



Research Output Journal of Education 6(1):16-24, 2026

ROJE Publications

PRINT ISSN: 1115-6139

<https://rojournals.org/roj-education/>

ONLINE ISSN: 1115-9324

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<https://doi.org/10.59298/ROJE/2026/611624>

Social Networks and Inequality: How Ties Reproduce or Reduce Disadvantage

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dual role of social networks in shaping inequality, focusing on how interpersonal ties can both reproduce and reduce disadvantage across economic, educational, and health domains. Drawing on classical and contemporary social network theories, including the works of Granovetter and Bourdieu, the study conceptualizes social capital as a relational resource embedded within network structures that vary in strength, diversity, and multiplexity. The analysis highlights how homophilous and resource-constrained networks among disadvantaged groups often reinforce inequality by limiting access to high-quality information, opportunities, and institutional support. Conversely, bridging ties, structural diversity, and exposure to heterogeneous networks are shown to facilitate upward mobility by connecting individuals to new opportunities and higher-value resources. The paper synthesizes empirical findings across labor markets, education systems, and health outcomes to demonstrate that network effects are context-dependent and mediated by structural and institutional factors. It further explores how digital and programmatic interventions can reconfigure networks to reduce inequality, while noting the persistence of structural barriers. Ultimately, the study underscores that social networks are not inherently equalizing or stratifying but operate as dynamic mechanisms that can either entrench or mitigate disadvantage depending on their composition and accessibility.

Keywords: Social Networks, Social Capital, Inequality and Mobility, Bridging and Bonding Ties and Structural Disadvantage.

INTRODUCTION

Social network structures shape inequalities in society, but the nature of the relationship remains unclear [1]. An emerging body of evidence shows that social networks reproduce economic, educational, and health disadvantage at the individual and family levels, while alternative studies demonstrate how social ties also provide access to pathways that support upward mobility [2]. Extensive work in sociology, communications, and the economics of uncertainty offers a theoretical lens to better understand these competing perspectives. Both individual- and group-level processes can determine whether social ties reproduce or counteract disadvantage. Structural aspects of the ties that connect individuals and households such as the nature, diversity, or mix of those ties—can also mediate these linkages. Some network approaches are especially apt for revealing how networks reproduce disadvantage [1]. The choice of network type and a fundamental distinction between ties and institutions emerge as critical considerations for understanding the ways that networks contribute to the micro-interactional reproduction of disadvantage [2].

Theoretical Foundations

Early work in social network analysis, notably by Granovetter, established the importance of network structure for identifying opportunities and acquiring resources that shape life chances [1]. Individuals seek out information and advice, and those with larger, more diverse networks gain early, exclusive access to this information and

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advice. The processes through which ties reproduce versus reduce disadvantage rely on social capital, structural embeddedness, and multiplexity [2]. Disadvantaged actors tend to have fewer, weaker, and more homogenous ties overall [2] and specifically to privileged actors [1]. Much research examines how social ties increase the reproduction of disadvantage across multiple domains, yet evidence also highlights the potential for ties to widen access, lower barriers, and point the way out for disadvantaged actors [2]. Disadvantaged actors frequently face stratified lack of access to high-quality, high-coverage job information, leading to prolonged job searches, fewer job offers, and higher likelihoods of employment in low-paying poorly-matched jobs [3]. A variety of mechanisms determine whether disadvantaged actors receive access via weak ties or bridges, but the presence of ties does facilitate the exchange of relevant information. Information and advice received indirectly from connections to privileged actors have much higher-quality jobs as their target compared to direct job offerings and continue to unlock high-quality opportunities even within net pay [4]. Information on obtaining better subsequent offer is also shared by privileged-brokered job information between connection and the low-paid person, acting as distinct entry points into the same broader professional arena [5].

Social Capital and Network Theory

In the aftermath of the industrial revolution, with the rise of capitalism and modernity, the theory of social networks has revolved mainly around Granovetter's studies [3]. Through personal ties, people rely on their private connections to generate occupational strategies [4]. However, in new contextual approaches, Bourdieu's theory of social capital and the fundamental work of Fields have emerged, evidenced by the literature on social capital in urban spaces [4]. Two fundamental points emerged in the theorization of networks and social capital. First, social capital is the notion by which individuals possess different degrees of access to the productive assets of others, clearly linked to the broader fabric of inequality already present in society [5]. Second, social capital is not an absolute abstraction; along the lines of relational sociology, Fields formulated the hypothesis that social capital relates to a topology, a demarcation of inter-links and cuts separating individuals from each other [6]. Within network theory, these two types of capital can take on additional meanings, although the predominant emphasis remains on labour, occupation, educational routes, or health focal points also for Bourdieu and Fields [4].

