discussion.

The interview began by asking about migration processes; when, how and why people migrated. Inter-personal relationships were usually central to this story and references to friends, partners and relatives were woven through the narrative before the sociogram was introduced - about 15 minutes into the interview. The sociogram took participants approximately 20 minutes to complete – interspersed with discussion. Then the interview continued around other related topic, including future plans. As the interview progressed many participants remembered additional contacts and added them to the sociogram. However, that is not to suggest that the sociogram and interview narrative neatly reflected each other.

Although interviews and sociograms are both qualitative methods, these are distinct data collection tools which, as argued below, elicit different kinds of information. Using visual, as well as narrative, techniques allowed different stories to be told suggesting the complexity, multi-dimensionality and fluidity of social relationships. Rather than regarding any contradictions between narrative and visual data as discrepancies, I use them to explore how stories of relationships unfold through the interactive process of the interview. The extent to which ‘weak ties’ were visualised on the sociogram varied enormously, as discussed below, raising salient questions about how such ties are understood and depicted by participants.

Sociograms tend to depict more strong ties than interviews alone, as participants seem to take seriously the task of populating the sociogram with as many friends as possible (Ryan et al, 2014). However, the opposite is true of weak ties (Rogers et al., 2014). Although commonly discussed in the literature, the concept of ‘weak ties’ is quite vague and not well defined outside of academic audiences (Clark, 2007; Conway, 2014). I had to use various prompts to encourage participants to think about these sorts of connections: *‘not so much close friends but people who could give you important advice whether about career or some specialist information’* or *‘people who can open doors for you. Do you have any connections or contacts with people like that?’* Despite such prompts, while completing the sociogram many participants were adamant that they had no-one who had ‘opened doors’ for them. An alternative approach, commonly used in quantitative network research, would be to present

participants with a list of occupations/ professions, asking them to indicate if they had links with any such individuals (see Molina et al, 2015). However, that would have elicited different data with limited opportunity to explore degrees of closeness.

To understand how social ties are depicted through the interplay of the interview questions/ discussion and the process of visualisation, I conducted an integrated analysis in two phases (Ryan et al., 2014). In the first phase I conducted a narrative analysis of a complete interview transcript and sociogram, focusing on how a participant tells their story in words and images. The second phase of the analysis was conducted in NVIVO and involved thematic coding across the full data set to identify the extent to which specific nodes were shared by all participants. This enabled an analysis of particular patterns of networking, such as what factors facilitated new social connections in contexts of migration. Thus, I suggest that just as visual and narrative data are collected together, there is a strong rationale for analysing them together through an integrated method. This analysis captures the dynamic interplay between how people talk about and visualise their social ties.

I present the findings in three sections below. Rather than presenting the data through the bi-focal lens of weak versus strong ties, or indeed the simplistic dichotomy of ‘natives’ versus co-ethnics, I want to understand participants’ explanations about how they forged various social ties and how these relationships may help to enhance their employment prospects. The first section considers the latent and realised resources inherent in particular social ties and indicates the networking opportunities but also obstacles migrants may encounter. The second section examines why participants may not ‘remember’ their vertical ties – ‘ladders’ – on sociograms as these weak connections lapse over time. While the third section discusses how weak ties may become strong over time. The conclusion considers the implications of these findings and highlights my contribution to understanding and conceptualising different kinds of social connections and, in particular, the employment enhancing resources realisable through these social ties.

#### From Latent to Realised Resources:

Martyna’s sociogram was particularly well populated with friends. However, she explained that she did not have any influential or useful connections and suggested some of the obstacles that migrants might encounter in forging such ties: ‘we didn’t have opportunities’. She explained that her Polish friends ‘don’t have connections’ and although she has met lots of British people through work and her children’s school, these were not necessarily helpful sources of information. She elaborated this point in relation to the search for a secondary school for her son: ‘But speaking to the parents when you are competing for a place is not, well, I’ve learnt that, it’s not the best thing to do’. She added: ‘they just don’t want to share the knowledge’. In other words, within her local, primary school-based, networks, information is not freely shared among parents but rather may be withheld in contexts of intense competition for limited and much coveted places at desirable secondary schools.

Martyna’s experiences suggest that the challenge is not simply to access networks but also to establish relationships of trust and reciprocity which enable the flow of valuable resources (i.e. information). The latent capital inherent in networks is not necessarily shared with all



members. Although not referring to employment opportunities, her experiences illustrate how competition may block the flow of resources. Social contacts are perhaps most likely to share information if it is mutually beneficial. There were many examples in the data of realised resources and these accounts suggest something of the context, processes and mutuality through which this may occur.

