The chance of influence: A natural experiment on the role of social capital in faculty recruitment[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The effect of social capital is often overestimated because contacts and centrality can be a consequence of success rather than its cause. Only rare randomized or natural experiments can assess the real causal effect of social capital. This paper relies on data from one such experiment: faculty recruitment at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) between 1960 and 2005, a leading French institution of higher education in the social sciences. It exploits the fact that the electoral commission, a hiring committee which produces a first ranking of applicants, is partly composed of faculty members drawn at random. It shows that when the PhD advisor is randomly drawn, it doubles the chances of an applicant of being shortlisted.

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"What has remained, however, and indeed has considerably increased, is a factor peculiar to the university career. Whether or not an adjunct lecturer, let alone an assistant, ever succeeds in achieving the position of a full professor, let alone of a head of an institute, is a matter of pure chance. Of course, chance is not the only factor, but it is an usually powerful factor."
Weber (2008, p. 28)

The role played by social networks and personal contacts in getting a job is one of sociology's most famous propositions (Granovetter, 1973, 1974). Indeed, labor surveys have shown repeatedly that an important fraction of the population in developed countries cites contacts as a reason they were hired in their current jobs (Marsden and Gorman, 2001; Ioannides and Loury, 2004). In the United States, half of the workers interviewed in the 1978 wave of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics heard of their current job from a friend or a relative and 40% of the men and one third of the women surveyed thought there was someone who may have helped (Corcoran et al., 1980). Moreover, one fourth of unemployed jobseekers surveyed in a 1992 study indicated that they had checked during the previous four weeks with friends and relatives to find work (Ports, 1993). In France, 20–25 percent of respondents who had been recently hired stated in Labor Force surveys taken between 2005 and 2012 that they "entered their firm" thanks to "family, personal or professional contacts" (Larquié (de) and Rieucau, 2015).

Yet despite the widespread view that personal contacts—and particularly weak ties—often facilitate job finding, the empirical evidence for a clear link between social networks and employment outcomes is limited. Some studies have found that weak ties can affect outcomes, either as a consequence of information gleaned from weak ties about job opportunities (Fernandez and Weinberg, 1997; Yakubovich, 2005) or as a result of the indirect influence that weak ties can have on people in charge of recruitment decisions (Lin et al., 1981). And there is strong evidence for the importance of strong ties, especially in countries like China where labor markets are not very competitive (Bian, 1997; Obukhova, 2012). People in charge of recruitment may therefore have great motivation to use their discretionary power in favor of the closest candidates.

However, studies based on large samples are much less confident about the causal impact of contacts on job opportunities. The first-order correlation between job contacts and professional outcomes disappears once a set of elementary controls is introduced and relationships are tested that extend beyond subsamples of white upper-class males (Bridges and Villemez, 1986). They also go down after the correlation between the characteristics of individuals and the characteristics of their contacts is taken into account (Mouw, 2003). In Mouw's broad survey of the literature on the causal effects of social capital (2006) he argues that there is actually little empirical evidence demonstrating a link between contacts

and job outcomes. He points to unobserved heterogeneity and reverse causality—two classic sources of bias, that are more likely to occur with network variables—as potentially leading to substantial overestimation of the impact of networks. He forcefully advocates for methods, such as natural experiments and randomized experiment techniques, which can overcome the current statistical limitations. Two previous studies based on such methods do in fact conclude that social capital hardly plays any role in job outcomes (Mouw, 2003; Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner, 2006).

If it is in fact true that social network variables mainly capture confounding variables like skills or successes (either past or anticipated), this finding would be of dramatic importance for network sociology. Indeed, it should lead us to seriously reconsider a very important stream of theoretical and empirical literature in sociology (Granovetter, 1973, 1974; Lin et al., 1981; Burt, 1992, 2005; Fernandez and Weinberg, 1997; Lin, 2001; Yakubovich, 2005; Obukhova, 2012). But while there are strong reason's to support Mouw's general critique of findings based on statistical estimations that neglect the aforementioned biases, at the same time there are reasons to think that Mouw's studies should not lead to a definitive conclusion about the effects of networks. The technique quoted by Mouw (2006), based on random assignment of students in campuses' dormitories, may not be the best natural experiment to assess the pure causal impact of social capital on recruitment. So before throwing out the sociological baby with the methodological bath water, we need to apply a more convincing causal methodology to situations where contacts or positions in the network are more likely to make a difference.

