

Laura Nota interviews Prof. T. Tracey

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?

Well, I think I have probably about 3 or 4 that I'm working on right now. I have an interest scale, it's called the Personal Globe Inventory, and I'm working on shortening it by having a shortened scale and I am using item response theory to do it: a way of getting the best items and shortening the scale down. It's cutting it down by two thirds. I'm excited about that. It's very nice. I'm using the latest methodology to improve our assessment devices.

In addition to that, I'm doing a study looking at how interests and self-efficacy together predict job success and major and occupation selection. We all know that interests predict occupation selection and sometimes on performance we also know that self-efficacy does, and one adds on the other. What I've been looking at is if they both magnify the effect of each other. If someone's self-efficacy agrees with their interests, that predicts an extremely good fit in an occupation, whereas if they don't it doesn't at all and it really does it very quickly as they start to disagree. So it says we don't need to focus on either one or the other, but add them both together and look and predict in a similar manner. Another study that I'm doing is I'm doing a lot in terms of person-environment fit. How do interests and self-efficacy predict occupation, predict major in terms of entry? How do they also predict my performance in those? Do people who fit do better? Do people who fit feel happier, feel more satisfied? I have done a lot on looking at how that is moderated by the characteristics of the person. Some people can fit anywhere and be happy. Some people have to be in a perfect environment for them to be happy. So I'm looking at the characteristics of people that do that. I'm also doing the same thing with environments. Some occupations, almost anybody will be happy in; some occupations are extremely constrictive. Being able to identify and categorize occupations where it is crucial that we find just the right person for and others where it doesn't matter, because generally we assume we are all equal: if you fit more, that is all that matters. That is some of the stuff I'm doing now that's kind of interesting.

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

Probably, at best it's there. I think there certainly could be much more discussion between researchers and practitioners and I view that as pretty much the fault of both.

Researchers could do much more in terms of making their research results distributed and disseminated to practitioners so that they could see the sort of things that are going on. Also practitioners could work much better with researchers to help them in terms of the key issues that need to be addressed. I think each side gets a bit too preoccupied with their view. One of the things that are happening in the US is particularly with regard to grants. These days a lot of federal grants are focusing on STEM fields: science, technology, mathematics, and engineering. What are the things in interests and competencies that lead people to choose those, how can we get them to stay in those? Because there is a huge drop out rate! That's what money should be invested. One of the key components of that is focusing on dissemination of knowledge, helping counselors use what is gathered from this research in their day-to-day practice. So, it is getting better, but it is still not great.

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?

That's a great question. In some ways, no, we are not going to help the economy of Greece, for example, right now, nor are we going to help the economy of the United States. Not directly. I think indirectly, we can have a huge effect. Of course, we can't correct past decisions and all that. What we can do in general to contribute to an efficient and productive society, we can help people find occupations, find work, find jobs that fit them. Certainly the economy could go bad again and they could lose it - but the answer is they will be happier in those jobs, they will be more productive in those jobs and then the tenure will be longer, so that we can be more productive. I think that is what we can do. We can help almost on an individual level, help people better fit in their occupations. The assumption being that if everyone - or pretty much more people - likes what they're doing they're going to be working harder, they are going to be more productive, they are going to be happier and we could even get into reducing health care costs because people are going to be less stressed out by things not fitting. In general quality of life will be better. That we can have a huge impact on. Certainly for broad numbers of people long-term is going to have a huge effect on the economy, on production. Short term, no. That's kind of the long-term view. Short term, you know, people need to get a place and jobs and we can certainly help people with getting out of the crisis, getting the skills how to go about getting jobs, have a go about building resumes and job skills. We can do all that, but that's kind of short term. If we can help them look longer term: I'm

looking for a job right now, and I need one, but if I can't handle myself, longer term I will be happier once I find something that better fits me. If I did just get a job now that doesn't fit me fine, it is a good, I'm employed and I can kind of live, but one of the questions should be how can I find something that is a better fit.

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

That's a hard question. Being a career counselor is an extremely difficult job. And to some extent, you are never going to have enough skills. Certainly, you need the requisite career theories, career knowledge, how the world of work functions, how people work, and the requisite knowledge of resumes and all that to be a career counselor. Beyond that, you need very good interpersonal skills, you need to be able to interact and kind of fit with a wide variety of very different people. I think more and more you are going to need very good skills with regard to, roughly, personal crises that individuals have. Jobs are not separated from issues that go on in their life and we can't say 'I will only talk to you about your career'. They could have their marriage falling apart, they could have anything else going on and that all interacts with what one's doing of one's career. I would like to see at least certainly some training and some skills in terms of personal issues, even perhaps some psychopathology, so they are familiar with it and can deal with some of this, because we cannot separate career issues from anything else that goes on in a person's life. I also think counselors need to have a good grounding in assessment. I could go on at length about the perils of clinical decision making when we just try and sit down and talk to a person. We are not very good at gathering and aggregating information. That's where assessments help us greatly. They are much more reliable, they are much more valid. We can use them very nice. Counselors are very skilled at putting these things together. They can use this but are not good at using interviews to gather information and it has been shown again and again and again. And assessment really does that much better than we can. Being familiar with using assessment devices I think is key.

The other one, which is probably more selfishly motivated, it would be nice if counselors had at least a pretty good understanding of research literature, how to read it. They can look at that and see what is new coming down. Because that is how it really gets started. They don't need to know all the sophisticated things, but being able to read it and understand it and make conclusions, and they can then go 'Oh, here are some new

techniques that really could apply to me'. They could be much more on the cutting edge. That would be nice.

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

I can answer things that *I* would like to focus on. I am not sure I can answer what everybody else should be doing. There are a few things. One is that there's a lot in about being individuals, in terms of how they go about choosing occupations, what they do. Older folks, people who are not 19 to 20 to 22, people who are 35 and lost their job. People who are 35 and went into computers because that's where there was a lot of money and they find they do not like it and they are at a loss. How can we help these individuals? Because they are very different from 22-year-olds. And the other one I think that we do a terrible good job on is non-college students and people who don't go to the best or 'most prestigious' jobs. And so I really am concerned about 1) we don't do a good job of categorizing those jobs and cataloging those jobs; and 2) we are not doing a good job of assessing the interests and skills of the people that they may be appropriate for. They are finding good fits in the occupation matter just as much as anybody else is finding good fits, but we don't turn the focus on them.