Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy 2009, volume 27, pages 1008 – 1021

doi:10.1068/c0850

The role of social networks and geographical location in labour market participation in the UK coalfields

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Received 19 May 2008; in revised form 3 April 2009; published online 14 September 2009

Abstract. The demise of the coalmining industry has entailed an increased geographical separation of individuals from workplaces, highlighting the importance of understanding the spatial dimension of job search for those living in the coalfields. There has been an increasing interest among labour market researchers on the role of place and social networks in influencing labour market behaviour. A growing body of literature focuses on the importance of social networks in shaping people's attitudes, behaviour, and decision making—in particular, the links between people's social sphere and the nature and extent of their participation in the labour market. We aim to examine the area effects of social networks and how these affect labour market position. We will draw on material gathered from a Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded project on the economic, social, and governance links between coalfields and their neighbouring cities. Part of this research was composed of eighty-five interviews carried out with unemployed job seekers across three contrasting coalfields (Lothian, South Yorkshire, and the central Wales valleys). We will focus in particular on the issues of accessing of South Wales jobs, knowledge and experience of the spatial labour market, and the role of social networks in influencing job search and job knowledge.

1 Introduction

As Europe moves ever further away from its position as one of the world's industrial powerhouses, so people and places alike have had to adapt to new social and economic requirements. The difficulty of finding dominant economic activities to replace those lost in industries such as coalmining has made it hard for many industrial towns and cities to redefine themselves successfully from within. In particular, service growth has brought with it very different skill requirements to those deployed in traditional industries, as well as altered working terms and conditions, such as part-time, flexible, or short-term contracts and generally lower rates of pay. At the same time many people, particularly men of prime working age, have found it hard to move from the view that an acceptable job should involve some form of skilled trade. In other words, it has been difficult for many residents of former industrial areas to adapt themselves from the needs of traditional manual and technical activities to the greater emphasis on interpersonal skills and customer relations involved in the service industries.

Alongside these sectoral shifts have been wider associated changes in the operation of the labour market. One particular change is the increase in journey-to-work distances. However, the increased travel costs associated with longer distance commuting effectively limits its scope to those in higher wage brackets—namely, people in managerial, professional, and administrative occupations. The rest are generally confined to a more restricted range of lower paid jobs within relatively easy reach of their homes. Changes in the locational prerequisites of many businesses and organisations have at the same time inevitably favoured some places more strongly over others. For many former industrial areas this has compounded these difficulties over access to work,

so that they continue to have difficulty generating sufficient jobs to replace those lost from traditional industries and to cater for new labour market entrants. The result has been the emergence of "new geographies of uneven development" (Hudson, 2003), with some areas forging ahead and others struggling to keep up.

Previous labour market research has shown that this geographical dimension is of crucial importance. Several studies have highlighted the importance of location in terms of matching jobs and workers, especially with the increasing separation of home and work in many former industrial communities (see, for example, Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001; Green and Owen, 2006; Turok and Webster, 1998). Studies of spatial mismatch have examined the role of the separation of people from jobs in some detail, showing that commuting tolerances vary between different subgroups of the working population. In particular, those living in deprived communities and those with lower skills tend to be less mobile, and generally have the shortest commuting distances (Chapple, 2001; Green et al, 2005; Houston, 2001; 2005; Rouwendal and Nijkamp, 2004).

It has been argued that individuals' social networks have a bearing on the parameters of job search too. Walker et al (1977) defined a social network as

> "a set of personal contacts through which an individual maintains social identity and receives emotional support, material aid and services, information and new social contacts" (page 35).

The literature suggests that those with 'loose' or 'bridging' social networks that link across a wider range of occupational and professional types are exposed to information about a larger number of job opportunities (Gayen et al, 2006; Holzer, 1987; 1988; Schweizer and Smith, 1974). This in turn means that they are more likely to be in better paid work than those with 'tight' social networks which include similar types of people. The higher propensity for unskilled job vacancies to be communicated by word of mouth means that those living in poorer neighbourhoods would benefit more from such 'bridging' networks in terms of access to employment. However, they tend to have much more localised social networks, composed of family and good friends, often also unemployed and hence not in the loop as regards information about job opportunities (Granovetter, 1995; Quinn and Seaman, 2008; Reingold, 1999).

