An Interview with David Blustein

Questions and discussion points composed by: Anuradha Bakshi and Gideon Arulmani (Co-Editors, IJCLP).

David Bluestein, is professor at the department of counselling, developmental, and educational psychology, Lynch School of Education, Boston College, USA. He is renowned for his contributions to the psychology of working, with particular reference to work-based transitions, interface of mental health and work/poverty, school to work transition, career development, relational theories and immigration, race, culture, and working. His work has been recognised through numerous awards and distinctions all through his career including the American Psychological Association's John Holland Award for Outstanding Achievement in Career and Personality Research in 1998, to the Society for Vocational Psychology's Distinguished Achievement Award, in 2013. Prof. Bluestein is a fellow of the American Educational Research Association, the National Career Development Association and the American Psychological Association.

Presented below is an email interview with Prof. Bluestein conducted by the co-editors of the IJCLP, Anuradha Bakshi and Gideon Arulmani in which he tells us a bit about himself and what drew him to this field. The interview goes on to focus on his views about developments in career psychology, inclusion, multiculturalism, testing and assessment, the notion of aptitude, and some of the most contemporary constructs that are influencing the research and practice of career psychology.

Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

First, let me say that I am honored and flattered to be included in this interview. Second, I hope to meet many of your readers at some point, perhaps in a visit to India or when readers of this journal have a chance to visit the United States.

I am a scientist-practitioner who has been practicing counseling psychology for nearly 35 years. I have been an academic for 30 years, first at the University at Albany, State University of New York and, for the past 16 years, at Boston College. My major responsibilities at Boston College include teaching courses in Career Development, Theories of Counseling, and Ethical and Legal Issues in Counseling. In addition, I currently see clients one day a week for individual psychotherapy and career counseling in addition to my full-time responsibilities at Boston College. I am also very happily married to a gifted, kind, and very empathic pediatrician.

What is your main area of specialisation?

I am trained as a counseling psychologist, which in the United States, typically includes vocational psychology as well as other mental health and psychoeducational interventions. Counseling psychologists also have a focus on prevention and developmental interventions as well as remedial interventions (such as traditional psychotherapy). Moreover, we are trained to be both scientists and practitioners, which I have striven to enact throughout my career. I am most deeply involved in the Psychology of Working framework (PWF), which is a perspective that my colleagues and I initiated about 15 years ago. I also have skills in traditional career

development theory, research, and practice. In addition, I have deep interests in socio-political issues that impact on people's work lives. Furthermore, I have clinical interests in traditional psychotherapy, with particular emphasis in relationship issues, work-family balance, anxiety, and depression. My orientation clinically is based on relational psychodynamic theories, mindfulness-based treatments, new cognitive-based theories, feminist therapy, and multicultural counseling.

How were you drawn to career/vocational psychology?

I would say that my being drawn to career and vocational psychology is based on my personal experiences growing in a working-class family in Queens, New York. I lived in a community that included both working class and more upwardly mobile middle-class families. (Our family was solidly in the working class!) I witnessed my parents work very hard and often feel great distress and anxiety about various aspects of their work lives. I began to understand how important work is in people's well-being by watching my parents manage their work lives in a world that did not offer them many easy opportunities. The final commitment to this field was made in my doctoral training. I studied for my Ph.D. at Teachers College, Columbia University, which has historically been the home of important advances in career development theory and practice. (I was a student there a few years after Donald Super retired; his presence was still felt in the program at that time.) Another factor that facilitated my interest was my work at a community college where I was fortunate to work with many first-generation college students, immigrants, and people who were losing their jobs due to layoffs and downsizing. (This was in the early 1980s when the U.S. economy faced a major recession with very high levels of unemployment.). When considered together, each of these influences helped to shape me as a scholar of work and career and also a social advocate who would seek to speak for those without a voice.

What is your strongest area of interest in career/vocational psychology? And could you say how/why this is an area of your interest?

My major interest is in expanding the impact of our work to include people without as much choice and volition in their lives. I am also committed to expanding the impact of our field so that we are able to inform public policy about work, education, training, and inequality. These issues have been my major mission in my work for the past decade or so. The reason that I am so compelled to pursue this agenda is because I believe that our field can have a positive impact on the lives of all people, not just those with some degree of choice. I would like to inspire the next generation of career development scholars and practitioners to think creatively about how to expand our impact. The conceptual lens that I have developed to foster this perspective is the Psychology of Working framework, which offers a meta-perspective that is based on a broad, inclusive, and justice-oriented view of work and life. At this point, a few colleagues and I are developing a precise theory based on the Psychology of Working framework, which we believe will help to advance this position in our field.

A glimpse into your "non-work" activities (hobbies and other pursuits) would be of interest to our readers.

I love my family, first and foremost. I have two wonderful daughters who each have their own children and I have four step-daughters who are also amazing young women. Each of our six daughters/step-daughters is a very special and gifted woman and each is full of life, love, and a deep capacity to give back to the world. I love music, especially rock music and folk

music and I love the arts in general (art museums, films). In addition, my wife and I love to exercise, especially bike riding during the few good months we have of warm weather in Boston.

