Making the Transition to Re-Employment: Social Networks and Their Impact on Social Assistance Recipients

John Paul Hatala
Louisiana State University

Abstract

This study focused on the role of social networks in the transition from social assistance to employment. The study consisted of a field experiment that was built into the training program that agencies normally deliver to persons on social assistance as part of the Ontario Works 'work-for-welfare' program. Participants were randomly assigned to a control or experimental group and the sample consisted of 92 in the control group and 40 in the experimental group. For the experimental group, a supplementary treatment, a 'job search management system' was added to the program that social assistance recipients normally receive. A Social Network Job Search Scale (SNJSS) was created and served as the dependent variable in a pre-test/post-test design. A positive correlation between strength of an individual's network and re-employment was found. Understanding the value of social networks is important not only for re-entering the labour market but also for obtaining employment that is above the minimum wage.

A social assistance recipient's return to the workforce is a complex, multifaceted process. Theory and research in this area has focused on the development of interventions such as training programs that assist people in making the transition to re-employment (e.g., AuClaire, 1978; Blumenberg, 2000; Van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992). While this research is important to the development of our understanding of this transition, it is limited by its inattention to factors related to a recipient's actual utilization of their social networks. Recently, researchers have focused much more directly on enhancing our understanding of social assistance recipient's self-efficacy and their own ability to remove themselves from state dependence through existing re-employment interventions (e.g., Cheng, 1995; Friedman, 1999; Kerlin, 1993). This research, though relatively immature as a field of inquiry, promises to add significantly to theories in this area.

Many attempts have been made to reintegrate the social assistance population into the mainstream economy, and particularly government-sponsored 'employment programs'. These programs have increased in number over the last decade, due in part to the low employment rates experienced in the early 1980s (Statistics Canada, 2003). A more recent example of a government program is Ontario Works, initiated in 1996 by the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services.

The purpose of the mandatory Ontario Works 'work-for-welfare' program was to force those individuals receiving assistance to actively search for employment. The stated objectives of the Ontario government were threefold: first, to ensure that social assistance recipients took responsibility for looking for employment and becoming self-sufficient; second, to provide an effective transition to employment; and third, to make welfare fair for people who require help and for the taxpayers who pay the cost (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between social networks and re-entry into the labour market by participants in the Ontario Works employment-training program. By examining a social assistance recipient's social network, we stand to learn much about how they confront and deal with re-employment. Such data can be instrumental in developing practical applications for assisting people making this transition.

The research questions for this study were as follows:

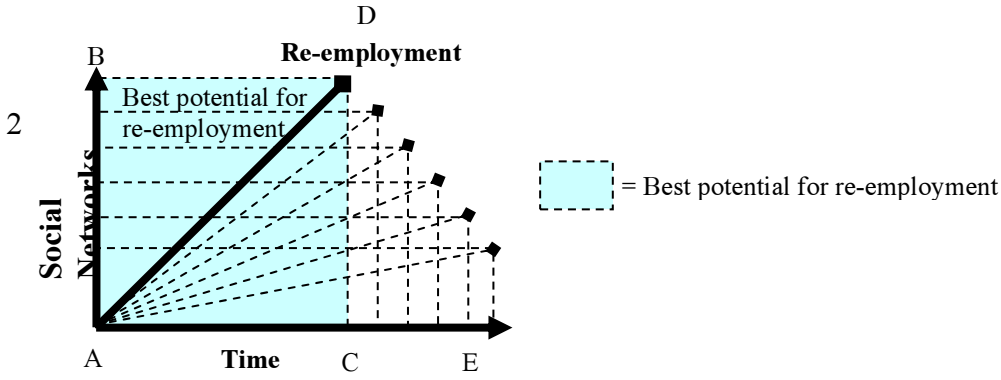
1. Is there a negative relationship between the strength of social networks and the length of time an individual is on social assistance?
2. Do those participants who have become re-employed have stronger networks than those who have not?
3. Has the treatment in this study strengthened the social assistance recipient's social network?
4. Are those social assistance recipients who become re-employed upon completion of the employment-training program been on social assistance less time than those who do not find employment?

Theoretical Framework

Social network theory was used to explain the efficient movement towards re-employment. By utilizing contacts within social networks and learning the necessary skills for networking, it was anticipated that the opportunity for re-employment will increase. However, not all networks are of equal benefit in facilitating a return to the workforce. Diverse networks, it was expected, will help the social assistance recipient to identify contacts and supports, which may help to decrease the time it takes to move towards employment.

Figure 1 highlights the conceptual framework this article will use. At the beginning stages of receiving social assistance (A), social networks (B) are usually at their fullest capacity and most likely to be of greatest benefit in the transition back to the labour force. With increased time on social assistance, social networks shrink and, it is assumed, will be less useful. If employment training is required, it is most likely to be effective when social assistance is first received. Training programs, it is expected, will assist in strengthening social networks, which assist reintegration to the labour force.