Mechanisms of Inequality through Ties

Empirical studies show how ties reinforce the barriers of disadvantage, leading to its reproduction through cascading mechanisms [1]. Notably, labor outcomes and educational access depend on the following: - Proximity to well-connected peers facilitates the spread of job openings among low-classes [1]. Networks that connect to high school dropouts or irregular-job workers are detrimental for first-work chance in school-to-work transition. - Disadvantaged groups experience cascades through occupational peers and restrictive neighbourhoods in job-seeking. The knowledge and information gained through peers vary according to links to schools and classes. - Neglecting support and care found in the frame of neighbourhoods leads to higher mortality rates [2]. The degree of market vacancies on social media channels among health-stigmatised individuals is an important factor for their participation [4]. On a broader level, systematic reviews reveal the distribution of similar types of access displayed by school dropouts or migrant workers, indicating the general maintaining principles of networks [5].

Bridges, Bonds, and Multiplexity

Multiple perspectives have emerged regarding the typology of ties within networks, broadly categorized into either bridging ties or bonding ties [6]. When considering multiplexity, a structural characteristic of networks where multiple types of ties exist between the same nodes, a separate dimension is added to the typology. People often have multiple motivations for connecting with the same individual, allowing ties to be defined not only as bonding or bridging, but also as multiplex or single [7]. Bridging ties serve as connections to social groups, organizations, or communities that differ substantially from the individual's primary network. These ties play a crucial role in accessing disparate information and resources, enabling individuals to engage with economically and socially diverse environments and facilitating the pursuit of unconventional social practices [8]. People who possess multiple bridges or multiplex bridges to different social groups often operate in specialized environments. The strength and multiplexity of these ties significantly influence access to directly relevant information and resources, impacting individuals' life chances and upward mobility [9]. Within the labor market, bridging ties to different industries provide access to alternative job opportunities and health information relevant for job choices [2]. In education, bridging ties to schools that offer contrasting curricula or pedagogical styles augment awareness of diverse educational paths [7].

Empirical Evidence on Reproduction of Disadvantage

Social networks of disadvantaged individuals frequently reinforce disadvantage rather than provide opportunities for advancement [1]. People from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to have social networks that offer less access to jobs, information, education, health resources, or legitimacy than those of their more affluent counterparts. The composition of an individual's network among their co-ethnics is more critical than the size of the overall network [2]. The individual case studies at the foundation of this section highlight how networks may

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convey privilege or access to exclusive positions, especially when ties are social rather than purely transactional [8]. People disadvantaged in the labor market rely disproportionately on informal job search networks, which often provide lower-quality job leads than formal or educational networks, so attainment of good jobs through these channels ultimately remains lower than it is for those with more privileged connections [3, 4]. Connections with co-nationals and co-ethnics reinforce disadvantages in educational outcomes; pro-school ties alone, however, are insufficient to obtain quality education, and maintaining ties with violence-prone peers harms student well-being. In the health domain, both studies analyse the role of neighbourhood social networks [5]. Links with co-ethnics slow recovery from health shocks, while neighbourhood networks involving co-nationals accelerate recovery from COVID-19 illness [1].

