

Cultural Capital and Young People's Career Progression Part 2: Making Sense of the Stories

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Introduction

This paper is the second of two, exploring the significance of cultural capital in the career development of young people. In Part 1 we presented the stories of two young people, whom we called Daniel Johnson and Tamsin Rooke. In this paper we examine the use of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as a means of explaining the similarities and differences between their stories. We conclude with a brief discussion of implications for guidance.

Dispositions to learning

As Daniel's and Tamsin's careers developed, each of them made sense of their changing situations through their own developing dispositions towards learning, education, social life, family, career and work. According to Bourdieu, such dispositions make up what he termed a person's habitus, are largely tacitly held, and strongly influence actions in any situation – familiar or novel. The habitus is influenced by who the person is and where in society they are positioned, as well as by their interactions with others, in what Bourdieu terms a field, such as the field of further education and the youth labour market. Habitus is ingrained and fairly stable, but not unchanging:

The habitus is a product of conditionings which tends to reproduce the objective logic of those conditionings while transforming it. It's a kind of transforming machine that leads us to 'reproduce' the social conditions of our own production, but in a relatively unpredictable way, in such a way that one cannot move simply or mechanically from knowledge of the conditions of production to knowledge of the products (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 87).

Many of the young people in our research changed in their learning and career dispositions or activities over the four-year period of the project, as in Tamsin's case. Such changes were often unpredictable although they could usually be understood with hindsight. Yet often, as with Tamsin, not everything about a person's dispositions altered, and very few, if any, broke free of the patterns of educational and employment progression predicted for the broad social categories of gender and class to which they belonged. For Daniel and Tamsin, identity and habitus were significant forces in the transformation of their learning careers and were themselves partly transformed in that same process. Daniel's commitment to music and Tamsin's to working with children were the cornerstones of their identities for

much of the time we knew them. Tamsin's career was marked, initially, by a slow but steady growth in confidence in her own capabilities to the point where she contemplated progression to university. However, the reality of having to provide for herself once her BTEC course had finished, meant that the need for domestic security and the Burger Bar opportunity structures assumed greater importance. Her identity had been further transformed in this process, despite the fact that she maintained some of her aspirations for university. Her identity as a prospective nurse, child carer and social worker was modified as she climbed the Burger Bar career ladder. Daniel's career shifted from a musician who loved being in college to learn, to a musician who did not want to stay in a college focussed upon examination success, to a musician who lived by doing a series of low-skilled jobs. Towards the end of our fieldwork, he was changing again, into someone with a possible catering career, who wanted a family, but still enjoyed his music. So what is cultural capital, and how does this help explain these evolving careers?

Cultural capital

Olneck (2000, p. 319) describes three forms of cultural capital:

First, cultural capital is embodied in styles and manners and in modes of bearing, interaction and expression. It is also embodied in cultural preferences and affinities, in apparently intuitive responses to valued distinctions and institutional expectations, and in ease and facility in valued ways of knowing and reasoning and with valued schemes of appreciation and understanding. Finally, it is embodied in the command of valued cultural knowledge.

Most commonly, cultural capital has been used to distinguish between social groups and the advantages and disadvantages that accrue to them through their possession or lack of possession of it. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that there is a strong relationship between the possession of cultural capital and the capacity to invest it profitably, and success within the educational system. Other researchers, like us, have examined the concept as something possessed and used by individuals (Hodgkinson et al., 1996; Ball et al., 2000).

Superficially, the contrasting stories of Daniel and Tamsin are paradoxical, from a cultural capital perspective, for each can be seen as both confirming and contradicting the sorts of explanation emphasised by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) with regard to educational progress. Tamsin's situation at the time our research finished – working in a hamburger bar and increasingly thinking of raising a family rather than going on to university – fits the common female working class trajectory. It could be argued that she lacked much of