Figure 1 – Conceptual Framework



If no interventions are introduced and time elapses (E), social circles begin to shrink and the length of time it will take for re-employment increases.

Social networks and re-employment

Social Network Ties

Research dealing with social networks has involved the identification of both 'weak' and 'strong' ties (Granovetter, 1973; Granovetter, 1982). Weak ties have been identified as acquaintances and socially distant; strong ties are close, such as family and friends. Granovetter (1973) conducted empirical studies testing his hypotheses on "the strength of weak ties", arguing that those individuals with fewer 'weak ties' are less likely to be exposed to employment opportunities than those with many.

The study of weak ties has yielded specific observations among marginalized populations. Poorly educated individuals are more likely to use strong ties for jobs compared to those who were well educated (Ericksen & Yancey, 1980). A number of studies indicate that marginalized populations rely more on strong ties than do others, making access to quality employment opportunities less likely (Granovetter, 1982).

If weak ties are in fact the best possibility for a social assistance recipient to find employment, how can government-funded employment training programs expand social networks amongst marginalized populations? One strategy in increasing the probability of re-employment is a program that helps social assistance recipients to cultivate weak ties. By comparison, a highly concentrated network of strong ties fragments poor communities and weakens opportunities for a broader range of contacts (Auslander & Litwin, 1988; Granovetter, 1982).

Members of low-income communities often rely on strong ties for monetary and social support. Ultimately, poverty places additional strains on social ties and makes it difficult to use these as resources to finding employment. Social assistance recipients lack weak ties and their strong ties may become strained if too many demands are placed upon them. For example, single mothers who have obtained low-wage jobs are forced to utilize their strong ties for child support and are often unable to repay the debt (Garber, 1999). Without that support, however, they may have a high absentee rate at work and eventually lose their jobs (Hanson & Pratt, 1995; Oliker, 1995).

Causes of Social Isolation and its Effect on Re-employment Over Time

Although the majority of studies on the stability of social networks over time have dealt with mainstream populations, it may be possible to extrapolate from those findings to marginalized populations. If utilizing existing contacts represents links to possible employment opportunities, then building constructive social networks is a vital resource for social assistance recipients. If people stay on social assistance for longer periods of time, there is reason to believe that social networks deteriorate (Garber, 1999).

Social network analysis has attempted to address the question of network changes over time (Feld, 1997; Morgan, Neal & Carder, 1996; Suitor & Keeton, 1997; Wellman, Wong, Tindall & Nazer, 1997). It has been demonstrated that supportive ties are the most likely to persist and that frequent contact between network members is also associated with the persistence of relationships (Feld, 1997). However, the persistence of relationships among the unemployed can diminish over time due to feelings of isolation and depression (Amundson & Borgen, 1987).

Tilly (1968) found that involvement in group activities is related to change, whether personally or for society as a whole. Those who sit at home and are not involved in groups have a difficult time bringing about personal change. Extrapolating from this research, it might be expected that a social assistance recipient's participation in extra-curricular activity would be an effective means for expanding and maintaining social networks. Increased contacts are likely to correlate with identifying employment opportunities. If social assistance recipients are not encouraged to get involved in the community by either volunteering with charities or through work placements, the research on social networks suggests that the chances of remaining on welfare for longer periods of time dramatically increase. In that regard, shrinking social networks might be viewed as an intervening variable between the degree of community involvement and time on social assistance. More active community participation should lead to enhanced social networks that in turn reduce the time on

social assistance because the networks generate job contacts. In addition, the need to make contacts outside an individual's social network is critical if marginalized populations are to access job-related information. Putnam (2002) indicated that participation is down for unions, churches, and political parties. This is of concern as these forms of social capital are especially important for empowering less educated, less affluent portions of the population. Putnam found more social networking among the affluent than among the working classes. If marginalized populations continue to remain within their social networks, opportunities for receiving information that can benefit their upward mobility will be missed.

While the existing research does not test this relationship directly, there is some evidence that the probability of exiting from social assistance decreases with more time in that role. This evidence comes from the research of Barrett and Cragg (1998), who examined welfare data in Canada between 1990 and 1992. That study found initial welfare spells are relatively short in Canada. For second and subsequent welfare spells, time on welfare increases (Barrett & Cragg, 1998). Recurrent short-term use is the most common pattern of welfare participation both in Canada and the United States (Bane & Ellwood, 1983; Barrett & Cragg, 1998; Gritz & MaCurdy, 1992). Moreover, the Barrett and Cragg study (1998) shows some relationship between the amount of time on social assistance and the probability of exit. Employable single men with no children have an exit probability at one month of 28 percent, at two months of 29 percent and at three months of 25 percent. Unemployable single women with one dependent child have an exit probability of 16 percent at one month, 15 percent at two months and 13 percent at three months (Barrett & Cragg, 1998). Although the relationship between time on social assistance and the probability of exit is not strong, the trend is apparent. The longer an individual remains on social assistance, the probability of exiting the system decreases.

