

**Understanding career decision-making and progression:  
Careership revisited.**

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Dedicated to **GEOFF FORD**, who is very much missed.

**Abstract**

*In this lecture, I will draw upon my research career to present my latest ideas about career decision-making and career progression. Career decision-making was one of my first research interests, as part of a longitudinal study of the short-lived Training Credits scheme for young people, in the early 1990s. Based upon that work, I, Andrew Sparkes and Heather Hodkinson developed a new theory of career decision-making, which we termed 'Careership'. Since then, further research conducted by myself and other researchers has thrown further light on Careership. In this lecture, I will explain how such new evidence confirmed major parts of the Careership theory, whilst showing the need for some significant modifications to other parts of it. I will conclude by briefly identifying some issues for research, policy and practice that arise from what this research and theorising show.*

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## **Introduction: the place of theory in the career guidance field**

In the career guidance field there is a plethora of competing theories of career decision-making and career development. This plurality raises important questions about the place and purpose of theory in the field. Mouzelis (1995) identifies two kinds of theory in social science and argues that it is important to distinguish between them. They are:

- (i) theory as tools for thinking
- (ii) theory as a set of statements telling us something new about the social world and which can be proved or disproved by empirical investigation.

The range and diversity of competing career theories demonstrates that even if some of those theories were intended to be of the second type, none has yet achieved that status. In my view, it is more helpful to understand these theories as ways of helping us think about and understand career. Inkson (2004), following Collin (1998), implicitly makes the same point in identifying nine key metaphors through which career is understood. Though John Killeen (1996) saw theory as of the second kind, even he implicitly acknowledged aspects of theory as a means of thinking, when he classified career theories by the differing ways in which they understand the relationships between agents, action and environment.

For practitioners, policy makers and others interested in improving or justifying professional career guidance, good theories provide ways through which to evaluate and amend provision and practice. With this purpose, two questions follow: why do we need theory to help us do this and how do we choose which theory (or theories) to use?

Theories provide a general way of understanding career processes that is more than simply the accumulation of practitioner experience or the blending together of idiosyncratic stories. In fact, all policy and practice in the guidance field are informed by theory, which is not simply the province of academics. In the UK, much career guidance policy and some practice are underpinned by a folk theory of career. Politicians and civil servants fall back on this apparently common-sense theoretical position when trying to decide what to do about guidance and some educational provision. This folk theory is fluid and changeable, but often includes many of the following assumptions:

- Career decisions entail matching a person with a career opening
- Career decisions are or should be cognitive and rational
- Career decision-making is a process culminating in an event (the decision)
- Career decisions are made by the person following the career
- Good career decisions reduce educational drop out and increase employment
- Career decisions are made at the start of a linear career, or linear career stage
- Career progression is normally straightforward if a good decision has been made.

From this position it is assumed that the prime purpose of career guidance is to increase the quality of the career decision-making process, leading to an increase in the number of good decisions, which will lead to less educational wastage and reduced unemployment. Though much of this lecture will show how and why this folk theory is wrong, my initial point is to establish that those interested or engaged in career guidance cannot help but have some theoretical view about career.

As this is the case, how can we decide which of the many competing career theories we should use? A good theory should fulfil two criteria:

- It should be congruent with the ways in which career decisions are and/or could be made and the ways in which careers actually and/or could develop;
- It should provide understanding that can valuably inform research, policy and practice.

Many existing theories of career decision-making attempt to do two different things. They set out to explain how decisions are made but also to set out how decisions should be made. This may be because many people make career decisions in less than optimal ways. If we wish to help them improve these processes, it may help to know what a good career decision would look like. However, there is no point in identifying idealistic ways of making decisions that are so far removed from actual experience that they

form an impossible model to strive for. This often happens when we approach career decision-making as an abstract logical process rather than examining the complex, messy ways in which such decisions are actually made. Consider this extreme example:

‘We assume that, knowing their capacities and other personal characteristics, individuals form an estimate of expected earnings resulting from each education, training and labour market option, and, taking into account their taste for each, choose the stream which offers the greatest net utility’ (Bennett, et al., 1992, p13).

This can be read in both ways. The main assumption is that this statement represents a true account about how career decisions are made. Alternatively, it can be seen as normative – career decisions not made like this are faulty and will result in less than optimal career progression. Yet this theory only works as a normative guide to policy and practice if it is also achievable. To be given credence, there should be a significant number of successful people out there who actually behaved like this.

It follows that in evaluating career theories, normative or not, we need to know how well they fit with career decision-making and development in real life. Weaker theories possess two types of fault. Either they actually get things wrong, for example because few if any decisions are made in the ways they describe (surely the case for Bennett et al’s view) or they oversimplify career decision-making and progression by omitting factors and influences that are crucially important. It is only once we are fairly confident about the congruency of a theory that we can ask the second question – is it of any use? In the light of this discussion I will now examine my own career theorising.

### **Careership constructed: researching a Training Credits pilot scheme**

My first research engagement with career was an investigation of a short-lived government scheme to train young people – called Training Credits. This scheme was introduced in a pilot form in 1991. Drawing upon the then dominant market thinking, the central idea was that each trainee would be given a credit, which was to be used to pay for their training. This was supposed to give the trainee customer power over training providers. Central to the operation of Training Credits, in the pilot scheme we studied, was the folk theory about career already outlined. The research was a small longitudinal case study, following 12 trainees for 18 months, from school and through their training. As well as repeatedly interviewing the trainees, we also interviewed networks of stakeholders involved with them, including parents, careers teachers, careers advisers, training providers and employers (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996).

The data revealed two major failures of the folk theory of career:

- 1). Actual career decision-making was not rational in the ways assumed by the scheme.
- 2). Career progression was often non-linear and was strongly influenced by actions, events and circumstances that lay beyond the control of the young person.

