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Social Networks and the School-to-Work Transition

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Dagmar Müller

# Social Networks and the School-to-Work Transition

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**Abstract**
Müller, D. 2020. Social Networks and the School-to-Work Transition. *Economic studies* 189. 146 pp. Uppsala: Department of Economics, Uppsala University. ISBN 978-91-506-2826-5.

**Essay I:** This paper studies the importance of market work during high school for graduates' school-to-work transition and career. Relying on Swedish linked employer-employee data, I show that such work provides students with an important job-search channel that some graduates are deprived of due to establishment closures that occur just prior to graduation and labor market entry. I identify the effects of the closures by comparing classmates from the same vocational tracks and find immediate and sizable negative effects on employment and earnings after graduation. The effects persist for up to 10 years, but are not permanent. Graduates who lose a connection in an industry that is relevant to their specialization in vocational school adjust by finding employment in less-relevant industries.

**Essay II (with Lena Hensvik and Oskar Nordström Skans):** Using Swedish economy-wide data spanning across two deep recessions, we examine how the role of social contacts in matching labor market entrants to employing firms changes with labor market conditions. We measure social contacts acquired during paid work while in high-school and rely on interacted class-plant fixed-effects models to isolate the effects of interest. One third of post-graduation matches are formed at establishments where youths worked during their studies. Furthermore, graduates are much more likely to match with sites to which coworkers from these jobs have relocated. These patterns are strikingly counter-cyclical, suggesting that social contacts are crucial determinants of matching patterns in bad times.

**Essay III:** I provide empirical evidence on whether a longer education can causally reduce the reliance on social contacts in the transition from school-to-work as suggested by previous theoretical work. Relying on matched employer-employee data, I exploit a Swedish trial that generated exogenous variation in the length of vocational upper secondary education and analyze how this affected the use of parental job-search contacts. I find a negative and non-trivial impact on the probability of working at the same establishment as a parent during the early career, which is entirely driven by students with high-educated parents. For the group where the use of parental ties is most prevalent, students with low-educated parents, the reliance on parents appears resilient to policy-induced changes in the length of education.

*Keywords:* labor economics, social networks, social contacts, job search, job matching, young workers, school-to-work transition, youth labor market entry

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Uppsala, April 2020

Dagmar Müller

[1] Also, thanks for putting up with my dog obsession.

# Contents

# Introduction

The school-to-work transition is a defining moment in life, marking a major step towards adulthood and independence. However, despite all preparations culminating to this moment in time, finding a job can be particularly hard for young workers. With little work experience and fewer means to signal ability than more experienced workers, youths are at a disadvantage due to the intrinsic uncertainty that firms face about the productivity of young workers in their hiring decision.

The consequences of the resulting friction are reflected in youth unemployment rates that are often well above the ones for more tenured workers. Long-lasting scarring effects of initial joblessness manifest in terms of higher unemployment and earnings losses in adulthood (see e.g. Gregg, 2001; Burgess et al., 2003; Arulampalam, 2008; Neumark, 2002). Likewise, young workers are routinely hit hardest by business cycle fluctuations and suffer not only the immediate consequences, but are also negatively affected in terms of job finding and earnings for up to a decade into their careers (Raaum and Røed, 2006; Kahn, 2010; Oreopoulos et al., 2012). Hence, it seems that the circumstances surrounding how and when individuals enter the labor market are at least as defining as individual and societal investments for how today's young will fare in tomorrow's labor market, a prospect that we are forcefully reminded of in the light of the economic consequences of the current Covid-19 crisis which will likely produce yet another lost generation.

Given the importance of the period of labor market entry for career prospects in the long run, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms governing a successful school-to-work transition and the consequences when those mechanisms are not in place. While the question of how economic conditions affect youth labor market entry has recently received renewed attention, there is limited direct evidence for this exact point in the career on one of the most important job search channels that has been identified in the literature - *social contacts*. Estimates suggest that a third to one half of all jobs are allocated through social networks, making it possibly the most important job search channel (Ioannides and Loury, 2004). In fact, an extensive body of empirical research has confirmed the importance of social networks[2] and documented that the reliance on social contacts is more prevalent among younger workers (see e.g. Topa, 2011; Pellizzari, 2010). However, we know surprisingly

[2]For a detailed literature overview, see Topa (2011) and Oyer and Schaefer (2011) for a firm-side overview.

little about how access to social contacts affects graduates' chances of finding a first job and to what extent, and under what circumstances, initial usage matters over the course of graduates' careers.

Studying how graduates use social contacts to enter the labor market is valuable because it helps us to understand how job matching works in practice and in particular, whether such channels lead to more productive matches and better labor market outcomes. This also has implications for equality of opportunity if access to useful social connections differs among groups at an early career stage and if the reliance on social contacts is persistent and difficult to offset by alternative modes of entry.

