

Cultural Capital and Young People's Career Progression Part I: Daniel Johnson and Tamsin Roorke

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Introduction

Underpinning much contemporary UK policy are assumptions that career progression should normally form a linear pathway where good education and good guidance will result in successful adult lives. But the careers of young people often do not fit such assumptions. Instability, pragmatic rationality (Hodgkinson *et al.*, 1996) and unpredictability are commonplace, and career progression is intricately bound up with a wider life experiences. One way of understanding some of the less visible processes at work is through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital.

In two linked articles, we draw upon data from a four-year longitudinal research study which commenced in 1995 and was funded by the then Further Education Development Agency (Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1997, 1999, 2000; Hodgkinson & Bloomer, 2001). The focus was upon young people's experiences of their learning within three further education colleges in different parts of England. Data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 50 young people in their final year of compulsory schooling and on a further five or six occasions at six- to twelve-monthly intervals. Here we present the stories of two of them. In part 2, we show how cultural capital can help explain the similarities and differences between these stories and draw out some implications for the role of guidance.

Daniel Johnson

Daniel came from an educated, professional, middle class family and, until the age of 13, had attended a fee-paying private school.

Then ... our whole family went over to Australia for a year. And I went to school for a year there and I saw a different world, ... I saw there was something bigger than my little school. And then I went back to this private school and it was like, "Oh no, I can't cope with this. It's so small and narrow-minded." So I said, "I want out."

Throughout our research, Daniel described close family ties and the strong support of his parents: "they're always there and they always support me; they're always bailing me out." In a discussion about how his schooling might have

prepared him for life, Daniel insisted, "No! I think that probably most of that has come from the family and friends." Elsewhere he spoke with confidence about finding his way and discovering himself. He was an avid reader, for reasons he again linked to his parents. "I think quite a lot of that has got to do with parents and how much they encourage it or how much they read themselves."

On his return from Australia, Daniel transferred to a state school. He was starting to develop a keen interest in writing and music, particularly rock and roll. His views on learning set him apart from many of his peers:

[I'm more concerned with] what I'm learning now and how it's going to affect me in life than how it's going to affect me in two hours of GCSEs because I don't approve of them: examinations.

Six months later, Daniel had deepened his interest in music and was seeking opportunities to perform in public. He opted to study A-levels in English, theatre studies and sociology. The reasons he offered for continuing his studies were intrinsic.

I think being alive is all about taking in as much as you can and trying to make some sense of everything, and trying to play around getting some order. So I think that you should take influence from everything, good or bad. You should look at something and you should try and take something from it. ... I don't know that you can ever stop learning. Or you shouldn't, y'know?

Daniel regarded his English teacher as excellent and had taken a keen interest in poetry. He thought theatre studies involved too much writing and critique and too little practical creativity while sociology was problematic:

At the moment, I've written [sociology] off. But that's not to say that I'm totally shutting out the possibilities that it could interest me. ... At the start we had a choice of the different parts of sociology that we could do ... I wanted to do power and politics, and they chose the family - which is what we're doing at the moment - and I'm just finding that so tedious. ... Every time I voted for something, I was the only person voting for it.

Daniel's emerging identity as a musician was beginning to impact strongly upon his learning. "Music is ... the major focal point of my life. That's what I live for. But, as with everything else, my focus in what I'm appreciating in music has changed." His enthusiasm for poetry stemmed from the fact that it helped his song writing; his quest for more

practical creativity in theatre studies had arisen because of his need for help with his public performance and presentation of music; while his interest in politics in sociology related to the protest music he was seeking to create at that time. Daniel's emerging identity found expression in other ways: he donned an army surplus trench coat, began to roll his own cigarettes, had his ear pierced and his head shaved.

While he could see some tangible benefits from his studies for his hoped for musical career, Daniel's approach to studying, which included largely ignoring course work and essays, was causing problems.

The way I'm learning it is that I won't be able to do the exam and get a good grade. . . . It's making the rest of my time at college seem pointless. . . . I'm thinking now, at this point, "I'd like to quit college." After having done a year and a half of it, I feel that if I stayed on to do the exams I wouldn't be able to do what I'd learnt justice.