As these weaknesses became clear we searched the literature, looking for a career theory that better fitted with the experiences of our subjects. All of the theories we encountered proved to be inadequate. Some, such as those based on matching personal traits to job characteristics (Holland, 1985) were just plain wrong. Not only did none of our young people make decisions remotely like that, but both they and the jobs changed over time, making the whole notion of matching unrealistic. Other theories were too partial, in ways that distorted our understanding of career processes. One problem was that most of them focussed on the individual decision maker, seeing the person as the only agent involved in making a career decision, and seeing that individual as separate from the context within which the decision was made. These person-centred theories, such as the developmental work of Ginsberg et al. (1951) and Super (1953, 1957), and the social learning theory of Krumboltz (1979) were in direct conflict with Roberts (1975) work on opportunity structures, which argued that career was not determined by individuals at all, for people fitted in to existing deeply entrenched patterns of social inequality, which mirrored and were part of structured occupational opportunities.

Our data showed that both the personal theories and Roberts' theory were partly correct, despite the fact that they were mutually contradictory. All our young people chose and were following careers that fitted existing social and occupational structures. These were working class young people, leaving school at 16, and following working class careers. The career pathways chosen also fitted gendered occupational patterns. Helen, one of our sample, chose the predominantly male career of car body repairs. However, she was made redundant after less than a year, and then moved to a more typically female job, working in a record shop. Nevertheless, it was clear in the data that all of our sample young people were active agents in choosing and constructing their careers. What was needed, and what we could not find in the existing literature, was a theory which could explain both the structural and individual dimensions of career. Law (1981) had already identified this problem, but expressed in a different way. For him, the problem was that the personal theories worked at the micro-level of the individual, whilst Roberts' thinking worked at the macro-level of society and social structures. What was needed, he argued, was a theory at the meso-level. We had some sympathy for this view, but it did not go far enough. We could clearly see the all-pervasive influences of social and occupational structures, even at the micro-level of the individual. Our subjects were making gendered and classed decisions. Put differently, occupational and social structures were part of the individual and the decision making processes, not simply the external context within which such decisions were made. None of the existing theories we examined dealt with this, and Roberts dismissed individual agency in ways that were at odds with our data.

It was this inadequacy in existing theorising that we set out to overcome when constructing our *Careership* theory. We turned to Pierre Bourdieu to do this. (See Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, for a good introduction to Bourdieu's ideas.) Bourdieu's work resonated with our data and with the ways we were thinking about it. Like us, his work was partly concerned with refuting the assumptions of economic rationalism which lay behind the views of Bennett et al (1992) and the dominant folk theory assumptions about decision-making. Also, Bourdieu's work provided a way to go beyond seeing structure and agency as opposites or as alternative ways of thinking about the world. Finally we were drawn to the heuristic nature of Bourdieu's thinking. This was not conventional grand theory based upon a priori assumptions and logic, but theorising that was grounded in empirical data, where ideas were developed and used as necessary to explain whatever problem Bourdieu was considering at the time. This directly met our research need – to use modified versions of some of his ideas to make heuristic sense of our data. Even before Mouzelis (1995) published his analysis, we were already seeing the need for a theory to aid thinking and understanding in relation to our data.

The *Careership* theory was published in several places (Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, Avis et al., 1998; Hodkinson, 1998). It argued that career decision-making and progression had three completely overlapping dimensions. They were the positions and dispositions of the individual, the relations between forces acting in the field(s) within which decisions were made and careers progressed, and the on-going longitudinal pathways the careers followed. I now think that our work on the first two dimensions was stronger than that on the third.

#### *Horizons for action*

The central idea in *Careership* theory is that career decision-making and progression take place in the interactions between the person and the fields they inhabit. Thus, career decision-making and progression are bounded by a person's *horizons for action*. The term horizon is a metaphor taken from vision. What we can see is limited by the position we stand in, and the horizons that are visible from that position. Those horizons enable us to see anything within them, but prevent us from seeing what lies beyond them. The horizons for vision are influenced by the human eye and brain. Some people can see more than others, and humans can see much less than some animals and birds. In a similar way, career decision-making and development are enabled within horizons for action, and constrained or prevented beyond them. The horizons for action are influenced by a person's position, by the nature of the field or fields within which they are positioned, and the embodied dispositions of the person him/herself. All existing career theories acknowledge the limitations imposed by the world outside the person. However, very few of them deal with this in a satisfactory way. Bourdieu's concept of field brings a better understanding of what is too often seen as simply an external environment or labour market. Central to field theory is an understanding that social environments are dynamic, complex and made up of interacting and unequal forces. Thus, the employment field in any geographical location entails complex interactions between employers, education

providers, local, regional, national and international labour markets and production relations and wider but pervasive influences of social structure (class, gender, ethnicity, age) national and international politics and policies, national and international economic climates, and globalisation. These and other forces interact with each other, so that changes to one may result in changes to others. That is, these forces are relational. The person making a career decision or developing a career is an integral part of that field. Their positions within and in relation to the field and their actions and dispositions contribute to the on-going formation and reformation of the field. The fact that few young women want careers as engineers contributes to the continuing gendered nature of employment in that field.

Within a field every player influences the relations of force but influences are not equal. This fundamental feature of career decision-making was revealed in the research data but overlooked in other career theories. Often, the greatest influence in career decision-making was not the person supposedly making that decision. Thus, Sam 'chose' to work as an apprentice in the same firm as his step-father. However, our research showed that his step-father encouraged him to do that and negotiated with his employer to create the vacancy, and Sam could not have chosen this career step if that employer had not then decided to take him on. Helen was made redundant from her car body repairing traineeship by her employer. Her next choice of a job in a record shop was strongly influenced by the refusal of another garage to give her a similar traineeship and the government-imposed rules for traineeship funding, which meant that she had to get another placement to continue her college course in car body repairing, and would lose her funding after only six weeks. The power relations between an employer and potential employee are not always so comprehensively in the employer's favour. Potential employees offering scarce and necessary skills or experience can often exert major influence over choice of position and the contract of employment. Top professional footballers are an obvious example.