Barrett and Cragg (1998) proposed two explanations for this finding. First, there may be a true duration dependency, whereby the experience of being on welfare changes the recipient's behaviour. Barrett and Cragg (1998) speculate that welfare spell duration is associated with human capital atrophy, changed patterns of employer screening, or a depressed desire to work. The second explanation may have been a statistical artifact, reflecting the effects of unmeasured individual characteristics or 'population heterogeneity'. Barrett and Cragg (1998) go on to explain:

> For example, consider a population composed of two types of individuals, the highly motivated and the less motivated. The highly motivated are more likely to exit welfare early, leaving behind a population of recipients composed of an increasing proportion of individuals with low motivation. The nature of the welfare population changes with spell duration, and if the characteristic (motivation) is not controlled for, negative duration dependence will be observed in the aggregate hazard rate even in the absence of true duration dependence. (p. 174)

Although initial welfare spells have been generally short, statistics show that there is a high level of recidivism rates among participants (Barrett & Cragg, 1998). Fifty-five percent of people leaving welfare return to the system within the first year. For example, although single men without children tend to have very short welfare spells, they also experience a very high rate of return (Barrett & Cragg, 1998). Even though long-term continuous welfare participation may not be characteristic of the typical social assistance recipient, long-term sporadic use is very common (Barrett & Cragg, 1998). However, the longer an individual remains off welfare, and the more work experience and human capital they acquire, the less likely they are to return.

The Barrett and Cragg (1998) study does not deal with the impact of social networks on the probability of exiting from social assistance. However, research by Garber (1999) using multiple logistic regression models does relate to social networks. She found seven variables to be significant, four of which measured levels of social isolation. These were whether the respondent owns her own home, the number of years she has lived in the neighborhood, whether her household has a working automobile, and how many neighbors rely on public assistance. (Other significant variables were the respondent's total number of years of school, whether she was married, as well as the number of hours she worked per week.) Garber also found that the proportion of neighbors receiving public assistance led to increased social isolation. The larger the proportion, the greater the likelihood of increased poverty.

A Social Network Theory Approach to Employment-training Programs

A social network theory approach to employment-training programs (Auslander & Litwin, 1988, 1991; Smith, 1989; Specht, 1986) suggests that social networks establish norms for behaviour within a training group, including accelerated job-search activity. Social networks may provide information and opportunity that are relevant to becoming re-employed by supplying additional contacts. According to theory, social networks (as they apply to social assistance recipients) may only be helpful if they reach beyond the participant's world, particularly as it relates to generating employment opportunities. This becomes critical in determining the time it will take to move towards re-employment.

On the basis of this conceptualization, employment program interventions must address existing social networks of participants and seek ways to expand them. If receiving social assistance is normative and socially rewarded within a social network, employment program interventions will fail unless the norms initiated within the network are modified (Friedkin, 2001). If, however, networks do not provide contacts necessary to find employment, they must be expanded. A social network analysis suggests that employment program interventions should seek to change social norms that are detrimental to job search behaviour. They should also capitalize on existing social network norms that are favourable to creating positive job-seeking behaviour. The social network approach also suggests that evaluating employment programs should focus on a participant's social network prior to and after the intervention and determine whether network changes are stable over time.

The research suggests that social

network enhancement should be an important objective of any training program for social assistance recipients. Social network theory can provide a context for understanding the dynamics associated with the transition towards re-employment and the elements involved in making that process more effective.

According to social network theory, networks provide support and contacts that are critical to employment opportunities. This theory has important implications for employment-training. If training programs involve introducing social assistance recipients to network knowledge, the task of practitioners is more focused than the diversity and fragmentation that characterize current practice. Training programs must account for the differences in network resources among the marginalized populations, and program delivery must be adjusted to provide participants with the knowledge to develop social networks that are useful.

Method

The research questions were tested through a field experiment in which a supplementary treatment, a job search management system, was added to the program for social assistance recipients normally undertaken by participating agencies through the Ontario Works program. A pre-test/post-test design was used for the primary measure of the study, the Social Network Survey (SNS), which determined the impact of the treatment on the social networking behaviour of the participants. A discussion of the treatment, the sample, measures and data analysis follows.