Labor Markets and Job Achievement

Job achievement, defined as attaining a job with characteristics deemed desirable, is considered a key outcome in labor economics [3]. It encompasses several dimensions: wage, contract type (e.g. permanent vs. temporary), adequacy of job characteristics, wage mobility, type of contract transition (e.g. from temporary to permanent), or job satisfaction [4]. Family and social networks play a significant role in determining job transitions and outcomes. Studies show that individuals whose previous job-type was identical to their subsequent job, a common scenario in dual transitional economies such as Colombia, rely heavily on their networks for job search assistance [5]. For instance, individuals with social ties in the same occupational field receive more information about training and job offers within that field [6, 9]. Consequently, the use of networks influences job transition and wage inequality, particularly in developing countries. Individuals who succeed in obtaining a job without support from their social network enjoy a wage premium of approximately 16% [8]. Family and acquaintances remaining attached to the same type of job-characteristics lead to direct access to better employment options and provide support throughout the entire job-search process [9]. Having a large network with contacts outside the same occupation is therefore advantageous for the market situation. Although urbanization contributes significantly to shaping employment and social interaction, a large proportion of the population still primarily contacts people within their immediate neighborhood [10]. Moreover, the decay of social capital highlighted by Putnam, demonstrates the inequalities entrenched within society, with particular focus on education and cultural opportunities. Gender and regional differences also affect the role of networks in job achievement; for instance, the use of contacts by women to find their first job is more prevalent in peri-urban and rural areas than urban centers [11].

Educational Outcomes and Access

Students' educational outcomes depend on their friends' academic performance [10]. Students with better grades tend to associate with higher-performers, amplifying pre-existing advantages. The educational attainment gap thus widens where selection is strong [9]. Individuals with relatively high cultural capital but low academic performance are particularly disadvantaged. State-funded schools exhibit greater grade homophily between friends than private institutions [5]. The institutional context of school choice is tightly linked to educational inequalities. In Sweden, this reform enabled students to select upper-secondary schools, still the main channel for further education [4]. Access to information on the academic performance of schools' previous students influences school choice; better knowledge about well-performing schools is often greater among more privileged groups [3]. Students with informed friends therefore attain higher educational levels as their choices are less restricted due to systemic barriers inherent in school choice [2].

Health Disparities Mediated by Networks

Social ties shape health opportunities and constraints within community environments. Disadvantaged neighborhoods affect not only the economic and material but also the social and health conditions of residents [7]. People in low-resource neighborhoods have limited access to information, goods, and services, including health resources that can mitigate illness or disability [8]. Lower-educated groups prioritize family ties and connection to their own communities, leading to dense but redundant networks [11]. Such clustered ties increase social control and influence behavior but also reinforce shared behavior and limit health and economic mobility options by restricting access to external resources [9]. High-SES neighborhoods provide a wider range of health-related resources, partly because the neighborhoods themselves offer substantial resources. Low-educated and low-SES networks originate from more localized and less valuable contexts [10]. Children from lower-SES homes continue clustering socially and spatially, missing opportunities afforded by broader networks more common for middle-class [11].

Evidence on Reduction of Disadvantage through Networks

Network settings remain critical to understanding the reproductive mechanisms of inequalities in disadvantaged communities over the life course; social contours nevertheless enable the alleviation of disparities in multiple domains [3]. Various targeted social programs reinforce beneficial ties among youth, connecting them with influential individuals who draw on their own stable sources of network capital to secure upward mobility for

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participants 8. Institutional sponsorship, such as public job-search platforms, widens communities' reach to otherwise unavailable folk and professional networks, stimulating higher-quality social ties [4]. Participants emerge better off relative to their peers who approach private networks of friends and acquaintances directly. Shared enrollment in specialized academic programs permits the emergence of diverse, high-status peer connections that enhance advanced-degree attainment, access to coveted educational institutions, and alternative career routes [5]. Social network analysis frequently construes whole ties as superior for expanding occupational, educational, and health avenues among disadvantaged groups. Yet the structural-profile composition of busy networks, comprising acquaintances with heterogeneous demographic features and origins over temporal spans, emerges as a more decisive predictor of upward mobility [6]. Individuals from neighborhoods experiencing reductions in concentrated disadvantage enjoy higher rates of occupational advancement and educational attainment and hasten access to certificate programs, associate degrees, college credits, and related vocational qualifications [7]. Connections among diverse racial, professional, and geographical categories act upon stratification forces. Acquaintances possessing such disparate attributes stimulate broader social participation even in refining neighborhoods with concurrent monitoring forces compressing upward mobility figures again compared to fundamentally diverse social niches [8]. Large, multiplexed networks featuring predominantly close-tie combinations of family, cohabitant, and kin relationships further corroborate widespread patterns notwithstanding geography, age, and race [9].