Thus, access to a large and diverse range of social contacts is seen to be important to labour market participation in general, and in particular appears to have a positive impact on the reintegration of potentially excluded groups into work (see also Calvo-Armengol and Jackson, 2004; Chapple, 2001; Lévesque and White, 2001; Lindsay et al, 2003; Ooka and Wellman, 2006). Similarly, in line with a long tradition of migration research, other studies have highlighted the importance of preexisting social networks in the host community in helping recent migrants to find better paid jobs than those without contacts (Montgomery, 1991; Munshi, 2003; Rainer and Siedler, 2008).

While the distinction between 'loose' and 'tight' social networks certainly appears to play a part in individuals' differential access to employment, there is a danger that its effects are overstated. Indeed, some authors have argued for a more circumspect and nuanced view of how social networks operate in relation to the labour market. Thus, Quinn and Seaman (2008) identify a reduction in the importance of being plugged into 'word of mouth' information circuits as employers' recruitment practices become more formalised, not least via the increasing certification of skills. Even where informal methods of job search remain significant, variations in job entries may bear little relation to the structure and composition of people's social networks. According to Reingold (1999),

> "finding jobs through word of mouth ... [may have] more to do with luck, such as being in the right place at the right time, than with patterns of social relations" (page 1926).

Pinkster (2007) also points to the positive as well as negative aspects of local social networks, suggesting that, while they give access only to a limited range of opportunities, they do not necessarily lead to unemployment. She also underlines the need to take account of sociospatial context, and the different social mechanisms that might be at work in seemingly comparable networks.

Insights like these emphasise the extent to which this remains an evolving area of research. In particular, the geographical aspects of labour market behaviour and the role of social networks in shaping them have been relatively unexplored. The aim of this paper is to contribute to these debates by examining the spatial dimension of job search among unemployed residents of three former coalfield areas in the UK, particularly with respect to their attitudes to commuting to the nearest city, and the importance of social networks in influencing their job-search patterns. The analysis illustrates the major role that perceptions and experiences of place and space have for many job seekers in former industrial areas such as the coalfields.

Since the end of the 1984 – 85 miners' strike 250 000 jobs have disappeared from the British coal industry. At the start of 2007 only six collieries remained in production, employing barely 3000 men. The demise of the mining industry has led to an increased separation of individuals from jobs, highlighting the importance of understanding the spatial dimension of job search for those living in the coalfields. In the past many coalfield areas exemplified 'occupational communities', defined as places where the social networks of work and nonwork are hard to separate, and hence where communities are generally homogeneous and close knit (Salaman, 1974). Many of those living in coalfield areas were able to secure employment close to home, whether it was in the mining industry or in the associated industries and services that grew up around it. Despite the success of economic regeneration efforts to attract replacement jobs within the coalfields, many of its residents have still been faced with a need to find work outside their immediate locality, by commuting to the nearest town, city, or designated employment growth zone.

While this regeneration has involved extensive site reclamation for employment-related uses, it appears that the scale of associated job creation has yet to match what was lost as a result of coalmining decline. For example, Beatty et al (2007) estimated that, for men, "only half the job (was) done" (page 1671) in the British coalfields by 2004. The extent of recovery also varied considerably between different places, some having eliminated two thirds of the shortfall, but others only a third (page 1666). At the same time, until recently, neighbouring cities and other urban centres outside the coalfields have also experienced employment growth, and, in the absence of other alternatives, some coalfield residents have looked to these more distance locations for potential job vacancies (Bennett et al, 2000; Fieldhouse and Hollywood, 1999; Parry, 2003).

This has not been a universal response, however. Indeed, studies tracking the fortunes of former miners have underlined the divergent experiences of those who take up jobs involving longer commuting trips and those who are unwilling or unable to do so. The increase in the number of female coalfield residents in work has also largely involved relatively local jobs. These adjustments to the loss of coalmining have also brought with them significant changes in people's social networks, not least in terms of a lessening in their overlap with the world of work (Bulmer, 1976; Dennis et al, 1956; Frankenberg, 1969; Hollywood, 2002; Strangleman, 2001).