Throughout all of our interviews, Daniel displayed a confidence in his own capabilities that was seldom visible in his peers, even those who enjoyed demonstrable success in their formal education. Moreover, compared with others, he seldom displayed a great concern for utilitarian matters, including plans for a future career. The account he offered in his final year of schooling, for instance, carried little conviction: "Essentially, I'd like to do something with music. . . . I'm looking for being a prison psychiatrist if I can't make it anywhere else."

It was something of a surprise when, in the autumn of the second year of his A-levels, Daniel announced,

I've also got an idea for an occupation sort of lined up. . . . I was thinking of doing a course in undertaking and funeral directing and if I quit college now I could start doing that course in January. . . . If there's one thing that's always stuck in my head it was how people seemed to be losing their jobs all the time in the news. And my dad was always fussing about his job and I thought, 'what about a job with really good job security?' . . . Not many people . . . can actually come to terms with seeing a dead body and putting it in a coffin and dealing with it. And since I've been along and had some work experience at a funeral director's, I know I can cope with it.

Despite the fact that Daniel claimed that it had always been "stuck in his head", this was the first occasion that we had heard him express any interest in security and the reason he should have done so at this stage in his career is intriguing. His exposure to funeral directing was the result of a work experience. There is an element of happenstance here, arising from the fact that Daniel had been assigned there rather than somewhere else. He was also buoyed by his parents' understanding and practical support: "because my parents have been putting money aside for my university

and since I'm not going to that, they're going to spend that on the course [in funeral directing]." It is also likely that the realisation that he would not get a good grade in his A-level examinations, coupled with his growing awareness of the instability of labour markets, created the conditions under which his interest in funeral directing assumed importance. He was seriously contemplating abandoning his A-level studies to enrol on the specialist course in funeral directing. In the event, he decided to continue his A-level studies and planned to seek admission to the School of Funeral Directing and Embalming the following year.

Three events were significant in this decision. First, he visited the USA to see his sister:

I saw this girl who had no money, no amazing job and no amazing future career prospects but she was really happy, you know. Everything was sorted in her life and I came back and I started thinking, you know, 'Shit! I want to be like that.'

Then there was the start of a new relationship:

I got a kind of renewed interest for it [A-level study] when I came back from America because I got a new girl friend who was in one of my groups and she kicked my arse in gear and made me work. And I started working and enjoying it, basically, because she was giving me a kick up the arse, which is what I need to do work.

Thirdly, the School of Funeral Directing and Embalming opened a September-entry course, enabling Daniel to progress directly there after completing his A-levels.

So Daniel continued with his A-level studies. If any of these three events had not occurred, he might have made a different decision. This judgment was reinforced when, after two further months, he broke up with his girlfriend.

But when that relationship finished, that kick up the arse went and I was right back to doing fuck all again and it was the wrong time of the year to be doing that.

He left college and obtained a full-time job in a hamburger bar.

Suddenly, I kind of thought, 'Oh shit, I'm 17 and I don't have a clue what I want to do. Maybe I don't want to do funeral directing.'

Three months after withdrawing from his A-level course, it was difficult to discern any clear aspirations. "What I'd like to do is, if ever I got into a position where I had a lot of money, I'd like to start up a business and just be in charge of it business-wise." Six months later he said:

I still have no idea where I'm going. Still the only thing that remains constant with me is music, and that's all I

want to do. All the rest is just, 'Balls to it! Give me the money in my pocket so I can go out drinking or whatever.'

Two years later, there were changes in Daniel's aspirations. He talked about his work in the kitchen of a pub, as "a sort of trainee assistant":

I do really love this job. It's such a good chance to have responsibility.

So life is good?

It's on the up in terms of I've got a career. If I stay with it and work hard and I don't drink all my money away ... then I've got a career and I can make a good go of it. . . I love working in kitchens because I've spent most of my time working in kitchens in most of my jobs. . . . Now that I've got the basis of a career, I can certainly better achieve the whole thing of getting married because no one's really going to want to marry you if you've got zero prospects, as I had this time last year.

He had also now positioned "getting married" at the focal point of his life.