Treatment

The treatment for this study was a job search management system, designed by the investigator, which was administered in conjunction with the existing curriculum of the employment-training program. The system was designed to help participants to work through systematically the necessary steps to become employed. A central feature of the system was the 'job search board' that enables both a participant and facilitator to monitor job search activity and the number of contacts made during a defined period. The system encourages facilitators to stress the importance of the number of contacts made by participants and allows them to rate the significance of each encounter to determine the value of job-related information that may be provided by the new contact.

Social network audits were performed on a regular basis to ensure that participants were attempting to make contacts that could assist them in their job search. The results of a social network audit allowed the facilitator to determine the number of contacts each participant was making. If there was a need to increase the number of contacts, interventions were implemented. For example, role-playing techniques were introduced to practice the necessary rapport-building skills and scripts were developed to assist participants in introducing themselves in networking situations.

For each employment opportunity (contact) identified by a participant, a 't-card' was filled out with the company name, name of contact, position title, job description and next step recorded. There are six columns to the job board:

- *Column 1:* is 'opportunity' and includes possible leads for employment and the specific contact;
- *Column 2*: is 'applied' and includes all opportunities for which the participant has actually submitted a résumé or completed an application;
- *Column 3*: is 'set interview' and represents job interviews that have been set but not yet attended;
- *Column 4*: is 'interview' and includes all interviews that have actually been attended;
- *Column 5*: is 'verbal job offer' and represents actual job offers to the participant, and
- *Column 6*: is 'job' and signals that the participant has actually started employment.

Job board reviews were conducted individually and as a group to determine the status of the participant's job search activity and the number of contacts developed. The job search management system is based on the principle of assisting individuals to move from step-to-step within a normal job-hiring cycle. Using the job search board provides a visual representation of the job search process and assists participants in monitoring their job search progress. The job board allows participants and facilitators to track job search activity and identifies any corrective actions that may be necessary for making the transition to re-employment. The job board highlights whom the participants are connecting with and how they are utilizing these contacts.

Sample

For the study, local employment agencies in a large urban centre in Southern Ontario, which were offering Ontario Works employment programs, provided access to participants who were asked to volunteer for the research. Of the social assistance recipients asked to participate in the study, 8 did not volunteer (5.7%) giving a total sample size of 132. The agencies indicated that those individuals that chose not to participate were representative of clients. After the social assistance recipients had agreed to participate in the study, the agencies were randomly assigned to the control (n = 92) or experimental group (n = 40). The reason for the lower number of respondents in the experimental group was due to the time and resources available to the investigator to provide train-the-trainer sessions for workshop facilitators. While both members of the control and experimental group received the employment program of the agency in which they were enrolled, participants in the experimental group also received the treatment. The study employed a pre-post correlation design and all participants completed a survey twice, immediately before the program began and immediately following. For the entire sample, the age ranged from 20-64 years, with 66% male and 34% female. Fifty-seven percent of the sample were single males and never married; 56% did not have any children. This pattern is similar to that found in a study in British Columbia (Barrett and Cragg, 1998) and another commissioned by Toronto Social Services (2001). As for race, 54% were listed as a visible minority, 33% as Caucasian and 14% as Aboriginal. English was the most common language spoken, followed by French. Most respondents had completed high school but had not

achieved a post-secondary school credential, although 19% had completed a Bachelors degree, 6% obtained a masters degree and 1% a doctoral degree. Two to three was the average years of experience in the workplace. The median time on social assistance was 0 to 6 months (31%) with the majority of respondents (62%) having a previous welfare spell. This is at odds with previous studies in the United States (Ellwood, 1986; Gritz and MaCurdy, 1992), which identified the median spell on welfare as two years and a 40% return subsequently. However, studies in Canada (Barrett and Cragg, 1998) concur that welfare spells normally end within six months but have a high level of recidivism, with 25% of recipients returning to welfare with in 3 months and 50% within a year. In Barrett and Cragg's study (1998), 30% collected welfare prior to the research; however, that information was not collected in this study.

Measures

The principal measurement device was the Social Network Job Search Scale – (SNJSS) designed and tested by the investigator. The instrument, based on existing social network surveys (e.g., Chin, 1993; Granovetter, 1972: Porter, 1998) and adapted to the social assistance population, measured the strength of a social assistance recipient's social network. The instrument was pilot tested with fellow students and social assistance recipients known to the investigator. In addition to the SNJSS items, sociodemographic information (e.g., gender, age category, marital status) was collected to enable comparisons with prior research (e.g., Leik and Chalkley, 1991; Suitor and Keaton, 1993). Surveys were administered on the first day of the program (Base Line) and upon completion of the training (Post-Test).

Social Network Strength

A major component to this research was identifying the relationship between the strength of a social assistance recipient's social network and the transition towards re-employment. The strength of a social assistance recipient's social network was determined using the following variables:

Number of contacts identified: Respondents were asked to identify (by first name) up to 10 of the most important persons in their life. Each of the names was coded as a contact. If the same name appeared on the second survey, it was coded and compared to the first survey for ranking.