In the three chapters of this thesis, I investigate various aspects of how social contacts matter for a successful school-to-work transition and long-term labor market outcomes. In all of them, I rely on extensive Swedish population registers and matched employer-employee data in order to identify the types of social networks that young workers tend to have ready access to even when other types of connections are scarce.

In the first two chapters, I focus on work-related networks in the form of former employers and co-workers from market work during high school. Recent papers (see e.g. Cingano and Rosolia, 2012; Glitz, 2017; Saygin et al., 2019; Glitz and Vejlin, 2019; Eliason et al., 2019) have emphasized the role of social contacts acquired in the labor market (mostly in the form of former co-workers). In the Swedish setting, they provide students with a crucial, and common, opportunity to form connections to potential employers: the vast majority of Swedish high school students has been employed prior to graduation.[3] Long vacations during the summer and a tradition of providing jobs aimed at young workers account for why working while in high school is so prevalent among this group. In fact, I show that employer contacts from high-school jobs account for almost a third of direct transitions into the labor market.

In the last chapter, I focus on the potential for policy-induced changes in the length of upper secondary education to offset the reliance on strong ties in the form of parents. Parental contacts are likely to be accessible to young workers for obvious reasons. Surveys name parents as one of the most commonly used types of job search contacts, and empirical evidence confirms that they are important for where young workers find employment (see Kramarz and Skans, 2014).

Another feature common to all chapters is the focus on graduates from vocational upper secondary education.[4] This group tends to enter the labor market directly after graduation and receives education towards a specific occupation in various vocational tracks, thus allowing for a cleaner comparison of labor market outcomes among students in the same tracks as in the first two chapters. Usage of social contacts is also generally higher as compared to for

[3] For a description, see chapter 1.

[4] In Sweden, this group accounts for roughly half of all graduates.

graduates from academic tracks, hence making the study of contacts for this group particularly relevant.

In the remainder of this introduction, I provide an overview of theories explaining why social contacts matter for job search. For the purpose of this thesis, I remain agnostic about the driving theoretical mechanisms, but give some examples of how they are relevant to the young. I proceed with a short summary of the three chapters in this thesis. Broadly speaking, the first two chapters analyze how important access to contacts from work during high school is for labor market outcomes both in the short and long run and whether the usefulness of these contacts varies with the business cycle. The final chapter approaches a slightly different and understudied question: whether more education can substitute for the importance of strong social ties in signaling ability during job search.

## Why are social networks important?

On a theoretical level, the literature differentiates between two main mechanisms to explain the role of social networks for job search. The first strand of literature focuses on the role of social networks in transmitting information about job vacancies. This channel was put forward early on by Granovetter (1973) who emphasized the importance of the intensity of network connections in transmitting useful information about available jobs. Less intense connections ("weak ties") are more likely to convey new and unheard information as opposed to close connections ("strong ties") in the form of family and friends.

A formalized version of this information transmission mechanism is described by Calvó-Armengol and Jackson (2004, 2007) who model how social networks increase the arrival rate of job offers for unemployed workers: In each period, homogeneous agents are either employed (with a non-zero wage) or unemployed and receive random job offers. Unemployed agents accept the job offer, while employed agents pass the offer on to an unemployed agent in their network (as long as the offer does not dominate their current job), thus leading to faster transitions into employment.

The other types of models emphasize firm-side benefits of relying on social networks based on the premise that firms can reduce uncertainty in the hiring process through the use of referrals (as in Montgomery, 1991; Simon and Warner, 1992; Dustmann et al., 2016). According to Simon and Warner (1992), the use of referrals from random incumbent workers can reduce uncertainty about the productivity of the specific match for both workers and firms. According to this line of thought, hiring workers connected through the network can reduce uncertainty about how well a worker's abilities fit the needs of the firm, which allows for workers that are on average better matched.[5] In

[5]For extensions to this model, see e.g. Dustmann et al. (2016); Galenianos (2013).

Montgomery (1991), firms can mitigate adverse selection of new employees by hiring workers connected through productive incumbent workers. The idea is that an incumbent worker's productivity serves as signal of the productivity of connected workers. Due to assortative matching, high-ability workers are likely to be connected to other high-ability workers, thus reducing uncertainty about the quality of the potential hire.

The resilience of social networks for signaling the productivity of workers is explored in more detail in Casella and Hanaki (2008). The paper analyzes the potential of signals obtained in the market to substitute for the use of social networks. In an extension to the Montgomery model, workers can either signal their productivity through social networks or through obtaining a costly, but imperfect, signal in the education market. Despite the fact that the costly signal can transmit information more precisely, networks prove to be resilient in most cases since firms prefer to hire through social networks based on the access to privileged information at a low cost. The results imply that workers can abstain from obtaining costly signals (e.g. education) to signal productivity if they can use social contacts as a substitute.