I don't think I'll ever be content until I retire and only then providing I've retired with a wife. Sounds silly but one of my major goals is to be married and have kids and in fact that would probably be as equally a perfect ending to my life as becoming famous from music. I couldn't say which one of those. I'd like to have both but if I had one and not the other, it would do.

Tamsin Rooke

While Tamsin's family gave her encouragement to pursue her studies and celebrated her successes, they were not able to offer much practical support. Through most of our research Tamsin lived with her grandmother, as that was the only arrangement that would enable her to have a bed of her own. She also suffered from myopia, for which she was prescribed thick-lensed spectacles. However, as her tutor reported, "she rarely wore her glasses initially, or her glasses were always broken and she couldn't afford to have them replaced." Her mother and three younger brothers and sister were regularly unemployed. The family had no prior experience of education beyond the age of 16 or of any substantial educational success.

I sort of looked at my family and a lot of them are on the dole or doing jobs they don't really want to do. ... It's just like, I come from a working class family and my mum didn't really work, hasn't got any qualifications, so I just want to do better y'know. ... It's like my brother and sister are both expecting children: my sister could be dropping [giving birth] any day now and my brother's child will be born in April and they're both younger than me. ... My sister, she didn't want a family at all.

She wanted to get into the RAF or whatever, fighter pilot, whatever. And my brother, I don't know: football or something. ... My sister's goals have completely gone out of the window, which I think is such a shame.

Having left school with low GCSE grades, Tamsin's options were limited. She was determined to work with children and enrolled on a pre-nursing course. She soon learned that while there were a number of opportunities open to graduates of the pre-nursing course, these did not include access to nursing.

So I thought, 'Oh yeah, it's to do with nursing.' ... There's about ten of us that thought, 'Yeah! Y'know, they're gonna go straight to nursing after', which you can't. You need two A-levels or whatever after it so a lot of people were quite gutted.

Tamsin resolved to continue her studies to the highest level possible in order to work with children. She passed her pre-nursing course, and began a BTEC National Diploma in nursery nursing. "I thought, 'if I'm still going to do nursing, I'll do it with children.'" However, even before she commenced the course, she had formed the view that she would probably not excel.

I'm going to get a 'Pass'. I'm one of the worst in the group. ... I'm never going to be top of the class. I know that. I'm always going to be an average person and I realise that now. I'm not trying to go higher than I can but I'm pushing myself gradually, not expecting it to be brilliant altogether.

This resolve to succeed was expressed repeatedly in successive interviews, but was severely tested under the pressures of the course.

Like yesterday, two people cried! One girl was stressed out about her assignments and the other girl was like, "Why am I here?" All upset.

Have you ever felt like that?

Yeah, definitely! Sunday, I was going to leave again. All these problems and I think, "Right! I'm going to leave." But I never do.

You've never mentioned this to me before. Can you tell me how it came about?

What it is, is just being a student. I want some money, you know. I hate doing the assignments, I really do. And I want - it sounds really stupid - but I've always wanted to work with monkeys. But, 'cos people take the mickey, so I never did it. And then I had a careers interview about three weeks ago and we talked about it and he said that he could get me an NVQ level two at a wildlife park and I'm still waiting to hear from that.

As in Daniel's case, there was no single factor pushing Tamsin to drop out. She endured financial hardship and her achievements on the course were relatively modest but

these were not the causes of her impending withdrawal, they were the conditions under which she contemplated it. The possible opportunity to work with monkeys prompted her to reconsider her commitment to the BTEC course and to working with children.

Three days later, after reflecting on her family's circumstances, and still not having heard from the careers officer, Tamsin reassessed her situation again.

Like, on Sunday, I was thinking I was going to leave. But then you talk to yourself and it was like, 'What am I going to do if I leave?' I sort of looked at my family and a lot of them are on the dole or doing jobs they don't really want to do but they had to do it because of the money.

Tamsin did well in her work placements, but struggled in her assessed assignments. Her tutor encouraged her to accept that "some people do better at theory but you are much better with the practical . . . and you might not get any higher."

But I didn't want to be just a Pass. So you just, I don't know. After you have the talk, a couple of us had the talk, and some people just stay as Pass. And . . . I thought, 'I'll show you.'