The findings presented here are drawn from a larger study funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on the links between coalfields and their neighbouring cities [for the full report see Gore et al (2007)]. The research was carried out across three contrasting former coalfield areas and their neighbouring cities: the central valleys and

Cardiff in South Wales; Lothian and Edinburgh in Scotland; and South Yorkshire and Sheffield in England. A key strand of the study investigated the labour market participation of unemployed residents in each of the three coalfields, in particular covering the role of the nearby city in their job search and the impact of social networks on attitudes to work and commuting.

The remainder of the paper is structured into four main sections. In section 2 we provide a summary of the three study areas and the research methods used; in section 3 we examine coalfield links to the city labour markets; in section 4 we examine the relationship between social networks and job search; and in section 5 we draw out the main conclusions and implications.

2 The study areas and research method

We focused on three former British coalfield areas and their neighbouring cities (Lothian – Edinburgh, central valleys – Cardiff, and South Yorkshire – Sheffield) (Gore et al, 2007). We investigated economic, social, and governance links between each coalfield – city pairing, and assessed whether the coalfields are reviving in their own right, or are more likely to become residential areas and lower-level service providers for newly resurgent cities.

Table 1 summarises the relative sizes and labour market positions of these three study areas. There are clear differences between them in terms of both geographical extent and population size, as well as between each city and its coalfield hinterland. Including this range of places was a deliberate choice, the aim being to investigate the influence of different contextual factors on patterns of integration.

At peak of production the South Yorkshire coalfield was the largest in the UK. During the 1980s there were sixteen pits in operation employing 15 000 people, but now there are just two in operation in South Yorkshire (one of these, Hatfield Main, recently reopened), providing around 800 jobs. Although coal dominated the area, extensive steelmaking and manufacturing also operated alongside the mining industry. By contrast, the central valleys coalfield was more strongly dominated by the mining industry. and has taken longer to recover, partly due to the lack of other industries and to the physical geography of the area which makes transport and travel to the main employment growth area around Cardiff more difficult (the last pit in Wales closed in 2008). The Lothian coalfield is much smaller than the others, and has experienced a longer period of decline, with all but one pit shut by the late 1980s. As a result it has had longer to adapt. In addition, mining existed alongside a number of industries

Table 1. Profile of the three study areas (sources: *Regional Trends* 2001; *Mid-year Population Estimates* 2003; *Local Area Labour Force Survey* 2003).

	Area (km^2)	Total population	Working age population	Employment rates	
				males	females
Central valleys coalfield	755	435 000	265 000	65.8	59.0
Cardiff county borough (local authority area)	140	315 000	205 000	73.9	67.6
South Yorkshire coalfield	1004	655 000	405 000	70.9	64.5
Sheffield city council (local authority area)	367	515 000	320 000	77.0	67.8
Lothian coalfield	457	120 000	65 000	79.8	75.4
City of Edinburgh council (local authority area)	262	450 000	295 000	77.5	72.1

Note: population estimates have been rounded to the nearest 5000.

including manufacturing and textiles. It has also benefited from its relative proximity to Edinburgh. The Edinburgh economy has gone through a sustained period of growth, expansion, and job creation which has benefited many of the surrounding areas such as the former Lothian coalfield.

Information was gathered from structured interviews with eighty-five coalfield residents who were currently unemployed and actively seeking work (thirty in the Lothians, thirty in South Yorkshire, and twenty five in the central valleys). Interviews were conducted with forty-five men and forty women whose ages ranged from under 20 to over 50—with over a third aged between 20 and 34. Most were in receipt of benefits and had just basic school or vocational qualifications, although several had none at all. Access to respondents was gained mainly via contracted providers of employment advice and support, with only a small number being referred directly by Jobcentre Plus. The interviews were carried out face to face with the respondents. A standard interview schedule was used, and this covered questions on labour market history, qualifications, attitudes to commuting, access to transport, job-search techniques, and the extent and use of social networks.

This represents a move away from standard analyses of the barriers to work faced by the unemployed that focus solely on skills and job-search techniques. Instead, more attention was paid to the links that the individual has to the place where they live, to the neighbouring city, and with the people in their own social networks. These factors are seen as important forces in shaping people's labour market engagement. The findings of this research are intended to contribute to debates on how to engage certain groups with the labour market.

3 Coalfield links to city labour markets

One of the key focuses of the research was on the relationship that workless coalfield residents had with their neighbouring city. During the interviews particular emphasis was placed on respondents' attitudes and willingness to work in the city, any previous experiences of working in or visiting the city, and other connections they might have with the city.