Social Interventions and Network-Based Programs

Social networks shape opportunities, the diffusion of information, and the adoption of behaviors, so interventions that alter network structure can improve equity of access [2]. The most straightforward approach to reduce disadvantage is to identify and strengthen links to salient social contexts. However, programs like the matched grant-based microcredit approaches that aim to alter adult networks are infrequently enacted due to limited perceived demand and questionable efficacy [1]. As alternatives, many interventions target the networks of children. Schooling enhances children's connections to peers from different family backgrounds and to mentors such as teachers and coaches, so educational policies can alter network structure [3]. Whether they operate through ties or directly on capital, programs that promote social interactions can expand educational opportunity. Programs like BigBrother BigSister and KidsHope link children with adult mentors and indicate that access to well-connected mentors facilitates upward mobility [4]. Social interaction through friendships and ties to adult friends can then impact transitions from school to work, especially for disadvantaged youth [12]. School-based interventions with monitoring and tracking (like the SmartFish strategy) that encourage networks of social control can reduce delinquency by strengthening pupils' ties to school and enhancing positive peer social life [2]. Free summer camps have been proposed to expand connections among low-income pupils [11]. Connecting peers with adult mentors can promote upward mobility, and mentoring connections can also be encouraged through school extracurricular [9].

Network Diversity and Upward Mobility

Social network initiatives designed with a strategy to broaden ties can also support access to education and opportunities [10]. When disadvantaged youths are recruited for such programs, they are matched with diversified mentors whose socio-economic status is concentrated in the low and low-middle classes. Disadvantaged youths whose mentors increase educational perspectives, access to high-status higher-education centers, or exposure to professionals elevate their activity [11]. Several mechanisms, such as referrals to family education, financial assistance, or socialization into seeking support from high-status individuals associated with their mentors, further enhance educational attainment [13]. Even when educational attainment improves, access to small firms and family businesses remains prevalent for these youths, limiting professional advancement [12]. Yet, access to higher education widens the number of job offers, which is pivotal in countries where professional networks are critical for recruitment. Providing individuals with educational perspectives through diversified ties has the potential to reduce sociological reproduction [1].

Online Networks and Democratization of Access

Despite worries about rising inequality and shrinking opportunities [2], digital networks may help disadvantaged youth achieve upward mobility by democratizing access to information and opportunities. Research shows that exposure to high-wealth and highly-skilled peers raise youth's aspirations as well as their chances of attaining high-wage jobs, even when controlling for parental background [14]. A similar approach to the undergraduate admissions process enhanced accessibility and equity, leading to increased recruitment of disadvantaged and underrepresented students [15]. Specific kinds of exposure supplement longstanding mobility channels. Instead of simply reinforcing existing information channels or encouraging light touches, interventions that broaden tie structures can catalyze significant upward mobility [13].

Methodological Considerations

Network structures play a key role in shaping group membership and behavioral dynamics. The very concept of networks in sociology and social science advances the study of social capital and inequality, tracing the mechanics of cultural and social reproduction through structural, functional, and position theories [1]. Cultural resources are embedded in social relations, thereby constructing field-specific capital, which interacts with social classes and legitimizes inequality transmission [2]. Network studies focus on the gambling and investment sectors of the economy. Empirically, individuals in expansive professional networks earn 33% more than those unable to capitalize on existing networks, while job-seekers with access to external information and connections maximize the value of their local market [3]. Beyond economic returns, extensive networks help to bounce back from crises, regardless of liquidity. Consequently, policy measures that either reinforce or reformulate existing networks become crucial interventions to counteract the impact of social capital on social reproduction or to embed cultural, economic, health, and educational phenomena [4]. The strong reciprocal relationship between socially structured networks and economic systems across institutional frameworks raises the possibility of pre-existing determinants anchoring economic activity with cross-national compatibility to analyzing the genesis of extreme social inequality [5]. National distributions of social capital, reflecting diverse transmission modes of ties, emerge as fundamental socio-political assets, and existing accounts provide rigorous explanations of the automatic selection mechanism accounting for the stable period of social networks consolidation [1]. A socio-political pattern encompassing models of state intervention in the economic arena and political orientation of economic agents extends the understanding of capital accumulation, signalling the need for similar accounts beyond economic phenomena [2].