The person always exerts a major influence on their own horizons for action. Bourdieu's concept of dispositions is a good way to understand that. A person's dispositions are deeply held and mainly tacit ways of viewing and understanding the world, that orientate us towards all aspects of life. These dispositions (collectively termed the habitus, by Bourdieu) develop throughout our lives, being strongly influenced by our position(s) in the world, and our interactions within it. It was easy in the research to see the significance of gendered and working class dispositions in our young sample. Dispositions are partly cognitive and discursive, but only partly. They are also embodied, being physical, practical, emotional and affective. Dispositions often become deeply ingrained, but can and do change over time. Just as a field enables some career decisions but prevents others, so do a person's dispositions. Laura wanted to become a hairdresser, but was adamant that she would not join what she still called the YTS (Youth Training Scheme), even though this was at that time the main way through which to get hairdresser training. For her, doing YTS lay outside her horizons for action. Reay et al. (2001) describe one young man considering university. His only choices were between Oxford and Cambridge, and between the various Oxbridge colleges. All other Higher Education institutions lay beyond his personal, upper middle class horizons for action. Another of our research subjects, David, had always wanted to work on a farm. These career dispositions had developed throughout his young life, as the son of an ex-farm worker who had a small piece of land and a few animals, living in a rural village. He had worked part-time on a local farm for several years before he left school. His deep love of farming was embodied and eliminated any other career choices. He got a farming traineeship in the same farm where he already had a part-time job, taken on by a farmer who had a commitment to training for the long-term benefit of the farming industry and as a duty to help young people beginning their careers. Thus, as the Careership theorising explains, field and personal dispositions interact with each other, and the horizons for action are established through those interactions. Horizons for action can and do change, when the person's position changes, when a field changes or when a person's dispositions change.

#### *The decision-making process*

If the interactions between the individual's dispositions and the field establish that person's horizons for action, that same interaction also influences decision-making within those horizons. This has already been illustrated in describing the ways in which some of our young people's career decisions were strongly influenced by others, and by the forces in the field. Yet all of them took an active part in the decision making process. At the minimum they had to say yes and could have said no to opportunities that came their way. Some were as proactive in deciding not to do things as they were in finding, constructing,

choosing or accepting opportunities that became available. In theoretical terms, the interactions between position, field, dispositions and actions strongly influenced all decision-making but were not deterministic.

Given the dominance of the folk theory of decision-making within the Training Credits scheme, one thing struck us forcibly. Whilst the folk theory and the official Training Credits processes assumed that the achievable ideal was completely rational decisionmaking, what we found were young people going through complex decision-making processes that were at odds with those assumptions. On the other hand, every one of our sample had at least partially rational reasons for making their choices. In order to make more sense of this observation we analysed both the rational assumptions in the folk theory and the actual decisions of our sample. Rationality, as assumed/described in the official documentation for the scheme and in the folk theory that underpinned it, had several characteristics. Firstly, rational decision-making was only cognitive and discursive. It entailed the explicit logical analysis and evaluation of information – both about the self and about the labour market and/or particular possible job opportunities. Secondly, this process was assumed to be improved if all relevant factual information was gathered and analysed, that good information was sifted out from information that was less reliable, and that good decisions entailed the comparison of a range of possible job opportunities. A third assumption was that a good rational career decision was a firm choice of a pathway that would persist for a lengthy period of time. As we looked closely at these assumptions, we were struck by the parallels with what Habermas (1972) termed technical or instrumental rationality. This was most obvious in another assumption of the folk theory – that it was the quality of the decision-making that would determine whether or not a young person found themselves in a suitable and desirable career. That is, if we get the means right, the ends will take care of themselves. Consequently, we labelled this sort of rationality *technical rationality*.

We described the decision-making of our subjects as *pragmatic rationality*. The main ways in which pragmatic rationality diverged from technical rationality were as follows. Firstly, the decisions made by our subjects were more than cognitive and discursive: they were embodied. They involved the physical, practical emotional and the affective, as well as the cognitive. In many ways, these decisions resembled the sorts of lifestyle choice that Giddens (1991) wrote about, involving, in his terms, the subconscious and practical consciousness, as well as discursive consciousness. Another way of describing the significance of the embodied nature of the decisions is that they were partly tacit. That is, the young people could not completely articulate some of their likes and dislikes. David expressed deep and consistent enthusiasm for farming, but his commitment went way beyond any rational reasons he could give. He knew that he had chosen a profession fraught with difficulties - low pay, poor job security etc – especially for someone like him, without a farm to inherit. Helen chose to train for car body repairs partly because she had enjoyed working on cars with her dad and was artistic by nature. She held an idealised vision of the future, where she did customised painting jobs on special cars.

Secondly, all the decisions in our study were based on partial information, often taken from what Ball et al. (2000) later termed 'hot sources' – that is, from people whom they felt they could trust, rather than from, say, official printed materials. No-one was concerned to get full information – whatever that means. Furthermore, many of them considered one opportunity only. Evaluative questions rarely entailed comparing this opportunity with possible others, but rather deciding whether or not this opportunity was what they wanted to do. Some, like David and Helen, actively worked with others to construct the opportunity itself. In David's case there was never really an actual decision – simply a lengthy process of constructing a training opportunity that was then taken up. On the other hand, Becky became a trainee dental nurse because a training provider found the opportunity and asked her if it would do. She said yes, because she saw the traineeship as a chance to find out whether or not this was a job she really wanted. Her 'choice' provides a good example of a rational component that did not fit the technically rational model. From her perspective, getting a paid traineeship to explore a possible career was not irrational.

Thirdly, as I have already shown, career decisions often involved several people, yet the technically rational view was that only the young person made a decision. In a related way, serendipity was important in many of the stories. Helen got her first traineeship, partly because the garage owner had already employed one young woman, who was taken on as part of a package deal, to attract a very highly skilled male worker he wanted to attract. This serendipitous appointment opened the way for him to consider a second female (Helen) in a strongly male occupation.

