Career Counseling, Science, and Policy: Revitalizing Our Paradigms and Roles

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Herr (1996), Bloch (1996), and Watts (1996) highlight important shifts that are occurring in the structure of work, in social policy related to career services, and in the ecological context of guidance. Such shifts may have far-reaching implications for the science and practice of career development, particularly for counselors' roles in assisting individuals and organizations with issues of work preparation and transition. This article revisits some of the authors' key assumptions and observations, offering additional suggestions for ensuring that career theory, research, practice, and policy remain responsive to the changing social–political–economic context.

As the new millennium approaches, there will doubtless be an increasing chorus of articles in our professional journals that herald the need for change in the very foundations of our professional roles and services and in the content and methods of our scientific inquiry. I suspect that such phrases as "career counseling in the twenty-first century," "career counseling in a postindustrial world," and "career counseling for tomorrow's challenges" will repeatedly grace our books and journals. This sort of self-consciousness comes at a logical time (near the centennial of the career guidance profession) and, as we tell our clients, it is wise periodically to take stock of where you are and where you are going. However, in so doing, I think we also need to guard against the temptation to conclude that the path we have been on is necessarily misguided, that nothing short of a full-scale course correction will do.

In this special section, Herr (1996), Bloch (1996), and Watts (1996) provide the career counseling profession an outstanding service by

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issuing a collective wake-up call. They nudge us out of our contented reverie with the messages that the nature of work is changing in industrial societies; that the very concept of "career" needs to be redefined; that our educational establishment is largely ignoring the mandate to prepare students for the workplace; and that our own service delivery systems and theories need to be reinvented lest we become irrelevant or obsolete. To observe, as Watts does, that "career counselors need to pay much more attention than they sometimes do to the social, political, and economic contexts of their work" (p. 42) seems almost an understatement.

Reading this set of articles, I am convinced that we need to respond to social, political, and economic factors significantly more than we ever have. However, how we frame our response depends partly on how we assess the severity of the problem and the adequacy of current solutions. Should we assume, to borrow the current ecological admonition, that "reusing, recycling, and repairing" is the appropriate response? Or do we need to entirely replace our cherished ideas and practices?

In this article, I would like to revisit some of the key assumptions and conclusions offered by the authors in this special section, augmenting their observations with a few modest suggestions for action in the areas of theory, research, service provision, advocacy, and social policy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND THEORY

Herr (1996) offers a wise perspective on the complex, systemic, and multilayered forces that shape both the delivery of our services and the accretion of our knowledge base. A central part of his thesis seems to be that our major theories, and the research and practices emanating from them, are overly insular and narrow in their purview. Herr notes, for example, that our "theories and practices are culture-bound" (p. 6) and that we have tended to be more concerned about the empirical validity of our techniques than about the social–political–economic context within which our theories and methods are located.

Additionally, though he acknowledges important signs of change, Herr (1996) suggests that our conceptual lenses have tended to focus disproportionately on intrapsychic influences on career development, failing to take serious stock of contextual factors, such as culture, socioeconomic strata, and social policy. Watts (1996) similarly observes that, "a broader and more dynamic theoretical base is needed if career counseling is to find and deliver the new role that is now demanded of it" (p. 42). Presumably, this broader theoretical base would include more complex and differentiated conceptions of the environment and of the reciprocal interplay among the person and the contextual factors.

Although both writers offer a compelling view that our basic paradigms and theories need reinvigoration, my own sense is that this is an area in which innovation and progress are occurring, if not as

dramatically as some may desire. Recent theoretical efforts, for example, have attempted to conceptualize the context in sophisticated terms (Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986) and to ponder ways in which key features of the person (e.g., cognitive–expectancy variables) and environment (e.g., culture, economics, barriers, support systems) may interact within the course of career development (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).

Accompanying this greater focus on contextual factors and person–context transactions has been a renewed focus within the vocational literature on such issues as human agency, empowerment, and methodological plurality (Borgen, 1991). Earlier trait-and-factor models have been reconceptualized in more dynamic, person–environment interaction terms (e.g., Rounds & Tracey, 1990) and their scope has expanded from matching (invariant) aspects of persons and (presum-ably stable) aspects of vocational environments to studying how individuals adjust to changing work conditions. The theoretical and empirical literatures still have a long way to go to incorporate fully such variables as gender, culture, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status into our understanding of career behavior (Fitzgerald & Betz, 1994), but some notable signs of progress are evident (e.g., see Fitzgerald, Fassinger, & Betz, 1995; Leong, 1995).