Models that focus on how social contacts can reduce uncertainty in the hiring process can also point to why social networks might be of particular importance for the young. If firms face difficulties screening the abilities of young workers who are just about to start their careers due to a lack of available information (Altonji and Pierret, 2001), hiring through social contacts can mitigate some of that uncertainty. In addition, hiring firms might predominantly rely on hiring through referrals due to the value of privileged information obtained through this channel (Casella and Hanaki, 2008).

A third approach models hires through referrals as a means to reduce moral hazard (Heath, 2018). In this setup, firms pay their workers low initial wages so they can later raise wages as an incentive to exert effort. Due to minimum wage constraints, firms are prohibited to follow this strategy for lower-skilled workers. Instead, firms hire low-skilled workers through referrals of (mainly higher-skilled) incumbent workers who accept to forego wage increases if the referred worker performs poorly. As a result, referred workers are incentivized to exert effort in order to avoid wage penalties for both themselves and their contacts. This type of model is particularly relevant for strong ties, since the enforcement of implicit contracts should be more easily achieved among closely connected workers. The model also points to the importance of parental connections for young (and in particular, low-skilled) workers.

## Usage of Social Contacts during the School-to-Work Transition

Notwithstanding the extensive empirical literature that has shown that usage of social contacts is higher among younger and low-educated workers (see e.g. Pellizzari, 2010; Corcoran et al., 1980; Datcher, 1983; Elliot, 1999), there is little direct (empirical) evidence on how the reliance on social contacts affects labor market entry (and thus career prospects for those lacking social contacts). A paper that focuses explicitly on graduates from different levels of schooling is Kramarz and Skans (2014) who provide a detailed empirical analysis of how different types of social contacts affect sorting patterns across students from the same class. The authors document that parental ties are an important predictor for post-graduation employment and that this channel is especially important for graduates with lower levels of schooling. They also show that graduates who find a job through their parents benefit in terms of longer job longevity and higher wage growth. In a similar setup, Hensvik and Skans (2014) show that job contacts from high school are predictive of where a cohort of Swedish students find a job after high school and reduce the amount of time it takes to enter employment.

Both papers also point towards economic benefits of job-finding through those channels. This is in contrast to the argument put forward in Bentolila et al. (2010) who highlight that job finding through contacts can indeed lead to mismatch and thus lower productivity if connections only extend towards occupations that do not match the worker's productive advantage.

In fact, the current literature falls short of providing enough evidence on how workers fare in the absence of connections, and we do not know how severe the consequences are for graduates who lack or are deprived of the possibility to rely on social contacts for job search. This fundamental question is the subject of the first chapter of this thesis.

In **Chapter 1: Lost Opportunities: Market Work, Establishment Closures and the Impact on Career Prospects**, I study how graduates are affected in the short and long run when they are deprived of a very important job-finding channel: employer contacts from market work during high school.

In the paper, causal identification relies on exogenous variation in access to employer connections that arises due to closures of establishments where students worked during high school and that occur just prior to graduation. The identifying variation stems from a comparison of students who lost an employer connection with other students from the same class and vocational track whose employer connection remained intact. This strategy allows me to remove several confounding factors.

The results show sizable negative effects of a lost employer connection on employment and earnings after graduation that persist for up to ten years, but are not permanent. Another contribution of the paper is the investigation of mechanisms behind the results. Graduates who lost a connection in an in-

dustry relevant to their occupational training from vocational school are more severely affected and are more likely to find employment in an industry which is less relevant to their vocational training, thereby leading to worse matches at least in the short run.

The implications of this are significant as they indicate that lost employer connections can act as an idiosyncratic shock with similarly long-lived effects as graduating under adverse labor market conditions. Thus, scarring may occur as a consequence of differences in access to productive social contacts at the time of graduation, even though it is important to note that the analyzed employer connections combine aspects of losing social contacts as well as firm-specific human capital.

The analysis also explores the question of whether the loss of labor market contacts can be replaced through relying on other types of social contacts. This seems to be the case indeed. Students who are affected by an establishment closure are more likely to find replacement jobs at their parents' workplace.

In **Chapter 2: Connecting the Young: High School Graduates' Matching to First Jobs in Booms and Great Recessions**, co-authored with Lena Hensvik and Oskar Nordström Skans, we focus on the same type of labor market contacts from work during high school as in the first chapter, but differentiate between "recall-type" direct links to employers and indirect contacts in the form of former co-workers who moved to other establishments.