Number of contacts identified as family or friend: For each of the names identified, the respondent was required to indicate whether the contact was a family member or friend and their responses were coded accordingly.

Number of contacts who would provide financial support: As well as reporting the most important persons in their life, respondents were also required to state whether the individual listed would provide financial support. This was coded as '1' for yes and '2' for no.

Number of contacts who would provide emotional support: Contacts who would provide emotional support were coded as '1' for yes and '2' for no.

Number of contacts who would provide child-care: Those respondents who indicated that they had children were asked if the contacts listed would provide child-care. This was coded as '1' for yes and '2' for no.

Number of contacts who would provide job leads: Contacts listed who were in a position to provide job leads to the respondent were coded as yes or 1, and others were coded as no or '2'.

Number of contacts who were presently collecting welfare: Contacts listed who were also collecting welfare were coded as yes or 1, and others were coded as no or '2'.

Number of contacts who held similar positions the respondents was interested in: Those contacts that held a position that the respondent was pursuing were coded as yes or 1, and others were coded as no or '2'.

Number of job-related discussion with family members:

Respondents were required to indicate how many job-related discussions they had with family on a weekly basis.

Number of job-related discussion with friends:

Respondents were required to indicate how many job-related discussions they had with friends on a weekly basis.

Social Network Strength Formula

A formula was developed based on the above variables to determine the strength of the respondent's social network (SNJSS). Points were accumulated for the number of people identified as part of the respondent's network along with the number of contacts identified as friends, those providing financial, emotional, job leads or who held a similar position, and the number of job-related discussions they had with friends and family. It is assumed that network members who could provide job-related information and support are valuable to the social assistance recipient's transition into the labour market. Points were subtracted if the respondent indicated that the contact was a family member (strong tie) or collected welfare. The rationale for subtracting these scores was so that the purpose of the employment-training program was to grow their networks with members who could provide relevant information or resources. Also, if the respondents network consisted of members who were also on social assistance, the opportunity for job-related information was potentially limited and of no value to the participant. Subsequently, negative points were given for those variables that would not add value to the social assistance recipient's network. Therefore, the formula reads:

STRENGTH = (# of contacts + friends + financial support + emotional support + job leads + similar position+ discussions with family/friends) – (family + contacts on social assistance)

This formula was developed based on social network research that has described the components of a strong social network and which provides job-related information to include a combination of the above stated variables (e.g., Granovetter, 1973; Ooka & Wellman, 2003; Strathdee & Hughes, 2002; Wilkinson & Robinson, 1997).

FINDINGS

Scoring the Social Network Job Search Scale

The scores for the variable SNJSS for the pre-test ranged from 2.00 to 51.00 points. The mean strength score for the pre-test (n = 132) was 22.94 with a standard deviation of 12.20.

Post-test strength scores (n = 44) ranged from 5.00 to 55.00 with a mean strength score of 27.39 and a standard deviation of 11.63. An increase was noted in mean strength scores from pre- to post-test. This may have been due to the participant's exposure to training and other individuals they may have come in contact with during their job search intervention. For the pre-test, the mean length of time on social assistance was 1.71. The range of time on social assistance was from '0 to 6 months' (a value of 0.25 was used in the analyses) to over seven years (8.50). The standard deviation was 2.25. The mean social network strength score was 22.94 with a range of 2.00 to 51.00 and a standard deviation of 12.20.

Q1 Is there a negative relationship between the strength of social networks and the length of time an individual is on social assistance?

Using the pre-test data for the entire sample (control and experimental groups combined), correlation coefficients were computed for the length of time on social assistance and the strength of social networks. Using the Bonferroni approach to control for Type I error across the correlation, a p-value of less than .05 (05/10 = .005) was required for significance. The results of the correlational analyses for time on social assistance and social network strength were not statistically significant (r = -.01).

Q2 Do those participants who have become re-employed have stronger networks than those who have not?

To evaluate the second research question, an independent-samples t-test was used to compare social network strength for those participants in the study who secured employment and those who had not. The sample available to answer this question was very small, as only 7 respondents in the experimental group and 3 in the control group indicated that they had secured some form of employment. To answer this question, these 10 respondents were compared to those remaining on social assistance—58.8% for the experimental group and 74.1% for the control group, or 68.2 % of the total sample. The post-test measure of social network strength was used. The t-test was significant, t (42) = -2.06, $p < .05$, thereby supporting individuals with stronger networks are more likely to secure employment. Respondents who became re-employed (M = 20.80, SD = 9.85) had higher social network strength scores than those who remained on social assistance (M = 13.82, SD = 9.31). Although there are differing interpretations possible for this finding, one is that stronger networks increase the chances for becoming re-employed.