As my comments suggest, I would not necessarily come to the conclusion that current career theory and research are passé, that our intellectual agenda should bend to everchanging market forces, or that our models and methods need fundamentally to be leveled and replaced. I would, however, agree that there is much room for refinement, expansion, and restoration. It seems reasonable to assume that basic career development processes, such as how interests develop, are not likely to change because of shifting economic or policy trends. However, the activities to which particular individuals are exposed (and for which they are reinforced), the compromises that people must make among available academic and occupational options, the ways in which they prepare for work, and the nature of their work tenure and transitions will clearly be linked to ecological trends. Thus, our theories need to expand from their current emphasis on initial career choice to better encompass processes of lifelong development and change.

How, specifically, might career counseling theories expand to better capture the changing nature of the work world? I would cite three broad suggestions. First, we could draw to a greater extent on the literature on life transitions and adjustment to predictable and unpredictable life events (Brown & Heath, 1984; Gibson & Brown, 1992), incorporating relevant models and findings (e.g., on coping with change and stress) into our career theories.

Second, the empirical literature could provide much more sustained attention to issues of workforce preparation, including methods for promoting occupational socialization and imparting the generic skills cited by Bloch (1996) (e.g., teamwork, negotiation, leadership, multicultural competencies), as opposed to programs that focus more narrowly on Parsonian matching methods or that merely

provide work apprenticeships without a self-reflective, developmental component. Parenthetically, although school-to-work programming methods are proliferating, their grounding in career development theory and research is not always apparent (cf. Blustein, 1991). Related to these first two points, and drawing on Watts's (1996) United Kingdom experience, career research might also focus on developing and validating methods to effect "transition learning," that is, skills involved in implementing decisions and managing career transitions beyond one's initial entry into the workforce.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

I suspect that most readers will be alarmed, though not entirely surprised, at Bloch's (1996) survey results. In interpreting her findings Bloch suggests that "large segments of the secondary population were not involved in curricular or guidance activities that lead to the personal and interpersonal career development outcomes identified in federal policy" (p. 30). A full 75% of her respondents saw a discrepancy between desired outcomes (of work-force preparation) and current practice in secondary schools, and many reported a lack of knowledge about federal school-to-work initiatives. Where career development services were offered, college-bound students seemed to be the primary beneficiaries, with work-bound and at-risk students being underserved. Bloch further observed that "counselors are far less involved than teachers in workforce preparation" (p. 33).

Bloch's (1996) findings and thoughtful reflections deserve comment. These findings must be tempered by the fact that the response rate to her survey was only around 50%, raising questions about generalizability to those sites that did not respond and to the many states that were not included in the survey. As Bloch notes, the survey was also conducted prior to the passage of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act. Although such a " 'snapshot in time' of workforce preparation policies" (p. 21) and secondary school practices is important to our field and to concerned policy makers, snapshots eventually lose currency, and any single snapshot, examined in isolation, cannot give us a sense of progress (or stasis) in school practices. Just as families mark their changes in photo albums, our field needs multiple snapshots over time to track its evolving practices.

Judging by the recent upsurge in workshops and publications relevant to school-to-work transition, school and career counselors seem to be taking the new federal policies seriously. However, just how serious—and how effective—our response has been, is naturally open to question. It would, therefore, be valuable to assess school-based work preparation practices longitudinally, buttressing Bloch's (1996) survey with ongoing study both of modal practices and of "best practices" (i.e., identification of particularly innovative or effective programs). Establishment of a national database would be useful in this effort.

Despite inevitable limitations in survey methodology, Bloch's (1996) findings force us to think seriously about the role of secondary school counselors in delivering career services as well as about

administrators' support for the work preparation mission of their schools. It is possible that Bloch's findings reflect the low esteem (or at least the low priority) in which the career development function is held in many schools. Educational reform efforts have consistently ignored students' career development needs and the broader (e.g., social, familial, economic) context in which schooling takes place, and counselors have often been conspicuously absent from the reform table. Much energy has been directed at issues of classroom teaching and learning, while extraschool influences that affect learning and the larger question of what students are being educated for (basic literacy alone? standardized test performances? effective entry to higher education or work or both?) have frequently been overlooked.