Experiences of initial de-skilling were common among my participants (see also Parutis, 2014; Nowicka, 2014; Trevena, 2011). This was usually because of limited English language skills and the associated impact not only on job opportunities but also network reach. Although a graduate, Oliwia spoke little English when she arrived in London and could only find work as a cleaner. She commented upon the challenges of making connections with influential or knowledgeable people: 'It's hard if you are not working with them... you need to work for this kind of trust'. As a cleaner Oliwia had limited opportunities to meet new people. Most of her friends were doing work. Thus her network reach was limited. However, later she completed an English language course and got a weekend job on a market book stall and later, after acquiring more experience, found a job in a large book shop. Here she had opportunities to broaden her professional networks by establishing good working relationships with representatives from various publishers (i.e. *reps*). As Lancee (2010) notes, it takes time, perhaps years, for migrants to build up bridging connections. The reps invited Oliwia to join them for after-work drinks and gradually she built up good relations based on shared interests and frequent contact. On one of these social occasions she received a job offer.

I met my, my now boss and he was like saying 'oh, I need an assistant' and I was like 'ok, well, I'm looking for a job' and he was like 'well, email me' and then I forgot all about this... and then he wrote to me and that was, as my friend was organising some drinks and copying everyone's email, so he took my email from the list

Oliwia's narrative clearly fits Granovetter's notion of weak ties as people encountered through chance meetings or through mutual friends (1973: 1371). There is a striking similarity between the experiences of Oliwia and Dominik.

When Dominik arrived in London from Poland with his wife in 2003, he spoke little English and relied on Polish friends to help with accommodation and finding a low-paid, low-skilled job. 'It was very difficult for me because I didn't speak any English... I knew that I would have to start somewhere at the very bottom'. Gradually he improved his English by attending a language course. He gained more work experience through a series of jobs in catering: 'so I had that skill. My English was better, my confidence was better'. Meanwhile his wife, who already spoke good English, had progressed more quickly and was working for a large company. In 2009, at a party organised through his wife's work-mates, Dominik met a man who owned a chain of restaurants: 'it was just a conversation we had, you know, who you are, what you're doing, what you like and so on'. This casual acquaintance carried on through a few more social encounters: 'we'd probably seen each other like one or two more times'. Then the man contacted Dominik informing him about a vacancy in the company. Thus,

Dominik secured the position as manager. This story appears to conform to a stereotypical process of initial reliance on bonding social capital to the eventual emergence of bridging capital accessed through weak ties. Interestingly, when I asked Dominik to visualise his network using a sociogram (see Figure 1), this weak tie did not appear at all. Dominik now had a different job and that initial relationship was no longer part of his network. These fleeting, though often highly significant connections, may be difficult to depict. I return to discuss this point in a later section.

For Dominik and Oliwia, these individuals proved to be highly influential, offering career changing opportunities, and could be described as ‘vertical bridges’ or ladders (Ryan, 2011) based on their relative social location, access to valuable resources and their open relationship with the migrant. However, these new acquaintances were not random strangers but rather formed part of a wider network of mutual contacts and, hence, should not be understood as isolated dyads (Wellman, 1997). As Oliwia explained: ‘Because I had a good of a reputation, it was my reps, they actually recommended me’. Thus, I suggest that ties may be most effective not only when they bridge structural holes (Burt, 1992) but also when they are guided by reputation and recommendations facilitating trust (Uzzi, 1999). In addition, in each case, the future employer was looking to fill a vacancy, so the tie was mutually beneficial.

The initial downward mobility of all my participants make any attempt to locate their class positioning quite complex (Eade et al, 2006). Most of my participants went ‘down to the bottom’ – several, like Oliwia, were cleaners – but over time they have climbed up in their careers. This suggests the importance of taking a long term perspective in migration research.

While Oliwia and Dominik’s bridging contacts occurred largely by accident, other participants were more pro-active in forging influential connections (see also Morosanu, 2015). Angelika, now a data analyst who initially worked in a bar, described her efforts:

in terms of like a career development you’re, you’re looking for somebody who’s, more mature, with more experience who’s more like a mentor really... So I’d be looking for somebody from LinkedIn, or through those meetups that people organise (Angelika)

In addition to social opportunities, the ability to engage in bridging activities also requires cultural capital, particularly language fluency. On top of language, Cederberg (2015) notes, it also takes time for migrants to acquire familiarity with the cultural nuances and social mores of the new society. Izabela, who is a life coach, argued that migrants need to go into social situations, even if they initially feel uncomfortable, so that they can gradually build up new connections.