In many of your writings, you have urged that vocational psychology has to be more inclusive. • **What do you mean by "inclusive"?**

By inclusive, I am referring to making space in the career development/vocational psychology tent for all people who work and who would like to work. This will include people from poor backgrounds, recent immigrants, people with disabling conditions, and others who have been left out of the career discourse in our field and who have been similarly marginalized in a given society.

How inclusive is vocational psychology today?

I think that we have come a long way from the very narrow purview of the post-World War II era in North America and Europe, when the major classic theories emerged, which primarily focused on people with some degree of choice and volition. Initially, our field was responsive to the feminist revolution; indeed, some of the major scholars in the 1970s and 80s in our field were feminist women who helped us to understand the need to embrace gender as a major factor in our work lives. We also have worked harder to include people of color here in the United States in our mission. However, we have a long way to go. That said, we are starting to witness some changes within the past decade in such theoretical statements as life-design theory, social cognitive career theory, and the systems theory framework, which are increasingly incorporating social and economic barriers explicitly into their models.

What are some examples of ways in which vocational psychology is inclusive?

We can expand our theoretical formulations to include those who face significant barriers in their lives. This may involve adapting current theories, as I indicated above, or developing new theories. In my view, the new theories will need to be interdisciplinary, incorporating advances from economics and sociology into existing or new psychological formulations. We also have made major advances in incorporating feminist ideas in our theories, which is perhaps best manifested in Mary Sue Richardson's brilliant new perspective on counseling for work and relationships.   In addition, multicultural perspectives have been infused thoughtfully into research and practice by such scholars as Fred Leong and Nadya Fouad, among others. Furthermore, important new advances are emerging from outside of North America and Europe, including work by Gideon Arulmani from India; Peter McIlveen, Wendy Patton, and Mary McMahon from Australia; Hanoch Flum, Itamar Gati, and Gali Cinamon from Israel; and Mark Watson and Graham Stead from South Africa. I encourage the contributions from scholars from around the globe, who will radically transform our work with their innovative and creative new ideas.

Who or which individuals and groups are still not included, not addressed?

I believe that people who are very poor—the homeless, those without 21st century education and training, and people with disabling conditions are still not being adequately addressed. Another group that we need to pay careful attention to is the growing cohort of older workers, who are living longer and are striving to remain active in labor market. Furthermore, despite the wonderful efforts of our colleagues in vocational rehabilitation, we still have a long way to go to include individuals with disabling conditions in our mission.

What are the challenges in the study and practice of vocational psychology?

I think that the most significant challenge for us is to be more inclusive and to develop new models and methods for those without as much as choice. Another related challenge has to do with the growing role of technology in the workforce, which will result in major reductions of work around the globe. I believe that our field needs to be on the cutting edge of this issue, raising the importance of work in people's lives as a fundamental human right. In addition, we need to develop tools and approaches for clients who will be faced with the need to reinvent themselves multiple times across their life spans.

How has your work in vocational psychology altered over the years? Why?

My work has changed dramatically over the years. At the outset of my academic career, I was studying rather traditional issues, such as career exploration, career decision-making, and identity formation. During my first sabbatical in 1992, I read deeply and widely about the struggles that non-college bound youth were having transitioning to the adult world of work. This opened my eyes to the potential for scholars such as myself to join together to create activist and engaged research that would seek to change the status quo in our field. The later part of the 1990s was a period of continued reflection for me, which culminated in the publication of my first article on the Psychology of Working in 2001. I still very much value the research that I conducted earlier in my career; I think that it set a clear foundation for the work that I am doing now.

Career counselling contexts are becoming increasingly multicultural and both scholars and practitioners are calling for culture-specific approaches to guidance and counselling. Against this background we have two contrasting points that we would like you to comment on:

Are there "universal" principles that straddle all forms of career guidance?

This is a fascinating question. I think that there are some universal principles, but even these principles are culturally and historically bound. One of the "universal" principles in our field is that people strive to find meaning and satisfaction in their work lives. However, meaning and satisfaction may be defined in very different ways in diverse cultures. In Western cultures, self-determination and following one's dream are often viewed as the ticket to a meaningful and joyful work life. In more collectivist cultures, meaning and satisfaction may be derived from working in a position that offers one's family and community stable sources of income, dignity, and room for advancement. That said, I do think that people across cultures strive for a good fit in their lives; the notion that we are seeking a good connection between ourselves and our work-related tasks is certainly a robust principle, although not entirely universal.

Could you give us pointers on how career guidance could be culture specific?

I think that an analysis such as the one that I provided in the previous response is a good example of how to infuse culture into our thinking. Even though most of us would concur that people are looking for a good Person-Environment fit, the nature of that fit is often constrained and defined by one's culture. Becoming more culture-specific is often attainable by conducting a careful culturally-informed analysis of the underlying assumptions of a given set of ideas and practices. Also, I suggest that asking people who are immersed in a given culture to function as informants to provide input into existing and new formulations about work and career.