One may, alternatively, be depressed or optimistic at Bloch's (1996) finding that teachers are more active in workforce preparation activities than are school counselors. Assuming that career development is being effectively infused throughout the curriculum, that counselors are spearheading and coordinating this effort, and that teachers are receiving adequate training in providing career development activities, this would be cause for great joy. However, these may all be naive assumptions. Bloch describes a commonly held image of school counselors: Many are seen as preoccupied with scheduling and other administrative tasks, as overworked in responding to crises and other remedial presses, or as better trained at traditional counseling than they are at consultative services. Moreover, it is unlikely that teachers-in-training receive any sort of systematic exposure to career development practices within most colleges of education.

Bloch (1996) does not seem to be sanguine about prospects for dramatic change in career-based school programming, noting the disappointing history of efforts to introduce generic and cross-disciplinary components into schools' curricula. On the other hand, she acknowledges recent changes in public sentiment, modest funding incentives, an emerging competency movement, and development of comprehensive school guidance programs—all of which may lend much-needed momentum to the workforce preparation effort. However, more is clearly needed beyond these positive developments, and Herr (1996) and Watts (1996) illuminate some potentially fruitful paths for counselors to explore in relation to workforce preparation and transition services.

At a collective and systemic level, we may ultimately need to contend with Herr's (1996) apt description of the "uncoordinated mosaic" (p. 16) of career guidance policies and programs that exist across the nation. This lack of coordination has diffused and diluted the effectiveness of career services. Trying to establish order undoubtedly requires a creative and concerted advocacy effort by our professional organizations and leaders. Such an effort may require that we forge, articulate, and sell (to policy makers and the public) an overarching career services delivery system that truly makes sense to career and school counselors; a system that is founded on "dual notions of efficiency and social equity" (Herr, 1996, p. 14) and that better coordinates career services across educational and noneducational settings. Additionally, for school-to-work initiatives

to succeed, counselors will likely need to find a sustained voice within the school reform movement, "educating" skeptical administrators, teachers, and parents, and lobbying politicians.

The huge outlays of professional energy required to address such an agenda—and the formidable structural barriers that must be negotiated (e.g., a federal bureaucracy that compartmentalizes education and labor)—are clearly daunting. However, we do not need to start from the ground floor. School-to-work preparation policies seem to be in the process of change (even though their implementation may be slow) and the pressures of global economic competition and other forces (e.g., technological advances, demographic shifts) are likely to provide the motivation to sustain this change. Furthermore, some interesting models for career service delivery are emerging (such as the recent proposal regarding comprehensive federal career service centers), which counselors might help shape and mold further through advocacy efforts. American counselors can also profit from the international perspective that Watts (1996) provides on emerging service delivery structures in the United Kingdom and other countries.

Finally, the articles in this special section imply the need for much innovation on the part of individual practitioners and counselor trainers. For example, efforts are needed to adopt, refine, and implement comprehensive school guidance programs that attend systematically to workforce preparation (Bloch) and that are ecologically-sensitive and sophisticated (Herr). Watts' suggestion about the need for "adaptability and creativity" (p. 52) in career service provision should also be heeded. Advances in technology and communication offer an exciting venue for such creativity. For example, although computerized career guidance and information systems have been around for a while, counselors have scarcely begun to tap other technological possibilities that could extend the field's reach into community-level interventions, such as providing exposure to career information via public television outlets. Computer networking, distance learning, and the information superhighway are also rife with possibilities, as illustrated by one innovative, theory-based effort to develop an "electronic community" linking racial–ethnic minority youths to supportive career development experiences and role models (M. T. Brown, personal communication, February 4, 1995).

CONCLUSION

Watts (1996), Bloch (1996), and Herr (1996) offer an important set of perspectives on the present and the future of career counseling. They remind career counselors that the value and relevance of their services will depend on how they adjust to rapidly unfolding changes in the structure of work, to the ecological context of guidance, to the press of federal policies, to the pace of educational reform, and even to new meanings in the very concept of career. We, as career counselors, can confine our image of career counseling to that of "a limited switch-mechanism" (p. 43) between the realms of education and employment, as Watts (1996) describes our past function. Or we can

envision a different metaphor and set of roles—a view of counseling and guidance as linchpins in the processes of work preparation and transition, helping individuals and organizations to anticipate and negotiate passages to and between career settings. If we accept the latter challenge, we will need to ensure that our theories and research are sensitive to context and culture. We will also need to be proactive in helping to shape and implement relevant educational and work policies. And we will need to encourage our innovators and entrepreneurs to fashion novel career service delivery formats, harnessing the capabilities of new technology. Such a future requires us to repair, reuse, recycle—and to reinvent.

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