One of the principal differences between those living in the case study areas was in terms of their proximity to the city. Using computer-based digital maps, distances were calculated from each postcode sector in the three coalfields to the midpoint of the neighbouring city's central business district. This indicated that on average residents of the central valleys live at the greatest distance from the neighbouring city (16.5 miles, compared with 7.7 miles for the Lothian coalfield, and 10.7 miles for South Yorkshire). For South Yorkshire the furthest possible distance respondents had to travel was 16.8 miles from the northernmost part of the Barnsley area (this was only one respondent), and the nearest was Rotherham at 3.9 miles. For Lothian the furthest possible distance was 14.6 miles from the Gorebridge area, and the nearest was 3.6 miles from Dalkeith. For the central valleys the furthest possible distance was 31.1 miles from the north side of Merthyr Tydfil, and the shortest was 6.4 miles from the Caerphilly area. This has obvious implications for commuting propensities, as outlined in table 2, which clearly shows how the scale of out-commuting varied between the three coalfields, with the highest rates found in Lothian and the lowest in South Yorkshire.

Existence of public transport networks or the availability of a private car had a strong influence on willingness to work in the city. Evidence from the interviews showed that, although many respondents were willing to travel to work, the scope for this was very often hampered by poor access to transport. Only eighteen (out of a total of seventy five) respondents had access to a car or a driving licence, meaning

Table 2. Commuting, 2001 (source: Census of Population, Special Workplace Statistics 1991 and 2001).

	Percentage of working age population			Percentage change 1991–2001		
	men	women	all	men	women	all
Central Valleys coalfield to Cardiff	8.9	8.0	8.5	+23.5	+30.7	+26.7
South Yorkshire coalfield to Sheffield	7.3	5.7	6.6	+6.0	+26.8	+13.9
Lothian coalfield to Edinburgh	37.8	41.2	39.5	+20.7	+42.7	+31.2

that the majority had to rely on public transport, which restricted the areas to which they could travel. This was a matter not just of available services linking different places, but also of the time and distances involved. When discussing how far they would travel to work, those respondents without access to a car were quick to state that their search area was restricted by the public transport network. For example, one unemployed male, age 29, lived in Lothian and was willing to travel to Edinburgh but felt that he was restricted by the public transport network and by the fact that he could not drive, as he states:

"That is one of the main barriers because you are restricted in where you can go to where the buses go. There is a limit to how many buses you can take."

Each of the coalfields has extensive public transport networks, with regular bus services running between Lothian and Edinburgh; South Yorkshire is served by both buses and trains (and trams within Sheffield); and bus and rail services run between each of the central valleys and Cardiff. However, although extensive, by their nature such services tend to provide access to the more central locations, with outlying industrial estates, business parks, and out-of-town retail centres being much less well connected. Equally, people's homes may or may not be close to these transport networks. This meant that many respondents had to restrict themselves to those jobs that were accessible by direct public transport links.

There was also a strong contrast between the three areas in terms of the geographical scope of people's search activity. While many stated that they wished to work locally, in the Lothian and South Yorkshire coalfields it was recognised that opportunities existed across a broader area. In the former, this principally meant Edinburgh; indeed, several Lothian respondents considered Edinburgh itself to be part of their local area. In contrast, South Yorkshire respondents were much more likely to mention a range of employment centres within the Yorkshire coalfield (Barnsley, Dearne Valley, Doncaster, Rotherham, Wakefield). Interestingly, the main centre of regional employment growth, Leeds, did not feature at all on people's job-search horizons.

In the central valleys there was a stark contrast between those living in the northern and southern parts. All of the former were looking just for local work, and dismissed the possibility of the long journey to Cardiff. Most of these were young, which is another important factor in the job-search equation (see later). The small minority who were searching beyond the coalfield all lived in the southern or middle sections, and did not confine their attention just to Cardiff, but included other places in the coastal belt such as Bridgend, Cwmbran, and Newport within their compass. Moreover, travelling times (and associated costs) from some parts of the coalfields into the neighbouring city or other employment centres may be prohibitive. For example, it takes over an hour to go from the heads of the valleys to Cardiff by public transport. Given that people generally do not live immediately adjacent to a bus stop or train station, nor do they work right by their alighting point at the other end, then their

overall travelling times are likely to be much greater. That said, some parts of the three coalfields lie much closer to their neighbouring city, and hence have shorter and more frequent services. Thus, Edinburgh can be reached from Dalkeith, Cardiff from Pontypridd, and Sheffield from Rotherham in around 20 to 30 minutes.

