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Understanding career decision-making and progression:  
Careership revisited

**Phil Hodgkinson**

**John Killeen Memorial Lecture**

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Dedicated to

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# Career Theories

Two types of theory in social science:

- Theory as tools for thinking
- Theory as a set of statements telling us something new, which can be proved or disproved empirically (Mouzelis, 1995)



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# Folk Theory of Career

- Career decisions entail matching person with job
- Career decisions are/should be cognitive & rational
- Career decision-making is a process culminating in an event (the decision)
- Career decisions made by person following the career
- Good career decisions reduce educational drop out & increase employment
- Career decisions made at start of linear career
- Career progression is straightforward after a good decision



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# How to choose theories

A good career theory should:

- be congruent with the ways
  - career decisions are/could be made
  - careers are/could develop
- provide understanding that can valuably inform research, policy & practice

Common faults:

- the theory is wrong
- the theory is partial & misleading - inadequate



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## An Example

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



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## Careership constructed

- Study of Training Credits pilot, in early 1990s
- 2 major failures of folk theory
  - Actual career decision-making not rational in ways assumed
  - Career progression often non-linear & strongly influenced by actions, events & circumstances beyond the control of the young person



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# Existing Career Theories

- Matching was wrong
- Personal theories neglected
  - Social structures
  - Actions of others
  - Unequal power relations
- Roberts' work neglected individuals
- Both partly right but contradictory



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# Careership

Three completely overlapping dimensions to career decision-making & progression

- The positioned person's dispositions (habitus)
- Interactions in the field(s)
- Longitudinal progression, seen as turning points with interspersed routines



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## Horizons for Action

- Career actions possible within horizons, not possible outside them
- Horizons are
  - internal & subjective (dispositions)
  - external & objective (e.g. labour market)
- Horizons determined by interrelationships between both
  - Most career theories focus on external horizons
- Horizons can change when:
  - Position, dispositions and/or field changes



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# Career Fields

- An employment field functions as unequal relations of force, between, e.g.
  - Employers & education providers
  - Students &/or workers
  - Labour markets & production relations
  - Social structure (class, gender, ethnicity, age)
  - National & international policies & economic relations
- Any participant influences a field
- Influences are unequal, affected by
  - Position
  - Resources (economic, social & cultural capital)



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# Pragmatically rational career decision-making

Career decision-making is

- Embodied (social, physical, practical, emotional, affective as well as cognitive)
- Partly tacit
- Based on partial information
- Not completely irrational
- Made through unequal interactions in the field

Directly contradicts folk theory & not fully recognized in published career theories



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# Routines & Turning Points

- Careers often non-linear
- Strauss (1962) identified turning points
- I now think that we wrongly
  - Identified turning points within a very short (18 month) career period
  - Classified both turning points & routines into types
  - Saw types of routine as separated by turning points



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# More Recent Research

- 6 research projects informed by careership
  - Ball, Maguire & Macrae - young people in London
  - Ball, David, Davies & Reay - HE choices
  - Hancock - male returners to education
  - Bloomer & Hodkinson - FE students
  - Bowman, Colley & Hodkinson - fulltime Masters students
  - Hodkinson, Hodkinson, Ford & Hawthorn (with others) - learning lives of adults
- Total sample of over 300
  - all social classes, different ethnic origins, different parts of Britain, differing ages, different periods of time.
  - school to training, work, FE & HE; HE or work into Masters; FE & HE to work; one job to another; work to retirement.



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# Careership Confirmed

- Much of Careership thinking congruent with career decision-making & progression
  - Horizons for action; fields; need to integrate personal & situated views of career
- Areas of refinement
  - Position
  - Career styles
- Area of disagreement
  - Pragmatic rationality
- Area of change
  - Understanding longitudinal dimension of careers



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# Positions

- Originally focused on two types of position
  - Position in social structures
  - Position in fields
- Both important, but now need to add:
  - Geographical positions
  - Historical positions
  - Generational positions
- All positions are both subjective & objective



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# Pragmatic Rationality

- Seen as one decision-making style amongst others
  - Over-focuses on degree of rationality
  - Ignores more important characteristics
- No-one is
  - Entirely cognitively rational (not embodied & social)
  - Entirely discursive (non-tacit)
  - Making decisions entirely independently
- All career decision-making is pragmatically rational
- This does not mean that all people make career decisions in identical ways



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# Styles of Decision-Making

- Different styles of decision-making identified by Hancock (2006) &
- Bimrose et al. (2008)
  - Evaluative careerists
  - Strategic careerists
  - Aspirational careerists
  - Opportunistic careerists
  - All are deeply embedded in the person's dispositions
- All are pragmatically rational, as defined here



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# Understanding Careers Longitudinally

- Careers are progressively constructed by positioned people, as part of their participation in career-related fields
  - Happens through actions, interactions & reactions, over time
- Career construction is
  - enabled and constrained by horizons for action
  - neither teleological nor deterministic
- Careers evolve, develop and/or transform over time, influenced by what went before



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# Learning

- Learning is a major process within career construction
- Such learning
  - Is embodied, social & positioned
  - Is partly tacit
  - Can be intentional and/or reactive
- Learning can reinforce existing dispositions and career and/or contribute to change



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# Turning Points

- Arthur et al (1999) explain non-linear careers:
  - Developmentalism, following Super
  - Boundaryless careers in post-modern times
- Developmentalism
  - does not work when ‘stages’ can occur in any order: overcomplicated, at best
  - Retains Strauss’s ladder metaphor- 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)



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# Implications for Research

- Careership theory
  - Alerts researchers to the significance what may be bracketed off
  - Points to the value of detailed research that examines
    - Complexity
    - Longitudinal processes
    - The person in relation to fields



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# Implications for Practice

- Guidance works when it adopts perspective of the client
- Traditional person-centred guidance works
  - Can be helpfully understood as enhancing learning
  - Can sometimes result in greater agency
  - Is legitimately concerned with reinforcement as well as change
- Guidance is limited in its impact



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# Implications for Policy (1)

- no single, correct way to make a career decision
- whether a career decision is 'good' is a value judgement made with hindsight
- guidance more likely to succeed when in synergy with other forces, so the more successful guidance is the more invisible it becomes
- careers may 'fail' despite the best guidance
- guidance provision cannot be judged against educational & employment success



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## Implications for Policy (2)

The folk theory of career is wrong because:

- Careers are complex & partly uncertain
- Career decision-making is neither a technical logical process, nor simply a matter of getting & processing accurate information
- Career entails much more than individually driven processes
- People and fields change over time, in partly unpredictable ways



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# Principles for Policy Makers

- 1). Career guidance can help many people take more control over their own futures.
- 2). Career guidance is high skilled professional work requiring professional conditions of service.
- 3). Attempting to manage career guidance through performance outcomes will distort & damage practice.
- 4). Understanding career to underpin policy can come from
  - either a dedicated stable group of civil servants
  - and/or from a powerful professional body representing the whole guidance community.
  - This understanding should be informed by good research and appropriate career theory.



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# Conclusion

- In this lecture I have:
  - Examined the nature of career theories & suggested how they may be evaluated
  - Updated the Careership theory
  - Given some pointers its uses in informing research, practice and policy.
- Career guidance works, despite the fact that policies supposed to support it do not.