

SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE SINGAPORE MERITOCRACY

by VINCENT CHUA

In contexts where meritocratic norms are emphasized, do social networks matter, and how? Dr Vincent Chua, a CFPR Steering Committee member and faculty member of the NUS Department of Sociology, shares his research and insights on the subject of networks and the meritocracy using data from Singapore. He discusses a paradox, showing that the meritocracy reduces as well as amplifies the usefulness of social networks for getting ahead in life.



As a Singaporean, I have often wondered about the usefulness of social networks. As children, we were drilled on the importance of a good education. The “scholars” are the envy of society: they go to the best schools, the best universities abroad; they secure the best jobs, often in the well-paying state sector. The booming private tuition sector reflects the belief among parents that good grades facilitate the good life. There is much anxiety around national examinations and school placements in Singapore.

Yet it is equally hard to imagine a society, however meritocratic, where social networks do not matter. Parents are sponsors of their children’s education. Teachers impart knowledge. Collaborations are necessary for the accomplishment of tasks in the workplace, and so on. Networks are everywhere, interwoven with our everyday lives and routines.

These form the basis of my research questions: Do meritocratic characteristics decrease the usefulness of networks? How do networks continue to matter *despite* the meritocracy? I begin by discussing two of my own works, the

first is “Social Networks and Labour Market Outcomes in a Meritocracy” published in *Social Networks* (2011); the second is “The Contingent Effects of Unmobilized Social Capital on Getting a Good Job” published in *Sociological Perspectives* (2014).

The studies are based on a 2005 dataset of the personal networks of some 1,143 Singaporeans. We adapted a range of “name generators” and got respondents to name people who helped them with different kinds of tasks – e.g., with whom do you discuss important matters? Next, we got them to provide information about their network members. We had questions about how people found jobs and who facilitated those searches.

The first article shows that meritocratic characteristics do significantly reduce the usefulness of job contacts. The second reveals that there actually are limits to how much meritocracy can curb networking activity.

I found meritocratic characteristics to curtail networking in several ways:

First, well-educated people are less likely than lower-educated people to use job contacts.

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Presumably, their formal qualifications are paving the way into jobs making the social network redundant. Second, people are less likely to use job contacts for entering jobs such as public administration and defense, education, and health and social work, and are more likely to use job contacts for jobs in wholesale and retail trade, hotels and restaurants, and construction. The former set tends to require a more formalized education.

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Third, all else held constant, contact use is associated with lower earnings on the job. This is especially so in the state sector: People in the state sector get lower earnings from using job contacts than people in the multinational and small business sectors. The state sector emphasizes meritocratic recruitment more than the non-state sectors, thus reducing the usefulness of job contacts.

In my search for explanations, I drew inspiration from a body of literature known as “varieties of capitalism” (Hall and Soskice, 2001), particularly their discussion of “tightly- and loosely-coupled linkages” between education and labour market systems. The state sector in Singapore exemplifies tightly-coupled linkages, in the sense that paper qualifications are critical to the employment decisions of recruiters. In contrast, the small business sector (SME) places a lower priority on qualifications, therefore job contacts are much more useful to the workers there.

I was mindful about the gaps in our present literature, one being the growing

understanding of how social contexts affect the role and value of social networks in labour markets. Some studies show that networks matter, others show they do not. Rather than this-or-that, we need an approach that says: “it depends.”

As I presented my work to different audiences, the general comment that came back was that I may have underestimated the role of networks. My response is two-fold. First, mine is an argument about relative effects: Networks matter, but to a *lesser* degree in some sectors than others, not that they are irrelevant. Second, it made me to consider the role of *other kinds* of networks, e.g., networks *other than* job contacts *per se*.

Again the literature comes in useful here. Nan Lin writes about the “invisible hand of social capital” – the kinds of social connections forged as a result of one’s daily routine: ties between partygoers, old boy networks, ties between family members, an influential parent, and so on.

These people may not help with securing a job *per se*, but are critical for shaping performance on the job itself, for example, a high-status parent who imparts work and life experiences to an adult child; the wider repertoires that people gain from associating with different kinds of people; parents and spouse whose love and concern increases well-being and productivity at work, and so on.

I wanted to test if these kinds of networks – what I term “unmobilized social capital” would turn out useful *despite* the meritocracy.

