



History, Theory, Application and the Future of Career Guidance: An Interview with Tony Watts

Interviewed by Gideon Arulmani

Tony Watts is perhaps one of the most influential figures in the field of career guidance and counselling. Based in Cambridge, England, he is a Founding Fellow and Life President of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling (NICEC); Visiting Professor of Career Development at the University of Derby; and Visiting Professor at Canterbury Christ Church University. In addition to his extensive publications, Tony Watts has lectured in over sixty countries, and has carried out a number of comparative international studies of career guidance systems. He has been a consultant to international organisations including the Council of Europe, the European Commission, OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank. In 2001/2 he worked at OECD on a 14-country Career Guidance Policy Review, subsequently extended through other bodies to cover 55 countries. He has also been a consultant to the European Commission's European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network, and a member of the Board of the International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy. He was awarded an OBE in the 1994 Queen's Birthday Honours List for his services to education.

Tony has been closely involved since the late 1990s in the career guidance work that we have been doing in India. He participated in the first National Consultation of Career Psychology in 2006, and in 2010 in the IAEVG-Jiva conference in Bangalore as a keynote speaker. His advice has been formative to the development of career guidance services in India.

Tony is moving on now from careers work to spend more time on his other passions – which include cricket and early music! It was my privilege to interview him, in Canterbury, England, on the cusp of his shift away from direct involvement with career guidance and counselling. Contemporary career guidance and counselling, all over the world, has been touched by his gentle influence. I am sure the career guidance community will join me when I describe him as a father of modern career guidance. In this interview he looks back over the decades of his involvement in the field and the points he makes have deep relevance to researchers, practitioners and policy-makers not only in India but to all those involved in career guidance work.

Gideon Arulmani (GA): Tony, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview for the IJCLP. Career guidance is a young field in India and so I would like us to focus a bit on content and your views on definitions and concepts as well as a bit on history, keeping the Asian-Indian/developing world context in mind. To get us started, my first question is related to concepts and definitions. What would you say is the difference between occupation and job on the one hand, and career on the other hand, and would you see a difference in this respect between developed and developing countries?

Tony Watts (TW): We tend to think of occupation as being part of the formal economy and as being structured in some clear-cut way. I think job is a little more fluid but, again, I think it tends to be the notion that somebody gives you a job and therefore, again, it has got a kind of formality about it. It is very much a part of the formal economy. The curious thing is that career

in the past was a subset of all of that. It was only for people who were in an occupation or work organisation and had some opportunities for progression within it. That was the old model and I think we've been reframing it. So instead of being progression through a hierarchy within an *occupation* or *organisation*, it is now about lifelong progression in *learning* and *work*. I would add that *giving* is also key. I suppose I tend to use *learning* and *work* but I define both quite broadly. Work is not just employment: it's also self-employment and the other forms of work which we all engage in, within our homes and communities, much of it without money changing hands. Similarly, what we learn is not just through formal education and training but also through informal learning. If you have that breadth of definition, then I would argue that everybody has a career whatever culture they are in and whatever roles they play within that culture. Under the old definition you could say that occupation and job were more relevant in developed economies (we will use the terms "developed" and "developing" because it is easier – I do acknowledge that it is more complex than that) where the economy is more formalised and where there are systems which surround the whole concept of employment. If for example you are unemployed in these economies, you get unemployment benefits. So it is all formalised to that degree. That is much less so in developing countries where large numbers of people work outside the formal economy. So my argument would be that under the new definition career can be equally relevant in all countries. But such a definition would have to be reframed and re-thought for those different contexts.

GA: Staying on with concepts and definitions, you have been close to Donald Super and when you look back now at the concept of developmental stages, what is your comment on whether there are stages, whether they are blurred now, and whether there are new developmental stages that have emerged?