the cultural capital that would have helped her to go to university and enter even a predominantly female professional career, such as nursing or child care. She had no family experience of educational success to draw upon, and no 'insider knowledge' of the system. In her social networks of family and friends, she would have had to constantly work against cultural norms and expectations if she was to fulfil her university ambitions. From this perspective, she is a typical case of a working class young woman who, despite all her efforts, lacked the cultural capital to break out of the constraints of her daily life. Even had she succeeded in going to university, her low status vocational course would have probably led to a relatively lower status university than the ones that Daniel could have accessed through his A-level courses. In contrast, Daniel's story appears to contradict a simplistic cultural capital argument. He appeared to possess all the cultural and social capital, including prior academic success, needed to obtain high A-level grades, progress to university and get a well paid, professional job. But rather than reproducing the values and career typical of his class background, he transgressed them in his consideration of a vocational course in funeral directing, and in eventually dropping out of college to take-up a low-skilled job.

However, both stories can be read differently. If cultural capital was simplistically deterministic, Tamsin would have dropped out of college when her friends did, or perhaps struggled on and achieved a bare Pass rather than a Merit, and progressed to low status employment with never a serious thought of university. The fact that she did not drop out, that she got better grades than anyone expected and that, at least for a time, she held strong and educationally realistic ambitions to go to university, poses a challenge to simplistic readings of the cultural capital thesis. The alternative reading of Daniel's story, that cultural capital can partly explain what happened to him, is less obvious. But his love of learning and his strong intrinsic motivation links directly to the middle class values of his family, with well educated, inquisitive parents prepared to engage him in discussion, books always in evidence, and intellectual ideas and creativity valued for their own sake. Yet it was these practices and values which contributed to his dropping out of college. Furthermore, when we compare Daniel's interviews with those of Tamsin, there is a sharp contrast. Tamsin was always concerned with practical realities and even her interest in monkeys was justified on these grounds. Her accounts often demonstrated a lack of confidence in educational surroundings, and a worry about the future, even though these were balanced by a strong determination to succeed. Daniel, on the other hand, almost always exuded self-confidence but appeared to lack determination, except with regard to his music and his constant quest for new knowledge and understandings. A plausible explanation for this is that he considered he was following a low-risk strategy: his cultural capital was so strong that he felt able to spend time in low level jobs, confident that he would always have the resources to change his situation if he

needed to. By the end, both were economically poor, working in similar jobs, but Daniel was thinking about his music as well as getting a wife, whilst Tamsin's mind was focussed on earning a living and saving for a family. Their situations were culturally different and their cultural capital remained significantly different.

This interesting combination of contradictions and partial paradoxes can be summed up in this way. Tamsin and Daniel arrived at similar career positions in their early 20s, but by contrasting routes, partly because their respective cultural capital resources influenced their educational and career progressions in different ways. In other words, cultural capital is a necessary factor in explaining their learning careers, but it is not sufficient for this purpose, nor was its operation simple. To tease this out further, we need to understand cultural capital as a relational concept, and also examine the implications of using the concept at an individual, rather than group level.

For Bourdieu, cultural capital can only be understood in relation to the field within which it exists. In our cases, the field encompasses the transition from compulsory education in the UK into further education, university, work and/or unemployment. Because of the nature of our research, our spotlight into this field focuses primarily upon the experiences of our sample with regard to their experiences of formal education, but the field also encompasses the transition from adolescence to adulthood, including the achievement of independence from parents, the establishment of a person's own home, and the acquisition of a new partner or family. In one key sense, Daniel's and Tamsin's positions in this field are similar, for they both began as full-time students, living with and largely supported by their parents or grandparent, and both ended up in employment, supporting themselves on low income. In other ways, their positions were different: most obviously in terms of their genders and social class backgrounds. In Bourdieu's terms, they were positioned differently in at least these respects, with differing habituses embracing differing dispositions to learning. In the field in which they were positioned, each interacted with large numbers of others, who were also positioned. Because our research focussed mainly upon the individual cases themselves, we cannot produce an empirically grounded map of these others and their relationships. Nonetheless, the stories that Daniel and Tamsin tell suggest that significant others in the field did include, at the very least, parents, siblings, boy/girl friends, other friends and fellow students, teachers, employers and fellow workers. At times, other relatives may have been involved, and also other professionals, such as careers advisers. Daniel's and Tamsin's stories provide numerous examples of the significance of such interrelationships.