Respondents were asked about their willingness to travel to the neighbouring city to work. Thirty-five respondents stated that they would definitely work there and were already looking; thirty would do so if certain conditions were met (such as convenient location, type of job, or wage levels); twenty stated they would definitely not. However, it should be noted that many of those who were conditionally willing to work in the city had not specifically included it in their stated area of job search. As might be expected, more respondents living in Lothian were willing to commute to the city than in the other two areas, with those in the central valleys the least willing and most likely to confine their search to the local area. This can be explained partly by the closer proximity of towns in Lothian to Edinburgh, compared with many parts of the central valleys in relation to Cardiff. Moreover, the interviews included some young people living in the north of the central valleys, and the longer journey times and their lower propensity to travel distances will have affected the scale of these responses.

In line with previous research (Chapple, 2002; Green and White, 2007; Green et al, 2005; Rouwendal and Nijkamp, 2004; Stoloff et al, 1999), the age and gender of respondents were found to have an important bearing on willingness to travel. It was found that female respondents had a much lower propensity than men to travel outside their immediate locality for work. In addition, female respondents were less likely to have worked in the city in the past and consequently had less experience and knowledge of commuting for work. This was particularly the case for women who had caring responsibilities for either children or older relatives (one male respondent had caring responsibilities for an older relative). Many stated that they were able only to take jobs that were within school hours (generally between 9 am and 3 pm) and consequently tended to be looking for part-time work close to their homes. Travelling times were thus a prime concern—for most women with caring responsibilities, commuting to the city was neither practical nor financially viable.

The lower pay attached to such posts in turn placed further geographical limits on their job-search horizons. For example, one female respondent in the South Yorkshire coalfield, a single parent, aged 24, described how she could look for part-time work only in the local area as she needed to be back in time to pick her daughter up from school. In addition, she had very limited work experience and restricted herself to the local papers and family contacts as sources of information about job opportunities. She did not consider working in Sheffield as she considered it to be too far away and she did not know anyone who worked or lived there. For this respondent, and many others like her, the lack of opportunities locally available at the times required restricted her ability to enter the labour market.

The age of the respondents also affected willingness to work in the city. Green and White (2007), in their study of the social networks of young people, found that where people live can significantly affect their access to training and employment opportunities. Those from the younger age groups (25 and under) living in the coalfields showed, in general, less willingness to travel to work in the city (it should also be noted that very few younger people held driving licences). It might be thought that younger people with fewer ties and family commitments would be more willing to undertake commuting. However, evidence from the interviews showed that there was a reluctance to travel amongst this group with most stating that they were looking for local employment. This can in part be related to a lack of knowledge and experience of the city. Indeed, a couple of respondents from the central Wales valleys had never

been to Cardiff. Many younger respondents referred to the city as being frightening or unfamiliar; a number were concerned with getting lost and not being able to find their way around. This illustrates that there may be scope for widening the experiences and knowledge of other areas for young people living in deprived communities, so that they do not restrict themselves to the local area for employment and training.

Familiarity with, and knowledge and experience of, the city were major factors that seemed to affect willingness to commute there for work for all respondents. Throughout the coalfields, those who already had experience of working in the city, knew of people who worked there, or made regular journeys to it for other purposes were the most likely to consider commuting. A lack of experience of visiting the city is an important contributory factor to a reluctance to consider working there. Indeed, even from many respondents who stated that they would commute to the city, it tended to be within tightly prescribed limits. Thus, they restricted themselves to those areas that they knew and had been to before. This tended to limit them to the city centre or to locations in the transport corridor between their homes and the city.

Unfamiliarity sometimes combined with the sheer size of the city to deter people, as one respondent stated when talking about Sheffield:

"I went there once for a job interview but it right put me off, it's so big, the streets are a maze, I got myself lost and it was really scary" (South Yorkshire female, 27).