TW: I did find Don's model useful as a broad framework. But I think Don himself realised its limitations. He later started to talk about maxi-cycles and mini-cycles, for example, and that was about recognizing that you've got to do more to explain more, and that if you *restart* then you have to go through some of those processes again. Of course, as time has gone by, we would now I think frame it rather differently. For example, I have been very interested in a National Institute for Adult Continuing Education project in England which has been about mid-career, around the age of 50. This has been part of an effort which they have been making to rethink the life cycle. Don's work was a kind of psychological link to institutionalised transition points. So we tend to think about a key entry point into adulthood as being from the end of full-time formal education which in the UK has recently tended to be at 16, 18 or 21, and a key exit point as being retirement which has tended to take place at 65. This is all now changing. Entries and exits can happen at different ages, and there is a lot of talk about later and more gradual retirement. The NIACE work is a basis for rethinking public policies related to education, health and social issues, but it's also thought-provoking in other ways. Many people now take a lot longer to stabilise into a career direction: to get into what Donald Super would call the establishment phase. Many young people now move around a lot, both geographically and in what they do. But around age 25 they tend to start think about settling down, about maybe having children and getting a clearer sense of where they are going. This can of course vary, but 25 is quite a good general marker. And then around 75 is quite a biggie because at that point health issues often kick in big-time. Between these two, around 50 is when your children have probably begun to leave the nest, so you've got bit more freedom: 75 is in your field of vision but you've still got plenty of time, you've got lots of things you can do, and you are now less bounded by your children's needs. So this gives you a rather elegant, symmetrical model, with four stages and three key normative transition points, at ages 25, 50, and 75. It is not strictly comparable with Super's model, but it indicates how much his model would need to be reframed now. So, first of all, I'm saying that Donald Super himself realised the limitations of

what he was doing; and secondly, that if he was doing it now, he would certainly frame it differently. I still find his work useful but we need new models which help us to address more of the complexity.

GA: If you were to look at the developing country context, what would you say are the key elements of a career guidance service for these countries?

TW: The first time I did some work in a developing country was in Malaysia, and then later in a number of other countries. South Africa was a big one for me; subsequently I worked in a number of countries with the World Bank; and then I came to work a bit with you in India. Obviously, we are talking about a hugely different range of countries here. There *is* a role for career development professionals in developing countries. But the work cannot all be done by professionals: it has got to be done with a lot of support for involvement of other people. India, for example, is such a massive country: how do you even start to think about it in terms of delivery? One way to think about the role of career development professionals in developing countries is not only as career guidance service delivery agents but also as *capacity builders*. Of course, the professionals provide models of good practice but it's also about enabling and empowering other people. The notion of barefoot counsellors is a very powerful one. It is people who are part of or close to communities who are in the best position to do a lot of the work. Much can be done within the school system but it's not only the school system. It's about community capacity building, so that's where professional expertise and professional resources can be used to best effect: to support that kind of capacity building within communities. So that's one point to keep in mind for developing countries. I also think the *model* has got to be different, for all sorts of reasons. *Culture* is enormously important, and in almost all developing countries the *family* unit is much more important than it is in Western, developed countries. In many developing countries, people think on a *collective* basis rather than on an individualistic basis: that is a very different framework. And the different *belief* systems which underpin the way people think are also critical. So, career has to be linked to all of those things. You've done lots of work on all this, Gideon: some very important work. Also, within developed countries the processes of industrialisation, globalisation and commodification have moved much further in comparison to developing countries. To some extent, in developing countries you are constrained in what you can do. But in a way this makes the work potentially much more creative because it has to be grounded in relation to those realities. The *import* model does not work because in the end it's got to be grounded in the culture and the economy and the political system. The political system is particularly interesting. I learned this in South Africa because the first time I went there it was under the apartheid regime and, for a visitor like me, it was so patently clear that the delivery of career guidance services mirrored the political system. There was a very sophisticated career guidance system in the white areas, but virtually nothing in the black areas. Because for black people opportunities were purposely limited and nobody really thought about what kind of guidance could be appropriate for them. It was a strange mix of a developed country and a developing country, but the models were all developed-country models which, while reasonably sophisticated in those terms, had no relevance to the vast majority of the population, who were deliberately excluded from power and resources and access to building careers and prosperous lives. The divide was so stark in South Africa, but to some extent it's there in all countries. The political system plays a critical role in this respect. So what I'm really saying is it's got to be different in different countries, related to the local realities but also sometimes challenging them. Nonetheless, in all these respects, there's a lot of benefit in learning from other countries.