Data, Measurement, and Causal Inference

Data come from a comprehensive survey of a single economy [1]. To explore the extent to which interpersonal ties reproduce or reduce disadvantage, the analysis draws on a unique data set collected in Attica, Greece. Two sociological surveys were conducted among the same sample of 1,075 individuals during the second half of 2018: a general survey and a followed-up survey [2]. The first survey included a rich set of indicators to assess respondents' personal, family, and contextual attributes, as well as the degree of their social and professional isolation at the day of their last job search. It aimed to identify not only respondents' characteristics but also their self-perception [3]. The second survey focused on weak ties through the enumeration of the individuals who provided respondents with social and professional advice during the year preceding the survey. It aimed to identify ties by whom respondents received social capital [3]. Social capital is operationalized by means of three recommended dimensions: occupation level, exposure to the number of people searched by the network of ties who offered advice to the respondents, and education level. Occupational, educational, and job-search characteristics owned by extraterritorial networks are also measured [2, 1, 5].

Contextual and Cross-National Comparisons

Social networks are framed as vectors for inequality through an analysis of systematic differences in placement and advancement across institutions of learning [7]. The analysis indicates that individuals in disadvantaged neighborhoods face greater challenges when entering the educational system. Those within such neighborhoods, who receive institutional support at later stages of the educational process, advance fewer steps in relation to the number of connections made [5]. Various studies have found that residents of disadvantaged areas develop network structures that replicate disadvantage [4]. Even while positioned in more advantageous social locations, still within the same educational system, individuals from disadvantaged neighborhoods do not gain access to educational opportunities that facilitate social mobility [3]. Another key area where social networks exert an unequal influence on life chances and outcomes involves health. The emergence of health disparities across various social strata is well-documented [8]. Such disparities hinder overall quality of life and undermine further developmental opportunities for individuals located within marginalized areas [9]. However, the pace at which these disparities emerge can differ substantially on the basis of the social connections maintained. In particular, residents of socioeconomically disadvantaged areas develop more health-related network connections than others, and these ties encourage and propel involvement in health-endangering routines [1, 13].

Ethical Implications

Social networks, despite being a dominant part of communication channels today, are not free of dark sides. Five ethical concerns are the most prominent [1]. First, social networks direct user attention toward misinformation and sensationalized content (i.e., "clickbait") because of the market incentive to maximize user engagement. Although misinformation has long existed in society, the scale at which it spreads and impacts the populace through social networks is unprecedented [2]. Second, algorithm-based social networks help organize preferences and consumption patterns. While this gives consumers more tailored choices, the dark side is that it suppresses exposure to diversity and can lead to unhealthy consumer patterns, especially for vulnerable groups such as children [3]. Third, the same algorithm-based customization applies to advertisement as well. Advertisement is critical for the sustainability of most social networks but, like the above example, generates a known dark side by

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suppressing exposure [4]. Furthermore, a former user can remain in limbo to the point of being able to revert to the former state but not delete the user account permanently even through re-installing the application for the same device after removing it. Crippling user individuality via a permanent account casts additional perceived threats on the platform [5]. A known loophole enables a future user to view all previously posted messages freely [15]. Fourth, social networks are often manipulated to elevate the status of the contents supplied by enemies, competitors, opponents, antithetical groups, and so forth, benefiting indirectly from it while contributing implicitly and unintentionally to their flourish [14]. Fifth, social networks lead to anticipated dark sides, such as crime, hate, and cyberbullying. Accidental dark sides triggering data and contents modification inherited from mere social media rental also count [2].

Policy Implications and Interventions

Individuals' opportunities are affected by the social networks they occupy: they can be passed along, inherited and reproduced across generations, or they can provide access to new resources that reduce inequality [3]. Network building and opportunities to make and maintain connections are often taken for granted: the structures and geographic areas in which people work, the schools they attend, the social spaces they enter, and the friendship groups they join influence the breadth of their networks and the likelihood that they connect with people from different backgrounds [4]. Inequality, however, can arise in this process because neighbourhoods, friends, schools, and affiliations are rarely homogeneous or randomly distributed [5]. Those who are well positioned are often able to gain more connections because they have ready access to highly connected, well-resourced intermediaries. More privileged social groups are attuned to and clued in about the forms of access and social engagement that increase social mobility [6]. Inevitably, if specific social groups are unable or disinclined to pass along the sort of support necessary to connect to broader opportunities and other social groups, they become trapped within a narrow, similarly-disadvantaged network of ties [7]. To ameliorate disadvantage, specific policies can facilitate access to new social ties or to intermediary individuals who embody a different or more privileged social background, possibly leading to broader opportunities and greater upward mobility [3].