Another indicator of social network strength was the number of people identified as part of a network. This can serve as an activity indicator for the number of people the participant is in contact with during a training intervention. Those participants who became re-employed had a higher average number of people in their network (M=8.30) than those who were unable to get a job during the study (M=5.85), t (42) = -2.30, $p < .05$. Network size, in this context, probably is associated with a wider range of contacts for receiving job-related information.

The results also revealed the number of new members added to the network since the start of the program. The respondents who became re-employed averaged nearly five new members in their social network (M=4.90), while those who did not become re-employed averaged fewer than three (M=2.97), t (42) = -2.22, $p < .05$. The theory presented in this paper suggests that building new ties with contacts to the job market is critical to increasing the flow of job-related information. However, this study did not ask specifically whether the new members who were added to the networks between the pre- and post-tests assisted with the job search.

Q3 Has the treatment in this study strengthened the social assistance recipient's social network?

A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted with control and experimental groups as the independent variable. The dependent variable was the post-test social network strength scores and the covariate was the pre-test social network strength scores. A preliminary analysis evaluating the homogeneity-of-slopes assumption indicated that the relationship between the covariate and the dependent variable did not differ significantly as a function of the independent variable, F (1, 40) = 1.42, p = .240, partial η^2 = .03. The ANCOVA was significant, F (1, 41) = 4.91, $p < .05$. The strength of the relationship between the control and experimental group factor and dependent variables was fairly strong, as assessed by a partial η^2, with the group factor representing 11% of the variance of the dependent variable the social network strength scores.

The means of the social network strength scores adjusted for initial differences were ordered as expected. The experimental group had the largest adjusted mean (M=31.53) with the control group having the smaller adjusted mean (M=25.52). Through the treatment, the number of contacts a participant makes during a training intervention was monitored, and if network growth did not occur, corrective actions were taken to increase the exposure to job-search resources.

The experimental group was more likely to add new members to their social networks than the control group (Table 1). The average number of new members for the experimental group (M=4.19) was nearly double that of the control group (M=2.69), t (42) = 2.03, $p < .05$. However, adding new members alone does not increase the strength of

Table 1 – New Members to Network

Group	Total (n)	Mean	Std. Deviation	Strength Mean
Control	27	2.69	2.49	2.58
Experimental	17	4.19	2.96	2.75

social networks. Although new members to both groups increased, the significant difference between the number of new members added by the experimental and control groups suggest that the treatment might have strengthened the participants' social networks.

a respondent participated in was related to re-employment. Respondents who found employment (Table 2) had participated in fewer training programs (M=0.40) than those who did not become employed (M = 1.06), t (41) = 2.23, $p < .05$. The number of training programs is associated with the length of time on social assistance, with those who are on social assistance longer being more likely to participate in a larger number of training programs. Although the length of time on social assistance did not have a significant relationship to the strength of social network score (research question 1), it does appear to be related to the likelihood of re-employment. These findings will be explored in greater detail in the Discussion section that follows.

works were carefully analyzed to determine whether original network members who could continue to provide job-related information were maintained (Table 3). If a social network represents a critical link to re-employment, it is important that members maintained in the network during an employment training intervention be able to provide job search resources. There was no significant difference between the experimental group (M=3.53) and the control group (M=2.74), although the difference was in the expected direction.

An additional indicator of social network strength is the number of friends identified as part of a network (Table 4). This serves as an indicator for the number of weak ties the participant is in contact with during a training intervention and were only included if the frequency of contact was not more that once a month. The average number of friends in a network was significantly higher for those who found employment (M=5.80) than those who were unable to get a job during the study (M=3.71), t (42) = -2.27, $p < .05$. This finding could be interpreted as meaning that the number of weak ties a social assistance recipient is in contact with during an employment-training program increases the likelihood of access to job-related information.

Table 2 – Number of Previous Training Programs

	# of Training Programs	Std. Deviation
Got Job	0.40	0.70
No Job	1.06	1.06

Q4 Are those social assistance recipients who become re-employed upon completion of the employment-training program been on social assistance less time than those who do not find employment?

To evaluate the fourth research question, an independent-samples t-test was used to compare the length of time on social assistance for those participants in the study who secured employment and those who had not. The test was significant, t (17) = 2.42, $p < .05$, which supports that the length of time a participant is on assistance impacts their ability to find employment. Respondents who did not become re-employed had been on social assistance longer (M = 2.13, SD = 1.25) than those who found employment (M = 1.22, SD = 0.91). This finding could be interpreted as meaning that the length of time on social assistance has a negative impact on the probability of becoming re-employed.

In addition to the length of time on social assistance, the number of previous employment training programs that

Adding Network Members

Respondents were asked if their group of friends had changed since they first started to receive social assistance. There was a significant correlation between social network strength and change of friends for the experimental group (r = .81, $p < .01$); however, there was not a significant correlation for the control group (r = .07). This finding may indicate that new contacts were being added in the experimental group, but not the control group.