I just went to one Meetup and met plenty of people who were willing to introduce me to someone... really you just need to go out from your house and meet new people, it’s not so hard really. I know that people say that it is but it’s not (Izabela)

Interestingly, one of the contacts Izabela made, who provided her with useful career-related connections, was also Polish. As noted above, the structure of a tie cannot be simply assumed by the ethnic makeup of alters involved. On the contrary, the structure of a tie is more accurately understood by studying the relationship, the relative social location of the actors and the resources that flow through that tie. As noted below, these ties can be fleeting and challenging to research.

### From Ladders to Lapsed Ties

Most participants did not include 'weak ties' in the sociogram. On being questioned about connections with useful or influential people, many said they knew no one like that. However, it was noteworthy that later in the interview, after the sociogram was completed, reference was frequently made to precisely such connections. In some cases these were managers (Sonia) or university tutors (Ptryk, Sylwia and Marika) who played supportive, mentoring roles. In other cases, they were people met socially via mutual acquaintances (Karina). However, when completing sociograms these people were usually not mentioned at all. This raises questions about how particular relationships are perceived and represented visually on sociograms. Sanders et al (2002) also found that different research tools may elicit different data about social ties. These observations highlight the usefulness of combining data collection tools to elicit fuller information. While sociograms contained lots of ties to family and friends (see figures 1 and 2), work colleagues were only named ties when they were on friendly terms, otherwise they were represented as a general unnamed cluster of 'colleagues'. There was usually no sign of the 'weak ties' mentioned in the interview narratives. When probed further, participants usually seemed surprised that these fleeting acquaintances should be included in the sociogram. These short lived connections – influential at a particular point in their career – were often lapsed, forgotten. This is well illustrated by Sylwia.

While completing the sociogram and during the early part of the interview, Sylwia was adamant that no one had helped her: 'Not at all. No. I learnt by my experience. It was quite tough experience.' (Sylwia). Her story was presented from an individual perspective as a lone actor who managed to slowly climb the career ladder from the lowly beginning in catering to the senior professional position she now holds. However, as the interview unfolded Sylwia mentioned a university professor in London who had been quite influential in her early career development: 'actually, you know... she did help me, she did give me a job and she gave me good references, so I got into the training'. Following further probing, Sylwia acknowledged: 'Yeah, she opened some doors to some level.' The professor did not appear on the sociogram, the connection seemed no longer relevant. There may be other reasons why this once useful ladder had lapsed. It became apparent in the interview that Sylwia and her former professor had a difficult relationship. Sylwia had felt uncomfortable and somewhat intimidated.

I was invited to this kind of nightmare when going out sometimes, I felt, you know, I had to go and it was really, I mean, difficult experience for me, I just felt, in restaurants that my English wasn't good enough... It was quite posh and you know I just didn't, I really feel I didn't fit in... I felt really inadequate actually.

Thus, although this woman provided Sylwia with a potential social ladder through invitations to socialise in senior professional circles, this was not necessarily a pleasant or easy experience. In these 'posh' circles, Sylwia felt 'inadequate'. This experience suggests that beneficial bridging ties may be forged at a personal cost, for example, putting oneself into a new and uncomfortable situation. Bourdieu (1986) observed that networking requires endless effort.

As Erel (2010) observes, cultural capital does not easily transfer across national borders. Cultural capital may be valued differently in particular contexts (Cederberg, 2015). Over time participants like Izabela and Angelika, above, had built up cultural capital – language fluency and familiarity with social norms – to enable them to socialise with confidence in networking events like Meetups. For Sylwia, who initially lacked this level of context-specific cultural capital, these social encounters could be 'nightmares'. This difficult memory may partly explain why Sylwia did not maintain contact with her professor and did not include her in the sociogram.

Similarly Karina, although initially stating that no one helped her, later mentioned how a contact, met through her English boyfriend, gave her the first opportunity to gain valuable professional work experience through a temporary job at a prestigious British university. When asked if she had maintained contact with that individual, Karina stated that they did not get along any more. This is suggestive of some falling out or disagreement rather than simply losing touch over time. This points to the dynamism of ties and the need to understand how the initial relationship may transform.