Designing Equitable Network-building Initiatives

The key aspect of designing effective and equitable policy initiatives involves recognizing the mechanisms by which ties reproduce or mitigate disadvantage [5]. To promote favorable outcomes such as labor-market mobility, educational attainment, or health improvements for disadvantaged groups without unintentionally reinforcing historical disadvantage, policy designers can learn from inequality-focused perspectives within social network analysis [3]. Addressing access to strategic knowledge and ties among teachers can significantly enhance low-income pupils' academic outcomes [7]. Initiatives inspired by social-mobility studies that sought to broaden pupils' social networks improved Cambridge University admission rates among disadvantaged applicants [6]. Programmes aiming to connect displaced workers to strategic job-market knowledge through transient ties and weak links reduced the disadvantage associated with geographical location during the early stages of Canada's 2008–2009 economic crises [15].

Targeted Support for Disadvantaged Groups

Reducing disadvantage through enhanced connectivity often demands organized access, especially for those with few existing ties [6]. Targeted support has shown effectiveness in generating new connections and breaking cycles of isolation [3]. Users in disadvantaged areas frequently lack links to higher-quality employment nodes within job-search networks; interventions enlarging their neighborhoods increase access to superior opportunities and promote jobs with greater integration, stepwise capacity growth, and pay elevation [5]. In educational environments characterized by fierce competition, efforts to augment connections with highly mobile peers enhance upward transitions, indicating the viability of cultivating privileged links on students' behalf [8].

Evaluation Frameworks for Network-based Policies

To assess the impact of network-based interventions on disadvantage alleviation, indicators must capture individuals' positions and the characteristics of the networks surrounding them [4]. Contextual and cross-national differences in social norms, collective action, and support systems shape the role of networks in countering disadvantage, warranting examination of such variation alongside the influence of ties [5]. Additionally, the shift of large segments of the population to fully online networks, while offering potential for enhanced access to resources, raises questions about the extent of the positive effects, which must also be monitored. When supporting individuals in forging new ties, care must be exercised, particularly among minority or at-risk youth, to prevent unintentional reinforcement of stigmas associated with isolation [5]. Recent examples highlight the need for formal evaluation frameworks that capture the complex interactions between disadvantage and network reinforcement or alleviation. Tentative hypotheses on the influence of various characteristics, such as network size, heterogeneity, or digital connectivity, drive model construction and data collection for subsequent analysis of the effects of intervention on individuals situated in networks exhibiting dissimilar features [4]. The observation of

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different positions within the same overarching system would further inform the analysis are advantages accrued via existing links, or do meaningful benefits stem from social interactions? The combination of structural attributes, distinguishing the arrangement of pre-existing and novel connections gained through interventions, enables simultaneous examination of activity across classes [4, 5].

Case Studies

While social ties can reproduce disadvantage, they can also help mitigate its effects. One pathway through which networks facilitate upward mobility is by structurally linking individuals to diverse positions [6]. Greater structural diversity within networks, defined as the placement of network members in distinct social circles, translates into access to a broader range of opportunities and alternative adaptations. Empirical studies show that socially disadvantaged youth, exposed to a diverse set of connections through residential or programmatic interventions, gain access to college information, educational assistance, and job openings, which increases the likelihood of pursuing postsecondary education or employment [2]. In the context of migration, networks that differ structurally across origin and destination locations influence both the number of contacts abroad and the likelihood of international emigration [7]. In networks that are homophilous with respect to educational attainment, job-relevant information is less frequently shared in labor acquisition [1]. School and workplace commitments constrain social activities, leading to ties being reused across parallel contacts, thereby increasing the risk of crossing multiplexity thresholds at which privileged groups disconnect from the overall structure, further impairing upward mobility of subordinates [7]. Conversely, social networks can extend rather than constrict opportunities for candidates with high levels of demand.