Experiences of the city differed between coalfields. Those living in Lothian made far more frequent trips to Edinburgh than those in either South Yorkshire or the central valleys did to Sheffield or Cardiff. Again, this can be explained partly by the closer proximity of Edinburgh to the Lothian coalfield towns. Those in the central valleys made less frequent trips to Cardiff, with a number not having been there for many years or, in two cases, never having being there.

The lack of competing urban centres in the Lothian subregion may also help to explain these patterns, particularly in comparison with the more polycentric nature of South Yorkshire. Moreover, respondents in South Yorkshire tended to express a stronger identification with their locality, with Sheffield appearing much less dominant in its subregion than either Edinburgh or Cardiff are in theirs. Thus, fewer respondents in South Yorkshire travelled regularly into Sheffield and those who did tended to go to the Meadowhall shopping centre (on the northeastern outskirts, and hence closer to the coalfield), rather than to the centre of town. This lack of knowledge and unfamiliarity appears to act as a major deterrent to looking for work there, and ensures that people's spatial spheres remain relatively narrow. This highlights, with regard to policy, the importance of widening the geographical scope and knowledge of job seekers.

4 Social networks and job-search patterns

The interview survey also sought to examine the role that social networks play in influencing job search. Previous research has found that most unemployed and low-skilled people tend to have highly localised networks of family and friends, fewer links to other areas, and relatively low levels of mobility. It is argued that these localised or tight networks can have a restrictive influence on an individual's ability to look outside of their immediate locality for work. Granovetter (1973) found that neighbourhood-based dense networks were limited in getting information about possible jobs. By contrast, weak ties such as work contacts, casual acquaintances, or other nonintimate associations have been shown to play an important role in job search (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000; Wellman et al, 1988) because such types of ties provide access to a more varied source of information from a greater variety of people than is provided through a denser personal network of family and friends. However, as Bridge (2002) argues, although loose networks may be helpful in finding jobs, people must still

have job skills and access to job opportunities to be successful. They also have to be confident enough to broach the subject of work with people they may not know that well.

The social networks of respondents in all three areas tended to be centred on family and friends who lived in the immediate locality. Indeed, most had lived in their local area all their lives. This may explain why so many expressed a strong attachment to their local area, as attachments tend to become stronger with length of residence (Hummon, 1992). The close proximity of family and friends also contributes to such strong identification. There was little evidence of extensive connections to other areas, although a small minority had lived elsewhere and still had friends there. However, contact with them tended to be relatively infrequent and focused on social rather than employment matters when it did occur.

Throughout the three coalfields, socialising and day-to-day contact tended to be with other people who lived locally. The predominant pattern was to use local or nearby town centre facilities in terms of both regular shopping patterns and socialising. However, Lothian respondents were more likely to make trips into Edinburgh for food shopping at one of the large supermarkets. Similarly, several South Yorkshire respondents made regular visits to the Meadowhall shopping centre, but only a few of them included it in the geographical scope of their job search.

The interview evidence also provided information about the employment status of those in their networks. Previous research has illustrated that individuals involved in networks made up primarily of others who are unemployed are less likely to have the necessary contacts or incentives to be successful in finding work (Gayen et al, 2006; Schweizer and Smith, 1974). Respondents in Lothian and South Yorkshire were more likely to have a mix of contacts in and out of work than those in the central valleys. Valleys respondents tended to have more people in their network who were unemployed, which may have had a negative impact on their ability to find work. Those in the valleys also had the most frequent contact with those in their network. The higher number of unemployed people in their network and the higher frequency of contact with them may have had the influence of restricting their exposure to outside contacts who may have more positive experiences of the job market. However, this is not to underplay the valuable support that having frequent contact with a close social network would have had for many of the respondents.

Social networks were an important source of information about jobs (mentioned in seventy cases) and many respondents seemed to be heavily influenced by these flows of information. However, interviewees made it clear that support from their network was not just about sharing job vacancy information, although this of course played a prominent role. Other aspects cited included: assistance with curriculum vitae and job applications; accompanied visits to employer premises in advance of interviews; financial help to purchase interview or work clothes; childcare; and general emotional support. In a number of cases this involved only selected family members. This highlights the way that closed networks can be a positive support in finding work. Indeed, recent research carried out by Green and White (2007) and Quinn and Seaman (2008) has highlighted the importance of locally based networks in providing valuable support for those who are unemployed. The emphasis on loose networks in finding work can be seen, to an extent, to underestimate the positive value that close social networks can play for the unemployed.