There may be other reasons why some participants do not seem to remember 'useful connections'. Despite, assumptions in the literature, it should not be assumed that migrants approached networking in an overtly instrumental way (Clarke, 2007; Antcliff, et al, 2007). Some sought to join networking groups such as LinkedIn or Meet Ups as a way of building professional connections. However, those who relied on inter-personal relationships to access specific resources were hesitant to describe these ties as 'useful': 'actually I really never thought about that, yeah... it's kind of like having 'useful friends', doesn't sound right' (Oliwia). Clearly, Oliwia felt uncomfortable thinking about her social connections instrumentally. Karina went further and wondered if using people just for valuable information sounded too 'Machiavellian'. It is also noteworthy that Karina, who now works for a publicly funded body, explained that these types of social connections are not necessary in her area of work because all vacancies are advertised and all applications are considered through a transparent equal opportunity process. Her comments indicate that these bridging ties may be more relevant in some fields – such as private sector – than in others. Nonetheless, as I suggest below, networks may play an indirect role even within formal employment processes.

From weak ties to strong ties

So far I have focused on the fleeting nature of bridging connections. But the combined approach of sociograms and interviews also revealed a very different trajectory of such ties. I was struck by the fact that these initial, influential, ties were more likely to appear on the sociograms if the relationships had been maintained and even strengthened over time. This suggests the dynamics of relationships and the need to capture the life cycle of social ties.

Like most participants, Gabi experienced initial deskilling (Trevena, 2011) and was willing to take ‘any job’ (Parutis, 2014). She had worked as a waitress and described how a regular customer in the restaurant became a source of useful information:

He’s a banker, he’s got a very good job. Because he lived next door to the restaurant he was always coming over just for a chat and he helped me a lot with all advice. He was the biggest help, he guided me basically with everything.

Through this Englishman Gabi received valuable information and advice about getting on an accountancy training course and gaining relevant work experience. Now an accounts manager, she is very aware of how much this man’s advice and encouragement helped her. When I asked if she had included him on the earlier sociogram, she said yes and indicated an alter in the friendship quadrant located in the central circle depicting a very close relationship. She added: ‘we stayed friends. Since then we are always in touch’.

This transition from weak to strong tie was also apparent in the narratives of Ewa whose former advisor has now become ‘a pure friend’ and had also been included in the sociogram. Given, the earlier reference to equal opportunity policies and the limited need for bridging ties in some sectors of employment, Ewa gave an example of how her contact (now friend) had helped her understand equal opportunity policies.

it was 2004, I looked at the question, ‘*what does it mean this equal opportunity policy to you*’? What am I expected to answer?... I asked her about it. I said openly I would like to understand it, I will always fail on it and she actually explained to me all the English idea about it and then I wrote my answer and she actually said ‘*no, let’s sit down. You are thinking the right thing but you are not wording it as it’s expected*’.

This story clearly illustrates how this sort of insider knowledge, cultural capital, can be invaluable to someone who has recently arrived and is unfamiliar with such nuances (Morosanu, 2015). This points to the range of information flowing through these ties (ladders) – not just about a particular job but also general advice and know-how pertaining to country-specific employment processes.

The bridging ties described by Ewa and Gabi were both English people whose local knowledge was clearly an asset. However, not all such connections were English. Adrianna had a senior colleague who was also of migrant origin, Cypriot, but who had lived in London

for many years and provided career enhancing advice and information. Overtime, this colleague (see 'MS' on Figure 2) became part of a close network of friends, even accompanying Adrianna and her husband on holiday to Poland.

On first arriving in London, Mateusz rented a room in a house owned by an older Polish woman. Having lived in Britain from many decades, she had acquired extensive local knowledge which she was willing to share with Mateusz. As a retired health professional, she provided invaluable career advice and information which enabled Mateusz to move from catering to nursing. Thus, as argued earlier, a fellow migrant, including a co-ethnic, can be a bridging tie provided they span significant social distance and hence have access to, and are willing to share, information leading to career development and employment advancement. Over time, this Polish woman and her husband have become like pseudo-parents to Mateusz and his wife. When asked if he had included them in the sociogram he said yes and indicated their location in the closest circle, saying they are now 'super friends'. Bridging connections are not necessarily isolated dyads but, as shown in the sociograms, may become embedded in networks of interconnections relationships.

