MAKING THE LINKS: POVERTY, ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

This research examined how social networks help or hinder people in moving out of poverty and whether this varies within and between different ethnic groups living in urban and rural England.

Key points

- People's social networks were shaped by factors including ethnicity, class and gender, but personal characteristics, such as confidence, were also important in developing useful connections. Family and friends were seen as the basis for most relationships but there were low levels of awareness about wider social networks and how they might be used for moving on from poverty.

- People's links beyond their own ethnic community were important, but the added dimension of racism could prevent access to 'mainstream' influential networks.

- Social networks tended to be 'like with like', so while they were used to access employment, this was often into low-paid jobs which relied on informal recruitment processes.

- Strong bonds with family and friends helped mitigate the effects of poverty. However, developing bridging and linking ties with networks that could move people on from poverty involved risks and scarce energy and resources.

- Voluntary, community and faith based organisations were seen as important for facilitating access to cross-cultural networks.

- There were examples of good practice in agencies encouraging people to consider how their social networks could help them move out of poverty. However, there was no consistency in practice between agencies.

The research
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BACKGROUND

The research examined how social networks help or hinder people in moving out of poverty; and whether this varies within and between different ethnic groups living in England. Social networks are defined as the links and relationships connecting people with one another and with organisations. They are used for communication, co-operation and co-ordination and may involve face-to-face interaction or social technologies. The study sought to identify how networks affected trajectories into, through, and out of poverty. It examined people's awareness of social networks, how they accessed them, and how they are used in mitigating or moving on from poverty.

The research considered diversity within populations, rather than seeing ethnicity as about differences between migrant communities and the majority population. A layered approach moved out from the individual through family relationships, friendship circles, informal community networks, links generated by voluntary organisations and agencies, and the use of digital technologies to establish and maintain local or global connections.

Network awareness

The majority of interviewees did not analyse their networks intuitively, or their strategies for networking. The family provided the core relationships from which people built their wider social networks, but family expectations could also limit opportunities for networking. Some younger respondents were constrained by pressures to contribute to the family business or to stay close to home. Network awareness, self-confidence and a belief in having something to offer were fundamental to people's capacity to network.

Those who had reflected on their social networks saw the importance of broad, particularly cross-cultural, connections. However, trying to develop untested contacts in order to 'move on' beyond immediate family or community-based networks was seen as risky. Family and friends constituted a safety net of trusted financial and practical support. For many, this provided a springboard to develop 'weak ties' that could help them move on, but for some close relationships placed restrictions on their ability to develop useful links. Trust and reciprocity were recognised as fundamental and the conscious manipulation of social networks for personal or family advantage could jeopardise these very characteristics and increase the 'cost' of using networks.

Network access

The networks of all participants in poverty were shaped by social class, ethnicity, age and gender role expectations. Level of education and the nature of employment were seen as key in determining the characteristics, and use, of networks. Those in low-paid jobs, with long working hours, had particularly limited networks beyond the workplace. Members of more visible minority ethnic groups were affected by racism. Prejudice and discrimination were barriers to accessing and participating in influential networks.

Voluntary, community and faith organisations were seen as playing three important networking roles: as *places* where people felt comfortable and affirmed within their own culture; as *spaces* where diverse groups could come together to build connections; and as having the *faces* (people) with the skills and knowledge to bring others together.

Networking required resources including time and money. In dispersed minority ethnic communities in rural areas, travel distances and inadequate broadband were additional barriers. For migrant and refugee communities, learning English was a basic requirement to opening up networks, accessing employment or staying in work. Poor levels of English hampered access to, and participation in, networks. Formal learning (e.g. ESOL) was an important platform for developing connections as well as qualifications.

The power of social technologies to maintain personal networks was fully recognised and some participants felt that dependence on face-to-face connections might 'hold them back'. Social technologies offered opportunities for strengthening existing and lapsed ties. A minority saw social media as a way of 'marketing' themselves.

There were negative aspects to social networks. Informal recruitment procedures in certain industries confined some people to in-work poverty. Peer and family pressures could prevent people from moving on. Assumptions that some communities 'look after their own' were felt to be misleading and did not reflect contemporary life for many minority ethnic people.

The use, usefulness and limitations of networks

Social networks are important in surviving poverty. Interviewees described instances of sharing food, exchanging fuel cards, or finding out about low-cost clothing and food outlets or free exchange services. Most ethnically specific networks were about survival and socialising: 'getting by' but not 'getting on'. Where social networks did help people to escape poverty, it was usually through connections into influential, predominantly white, mainstream society. However, even those who were 'successful' identified limits to how far networks could take them, for instance in promotion at work.

Multi-cultural, 'open' services that facilitate contact and integration provide opportunities to establish bridging and linking connections or 'weak ties'. However, different ethnic communities also organise collectively to deliver their own support and advice services, sometimes because they do not feel well-served or welcomed by mainstream agencies. Some turned to family and community connections for advice – though the information given was not always reliable. Social networks were used to negotiate complex systems such as health, benefits and education.

Traditional cultures and values provided a basis for networking, although less so for some ethnicities and for younger generations. Digital technologies were widely used to maintain transnational ties.

Differences were apparent in the use of networks for access to finance. White British interviewees used loans within the family, from mainstream institutions or loan companies, whereas those from minority ethnic communities relied on informal or semi-formal saving and lending schemes, often based around the district of birth in their country of origin.

Representatives from statutory and private sector service providers were sceptical about the capacity of social networks to lift people out of poverty. A common view was that moving on from poverty was particularly difficult where low-wage labour markets were dominant.

Recommendations

- Mentoring could be powerful in promoting positive use of networks for gaining work, setting up businesses and progressing to better jobs. There would be value in piloting peer mentoring within the workplace and for those finding a return to work problematic.

- Employer action is required to address the negative 'grace and favour' aspects of networks in recruitment and promotion. Organisations should routinely review the extent to which informal workplace networks discriminate in access to employment and progression in the workplace.

- As online access increasingly becomes the default for service provision, the need to promote digital fluency becomes more urgent. Social media clinics, with an emphasis on network awareness, could be developed and linked to digital champions in Job Centre Plus.

- The networks of service users were recognised as under-used resources in identifying training and employment opportunities, but there was no systematic agency practice. Standardised 'toolkits' could be developed for employment support agencies. Toolkits should enable people to map their networks, help build strategies for extending and using networks, and provide signposting to agencies that can assist in developing 'bridging' capital.

- ESOL classes are critical for people from migrant and refugee communities seeking employment. They provide important spaces for cross-cultural networking that can lead to helpful inter-ethnic friendships and increased confidence in language and literacy.

- Voluntary, community and faith organisations offer vital advice and services, and inform signposting and networking within and between ethnic groups. These resources need to be protected and recognised. The principles of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 should be incorporated into public service commissioning procedures, with contractors required to demonstrate added social value through access to community networks.

- High quality volunteering helps develop links beyond family and community: its importance needs to be recognised, as does the diversity of motivations for taking up unpaid work in the community.

CONCLUSIONS

Social networks can help people stay out of poverty and deal with its effects. Building inter-ethnic bridging links that help people move on from poverty is crucial, but also problematic, as the networks identified through the research tended to be 'like with like'. In addition to cultural background, gender and class played important roles in shaping people's social networks. Inequalities within and between networks need to be acknowledged and addressed. For black and minority ethnic people, there continues to be the added dimension of racial prejudice and discrimination.

About the study

This research draws on interviews with 39 men and 52 women from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds in Birmingham, Cumbria and Liverpool. Focus groups and interviews with 28 agencies were undertaken to assess the use of social networks in helping people move out of poverty.

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