In addition to identifying new member growth, the respondent net-

Table 3 – Original Network Members

Group	Total (n)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control	27	2.74	2.19
Experimental	17	3.53	1.84

Table 4 – Friends in Social Network

	Friends in Network	Std. Deviation
Got Job	5.80	2.81
No Job	3.71	2.49

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATION FOR PRACTICE

Overview

This study has analyzed the impact of employment-training programs upon the social networks for social assistance recipients in their transition towards re-employment. A Social Network Job Search Scale (SNJSS) was developed, which included variables that assessed an individual's ability to gather job-related information. One purpose of this study was to determine whether employment training, and particularly the treatment that was introduced on top of the normal employment training program, strengthened social networks with contacts who could provide information about the job market. The results indicate network strength and access to contacts with job-related information to be positively related to the probability of re-employment.

Implications for Employment-Training Programs

The study demonstrated that higher scores on the SNJSS were positively related to the probability for re-employment. Employment training programs provide an excellent opportunity to network with others in similar circumstances. However, the contacts naturally occurring to social assistance recipients are likely to be others of the same social strata, and therefore, the opportunity for new and relevant job-related information may be limited (Granovetter, 1973; Smith 1999; Wilkinson & Robinson, 1997). Therefore, an intervention such as that used in this study that assists participants to utilize the information arising through their networks may be needed. The treatment in this study, a job search management system, was designed to help the experimental group participants to work through systematically the necessary steps to become employed. Without this intervention, the respondents in the control group did not experience a growth in network value, whereas the experimental group was successful at increasing their SNJSS scores. This network growth might have been due to the job search facilitator's ability to monitor the number of contacts the participants were making throughout the employment program. This is a point that could be explored in follow-up research.

Placement rates in employment for the Ontario Works employment training programs are generally low (City of Toronto, 2001) due to a number of different factors including labour market conditions, psychosocial issues, and limited skills of the participants. The length of time on social assistance was thought to be a factor in the strength of a social assistance recipient's network, as indicated in Question 1. However, the results indicated that there was not a significant correlation between these two variables. This could be attributed to two factors: first, the sample for this study had not been on social assistance for a long period of time (average 1 to 2 years); and second, the size of the sample was relatively small (N = 132). Future studies should use a larger sample and a greater range of time on assistance to determine whether the length of time on social assistance is positively related to SNJSS scores.

As indicated in question 2, there was a statistically significant relationship between re-employment and strength of social network score—that is, those who were re-employed had higher scores than those who were not. Although this significant relationship does not speak to a causal relationship, these data could be interpreted as meaning that network strength increased the probability of finding job-related information. Those with lower scores on the SNJSS networks may not have had the social resources to access the 'hidden' job market that comes about from contacts and may have resorted to more traditional job-search methods such as through newspaper ads. The 'hidden job market' refers to unadvertised job opportunities; in order to access them it is necessary to have active networks. Social isolation becomes a major barrier to re-employment for social assistance recipients who have been on welfare for an extended period of time (Barrett & Cragg, 1998; Boisjoly, Harris & Duncan, 1998; Leahy, Buss & Quane, 1995). Agencies delivering employment-training programs need to address social isolation by developing curriculum that promotes the monitoring and maintenance of contacts that are added to a participant's network.

For the large majority of the sample who did not make the transition to the labour market by the end of the study, the lack of success in strengthening their networks became evident after the post-test. The increased SNJSS scores for the experimental group indicate it could be useful to have a program that encourages participants to expand their networks with contacts that could provide relevant job-related information. The treatment allowed facilitators to monitor and measure the number of contacts each participant was making throughout the program. If the facilitator noticed that the participant's activity was not focused around attempts to make relevant new contacts, corrective actions were suggested. The most common approach to job-search training by the agencies was to monitor the number of employment opportunities identified by the participant through traditional methods and not focus on sources of job-related information from their networks. However, the treatment in this study encouraged facilitators to stress the importance of the number of contacts made by participants and rated the significance of each encounter to determine the value of job-related information provided by the new contact.

As part of the treatment, social network audits were performed on a regular basis to ensure that participants were attempting to make contacts that could assist them in their job search. The results of the social network audit allowed the facilitator to determine the number of contacts each participant was making. If there was a need to increase the number of contacts, interventions were implemented. For example, role-playing techniques were developed to practice the necessary rapport-building skills and a script was developed to assist participants to introduce themselves in networking situations. In many employment-training programs, facilitators take for granted that participants are able to develop rapport with potential contacts in order to solicit either job-related information or referrals. After a lengthy period on social assistance, research indicates that social skills tend to erode due to isolation (Smith, 1999; Strathdee & Hughes, 2002; Wilkinson & Robinson, 1997).