While the first chapter dealt with the effects of idiosyncratic shocks, i.e. losing access to the opportunities associated with employer links, this chapter examines how the usefulness of social contacts for the matching of labor market entrants to firms changes during aggregate shocks. To this end, we analyze sorting patterns over a 25-year period including both booms and recessions. The main focus of the paper is a detailed analysis of how the reliance on social contacts for job matching varies with the business cycle.

We identify how the existence of direct and indirect contacts affects the probability to sort into a specific establishment by estimating *class-times-establishment* fixed effects models for each of the 25 cohorts in our data. This allows us to estimate the counterfactual probability of being hired by the same establishment in absence of a contact as the probability that classmates without a tie sort into the same establishment. In a second step, we relate the individual estimates for each cohort with business cycle indicators in the same year.

The results show the presence of a direct link is a strong and robust predictor of where graduates find a job after graduation. The impact exhibits a strong countercyclical pattern and is about twice as important during recessions. The patterns for indirect links are very similar, but much smaller in magnitude. We verify the interpretation of our results through estimation of different placebo strategies in order to account for the possibility that firms might prefer to hire workers from certain establishments and through using alternative sources of

identifying variation. We also let the effect of a contact vary with supply and demand side characteristics and find evidence that about a third of the business cycle variation in the usefulness of contacts is driven by the fact that firms that hire more through contacts are also more likely to offer jobs to high school students during economic downturns.

The patterns imply that firms rely relatively more on hiring both directly and indirectly connected workers during recessions when workers' outside options are worse and firms' market power is greater.

In **Chapter 3: Is more education a substitute for job search through social contacts?**, I shift focus to parental ties and analyze whether more (policy-induced) education can reduce the reliance on parents during job search.

While a negative correlation between level of education and the usage of social contacts is well-documented, there is uncertainty whether the relationship is causal. I provide evidence on whether more education can be used as a substitute to signal ability in lieu of social connections by using a Swedish trial that extended upper secondary vocational tracks from two to three years. I use exogenous variation in the length of vocational programs generated by the trial[6] to estimate the impact of an additional year of education on the probability to be (simultaneously) employed at the same establishment as a parent for up to 20 years after starting upper secondary school.

The results show that attending a longer vocational program has a negative and non-trivial impact on the probability to work at the same workplace as a parent in the beginning of the career that is driven by students with highly educated parents. In contrast, usage of parental contact is resilient among students with low-educated parents. To assess robustness, I use a set of placebo-like estimates to show that a decrease in the likelihood to work with a parent does not reflect a shift of students' preferences away from employment in parental industries. I also show that the estimated effects cannot be explained by changes in employment levels.

Overall, the results indicate that strong ties in the form of parents are remarkably resilient among students with low-educated parents. Incidentally, this is also the group that tends to rely on their parents the most. A potential interpretation of the patterns could be that general education is less informative as a signal of ability for employers in industries of low-educated parents as compared to employers of highly educated parents.

The results also have implications for some of the findings in the first chapter, in which I show that lost employer contacts lead to a higher reliance on parents, hence raising the question of whether it is likely that there is room for policy to fill the void for those students who cannot rely on their parents to

[6]The strategy follows Hall (2012) who analyzes the effects of the trial on enrollment in university studies and related outcomes.

find replacement jobs. For students with low-educated parents this is unlikely to be the case.

## Concluding Remarks

In the three chapters of this thesis, I document that social contacts are an essential tool for young workers to gain footing in the labor market. In particular, I show that access to connections to the labor market established through work during high school has a causal impact on a successful school-to-work transition and that those connections are twice as important during recessions. In the Swedish context, job-finding through this channel is also quantitatively important, accounting for almost a third of direct labor market transitions.

The findings are crucial for our understanding of how the matching of labor market entrants to firms works in practice, but they are also highly relevant in the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic. There are already clear indications that summer jobs will be scarce as a consequence of the economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis, which will likely escalate young workers' struggle with the passage to the labor market during the crisis.

However, the results also imply that policies that foster employer contacts during high school can lead to a smoother transition into the labor market. The potential of such policies has not gone unnoticed, and prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been expressed interest by governmental and regional commissions in Sweden to set up trials to evaluate the effects of randomly allocating both private and public sector summer jobs, sometimes with a focus on disadvantaged youths.

The implementation of such policies might prove challenging, but even more crucial during the economic fallout of the current Covid-19 crisis. In relation to the findings of this thesis, such employer contacts might be particularly useful in providing an alternative path into the labor market for students whose parents are also affected by the economic fallout and thus less useful as job-search contacts. Such policies could offer a crucial lifeline for students with low-educated parents when more education does not work as a substitute for parental contacts.

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