Fourthly, the extent to which a person could influence his/her own career was strongly affected by their position in the field and the resources at their disposal. Like Okano (1993, 1995) we saw what Bourdieu calls capital as a very useful way of understanding personal resources. Bourdieu identifies three main types of capital: economic, cultural and social. Economic capital is the most straightforward, concerning financial assets. David's lack of a farm of his own was a major limitation of economic capital for his chosen career path. Similarly, Helen's need for the payments that went with the Training Credits scheme forced her to abandon her attempts to get a second garage placement and work in a shop instead. However, David and Helen had plenty of relevant cultural capital – David understood farming from the inside. Helen knew a lot about working with cars, cultural capital that had developed as she worked with her dad. Both also had valuable social capital. They knew people who could help them get the placements they wanted. David was already working on the farm, so knew the farmer, whilst Helen's garage employer knew her father well and valued the fact that Helen came from a 'good working class family'. It is important to remember that capital is relative to the field in which it is used. I lacked the social or cultural capital to become a farmer or a car repairer.

We used the adjective *pragmatic* to distinguish this sort of decision making from the technically rational official version. We hoped that the word would capture some of the purposeful and logical ways in which our young people acted, whilst making clear the differences from technical rationality.

Of all our theorising, it was pragmatic rationality that attracted most attention in the career guidance field, eclipsing some of what I regard as the more important work on horizons for action. A common line of argument was that our small sample of twelve working class trainees may well have made their decisions in the ways we described, but other people, for example the more educated and middle class, might well be expected to make decisions that were much closer to the technical rational ideals. It was this response which led Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) to suggest that there might be more restricted and enhanced versions of pragmatic rationality. I return to this point later.

#### *Routines and Turning Points*

The final part of the Careership theory examined the longitudinal dimensions of career and career decision-making. We were struck by the fact that most of the career literature saw career development as broadly linear and/or developmental. Yet when we looked at our data, only some of our sample had careers that resembled linear development, even though we only followed them for 18 months. Several of our sample told stories of changes of direction, sometimes dramatic, and even for those where this was not the case, we could easily see how major changes might occur in the future. To make sense of this, we drew on some early work on career by Strauss (1962). He had argued that common assumptions of career implied one of two metaphors. One saw career as like a ladder – as linear upward progression (the developmental theories). The other saw career as like an egg – boil it, fry it, scramble it, it is always an egg. This, Strauss argued, parallels assumptions that, say, working class kids always get working class jobs (Roberts' opportunity structures). Neither metaphor captured the spasmodic, chaotic and serendipitous ways in which actual careers advanced. Put differently, these metaphors fitted careers when macro patterns were analysed, but did not work at the micro-level of individual people. Instead, Strauss suggested that individual careers were broken up by occasional turning points – times of significant personal career change. Such transformations, he pointed out, can often only be recognised with hindsight.

As well as identifying turning points, such as when Helen was made redundant from her car repair traineeship, we also examined the periods of routine that fell between such epiphanies. We argued that routines and turning points were interrelated and then went on, I now think mistakenly, to classify both. Thus, turning points, we argued, could be structural, forced or self-induced, and routines could be confirming, evolutionary, dislocating, etc. Even as we wrote, we were aware of two difficulties. Firstly, as Strauss made clear, there are no clear divisions between routines and turning points. Secondly, perception of routines and turning points was partly a matter of scale. We were studying lives over an 18 month period. What seemed a major turning point in this short period might simply look like part of a longer period of routine if a forty-year life period was looked at. Equally, what seemed like periods of routine might appear to be part of a major turning point, if a more long term view as adopted.

Having outlined our early Careership thinking, I next move the story forward. How well does that early work still stand up today, and what refinements need to be made?

### **Reflections on further research**

There have been several further research projects, looking at career, that were informed by Careership. Stephen Ball has conducted two, one explicitly examining the Careership ideas in the context of young people's career progression from school in London (Ball et al., 2000). The other studied the decision-making process related to choice of university courses, also based in London. This second project did not focus on Careership, but produced findings that help reflect upon the relevance of the theory (Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al, 2002). Hancock (2006) studied 12 male adult returners to education, in Birmingham, explicitly exploring Careership. I have conducted three further research projects that informed the Careership work. In the first, Martin Bloomer and I followed 50 young people into, through and out of Further Education, in Plymouth, Exeter and Manchester (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000, 2002). Later, Helen Bowman, Helen Colley and myself followed 24 fulltime Masters degree students through their courses and for a further 18 months afterwards (Bowman et al, 2005). Most recently I have been part of a large research team studying the significance of learning in people's lives [1]. In this Learning Lives project we conducted detailed life histories of 120 adults, then tracked their developing lives for a further two to three years. Though career was not the prime focus, this allowed me to look at Careership over a much longer time span than any of the other studies. It also allowed me to consider the relevance of Careership for older people, for example in relation to retirement.

Taken collectively these projects permit an extensive evaluation of the Careership theory. They give a total sample size of over 300, from all social classes, of different ethnic origins, living in different parts of Britain, of differing ages, and at different periods of the last 40 years. They show people making different types of career move – school to training, to work, to further education (FE) and higher education (HE); from HE or work into Masters level HE; from FE and HE into work; from one job to another job; and from work into retirement or part-time employment. In my view this work confirms most of the Careership thinking, but points towards further important refinements of it.

The first thing confirmed is that career decisions and progression are always positioned, and the position always matters. However, it is now clear that there are different types of position that are important. In the original thinking we focussed on position within social structures, such as class, gender and ethnicity, and on position within whatever fields the individual was participating in. Both are always relevant, but they are not the same. This is because significant aspects of a person's position in a field may not be directly related to social structures. Thus, in our original study, the position of our sample young people as trainees strongly influenced their decision-making and progression. In that study, all the trainees were also predominantly working class. In the Masters degree research, we could see how very middle class students were also positioned as trainees or newcomers when they started work. Thus, position in a field and position within social structures may reinforce each other and are often interrelated but are not identical. Ball et al. (2000) showed that geographical position was important. In their study, they showed the significance of living in London, and Reay et al. (2001) showed major differences between different parts of London. This geographical positioning includes local educational provision and local labour markets, but where a person lives also influences their dispositions. The Learning Lives research showed that historical positioning matters. This is often overlooked in short research studies, which focus on what is happening at the time the research is conducted. However, when we look at lives over a 40 or 50 year period we can see that what happens to careers in, say, the 1960s differs from careers in the 2000s. When I look back at the Training Credits study now, it is apparent how historically specific that particular short-lived government scheme was. Finally, the Learning Lives research also made clear that there is a generational dimension to position. This is not the same as historical position, because two different generations living at the same time may experience and act in different ways (Hodkinson with Hodkinson et al., 2008).