GA: A question often asked in developing countries is the about the value of vocational pathways (VET) versus university pathways. The latter have a long gestation whereas employment outcomes through VET are relatively quicker. Do you have a comment on this?

TW: In a lot of countries, including developing countries, there's been a big push to try to raise the status of vocational education and training (VET). On the whole, the university route carries high status. Therefore lots of parents want their children to go there if they can get in. VET streams tend to suffer by comparison. On the other hand, because they are closer to the economy, they often deliver more immediately in terms of employment outcomes. I don't think merely raising the status of VET will suffice, if nothing is done systemically. First of all, seeing them as being two quite different and separate streams is part of the problem. Actually they need to interweave. If they are separate, the university path will always tend to be preferred because high-status professions are traditionally linked to university qualifications. So people may feel that by entering the VET system they are cutting themselves off from the real prizes within the labour market. If however they can enter VET but know there are progression routes, and opportunities to access the university system, attitudes might change. Also, if universities start to take the broad employability of their graduates more seriously and not just simply think their role is to get students through theoretical degrees which are completely detached from their future careers, then you could get a much more effective system which is closer to the labour market. While we continue to try and treat the two as alternatives, we are not addressing the root of the problem. Germany is perhaps the leading example of a strong VET system because their dual system interweaves theory and practice, and VET routes have high status. A number of countries are trying to replicate the German model. However, my colleague Richard Sweet, with whom I worked at OECD, used to say that the German dual system was the rhinemaiden of the VET discourse, luring countries to their destruction! And he's right because the point is that it only works in Germany because there are all sorts of social institutions surrounding it. In particular, it is part of a network of relationships between the employers, the unions and the government. If you don't build these structures, the dual system won't work. Even in Germany, they have been encouraging more people to go into higher education and they are beginning to worry about the number of people who are prepared to go into the dual system. So the key issue for countries that are wanting to promote VET is how you can avoid the rigid demarcations between these pathways and allow more cross-paths.

GA: Shifting to history, when you look back over the years, what would you identify as milestones in the evolution of career guidance?

TW: When I first came into the field it was heavily dominated by psychologists, and by Americans. We all looked to the United States to provide us with the strong models: all the theories were coming from there and we were trying to learn from them. And the role of psychometric testing was still very important. Then we started to move towards the developmental model, which was the big change that Donald Super introduced, shifting attention from differential psychology and measurement of individuals towards the process of learning: how we help people through their developmental stages. So we moved from a diagnostic and prescriptive model to a *learning* model. That started to change and shift the way in which we thought about career guidance. You could see all this taking place within the professional organisations related to career guidance. The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) was already there when I started and that was part of the prehistory in a way. But over the years, we have seen the models within IAEVG changing, and the kinds of people who associate with the IAEVG changing, with many more contributions from other countries and other disciplines. Another important part of the history is that the field of career guidance went through a phase when it became very closely linked with

counselling, and that again was strongly influenced by the States. Conceptually, Carl Rogers sat alongside Super in influencing the thinking. Client-centred counselling seemed complementary to a developmental approach to career. So we started to talk about guidance and counselling, and quite a number of services were based on this model. But gradually the two fields have bifurcated: counselling as it has become more professionalised has moved closer to psychotherapy, while guidance has moved closer to career and to a human resource development approach. There is now a big move towards the professionalisation of career professionals in their own right. You can see that happening across Europe and in other countries as well. This needs to be done and the time is ripe for it. At the same time I think it is very important that as the career development field becomes more professionalised, it does with so with clear links with its cognate professions which include teaching, counselling in all its forms, human resource development, and indeed the psychological profession because it still draws a lot from psychological models. Career guidance is greatly enriched by *cross-pollination*. But in the end it should stand as a profession in its own right, surrounded by all those links. At present, career guidance is still a weakly professionalised field. I'm absolutely clear in my own mind that we won't get really strong career development practices without a strong profession. But the profession has always got to be outward-looking. It must not be narrowly self-serving because that won't work: it's got to be prepared to spread its knowledge, spread its skills and competencies, involving others more and more. If you professionalise, you've got to start setting standards and boundaries, and these can easily become walls around you. So we've got to do this, but the way we do it has got to be clever and inclusive.