While field influences but does not determine meanings and actions, cultural capital, with its close cousins, symbolic and social capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), gives participants greater or lesser potential to influence a field, or to excel in it. Bourdieu sometimes distinguishes between

different forms of capital, but his prime purpose is to argue that capital includes a wide range of potentially valuable attributes. Here, we use the term cultural capital to subsume the others, for we are concerned with the explanatory power of the concept in general, rather than with the identification of specific forms and types of it. Of course, economic capital is also significant. The two often go together, although, as Bourdieu (1998) points out, the balance between them may vary considerably. When our research started, Daniel had much more of both than Tamsin, in relation to the educational field. By the end, their personal economic capital differed little, whilst the differences in cultural capital remained arguably wide, in type as well as proportion. As is the case with regard to positions, the significance of cultural capital is often unrecognised by participants themselves.

As Bourdieu makes clear, cultural capital is relative to the field in question: "the value of a species of capital . . . hinges on the existence of a game, of a field in which this competency can be employed" (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). Indeed, what has value in one field may not do so in another. Okano (1993, 1995) takes this further, arguing that what she prefers to call resources can sometimes be neutral or even negative, in a particular field. Thus, Daniel's very inquisitiveness, fed by his self-confidence, actually hindered his progress towards examination success. Also, differing forms of cultural capital may make it easier to do certain things in the field, but not others. As far as we could determine, Daniel was far better equipped than Tamsin to succeed in the academic game, which is a key part of this field. He was intelligent and articulate, had good examination results at 16-plus, had confidence in his own ability, and was well-read, with articulate parental support. He embarked with relative ease on the high status A-level route. Tamsin, on the other hand, had to work hard to get as far as she did. We have already pointed to the lack of financial security and experience of further education at home, to her modest examination achievements at 16-plus, and to her struggle to succeed in college. However, her capital had arguably greater purchase than Daniel's in her chosen field of child care, where many of those values, skills and attitudes, acquired by working class young women, proved well-suited, fitting the cultural expectations of this part of the field. While she may have lacked cultural capital in some absolute sense, that which she had was of more help in the practical workplace than in the formal classroom. This is one way that cultural capital contributes to social reproduction, for example, as working class young women take up roles for which their capital is useful and valued, confirming both the nature of the field and the place of themselves and their peers within it.

In a contrary way, Daniel's cultural capital had a gap, as far as the traditional academic game was concerned. He lacked the organisational capacity and determination or interest to succeed in the terms defined by external examination requirements. He was more interested in music and in pursuing knowledge for his own purposes, than in handing

in assignments, or getting examination grades. The cultural nature of these dispositions is revealed by the temporary influence of his girl friend. Whilst in that relationship, and drawing upon her capital as well as his own, Daniel briefly knuckled down to work, allowing his arse to be kicked, as he put it.

Cultural capital is not only relational to the field: it can also vary over time. As Tamsin's BTEC studies progressed, we can see her capital in the education part of the field increase. We can never know, but it is conceivable that, had she progressed straight to university, she might have had enough capital to succeed in a relatively low status vocational diploma or degree programme. However, her predominantly working class cultural capital probably contributed to her decision not to go immediately. Towards the end of our interviewing process, there were signs that her cultural capital as prospective partner and mother was growing at the expense of her academic capital. It is more difficult to identify changes in cultural capital in Daniel's story. However, it is interesting to speculate on his apparent loss of academic cultural capital when he dropped out, but we suspect it could be rapidly revived if he ever re-embarked upon an academic career with the primacy and determination he gave to his music.