All these different types of position are both objective and subjective. We can identify external and objective aspects of position that matter. Helen was a member of the post-baby boomer generation, working

class and female. She was a trainee working in the South West of England, in the early 1990s, within the Training Credits Scheme. However position is also internal and subjective. How we perceive of our position is part of that position, and influences how we can and do act. This mirrors the central thinking within the horizons for action metaphor. Career theories that either bracket off position or treat it only as a separate external context within which people operate, are flawed. A legitimate individual focus on career must fully recognise the inherently positioned nature of that individual and career.

All this research confirms that career decision-making and progression centrally entail interactions in what we termed fields. Career is always part of unequal and complex relational interactions. Career decision-making is never an exclusively individual act. Within any career field, actions of others, be they employers, managers, admissions tutors, government agents, Trades Unions, colleagues, family and friends have a significant influence. The ability of any individual to progress is strongly influenced by the resources (economic, cultural and social) at their disposal. Any career theory that does not take account of these complex and unequal power relations is inadequate. Any theory, which assumes that only the individual him/herself makes a career decision, is also inadequate.

Ball et al. (2002) developed an interesting way of understanding position in a field. They showed that some of their subjects choosing university courses were 'embedded' in the HE field. That is, they already felt familiar with and understood the ways that the field and the HE choice processes worked. In my terms, they were positioned and had enough relevant social and cultural capital to see the field as a familiar place where they could easily fit in. Others made 'contingent' choices. They were positioned too far from English HE, lacked cultural and social capital, did not understand much about how HE worked, and made very simple choices based on little information and a lack of understanding. For example, many chose the university nearest home, showing no awareness of the relative status between institutions.

All these studies confirm that neither positional factors nor the forces interacting in the field are deterministic. They also show lots of examples of serendipity, but this requires further amplification. Chance is important in people's careers, but that very serendipity is influenced by positions and by the field. One young Masters degree student got a good job because a friend found it for him. This was a serendipitous event that he had not worked for but simply reacted to. However, the event only happened because this middle class male student had been to a fairly prestigious private school, giving him social capital through the old boy network, through which this job offer came. These studies also confirm that a person's own agency - their thinking and actions - can and do exert a significant influence on their careers. It follows that Roberts (1975) work on opportunity structures is inadequate in understanding career. It is not that Roberts was wrong, for patterns of career broadly fit into patterned and unequal opportunity structures. Rather, this partial view is inadequate and seriously misleading if our purpose is to understand career, because it only shows one dimension.

My reading of this large body of empirical evidence is that it confirms the significance of dispositions in influencing the horizons for action of any individual and also the ways in which that individual thinks and acts within those horizons. In every documented case in these studies, and in many others within the studies I conducted which have not been fully documented, decision-making was more (or less!) than purely cognitive. There are always tacit dimensions, most obviously in the ways that people sub-consciously rule out many possible career options and never consider them. Career decisions are indeed embodied, though because of the tacit dimension, it is not often possible to separate out practical, physical, emotional and affective aspects.

Looking at these studies I have found no one making a career decision in ways that were not pragmatically rational. None of them were making decisions that are neither embodied nor positioned, none were making decisions uninfluenced by others, and none were completely irrational. Our work on pragmatic rationality is often misinterpreted as being one way of making decisions, a decision-making style, which can be compared to other ways of making decisions. Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) may have unwittingly reinforced this view, by writing about restricted and enhanced pragmatic rationality. In doing so, we focussed attention on degrees of rationality, rather than on the more fundamentally important characteristics of pragmatic rationality as a concept. Hancock (2006) followed us in adopting a continuum of types of rationality, arguing that the people in his sample used one of four different decision-making

styles: systematic, enhanced, restricted and no logic. He saw enhanced and restricted as versions of pragmatic rationality, but the other two as different. Yet when I read his findings, even within his systematic group, many of the conditions for pure technical cognitive rationality are not met, and even within his single no logic example, Liam, who was 'spontaneous, impulsive and more receptive to panic' (p207), there some elements of sense in the decisions made. His processes were non-systematic, but his decisions were not entirely irrational. He drifted from training course to training course and from job to job, responding to openings that he became aware of, and that would allow him to earn money. However, he sensibly chose not to be unemployed. All four of Hancock's styles are versions of pragmatic rationality in my terms. However, differences between decision-making styles are important, and this was missing from our early theorising.

Like Hancock, Bimrose et al. (2008) have produced convincing evidence that adults consistently use what they term different styles of career development. These are evaluative, strategic, aspirational and opportunistic. They go on to argue that one of these, opportunistic, resembles pragmatic rationality. They show that people are largely unable to change these deeply embodied approaches. In my terms, all the people they have researched have developed deeply entrenched partly tacit dispositions towards career decision-making, which can be classified into these four types. Just as with Hancock's examples, all four styles strike me as pragmatically rational in the terms I have used here. The evaluative careerists focus primarily on 'self appraisal through the identification and evaluation of individual needs, values and abilities' (p5). Typically, this entailed a sometimes lengthy process of self-reflection and self-evaluation. Aspirational careerists 'adopt a style of decision making based upon focused, but distant career goals and their career decisions are inextricably intertwined with personal circumstances and priorities' (Bimrose et al, 2008, p10). I cannot find any way in which either of these styles fails to be pragmatically rational. Neither is technically rational but both entail rational thought. Both are positioned and embodied: more than simply cognitive. The strategic careerists get closest to technical rationality and also closely resemble Hancock's identically named style group. They 'base their choices on a process of analysing, synthesising, weighing up advantages and disadvantages, and setting plans to achieve goals' (Bimrose et al., 2008, p8). They are striving to make decision-making as rational as possible, but they are not technically rational. Bimrose et al. (2008) present no evidence that their decision-making is not embodied – i.e. *only* cognitive. In fact, their strategic style is locked into their embodied and tacit dispositions. They are incapable of approaching career decisions in any other way. It was this sort of decision-making that Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) were crudely anticipating when we wrote of 'extended pragmatic rationality'.