In contrast, for some respondents their network was simply not suitable because its members were either not in the line of work that they were seeking or were out of touch with the part of the labour market they were looking to enter. This reiterates the

argument of Bridge (2002) that social networks will be of little use if the individual is not able to access the job available.

Despite the fact that many of the respondents used these tight networks to find work, this was not generally viewed as their main method. Most tended to use conventional channels such as the local newspaper, the Jobcentre, or an employment intermediary. This illustrates that, although information about jobs from friends and family may be useful, it was not seen as the main way of finding permanent employment. Rather, it was a supplementary method for gathering information and securing assistance to support people's operation in the labour market. This highlights that the role of more formal job-search methods should not be dismissed when understanding what part social networks play in the job search of the unemployed.

The role of social networks was again influenced by the age and gender of the respondents. Social networks were particularly important for younger people in terms of intensity and frequency. Younger respondents tended to have a greater number of friends that they saw more frequently than those in older age groups. Many had almost daily contact with a large group of friends. For this group, friends were seen as an important source of information about jobs and experiences of the labour market. It may be that peer influences are greater in this age group. Older respondents (those aged over 50) tended to have smaller networks and had less frequent contact with them; this was particularly the case for male respondents. Older interviewees were more likely to have networks that included people who had already retired and thus had little contact with the labour market. One respondent in her mid-50s, living in the Lothian coalfield, described how most of her friends and family were no longer in work and in consequence they felt increasingly unable to offer advice and support about possible vacancies and job search. As an alternative to this source of support, she stated that she received a lot of emotional and practical support from her peers at a local employability project that she was attending. This perhaps illustrates how the formation of new or different social networks within local areas can provide alternative forms of support and can diversify an individual's range of contacts.

The social networks of women also differed. Women respondents were more likely to have frequent contact with those in their network, as well as having more local and child-related networks. The circumstances of gender have largely been overlooked in the theorising and conceptualisation of social networks, and there is less understanding of whether women are able to build loose social networks through their social connections in the same way as men. Warr (2005) found that women's involvement in informal and familial networks has uncertain consequences for the social networks they are able to generate. Furthermore, Stoloff et al (1999) found that the greater the quality and diversity of a woman's social network the more likely she was to be in work. This suggests that those women that rely on local networks of close family and friends are less likely to access a wide range of information on jobs and are thus less likely to be successful in the labour market.

The female respondents in this research tended to have very closed social networks. For example, those with young children, in particular single mothers, were more likely to socialise with other single mothers who were out of work, which resulted in them forming social networks made up of very similar individuals. These more closed networks did not necessarily have a negative impact on the women's labour market outcomes, because in many cases they provided a vital source of support and advice. Indeed, a number of women recounted how they had heard of preemployment courses from other women in their network, which highlights a positive outcome for closed networks. For example, one female respondent from the central valleys, a 36-year-old single parent with three children, had contact mainly with other single mothers in the

area who were mostly all unemployed too. All her friends lived locally and some of them she had known since she was at school; she saw them most days and saw her immediate family every day. However, she gained a lot of support from this network in terms of childcare, information about local jobs, and also emotional support from them all "just ... being there for one another with everyday problems". This illustrates the complex role that social networks play in the lives of many women living in disadvantaged areas. Although they are very closed, being restricted to a small number of individuals in a localised area, the resources within this network provide a very valuable form of support that would be difficult to replicate by outside agencies.

5 Conclusions and policy implications

The interviews with unemployed coalfield residents produced a number of insights that endorsed but also enhanced findings from previous research. In particular, they underlined the fact that job seekers in the former coalfields face a number of barriers to accessing work in their neighbouring cities. In addition to the more commonly recognised difficulties, such as a lack of qualifications and work experience, the interview evidence demonstrates that there are also geographical barriers that affect job search over a wider area. These include access to, availability of, and proximity of transport, local peer group effects, and perceptual barriers relating to a lack of familiarity with places beyond what they perceive to be local.

Various factors restricted respondents' ability to travel to the neighbouring city for work. Most respondents were solely reliant on public transport which restricted the areas to which they could travel, and the times when they could get to and from their destination. Familiarity with the city and experience of travelling to the city were also important. Those that made frequent trips to the city, had worked in the city previously, or knew of people who lived and/or worked there, tended to be those that were most willing to consider travelling there for work. Knowledge and experience of travelling to different areas outside an individual's immediate locality thus appear to be important factors in influencing the geography of people's job search.