Cultural capital, thought of in these ways, is far removed from the deterministic interpretations sometimes placed upon Bourdieu's work. When we focus more explicitly upon its meaning for individuals, as opposed to groups, this is re-emphasised. If Tamsin were seen as a statistic - a single unit in a large study on class reproduction, for example - there would be little reason to question a deterministic interpretation of the relationship between her position and her achievements. She started and ended in the same place: a female in a working class family, becoming a working class female with a typically low-paid job, and ambitious to form a family. However, as we have seen, once the focus is placed upon her individual case, things look less clear cut. It is helpful to view cultural capital as contributing to her *horizons for action* (Hodkinson, et al., 1996), and to her ability to act within those horizons. A person's horizons for action determine the limits of their activity at any one time. They are made up of the relationship between external opportunity structures and the person's perceptions of those structures and of themselves. They are both external to the person and rooted in their habitus and identity. Cultural capital helps determine these horizons, for example through the ways in which it affects what is perceived as, or is practically possible. The lack of appropriate cultural capital is one of many reasons why Tamsin could not become a nurse. It may also have contributed to the fact that she never considered more 'male careers' as being within her purview. But cultural capital does not only help define horizons for action: its utilisation is one of many factors that contribute to achievement within those horizons. For, like chips in a board game, cultural capital can be deployed to greater or lesser degree, and more or less effectively. Tamsin's cultural capital made it easier for her to succeed

in her work placements than in college. Daniel's helped him cope with the intellectual ideas he encountered, but not the discipline of organised study. However, their use of cultural capital was not a predominantly conscious experience.

The cultural capital of a person can only be understood in relation to their unequal and complex positional relations and interactions in the field as a whole. Furthermore, at the individual level, as Tamsin's and Daniel's stories show, two further factors are significant, which are largely invisible in large-scale studies of groups. One is the agency of the person, acting deliberately or unintentionally within their horizons for action and within the field. Cultural capital may have influenced Tamsin's decision to continue with her BTEC course, and Daniel's decision to abandon his A-levels, but these decisions were not forced. In both cases, other options were realistically available, within their horizons for action, and consistent with the cultural capital they possessed. Secondly, happenstance can make a significant impact upon individual lives, and cultural capital should always be understood in relation to this. Happenstance can change horizons, both at the level of opportunity structures, and of a person's perceptions of what is possible and/or desirable, as when Daniel first considered, and later rejected, the course in funeral directing. Cultural capital influences the person's perceptions of and responses to changed circumstances.

Implications for guidance

Daniel's and Tamsin's experiences, and the effects of their respective cultural capital, positions and dispositions, challenges over-simplistic notions of what career guidance can be, and what it can achieve. To put it bluntly, many of the forces and pressures that influence career development are far more pervasive, and powerful, than formal guidance provision can ever be. If we are to develop realistic expectations for guidance provision, and avoid simplistic assumptions that greatly exaggerate its influence, this is an important lesson to learn. Careers are not determined by some simple combination of accurate information, good decision making skills and appropriate guidance. Life is much more complex and difficult than that.

However, just because guidance is not, and cannot be some sort of magic bullet, it does not follow that it cannot be immensely valuable. What it does mean is that its value cannot be guaranteed, and partly depends upon many factors outside the control of guidance providers. Guidance can be effective, when it is closely related to the interests of the client. This is because, as the two stories show, young people like Daniel and Tamsin do exert considerable influence over their own futures. Skilled guidance can help them do this more effectively and knowingly. There are obvious examples in both stories. In Tamsin's case, some skilled guidance, during her final college year, could have ensured that she knew she would be likely to get financial support at university, and could have helped her weigh up

the benefits of going immediately, as opposed to having a year off first. In Daniel's case, good guidance might have helped him consider a wider range of jobs and careers when he dropped out of his A-level studies, rather than seeing a funeral directing course or working in a burger bar as the only options. However, we cannot be certain that such guidance would have resulted in different choices, or that different choices would have led to better futures – for either or them. What is more certain, is that such guidance, to be effective, would have had to recognise as legitimate decisions frowned upon by national policy. Thus, it would have been necessary to acknowledge with Daniel that dropping out was a feasible and realistic option, and with Tamsin, that going to university would indeed be difficult, with no guarantees of success.

From this perspective, good guidance should be optimistically realistic, non-judgemental, and geared towards helping young people think slightly more clearly about, and possibly do slightly better, those things which they, not greater society, value. This entails realistic and honest recognition of wider social inequalities, rather than peddling an Anglicised version of the all-American dream. Above all, it means accepting that good guidance may not always make a noticeable or measurable difference. The same, of course, is true for many other social professions – not least, teachers, social workers, and researchers like us.

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