There are interesting and as yet unexplored links between decision-making styles and positions in fields. Ball et al's (2002) embedded choosers resembled the strategic decision-makers of Hancock and Bimrose et al, whilst contingent choosers resembled what Hancock calls restrictedly pragmatic and Bimrose et al. opportunistic. This suggests, in line with the Careership theory, that career styles relate to positions and fields as well as to dispositions, even for the most strategic.

For me, then, pragmatic rationality is not a decision-making style, but an important way of highlighting how career decisions are always made. The significance of retaining a view of pragmatic rationality as universal is that without it, career decision-making is too easily seen as a purely cognitive and individualistic process, bracketing off the positioned person and the field. This does not mean that all people make career decisions in the same ways, and we now need to add that there are significantly different styles of pragmatically rational decision-making.

So far, so good. Much of the original Careership thinking stands up well though it should now be enhanced and refined. However the final section of Careership, where we wrote about routines and turning points, now looks more problematic.

### **Rethinking routines and turning points**

It remains clear from subsequent research that career decision-making is an integral part of longitudinal career development processes. That is, a career decision is rarely an event. At the very least, there is build up to a decision and further evolution afterwards. However, it is now also clear that the attempt to

understand this through the linked concepts of routines and turning points, within the original Careership theorising, was confused. Research on UK Masters degree students showed that student experiences might resemble one type of routine at the time of one interview, and a different type of routine at the next interview, without any intervening turning point (Bowman et al., 2005). Based upon the Learning Lives data, it is clear that many people's lives contain significant periods of deep and significant personal change, which resemble Strauss's (1962) turning points (Hodkinson with Hodkinson et al., 2008). Putting these two empirical observations together, it makes no sense to talk of such turning points and intervening routines as occurring within a short 18 month timescale. Often, a turning point itself is longer than this.

My more recent research suggests that careers are progressively constructed by positioned people, as part of their participation in various career-related fields (Hodkinson et al., 2006; Hodkinson et al., 2008). This happens through actions, interactions and reactions, over time. This career construction may be partly planned and intentional: evaluative, strategic or aspirational, in Bimrose et al's (2008) terms. It is always embodied and social – more than just cognitive. It is partly and sometimes largely tacit. In this sense, career is very like other aspects of a person's life. Our on-going actions, reactions and interactions influence who we are, our positions, dispositions and identities. They also influence the fields in which we participate, and in turn our actions, reactions and interactions are influenced by those fields, and by the actions, reactions and interactions of others within those fields. These processes of personal and career construction can reinforce existing dispositions and career pathways, they can contribute towards changing those dispositions and career pathways, and they can sometimes do elements of both these things at the same time.

A central part of career construction is learning. Learning as I am using the term here is informal as well as formal, and is ubiquitous in people's lives (Hodkinson, Biesta and James, 2008). 'People simply cannot avoid learning' (Saljö, 2003, p315). Learning, like career decision-making, is an integral part of living, not a separate process that takes place in a separate context. When David chose to take a placement on a farm, this was a small part of a long-term process of constructing a farming career. This construction involved actions, including taking a part-time farming job whilst still at school, asking that same farmer to give him a placement, and the actions of that farmer in offering both the part-time job and the placement. The process of career construction and learning had begun well before David took up the placement, and continued long afterwards. Whilst on the placement, as well as learning the skills of farming and the theory of farming, David continued the process of learning to be a farm worker. His actions on the farm and at agricultural college all contributed to this reinforcing career and identity construction. A significant part of this was his further embedding within an agricultural community, at work, in college and at home.

Helen's eventually failed attempt to become a car body repairer can be similarly understood. Again, her career construction and learning had begun in childhood, working on cars with her father. It continued on the garage placement and in college courses. Once she was made redundant, she attempted to keep this career going, but failed, because of the nature of the field at that time. Once she had taken a job in a record shop, she gradually and largely unintentionally learned to think of herself a shop worker, and her actions, reactions and interactions worked as part of that field to progressively construct a new career as a shop worker.

When we compare these and numerous of other examples, it is clear that constructed and learned careers can take many different forms. It is also clear what we cannot understand this on-going process of career construction without fully integrating the other parts of Careership thinking – positions, dispositions and fields. This later work on learning as a central process within career construction led me to revisit Krumboltz's (1979) work on a social learning theory of career development. Even though I have belatedly accepted his focus on learning, I still find his theorising partly unsatisfactory. He saw the individual as separate from and interacting with other people and contexts, and learning through those interactive processes. There was a failure to understand the positioned nature of the individual, and that the person is an integral and influencing part of their fields. Also, Krumboltz's view of learning was predominantly cognitive, individual and disembodied, whilst I see learning as embodied and social. These problems led to a playing down of structural issues in Krumboltz's work. Apart from Krumboltz, it is Law (1996) who has consistently focussed on career learning. My more recent thinking is broadly consistent with his work, but with differences. Like Krumboltz, Law emphasises learning as an agentic process, and whilst not wrong,

underplays informal, tacit learning and learning's structural dimensions. This may be partly because he is concerned with how people can be helped to learn about career, whereas I see learning as an inherent and often tacit part of career construction and development.