GA: Much is being said about the future of work. What would you anticipate as being new features of work over the next ten years or so?

TW: Technology is transforming everything in work: whole occupations are disappearing, most occupations are being transformed, and new occupations are appearing, all because of technology. The concept of *occupation* is still a useful one but we've got a growing number of people moving *across* occupations. So perhaps now we have got to think much more about *competencies*, which you carry across whatever you are doing. The pace of these changes will only accelerate. So how do we develop frameworks which will enable people to adapt to these changes and indeed help to drive those changes? It's *people* who make the changes. So it's not just adapting to, not just being reactive: it's also being *proactive*. But how do we do that? To some extent, it's about concepts and language. In terms of career development work, that is quite challenging. The apparatus that we work with currently has to do with courses and occupations in the main. We help people to choose courses and occupations and then we seek to help them to develop within and now increasingly across them. So the notion of occupation still has some merit. But it's not sufficient any more. What you carry with you are your competencies, which is a fairly broad concept because it includes not just knowledge and skills but also attitudes and values. I find this a valuable line of thinking. We've got to continue to rethink some of this for not just for the next ten years but in a way which will prepare us for the ten years beyond that as well, because these processes will continue to develop and change. Also, increasingly, career choice is not just about choice of occupation: it's also about choice of *location*. This is one of the most fundamental choices. For example, in many developing countries including India, whether people in rural communities move to the city or not is a fundamental career choice, because everything else stems from that. Again, more affluent young people are now being encouraged by their parents to live and think globally, to be global citizens, and there are many who are doing this now. To become global citizens, they will need to find it easy to move across cultures: to be culturally aware but not bounded by it, to be able to read cultures fairly quickly and move easily in and out of different situations. They will then be able to build their careers moving *across* boundaries all the time. But where you base yourself

remains a key question. This becomes more complex when you have a partner. It used to be men who went out to work while women looked after the home and the children, but of course it's not like that anymore. Dual career planning is now more and more common in all countries. So now you have the challenge of facilitating the intertwined career development of *two* people's careers. And that raises all sorts of issues about how roles are negotiated within the home and how such decisions are made. For example, if one partner gets a new job abroad, does he or she go off and come back at weekends or more occasionally, or is the partner expected to move there as well? It is easier and quicker now to travel, but it has costs, in terms of money, time and stress. In the end it's about identity, about who you are and who you want to be, which is what career is essentially about. What you do in your learning and work defines who you become. But so does where you live and where you feel at home. I think issues such as these will become more fundamental for career guidance.

GA: Moving now to my last question: What would your advice be to career guidance professionals in countries like India, where it's a growing, slowly emerging profession?

TW: When I came to India a couple of times, I met some of your colleagues, and it has been inspiring to see how you are beginning to grow. People who make a commitment to this work are gold dust! You are planting seeds and it's very important that they flower but also cross-pollinate and cross-fertilise each other. So it's building a *community of practice* where people feel part of a community. In terms of developing effective services it's got to be a mix of clear professional standards and ethics, which is why professionalisation is important, but also related to the needs of the community and places in which they are working and the broader context. It's quite different if you are working in a school setting or in a public employment service setting or in a community setting: they make very different kinds of demands. You've got to be able to read the cultural and economic context and work as interventionists. At the same time you need to be clear about the nature of your involvement in career guidance: what your role is seen as being, where you are based, whether you will be paid for your work and where your livelihood is coming from. It's got to be partly about providing a service of high quality which is a model of best practice, but also always trying to *build capacity*. A few individuals in a country the size of India cannot achieve much on their own, but if each of you also develops models of practice based not just on service delivery but on capacity building, then it will grow rapidly, especially if it harnesses technology alongside human capacity building: that's the key. Legitimacy, credibility and groundedness are all very important. But I think the key is the focus on capacity building.

GA: Thank you Tony! Now, you are moving on from career guidance work and making a career shift yourself! On behalf of our readers and the career guidance profession in India, I want to thank you for all that you have done for this field. I place on record here that your visits to India were milestones in the history of career guidance in this country. We wish you the best.