These observations suggest not only that 'weak' ties may, over time, become strong ties, but also that such bridging connections may be most helpful when they are defined by trusting relationships and mutuality. As strong ties, these individuals continued to provide advice and information to Ewa, Adrianna and Mateusz. Thus it is not the weakness of the tie which is most significant but rather the willingness of someone in a position of seniority to take an interest, share resources and invest time and energy in building a strengthening relationship. This observation challenges the narrow, static and rather simplistic way in which 'weak ties' are often conceptualised in the literature.

#### Concluding thoughts:

While networks remain important as part of employment seeking strategies and building career progression, there have been calls for more research linking network theory to the practice of networking (Brown and Konrad, 2001). This paper aimed to consider how data on network use, particularly in relation to migrants' job opportunities, may help in developing network theory.

While much migration research tends to conflate network structure (strong or weak ties) with network content (intra- or inter-ethnic) and network direction (bonding or bridging), my work seeks to challenge this simplistic conflation. Thus, the key contribution of this paper has been to show the importance of disentangling tie strength, content and direction. In order to do so, I have not begun with any a priori assumptions about ethnic composition or resources inhering in specific kinds of social ties. Instead I have used rich qualitative data drawn from interviews and network visualisation to understand how migrants access and utilise particular kinds of resources through various relationships. Hence, instead of presenting data through the bi-focal lens of 'weak' versus 'strong' ties, or indeed the simplistic dichotomy of 'natives' versus 'co-ethnics', I want to understand participants' explanations about how they

forged new social ties and how these relationships may have enhanced employment progression over time.

Drawing on my previous work (Ryan, et al, 2008; Ryan, 2011), this paper develops the interrogation of 'weak ties' by exploring the importance of realised (as opposed to latent) resources, how migrants expand network reach to span relative social distance and build new relationships in the destination society. I use innovative methods to examine the dynamism of network relationships over time. In so doing, I make three specific contributions to understanding how migrants forge new ties that bridge social distance.

Firstly, in contexts of deskilling and downward social mobility, it takes time, effort but also opportunity for migrants to extend network reach and build connections that bridge relative social distance. A certain amount of cultural capital – such as language competence – is required to meet and socialise with people across social distance. Contrary to Granovetter, this paper indicates that bridging ties are rarely random dyads but are often embedded in circles of mutual acquaintances leading to opportunities for social encounters.

Secondly, it is necessary to differentiate resources available through these bridging social ties. Resources can vary from a direct job offer, to advice about entering specific employment sectors, to general know-how and support with application processes. However, that is not to assume that simply making connections that span social distance gives automatic access to resources. Latent resources inhering in networks may not be easily realised. Trust and mutual benefit are necessary to unlock these resources. I agree with Granovetter (1983), focusing on effects or consequences, such as success in getting a job, is helpful in assessing the extent to which resources have actually been realised.

Thirdly, my work demonstrates the dynamism of social relationships. Focusing on the life cycle of a tie, we can see that some lapse and are forgotten, while others strengthen and develop through relationships of trust, mutuality and reciprocity. While sociograms were more useful at depicting current relationships, particularly friends and family, the combination of visual and oral tools illustrated how connections changed over time. The absence or presence of influential bridging ties on sociograms illustrated how some ties fade with time, while others had grown from 'weak' to 'strong' ties.

Overall, I conclude that the concept of 'weak ties' risks simplifying the diversity and dynamism of tie structure, content and direction. I have argued that disentangling these dimensions of ties reveals interesting observations. In terms of tie direction, while a bridge describes a connection between people in different social situations, we need to distinguish between horizontal and vertical bridges. These beneficial social connections are most useful when connecting migrants to people in advantageous or influential social positions. I suggest the term 'ladder' more accurately describes 'vertical bridges'. Regarding tie content, vertical ties need not just be with natives. Other migrants and indeed co-ethnics, provided they are located in advantageous social positions and willing to share resources, can also serve as 'ladders'. Finally, for tie structure, I argue that these 'ladders' do not need to be 'weak'. Following Uzzi (1999), I suggest that connections that are too weak may lack necessary trust

and mutuality. My data show that ladders, may be 'strong' and remain advantageous leading to career mobility.

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Figure 1: Dominik



WORK COLLEAGUES

NEIGHBOURS/ HOBBIES

FAMILY  
P01016

FRIENDS

