Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers. by Mark Granovetter
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Published by: [American Sociological Association](http://www.asanet.org)
Accessed: 15/04/2014 16:32

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There are very few books in modern sociology that equal this one in terms of scholarly impact. Granovetter's monograph, coupled with his classic article "The Strength of Weak Ties" (and his more recent ASR piece on embeddedness, also reproduced here), is among the most often-cited writings in the discipline, and with good reason. It is altogether appropriate, then, that a 20th anniversary version of the book is now available, one that includes a thorough and insightful afterword that assesses the evolution of economic sociology over the past two decades. Having read this new version after a long period "away" from the original, this reader is struck once again by the innovative quality of the ideas in Getting a Job and the productivity of the research enterprise it inspired among so many successors.

The original volume challenged the tenets of modernization theory, which posits an increasing autonomy of economic and social spheres that is expressed as a decline in particularism and a corresponding rise in universalistic processes, including those that match jobholders to available occupational opportunities. If, as modernization theorists argued, particularism was on the wane, then the social context—the web of ties that individuals are enveloped in—should be of minimal importance in the matching process.

Granovetter's work showed conclusively that quite the opposite was the case. His study of professional, technical, and managerial workers in Newton, Massachu-

sett, demonstrated that connections were crucial in linking people to jobs—whether they were searching for employment or not. Information about job opportunities, and influence vis-à-vis references, travels along social networks, privileging those whose biographies have provided them with a large number of "weak ties" who can deliver news of job possibilities they would not otherwise encounter (even from their best friends).

Since the richest trolling grounds for weak ties is to be found in the workplace itself, advantage accrues to individuals whose career paths have brought them into contact with a wide range of people for a fairly short duration: long enough for them to demonstrate their talents, but not so long as to restrict the pool of contacts to a small number of strong ties. Labor-market disadvantage accrues to those whose personal histories have failed to position them to harvest effective weak ties. Women whose social networks are drawn disproportionately from their kin or nonworking neighbors, African Americans for whom residential and institutional segregation has limited the occupational prospects of network members—these are people for whom Granovetter's findings have special relevance.

Indeed, what is most striking about this 20th anniversary version of Getting a Job is the extraordinary generativity of the original ideas when set against (or in the context of) new empirical and theoretical problems in sociology. The original volume draws upon a small survey, conducted by the author himself and complemented by very simple, descriptive statistics. Indeed, it is hard to imagine such a study making it through the demanding statistical regimes of the journals we know today. Granovetter's afterword shows, however, that studies of large-scale national surveys in the United States (e.g., PSID and NLSY), Japan, Germany, Britain, and Holland largely confirm his original findings.

On the theoretical end of the continuum, the book reviews an amazing array of topics, ranging from job-search theory (where the relationship between "non-searching" and embeddedness is raised), to social-resources theory (where the connection between the social rank of network members and the "payoff" to their use as contacts can be

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understood). Granovetter argues that more attention needs to be paid to the structure of careers—the ways in which people acquire their networks in the first place, the impact of their early steps into the labor market on their long-term futures, and the consequences of economic disasters (e.g., recessions) on the vitality of networks and the careers they shape. He argues as well for the importance of understanding history—especially the local conditions of industrial development and the hiring practices that predominated decades ago—for conceptualizing network structures in particular cities in the present. History is relevant as well for studies of the school-to-work transition: Cross-cultural work has shown significant variation in the ways employers and teachers are networked (or disarticulated) to build links in different countries. Granovetter’s afterword lays out dozens of suggestions for theoretical cross-pollination of this kind.

For this reader, the most important new links between Getting a Job and current debates involve spatial-mismatch theory and the consequences of racial segregation. John Kasarda and William J. Wilson, among others, have argued that the flight of middle- and working-class minorities from the cities in the wake of the civil rights movement left behind an increasingly impoverished population of inner-city dwellers now bereft of realistic job prospects. Jobs are booming in suburban communities, which are largely inaccessible to ghetto dwellers. Meanwhile, the cities have become gentrifying magnets for a high-skilled, white-collar population. In short, job hunters are trapped in the wrong space.

Granovetter’s volume, challenging the underlying theoretical paradigm of mismatch theory, argues that geographical contiguity is not the controlling factor in job placement: Social networks rule. Hence it would make little difference if more suitable jobs were located hard by the inner city. If the contacts aren’t available to inner-city minorities, they will be out of luck anyway.

Segregation and ethnic control over occupational niches are critical here, as the author points out. Groups that have colonized particular employment domains, from the fire department to the green grocery, can effectively block the efforts of those who seek entry by restricting their networks, playing upon managerial desires for network-based recruiting, and refusing to open the “pool” of their ties to individuals in ethnic out-groups. Thus, in Chicago, Mexicans will find themselves excluded where African Americans predominate, and Blacks will face the same wall where the Irish control public sector employment. We must look to the structure of networks and the interaction between them and patterns of segregation to understand what kinds of people get jobs and what kinds face the highest hurdles.

There is no limit to the ways in which this book connects to the most pressing questions in contemporary sociology. Getting a Job is a modern classic from one of the best minds in the business.


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David Gartman’s Auto Opium offers the first comprehensive history of changes in American automobile design from the turn of the century to the present day. While automotive design—especially the introduction of styling as a marketing tool by General Motors in the 1920s and 1930s and the stylistic excesses of the 1950s—has always been a part of previous histories of the automobile, Auto Opium is the first book to trace these changes in detail.

For Gartman, changes in automotive design that placed appearance (style) at its center were the result of three interrelated struggles: the competition among car manufacturers for control of the automotive market; the struggle within firms between “stylists” and engineers and their allies for control over automobile design; and the struggle between