Local attachments and social networks were also important. Although social networks were used by many of the respondents to find information about job opportunities, more formal methods were still the main source. Where social networks were of most influence was in providing emotional and practical support. However, in a number of cases the very localised nature of people's social networks, and their composition predominantly of other unemployed people, appeared to have a negative influence by restricting the outlook of individuals to only the very immediate locality. Conversely, a few respondents with links to several people who were in employment stated that the nature of their jobs did not really provide any relevant leads or information about the type of work they wanted to do. These findings highlight the fact that social networks play a complex role in people's lives, and that closed social networks may have positive and negative connotations with respect to labour market activity. Certainly, many people living in the former coalfields reported that they provided an important source of support. In all three areas respondents had a strong identification with their local area and maintained strong social networks with others living there.

Moreover, important differences emerged between the three coalfields. Thus, respondents in the Lothian coalfield had the greatest links to the city, making frequent trips into Edinburgh, and being most likely to consider it as a potential place to work. This is hardly surprising given the geographical and labour market context. In contrast, there was greater reluctance to include the neighbouring city within the scope of people's job search in the other two areas. In South Yorkshire respondents tended to look to other areas within the subregion rather than automatically looking to Sheffield.

This no doubt reflects the fact that employment creation and economic regeneration have been just as effective *within* the South Yorkshire coalfield itself as in Sheffield. In the central valleys the reluctance to travel to Cardiff can be explained partly by the geography of the area that make such journeys very time consuming, particularly for those living at the heads of the valleys. Many respondents were aware of the job opportunities that Cardiff offers, but were unable to gain access to them due to slow public transport, long journey times, and the relatively high travel costs when compared with the wages on offer.

The findings of this research present a number of important implications for policy. Firstly, a one-size-fits-all approach to the revival of areas like the former coalfield communities is inappropriate. The geographical context of Britain's former coalfields varies a great deal. Some are able to rely on jobs in neighbouring cities to rebalance their local labour market; others need a solution that is internal to the former coalfield area itself. In addition, there are limits to the validity of treating cities as the dominant economic hub in relation to the coalfields. In particular, to frame the coalfields simply as part of the commuting hinterland of their neighbouring cities is to misunderstand Britain's new economic geography. The links are there, but they vary in strength and significance between different places.

Above all, the research findings underline that there should be greater recognition of the essentially local sphere in which most low-skilled people still live and work. Long-distance commuting may be appropriate for skilled and professional workers whose pay and conditions can more easily compensate for long travelling times. For many of the residents of Britain's former coalfields, and especially the more disadvantaged job seekers among them, long-distance commuting into neighbouring cities remains an unlikely prospect. The coal industry once provided local jobs; for many men and women local jobs still remain the way forward. Indeed, Quinn and Seaman (2008) have highlighted the positive impact that local job-creation schemes have had in Glasgow, where jobs were specifically reserved for local people. However, those living in the coalfields and similarly disadvantaged areas should not be discouraged from seeking opportunities outside their immediate locality and should be given the support to do so, where appropriate. If people are to be encouraged to commute over longer distances, then more consideration needs to be given to the most effective means of achieving this—for example, some kind of financial support to cover travel costs, or higher level skills training to enable access to better paid jobs. However, there are also many noneconomic constraints that deter city-bound commuting among people seeking relatively low-paid jobs, and these are likely to derail attempts to secure labour market reattachment by means of city-region-wide commuting.

Policy needs to recognise that, for many people, like those living in the former coalfields, social networks are still very localised and restricted to well-known friends and family. In order for disadvantaged groups to be able to successfully engage with labour market and training opportunities, there is a need to increase the flow of labour market and training information through such local social networks. Quinn and Seaman (2008) suggest that this could be through 'community animators', who can provide the vital link to second-order contacts in looser networks, as well as providing vital information themselves. However, it is equally important that policy should not underestimate the valuable contribution that close networks can provide in terms of support for many people. In this light, in line with Pinkster's (2007) arguments, perhaps more attention should be given to making more effective use of the mechanisms that underpin the operation of local social networks.

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