The inability to generate new contacts may be caused by low self-esteem, depression, and lack of either motivation or self-efficacy (Eden & Aviram, 1993).

Strengthening Social Networks

The treatment not only provided a measurement and monitoring tool for the job-search facilitator but also directly increased the number of contacts who provided job-related information. Traditional job-search programs must go beyond simply introducing networking skills and techniques that assist participants in making contacts, but introduce ways to monitor the number of contacts they make, the value of each contact, and whether new contacts are in a position to provide job-related information. By further determining the value of a social network, job search facilitators can utilize this information to increase the probability of employment.

In this study, over 50% of the respondents had participated in a previous training program, and of those, 25.8% had participated in more than two or more programs. Those respondents who became re-employed were more likely to be participating in their first training program than the other group members. If employment agencies are going to increase the chances of their participants making the transition towards re-employment, they must address this issue and understand that multiple program participation may affect the responsiveness to the intervention. Necessary actions must be taken to address possible reasons for lack of success in previous programs.

Referrals to employment opportunities are the strongest link to re-entering the labour market. Studies have indicated that those individuals that are referred to job opportunities were more likely to be hired than those who were not referred (Fernandez & Weinberg, 1997; Newman and Lennon, 1995). It is common for employers to use the social networks of their employees when they are interested in hiring someone (Livingston, 2002); similarly potential employees tend to use their friends to gather job-related information. Using these ties to hire new employees reduces information costs and most likely increases the quality of newly hired employees (Livingston, 2002). This evidence supports the notion that through strengthening a social network with contacts that provide job-related information, the chances of re-employment are increased.

Future Research

A number of limitations of this study lead to ideas for future research. A larger sample could be used to determine the effects of the job-search management system treatment across a broader range of participants. As well, a more comprehensive follow-up needs to be conducted to determine the stability of the networks.

The present study provides some evidence of the importance of social networks in increasing the probability of re-employment, as identified in prior research. A careful examination of the treatment yields practical insight into the nature and interplay of social networks and how programs and social assistance recipients can utilize them. Although the treatment has been tested on a small sample, there is reason to believe that it may have more general use. Other populations such as employment insurance recipients and laid-off workers can utilize the job search management system in their attempts to re-enter the labour market.

The network strength increases from pre- to post-test was substantial for the experimental group. However, it is necessary to perform longitudinal studies that track participants and their social networks over longer periods of time. This will add to the understanding of social networks and to developing interventions for adding new contacts to them. In order for individuals to re-enter the labour market, adding helpful contacts is of importance especially if the goal is to increase job-related information. The lack of meaningful contacts within social networks amongst the marginalized segments of the population may exacerbate economic inequalities and further marginalize them from the rest of society because low-income populated communities are less likely to be connected to economic opportunities (Wilson, 1996).

Implications for Practice

The ability of employment training programs to aid social assistance recipients in transition towards re-employment is important. If administrators and program planners are to be successful in facilitating this transition, it is not enough to measure social network strength; it is also necessary to develop practical applications in order to add relevant contacts to them. The treatment in this study provided participants with a job search management tool that not only managed the number of contacts they made during their job search but also monitored the value of each contact. The effectiveness of employment training varies depending on the number of previous training programs. Government needs to take this into consideration when creating new policies for social assistance and develop programs that address social networks and the impact they have in the transition back into the labour market. When implementing employment training it is important that these considerations are at the forefront, otherwise the intervention will not match the needs of the participants and may cause more harm than good.

Conclusion

Four major findings from this study have emerged and offer some insight into the transition towards re-employment. First, although the length of time on social assistance was not correlated to the strength of an individual's network, it was found that the length of time on social assistance is positively associated with the number of previous training programs. Widespread training program recidivism minimizes the impact of an intervention. It is likely that participation in multiple training programs is associated with ongoing barriers to re-employment and therefore a lack of readiness to receive career-related information (Robbins & Tucker, 1986). The social assistance recipient then becomes entrenched in the system with minimal likelihood of benefit from training programs. Further research is required to determine the long-term effect on social assistance recipients participating in more than one program.

Second, those participants in the study who became re-employed demon-

strated stronger networks than those who did not find employment. Adding contacts to a social assistance recipient's network during a training intervention could provide job-related information that increases the chances of them re-entering the labour market. Third, the treatment introduced to the experimental group was successful for increasing the SJNSS scores. Increased SJNSS scores may represent access to job-related information, which in turn, may provide additional job opportunities not found in more traditional job search methods. Although this sequence was not proved in this study, it could be tested in subsequent research. Fourth, social assistance recipients who are on welfare for a longer period of time are less likely to become re-employed.

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