Randomized experiments are expensive and difficult to implement for most real-life situations, including job recruitment. In social sciences, most randomized experiments are run in the fields of public policy research or development economics (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011). Natural experiments that could be used to learn more about the causal impact of networks on recruitment are unfortunately rare.

The only existing natural experiment in the literature is a recent study of recruitment in Spain (Zinovyeva and Bagues, 2015). In order to ameliorate a widespread perception of academic inbreeding (i.e. the tendency for universities to preferentially recruit their former PhD students), the Spanish Education Ministry required from 2002 to 2006 the randomization of the composition of academic hiring committees for the first round of academic recruitment. The presence of such a natural experiment allows Zinovyeva and Bagues to plausibly claim that the presence of personal contacts increases the chance of recruitment.

However, there are still several limits to this study. First, the study is not informed by any clear theory, sociological or otherwise, for why we should expect personal contacts to influence outcomes. Indeed, the study does not engage with forty years of research into the effects of personal ties.

Second, the study does not situate its findings within the particular cultural and political context that produced the natural experiment. Spanish universities are widely perceived as being influenced by a particular form of parochial nepotism unique to the Spanish context, and it cannot be assumed that an effect observed in this particular academic setting would necessarily also be generalizable to a wider array of European universities, and particularly elite institutions where academic leaders claim to be on the cutting edge of social scientific research, and therefore less influenced by parochial ties.

The recruitment of scholars at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), a leading French institution of higher education in the social sciences, provides a natural experiment that allows us to measure the causal effect of social networks at one of Europe's most elite academic institutions. Assessing recruitment in this setting will allow us to assess the scope of previously observed effects of social capital on academic recruitment. Firmly rooted in the four decade long sociological inquiry into the effects of social ties, this article uses the presence of the natural experiment at EHESS to conduct a theoretically informed estimation of the precise causal effect of social capital on placement outcomes within an elite educational institution.

The EHESS hiring procedure requires that two-thirds of the electoral commission providing the initial rankings for applicants be drawn at random from the institution's faculty. Thanks to the random component built into the selection process, we can apply the classical experimental feature comparing the outcomes of two groups: (a) the treated group, i.e., the applicants whose personal contact has been randomly drawn; and (b) the control group, i.e., the applicants whose personal contact has not been randomly drawn. The difference in the outcome between these two groups will indicate the effect of having a social contact on the committee. I exploit this feature for several types of personal "contacts" that are persons with whom the applicant is likely to have significantly interacted in academia before applying. It includes, for instance, the applicant's PhD advisor, other members of their PhD committee, their coauthors, and other persons who had the same PhD advisor.

As the article shows, when one of the randomly drawn committee members is the PhD advisor for a given candidate, it doubles the odds of that candidate being put forward for recruitment by the electoral commission. The influence of chance here is a chance of influence: the chance to have your contacts in the right place in order to influence an outcome in your favor. In this regard, the status of the university turns out to hardly be a mitigating factor. Academics at elite universities claiming to be at the forefront of scholarship may be just as susceptible to parochialism as any other.

In sum, the article provides strong evidence that social capital matters for academic recruitment. This result may be reassuring for the sociologist who coined the term, as well as the many sociologists who have spent much of their careers researching the effects of social ties. But at the same time it may be discomforting for many academic institutions whose methods of selection may deviate quite substantially from the meritocratic and universalist ideal of the university (Merton, 1973).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: The first section details the shortcomings of classical estimations of the causal impact of social capital. The second section establishes links between the EHESS study and previous studies of the academic labor market. The third section presents the data and the method. I present the results in the fourth section, and finish with a discussion of their scope and limitations.

1. Natural experiments on social capital

In network sociology, it has been very common since the work of Granovetter (1974) and Burt (1992) to use a basic regression analysis to try to explain an outcome (getting a job or a promotion, level of pay or pay increase) through the use of social capital variables. Social capital variables generally constitute either the "who" type of social capital (who you know, the influence of a specific contact) or the "where" type of social capital (where you are in the network in terms of centrality, structural constraint, etc.).

Mouw (2006) concentrates his criticism on the "who" type of social capital. Building on the research into peer effects conducted by the econometrician Manski (1993), Mouw shows that regressions seeking to evaluate the influence of a specific contact are particularly vulnerable to the "reflection problem." Since homophily is considered to be a universal feature of social relationships (McPherson et al., 2001; Lin, 2001), one can expect the presence of a strong correlation between an individual's characteristics and those of their contact, both on the observable dimensions, which can be controlled for in regressions, and the