When we examine lives over a long period, it is apparent that careers are often non-linear. Sometimes lives change dramatically and so can careers. One major study that showed this was Arthur et al. (1999). They examined the career life histories of 50 adults, and found many people had gone through significant career changes, sometimes more than once. The Learning Lives data tells a similar story (Hodkinson, with Hodkinson et al., 2008). Whilst all this work combines to undermine the folk theory of career progression, the ways in interpreting these career changes vary. Arthur et al. (1999) combine two ideas. The first is an argument that career is essentially developmental, related to the well-known work by Super (1980, 1990). The second is that they are evidencing a new social phenomenon of post-modern times, the boundaryless career (see also Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Littleton et al., 2000). I find both arguments unconvincing. The developmental argument breaks down when Super (1980, 1990) and Arthur et al (1999) argue that though development is a series of stages, those stages can occur in a different order for different people, depending upon circumstances. As soon as they do that the central value of development as an idea is undermined. What they are left with, it seems to me, is the truth that, at any one time our career is influenced by our past lives, in ways that enable and constrain future career actions. Rather, it is an inherent part of thinking about career and an on-going process of construction and learning. Furthermore, career development theorising still retains what Strauss (1962) termed the ladder metaphor of career. It is just that they now see many interconnected ladders, rather than just one. This metaphor still does not capture 'the open-ended, tentative, exploratory, hypothetical, problematical, devious, changeable, and only partly unified character of human courses of action' (Strauss, 1962, p.65). Strauss's (1962) notion of occasional major turning points further captures the non-linear nature of many careers.

Arthur et al. (1999) use boundaryless careers to explain the non-linear nature of career. This is unsatisfactory. I have made clear that career is influenced by historical position. Patterns of career now are different in some respects from those in the past. However, there is an empirical problem with the way in which Arthur et al write about boundaryless careers, which they see as a new post-modern phenomenon. Even within their own data there are people going through significant career changes decades ago, and the Learning Lives data shows the same (Hodkinson with Hodkinson et al., 2008). Put differently, there is data which shows that occasional significant career changes, turning points, were important in people's lives before so-called post-modernity. Now, as earlier, there are also individual careers that remain largely unchanged for long periods of time. Then as now, changes could be dramatic for some people. Strauss (1962) was writing about the unpredictability and changeability of individual careers in the 1950s. Turning points, therefore, are not a recent post-modern phenomenon. There may well be more turning points in a historical period when change is increasingly rapid, but the post-modern case is highly exaggerated. Consequently, boundaryless careers cannot account for all the substantial non-linear changes in people's careers. A further problem with the term 'boundaryless' is the implication that there can be careers with no boundaries. This conceals the on-going significance of horizons for action: of position and social structure. It may be true that many people face wider and less obvious career choices than in the past (Giddens, 1991), but those choices are always bounded. Thus, for constructing a valuable career theory, both developmentalism and boundaryless careers are unnecessary complications that are seriously misleading.

### **Implications for research, practice and policy**

I have showed that a modified and extended version of Careership is a way of understanding career that is supported by an increasingly large and diverse body of empirical evidence. It is now time to address my second question for the evaluation of a theory as a way of thinking – is it of use? This will always be a judgement made by those who read the theory, not by those who write it. All I can do is outline some of the ways in which Careership might help us in three contexts: research, practice and policy.

#### *Research*

The main value of Careership for research may be in warning about the dangers of leaving important aspects of career out of an investigation. Thus, if we only look at the person making a career or career decision and do not examine the fields where that career is developing, we risk distortions and misunderstandings. Similarly, if all we examine are the external conditions where careers are constructed but ignore individuals, the opposite happens. If we investigate career decision-making as a fixed time snapshot rather than as a longitudinal process, it is too easy to focus on a career decision as an isolated event. Even if we adopt a longitudinal perspective but only look backwards at what went on before an eventual decision, we may miss the fact that career construction continues after a choice has been made.

We have to simplify reality to research it, and all research has to decide what it can do and what it will leave out. The key is to be aware of the significance of what lies beyond the direct scope of any methodology adopted. If all we do is life histories with 20 adults, aged between 50 and 60, it is important to remember: that career does not finish for many people until well into old age (Ford, 2005; Hodkinson et al., 2008) so that there is always a future to career as well as a past; that these people are part of one generation and may share other positional characteristics which influence their careers; that people restore the past in the light of the present, which may lead some people to tell more coherent, rational narratives of their career than they experienced as that career was actually progressing; and that other actors may have had a significant influence on a career that is not always recognised by the person telling us their story. Careership theory can help those researching careers to be more aware of the significance what may be bracketed off in this way.

The theory also suggests some valuable approaches to researching careers and to interpreting the data that is collected. Detailed, longitudinal case studies help reveal career complexity, as do studies which examine significant others in relation to an individual whose career is researched, and/or the nature of the fields in which that career has developed. In analysing data, the Careership theory points to important things to look for, some of which may not be obvious on first reading the data. For example, people rarely talk explicitly about social class, ethnicity or gender, but data can and should be examined for evidence of such structural and positional factors.

### *Practice*

Theory as a way of thinking can never tell practitioners what to do. Guidance practice is complex and there are few universally applicable guides. However, in the current folk-theory dominated policy context, there is one exception to this lack of universal rules. Career guidance works best when the guidance practitioner builds from the perspective of the client. This is a central principle in much of the guidance field. What Careership can do is help remind practitioners why this matters. Any guidance intervention that lies too far beyond the horizons for action of the client will be dismissed. Avoiding this pitfall requires accurate and relevant knowledge of the fields (current and aimed for) but also the ability to fit within the dispositional aspects of a person's horizons, including any embedded career styles. Attempts, for example, to impose government-determined objectives will fail if they do not square up with those client dispositions, as will attempts to impose ways of making career decisions that a client is unwilling or even unable to adopt. Telling some truths about the occupational field may fail if the client is unable to accept them. This does not mean that guidance should always accept the status quo, or that guidance cannot help people change.

If Careership cannot show a practitioner how to conduct a guidance session, the theory can help us think of the role of guidance in currently unconventional ways. For example, we can see guidance as a valuable means of enhancing career-related learning and career construction. It can help people learn more about themselves, about their occupational fields they can consider, and about the processes of job entry and progression. This sort of learning can help people change their horizons for action, by helping them modify their dispositions and positions, and to know the field better. Part of this may well involve changing self-knowledge, for example through a process of narrative construction. Career guidance can also help clients become more agentic. One of many shared findings between some of my research and that of Arthur et al. (1999) is that those people who currently see their careers as personally successful and valuable are more likely to have been proactive in developing those careers. Alheit (1994) similarly shows how unemployed young Germans who actively worked for a job were both happier and more successful than those who were more passive. Interestingly, in his study it was the young women who were more proactive than the young men, reminding us once again, that agency is positioned and structured. Bimrose et al. (2008) reinforce the

value of proactivity of two types, pointing out that people using more evaluative or strategic career styles are also more likely to be successful, in their own terms. The Learning Lives research showed that personal narrative construction can make agency more or less likely. In any given situation, narratives of hopelessness and passivity narrow the horizons for action in ways that significantly reduce agency, whilst narratives of realistic hope and proactivity can have the opposite effect. Thus, though we must continually recognise external inequalities in a person's horizons for action, guidance can help some clients learn to become more agentic.

