

*Interview with Professor Robert W. Lent*

*By Laura Nota*

1. As a researcher, which are the most important research studies that you are currently conducting in the field of vocational guidance and career counseling?

There's two general themes that I'm most enthusiastic about in my research at the moment. One of them is a set of studies that are funded by our National Science Foundation. The focus of those studies is on how to encourage more women and racial ethnic minority members to go into what we call "STEM" fields: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. In most of these fields there is a shortage of women and racial ethnic minority group members. The focus of these studies is to use Social Cognitive Career Theory as a foundation for understanding which variables promote women and students of color to be attracted to these science-related fields and what variables, again derived from the theory, can be used to understand what keeps them in these fields, what keeps them persisting in science and mathematical types of fields. We are doing longitudinal research over the course of three academic years. We are trying to predict who will adjust well academically and who will persist to the point of actually getting a degree ... So that's one set of studies that I'm excited about. The other theme of new research involves extending the new satisfaction model derived from Social Cognitive Career Theory to adult career development. We are doing a series of studies on teachers both in the US and with you and Salvatore in Italy looking to see whether the variables in this satisfaction model are in fact good predictors. These are cross-sectional studies to this point but we'd like to eventually examine the theory longitudinally as well. I'm excited about this work because it integrates a number of variables like personality traits, social cognitive, and behavioral variables that have all been studied individually in the past. Our model is an effort to bring all them together and to consider how they function as a unit in predicting satisfaction and other aspects of adult career well-being or positive adjustment.

2. How do you appraise the quality and amount of interaction between researchers and counselors in your Country?

This one I can probably answer more succinctly. I would characterize it as insufficient. I think we have not found good ways to get researchers and counselors to talk to one another as often and as productively as we'd like. And I suspect that that's a problem all

over the world where career counseling has become both a science and an art. And I think the problem can probably best be understood not so much from a Social Cognitive Theory perspective but from John Holland's theoretical perspective, where researchers tend to be largely investigative types and counselors tend to be largely social types; more oriented to helping people in the case of the counselors; in the case of the scientists more interested in research methodology and things that counselors might not be immediately interested in. We are all interested obviously in understanding behavior and helping people to function more effectively, but we come at it from very different directions and so it has been difficult to sustain a productive dialog between those two groups. Obviously we need to keep trying if the two groups are ultimately going to succeed in both better understanding and helping people to cope with vocational challenges.

3. Do you think career counseling can give a contribution (how important and to what extent) to the downsizing of the problems caused by the International socio-economic crisis?

Yes and no. I think that if you think about career counseling as largely a matter of person-environment interaction, I don't think that as career counselors or as career scientists there's much we can do about the larger, macroeconomic issues - which are essentially environmental issues - that are creating havoc for people's work lives presently and probably will at various points in the future, too. We are not economists and we don't deal with that side of the equation. But on the person side of the equation I think that there are some things that we can do. I really like Mark Savickas's work and Beryl Hesketh's work here. Both of them focus on career adaptability or encouraging people to be resilient, and to anticipate that the future is probably not going to be as predictable and stable as in the past in terms of people being able to get jobs that will last a lifetime. I think the idea is finding better ways as career counselors to help people to learn that change is going to be a constant and that though we can't predict what the future of the environment will be, there are some things we can do to adjust to changing conditions. These things include developing skills to keep ourselves employable, to think of ourselves essentially as private corporations that need to remain viable over time, and to prepare to change jobs or grow in order to keep pace with changes in communication, technology, and the larger economy. We are now in a global economy. We are so interconnected and there's going to be chaotic economic downturns that the entire world has to deal with. It is difficult to do career planning at a personal level when there is so much unpredictability and even chaos, but as career counselors I think

we need to work on techniques that promote resilience and career adaptability, and to get people thinking about themselves as career agents that need to change over time.

#### 4. Which kind of training and what professional competencies should vocational guidance/career counselors possess?

I really like the model of career counseling that we use at the University of Maryland. That involves starting out by ensuring that students are well-trained in personal counseling and therapy. We start off by training students in basic helping and listening skills and in our first few practica, which are practical experiences where students are working with clients, we tend to expose them first to dealing with personal problems, emotional problems, relationship problems. Then, after they have a few semesters' experience working with personal problems, we expose them to vocational theory and counseling, and we give them the opportunity to work with career clients. The reason we do it in that order is because our experience has been that in the real world people who come in for problems with choosing a career or adjusting to a career frequently have personal problems that are interwoven with career problems, that it is not easy to separate them, and that just providing good training in career counseling isn't sufficient when students are likely to encounter career problems that are complicated by other issues, like the experience of negative affectivity or chronic career indecision or perfectionism. We also try to get across the point that career counseling can be complex with many clients, that it is not like following a cooking recipe, that some clients may have difficulty making any kind of decision, not only career ones.

#### 5. What should future research in this sector focus on?

I would mention four general areas, Laura. One is I think that there is a future for making career choice counseling more efficient. I think we already know through the meta-analyses that have been done by Steve Brown, Sue Whiston, Spokane and Oliver, and others that career choice counseling works very effectively for most people, but what we haven't learned until recently is about what we specifically do in counseling that accounts for that change. Brown and Ryan Krane's focus on five critical ingredients of choice counseling, I think, highlights that there are likely to be a finite number of things that we do as career counselors that account for the major changes that occur. If we can focus on those critical elements and perhaps identify others, we may be able to make choice counseling more efficient for more clients.

A second general thing is, as I was saying just a moment ago, because career issues are so frequently interwoven with personal, emotional, and relationship kinds of problems, I think we need to do a better job of researching career interventions that will be more likely to work in the context of these other issues.

A third area is focusing on interventions for career dissatisfaction and work adjustment problems, particularly for those who have little tolerance for poor person-environment fit. Perhaps you have noticed, too, that there are people who are able to tolerate poor fit or incongruence very well by developing coping skills, like finding a niche within a larger environment that feels comfortable for them, or doing things to moderate their stress level, for example, through exercise. So there are people who deal very well with incongruence or poor fit, but then there are others who are very, very sensitive to even minor amounts of misfit. It is for those who are not so good at tolerating misfit that we need to develop more effective interventions for dealing with dissatisfaction.

A fourth is to focus on those clients for whom the environment has been particularly harsh; people who have been exposed to poor economic environments, to poor educational quality, and so forth. Many in our field, like David Blustein, are concerned with how we, as career counselors, can better serve clients who have not been dealt as favorable a hand in the card game of life. Finding out better ways to provide career services to them would be a fourth area to focus on in terms of future research.

In sum, I think it is mainly a matter of identifying things we do well already and finding out how to make our interventions more efficient or reaching out to clients we may have a harder time helping because of personal problems or because of social, economic, or educational conditions.