What I found surprised me: the positive effects of unmobilized social capital on earnings were strongest in the state sector. Contrary to the earlier study, this one suggested that people

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needed networks – not job contacts per se, but a broader swath of connections to high-status (e.g., well-educated) individuals – in order to do well in their state sector jobs. My findings showed that access to well-educated networks bolstered earnings for all people, but especially so for those working in the state sector.

As for why, let me venture a few explanations:

First, meritocratic jobs require more paper qualifications and much of this human capital is in fact gleaned from one's social capital. James Coleman, the world-renowned American sociologist, had, in a well-cited article (written in 1988 for the American Journal of Sociology entitled “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital”) articulated the central importance of social capital in the acquisition of human capital. Parents play a critical role nourishing the minds of their children. Their involvement, the time and attention paid are critical for the inter-generational transmission of human capital.

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Second, meritocratic jobs may often invoke the most thorough and systematic employee evaluation processes. Systems such as the Potential Ranking Exercise (PRE) and Current Estimated Potential (CEP) used by the Singaporean state sector rely on “being known” – specifically, the officer being evaluated must be known by at least two appraisers on the panel for four years.

Third, officers in the public sector must often build connections with vendors in the private sector in order to procure services that the public sector is unable to provide for itself –

e.g., it hires external consultants who advise them on the most suitable job candidates for specific posts.

I have learned much from these sets of analyses, namely that while meritocratic characteristics do suppress active forms of network mobilization (e.g., “do you have a job opening for me ?”), they do not, indeed cannot, suppress the role of embedded forms of social capital, such as the enrichment one receives from encountering high-status individuals along the pathways of life. Serendipity, obliquity, chance encounters all work around and alongside meritocratic characteristics (and their institutions) to affect the life chances of people.

New studies have emerged concerning the role of unmobilized social capital, what others have termed “non-searching”, but this study is innovative for its analysis of non-searching in different job sectorial contexts, in this case, sectors that differ in the extent to which meritocratic norms are applied.

Let me now turn to the question of network inequality: If connections to high-status individuals are so important for success (as this study illustrates), what factors shape access to them? What are the sources of network inequality? Why do some people have more social capital, and some have less?

My studies show that women have more social capital than men (e.g., in the form of accessing well-educated network members); Chinese have more social capital than Malays and Indians; well-educated people have more social capital than the less well-educated people; in general, older people have less social capital than younger people.

The lower access to social capital among Malays has partly to do with their lower access

to education as compared to Chinese and Indians (something which I write about in two other papers in 2013 and 2015). Older people have less social capital partly due to older cohorts having had less educational opportunities than recent cohorts (Chua, 2013).

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Women have attained equivalent (or better) educational achievements as men; therefore their access to well-educated contacts has superseded men's.

In this regard, Singapore makes for a fascinating social laboratory for the study of social capital given the nature of its social divisions e.g., its multi-ethnic context, the prevailing gender script, the age hierarchies, its high levels of economic development (but with Asian characteristics seen in the respect for hierarchy, the strong work ethic, and the strong emphasis on education).

Beyond Singapore, my projects have entailed a range of societies. One study compares the economies and political structures of China and the US. There I extend my work on job sectors by examining how job sector and national characteristics combine to affect the value people place on social networking. The analysis is more involved than can be stated here, but one surprising finding is that Americans seem to value networking more than Chinese, implying that *guanxi* may be over-stated.

While many studies in social capital and social networks have originated in Western societies, there is more to learn and understand about how they matter in Asia. Serving this need, Barry Wellman and I recently edited two special issues on Social Networks and Social Capital in East and Southeast Asia for the *American Behavioral Scientist*. Forty-seven scholars contributed some 18 articles to the two special

issues. All articles analyzed their respective East Asian societies (China, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, Singapore, Thailand, and Taiwan) from a personal network perspective, using systematic data. Many of the writers had received training from Western universities, who subsequently applied their training to the study of East Asian societies and networks.

The future is promising for the study of social networks in Asian contexts, particularly Southeast Asia and the Global South. These contexts will yield new perspectives and insights on social networks: The transitioning economies of Myanmar and Vietnam, the caste system in India, and the village-city nexus in Thailand, the Philippines and Cambodia serve as important sites for the study of social networks. Mario Small writes that social networks do not hang in a vacuum. As new works arise, our vision of the interplay between societal contexts and social networks gets clearer day-by-day.

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