Workplace Networks in Labor Markets

When whites seek job information and advice, they are more likely than blacks to receive it from influential contacts [9]. Since blacks do not attain their first jobs through influential sources, they do not subsequently gain access to more advantageous contacts. Black-white earnings differentials in the U.S. persist because of the differential extrapolation of social capital and black networks lack labor-market-relevant human capital, weakening their viability [8]. Network theory views society as a net of connections or ties among individuals, creating a social structure of relationships. Inequalities are situated in socially interconnected groups rather than at the individual level. Some people move upward through their weak ties, often friends of friends, while others remain trapped among their own close-circle contacts, such as relatives and childhood playmates [8]. Disparities are both reproduced and reduced through stronger or weaker ties, often with opposite effects on mobility, depending on the sector of society [9].

Educational Networks and Pathways

Research indicates that social networks reproduce educational inequality among students, yet they can also reduce disadvantage [9]. Connections to peers who support academic effort complement academic and socio-emotional support from family [10]. Despite this potential, network ties remain relatively homogenous; students interact largely with others from similar socio-economic backgrounds. In-school networks generally exhibit lower levels of diversity than out-of-school ones, where dissimilarity in socio-economic background appears more representative of the neighbourhood. Having access to a wider range of peers, including high-achieving individuals, correlates with better educational outcomes [11]. Supporting the ability to form connections across diverse socio-economic categories could thus create opportunities for advancement [12]. Varied pathways provide further evidence on the feasibility of moving through diverse contexts. The social context associated with educational establishment generates opportunities that differ across tertiary education channels [13]. While professional training extends collective access to social ties within the workplace, securing a position remains challenging, and social connections at this level often tend to be narrow. Educational apprenticeships in upper-secondary offer wider opportunities before graduation, yet access to high-quality vocational programmes strongly correlates with the type of upper-secondary institution attended, establishing potential educational pathways early on [14].

Health Networks and Community Resilience

Neighborhoods are tied together in networks that connect individuals either directly or indirectly [11]. Events that occur within one community (such as deaths, relocations, and morbidity) create ripple effects that propagate through these networks to people living in other communities [12, 13]. Nonetheless, networks also provide rapid access to health, social, and economic resources when individuals move across neighborhoods [14]. Because people are socialized, revitalized, and situated within destination communities more deeply than in home contexts, network patterns developed in prior neighborhoods may continue to influence health, education attainment, and economic mobility. Children raised in communities with many more distant within-network connections are born into families with a greater range of destination neighborhoods [15]. Families with a greater number of past over-network ties migrate to locations where they have better access to centrality and destiny and achieve educational attainment and economic returns from these multiple advantages. Network connections in destination

communities mediate the association of pre-move neighborhood structural disadvantage with continued intergenerational disadvantage in health, education, and economic mobility [16].

CONCLUSION

Social networks occupy a central position in the production and reproduction of inequality, operating as both mechanisms of constraint and pathways for opportunity. This review demonstrates that disadvantaged individuals are more likely to inhabit dense, homogenous, and resource-limited networks, which restrict access to valuable information and reinforce existing socioeconomic barriers. In contrast, individuals embedded in diverse and structurally expansive networks benefit from exposure to novel opportunities, higher-quality information, and stronger institutional linkages that enhance upward mobility. The evidence further suggests that the effects of social ties are not uniform but are shaped by their structure, strength, and context. Bridging ties and multiplex relationships are particularly important in facilitating access to external resources, while bonding ties often provide emotional support but may simultaneously reproduce localized disadvantage when overly insular. Across labor markets, education systems, and health outcomes, networks consistently mediate inequality through differential access to resources and opportunities. However, networks are not inherently deterministic of disadvantage. Strategic interventions such as mentoring programs, school-based integration initiatives, and digital connectivity platforms demonstrate that restructuring or expanding social ties can meaningfully reduce inequality. Despite this potential, structural constraint such as residential segregation, institutional stratification, and unequal access to high-quality networks continue to limit the transformative power of such interventions. In conclusion, social networks should be understood as dynamic and context-dependent systems that both reproduce and mitigate inequality. Effective policy responses must therefore move beyond simplistic assumptions about connectivity and instead focus on enhancing network diversity, strengthening bridging relationships, and addressing underlying structural inequalities that shape who connects to whom, and to what advantage.

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CITE AS: Nabirye Amina Okwir (2026). Social Networks and Inequality: How Ties Reproduce or Reduce Disadvantage. Research Output Journal of Education 6(1):16-24. <https://doi.org/10.59298/ROJE/2026/611624>