As we have noted, Tamsin earlier remarked that she hated assignments. When we enquired further about this, it became apparent that she quite liked the assignment-based approach to learning but that assignments consumed valuable time, which she wanted for her expanding social life. In these circumstances, her college work suffered. Once she had resolved to "show them", she had either to cut down on her social commitments or soften her resolve to succeed. The friends with whom she was socialising were members of her course, and were experiencing similar problems. By the second term, several had left. Most of the students who continued did so knowing that work had to be balanced with their social lives, if they were to complete the course satisfactorily. Situations like this encouraged others in our sample to leave, as in Daniel's case. But Tamsin signed up to the limited social life of her remaining classmates.

My social life was too important for me then . . . but now I don't care, I think, because a lot of my friends don't go out a great deal now because they're concentrating on their course.

Soon after this there were significant changes in Tamsin's aspirations, and assessment of her potential.

I'm not going to get . . . the Distinction but I could get that Merit if I try really hard. . . . In the first year, all I got was Pass, Pass, and now . . . I've had two Merits and a Distinction and if I can keep that going then I may get to get a Merit. . . . Yeah, I can see myself going on in a

year or so, go on to University . . . but then if I do go to University then I'll have to still keep pushing myself.

Tamsin's end-of-course results were better than predicted: "I got two or three Distinctions and about five Passes and the rest were Merits, about seven Merits. So I did actually much better than I ever imagined I would."

Before she completed her BTEC course, Tamsin had taken a part-time job in a fast-food restaurant, Burger Bar, and, once she left college, this employment became full-time. She decided to have a "year out", working at Burger Bar to save money for university.

I think it's awful. If money was no problem I would have liked to have thought that I'd have been able to be at university by now but it's terrible, it really is. Loads of my friends would like to go to university but they know they're never ever going to be able to afford it . . . because of this grant thing that people have to pay now.

This decision coincided with the replacement of the university maintenance grant system with an expanded loan provision, and the requirement for a student contribution of £1,000 towards fees. Tamsin seemed unaware that this charge was means tested, and that she would almost certainly not have had to pay. However, the wages from Burger Bar did not stretch very far:

There's no saving whatsoever, the last five days. I get paid fortnightly and the last five days I've had no food. At the moment, Hovis bread and butter and I have some milk. It's hard paying all the bills but once we've settled in here then hopefully it will work out again, but I don't know.

Initially, Burger Bar was the means to an end. She was looking forward to a brighter future, "Not something like I'm doing at the moment where I hate it." However, six months after leaving college, she described her aspirations as follows: "Money, having a nice place to live, becoming higher at work [in Burger Bar] because that brings responsibility and I do like responsibility." She had set her sights on becoming a floor manager, which would provide her with an increase in pay and the responsibility that she sought. Higher education was still an ambition even though the planned 'year out' would probably turn into two. Later, Tamsin's university ambitions became further displaced.

Do you think that's something you might still go back and do?

Go to University? Yes, I really want to do it.

How far into the future might you be ready to do that?

I would say not for at least another four, five years. . . . There's just no way I can afford it at the moment and when I do go it's going to have to be somewhere . . . like a bus journey away or whatever.

Tamsin achieved promotion from floor manager to shift runner. There were further changes. Her attentions had turned to homemaking:

My friend, she'll go out and most of her money goes on going out to the pub and buying clothes while mine is, I bought plates this week. I only had, like, £20 left for that whole two weeks and I've already spent my money on plates.

Tamsin and her boyfriend were planning to set up home together. More subtle were those changes which Tamsin is best able to describe herself:

I'm not so ambitious now.

Why's that do you think?

Because I've had too many fallbacks. Know what I mean? All my friends, like my friend Jo, she's at University, she's in her first year and she says she admires me because I'm very, like, she says, "Well, what are you going to do?" and I'm saying, "Well, I'll just go for whatever, where ever my path takes me."

Some people feel comfortable with a plan or reassured by it.

Exactly. I haven't got that at all. I only look for the next, I don't know, six months or whatever.

In part 2, we go on to explore the ways in which the concept of cultural capital can help make sense of these stories.

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Note

Phil Hodkinson is a NICEC Associate.

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