Guidance can be legitimately concerned with career reinforcement, rather than change. Whether there has been a significant change in a client's dispositions and horizons for action or not, career guidance can help a client operate more effectively in the chosen occupational field. It can help people develop and improve their strategies and actions, by helping them learn more about selection processes and c.v. enhancement, for example. Guidance can help people avoid strategic mistakes, like not studying sciences at A-level whilst wanting to be a doctor.

Much of this fits quite closely with much traditional good guidance practice. Careership does not suggest radically new ways of working. Rather, it reinforces some key guidance approaches and gives a coherent explanation as to why they are important. This matters because these traditional approaches have been frequently under threat from folk-theory driven policy and management.

Careership also points to limitations of the impact of guidance. This is because no matter how well guidance is done there will be numerous other factors and forces involved in career construction that exert greater influence. The research and the Careership theory suggest that guidance will be more effective when working with the grain – working in synergy with some other significant influences on a particular client's career. The ability of a guidance practitioner to pull off such synergy depends partly upon the horizons for action of a particular client, but also upon the ability of that adviser to pick up as much as s/he can about the client's positions and dispositions early in a careers interview, and to build upon them. As someone who has never worked as a guidance professional, I find this skill breathtakingly impressive. Even so, there will be occasions when things fail, no matter how well the guidance is done. Good guidance practice should be informed about its limitations as well as about its potential, not least to minimise the stresses and pressures of unrealistic expectations.

### *Policy*

Given the directions of British, European and international policies towards career guidance (OECD, 2004), the Careership theory has three uses. The first is to show that the folk theory and many of the policy assumptions associated with it is plain wrong. The second is that Careership can help explain why it is wrong, and help identify some of the problems inherent in its continued dominance. The third is to provide thinking upon which better guidance policy approaches could be partially based.

Much of what is wrong about the folk theory has already been examined, but further points must be made. As the empirical evidence shows and Careership explains, there is no single good or correct way to make a career decision, and whether or not a career decision is a good one is always a matter of value judgement, which can only be made with hindsight – once we know how the subsequent career developed. Furthermore, as guidance is more likely to succeed when in synergy with other forces and influences, so the more successful guidance is the more invisible it becomes. When we add that careers may fail despite the very best guidance inputs, it is clear that guidance provision cannot be judged, as the folk theory suggests, against degrees of educational and employment success. Beyond this I have already explained how and why Careership theory shows that the folk theory is wrong. Here I will summarise some key elements. The first is the sheer complexity and partial uncertainty of career decision-making and career progression. Secondly, career decision making is positioned, social and embodied, influenced by horizons for action which are both subjective and objective. Decision-making is neither a technical logical process, nor simply a matter of getting and processing accurate information. Thirdly, guidance only works when it adapts to the positions and dispositions of the client, not that of a policy maker. Fourthly, career decision making and career progression are much more than individually driven processes, always involving other people, other agencies and organisations, and social and economic inequalities. Fifthly, both people and fields change over time, in partly unpredictable ways, so that career decision-making is not a process of matching person

to situation. Careership thinking, backed up by empirical data, shows that setting frameworks, targets and funding for guidance provision as if the folk theory is correct is the equivalent of asking chemists to turn base metal into gold.

No research, no matter how good, can tell us what a guidance policy should be. Researchers are not experts in policy construction or policy implementation, which are as complex as are careers. Consequently, I will restrict myself to four principles.

1). Career guidance can play a valuable role in many people's lives, helping them take more control over their own futures. This may result in more productive employment, but increasing employment should not be the major rationale for such provision.

2). Career guidance entails intervention into horizons for action - recognising and responding to partly tacit dispositions in relation to accurate and detailed understanding of the labour market and relevant occupational fields. This is high skilled professional work and requires professional conditions of service including initial and in service education and training.

3). Attempting to manage career guidance through performance outcomes will distort and often damage practice. Effective policy needs non-outcome based ways of helping guidance providers maximise the chances of high quality provision within their services. Inspection of facilities and procedures is one way to provide accountability, but this will only work if the inspections and inspectors fully understand careers and what guidance can do. If inspections are based upon the folk theory, they will do damage.

4). No politician can be expected to understand career decision making, career development or guidance. That understanding must come from a dedicated stable group of civil servants, and/or from a powerful professional body representing the whole guidance community, not just specialised bits of it. Unfortunately, in the current English context, both of these things look extremely difficult to achieve.

## **Conclusion**

The prime purpose of this lecture was to update the original Careership theory, and I have done that to the best of my ability. My second purpose was to discuss the nature and significance of theory in the career guidance field. I have argued that career theories are ways of thinking, which can be judged by their congruence with actual career decision-making and development and by their utility. I have shown that this modified version of Careership presents a valuable way of thinking about career, which better fits what research tells us than do many other currently extant theories. Some of these theories are largely wrong, whilst others are too partial and consequently unintentionally misleading. I finished by giving some pointers to the uses of Careership in informing research, practice and policy.

Careership and the research that underpins it show that traditional approaches to person-centred guidance provision remain fundamentally sound, even though it also suggests value in adopting a more relational and positioned approach to thinking about career and guidance. The research data also show that guidance has made significant contributions in some people's lives, and show far more numerous points in the lives of others where guidance could have been of value. Career guidance works, despite the fact that many policies that are supposed to support it blatantly do not. Keep up the good work, and don't let the bastards grid you down!

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## Endnote

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