Aptitude Testing seems to have fallen into disfavour in the West. Yet, in countries like India, career guidance is almost equated with aptitude testing and the demand for testing is high. Recently even the Prime Minister of India called for the creating of a national system of aptitude testing. The trend in the Western literature however seems to point toward "narrative" approaches and the notion of "constructing" a career. In collectivist contexts, it is hard for an individual to "construct" a career and most often career decisions are significantly influenced by the necessity for cultural "approval". Could you comment the following:

Does the notion of aptitude play a role in career decision making?

I am delighted to mull over this question. In short, I am generally not in favor of aptitude testing; in fact, I have not used a formal aptitude test in any of career interventions for the past 30 years. My concerns have to do with the limitations that these tests have, primarily in their reliance on "g" factor-based scales. (The "g" factor refers to the underlying factor that is ostensibly evident in intelligence tests and aptitude tests.) I fear that clients and counselors will view the results of aptitude tests as a "fait accompli" index of a level of intelligence. I view intelligence as mutable and responsive to educational and familial enrichment initiatives; in fact, I prefer to call intelligence "knowledge, skills, and abilities". I should note that I do not believe that my view is the norm here in the U.S. Some colleagues I know use aptitude tests or find sources of "g"-factor based indices to use with clients in considering their career options.

Does aptitude testing have a role to play?

In my view, I do not believe that aptitude testing has a major role to play, particularly with adults who have already experienced both school and work. I would prefer to use the larger sample of behavior that is reflected in academic transcripts and work performance rather than aptitude tests, which are a narrow slice of one's capacity to perform. Also, aptitude tests in the U.S. have tended to function to further marginalize students and clients whose families have been left out of the American Dream. For example, in the U.S. people of color and people from poor backgrounds often do not fare well on aptitude tests, which could serve to reduce their aspirations and constrain their ultimate career trajectory.

In collectivist contexts, how relevant are methods such as "narrative" approaches and the notion of "career construction"?

I do think that narrative and career construction approaches would be useful in collectivist cultures. There may need to be some modifications to the tools that are used currently in Western cultures to make the questions and tasks more relevant to clients living in collectivist cultures. However, I think that the major principles would be relevant.

How can the career counsellor draw the family/community into the career counselling process?

I think that we would want to draw the family/community into career counseling in some of the tools that are used in narrative career intervention. This might help these tools to become more culturally sensitive in that career decisions are embedded more explicitly in families and communities in many cultures around the globe. In a broader sense, I do think that we need to include families and communities in our work, particularly in poor communities where resources are limited. Decisions that are made by young people within poor families have a substantial

impact on the welfare of families; in this sense, it is important for students and counselors to incorporate families' perspectives in evolving career plans.

Career counselling is a new concept in the developing world context. Models and theories are nearly absent. Yet, the need for career guidance is rapidly emerging. By default, Western theories, tools and methods are being directly implemented in such contexts. What is your advice to researchers, practitioners and policy makers in developing countries who are involved in career guidance? What should be kept in mind in order to establish relevant systems for career guidance?

I think that career counselors and researchers should be very cautious about applying Western-based tools and methods in developing nations. I would suggest that practitioners build on indigenous approaches that have emerged and blend them with aspects of Western approaches that are promising in a given cultural context. We would need to test each and every principle, tools, and method used in developing nation to ensure that it is relevant and not denigrating in any way for students and clients.   My colleagues from South Africa, Graham Stead and Mark Watson, have written very thoughtfully about the use of traditional tools coupled with indigenous methods in the diverse landscape of South Africa.

Keeping the interface between career development and educational development in mind, what are some points that educational reformers could keep in view when they develop educational curricula?

We need to develop educational curricula that help to prepare well-rounded citizens who can engage thoughtfully in the 21st century economy. Rather than focusing on education that will train students for the jobs of today, we need to anticipate the jobs of tomorrow. We can do this by training our students to be creative and innovative so that they help to create the industries and practices that will create employment for people in the coming decades. In addition, we need to enhance our students' readiness for career transitions that will become constants in their lives; students need to learn the "soft-skills" of empathy, tolerance, mindfulness, optimism, flexibility, and agency so that they can manage the stresses that will be part of the world of work. The final point that I would like to make is that we include critical consciousness education in our reform efforts. Based on the work in liberation pedagogy by Paulo Freire from Brazil, I believe that we need to teach our students to read and to "read the world". Students need to understand that work is a human right and that economies need to be structured to ensure that people have access to dignified and decent work.

What new developments are likely to occur in the world of work in the coming years? How will theory, research and practice flexibly adapt to these potential developments?

As I indicated earlier, I foresee the near future as a time of great flux in the global economy. I believe that we are entering a period wherein technology will replace large numbers of jobs across the globe, which will necessarily transform the world of career counseling and career development education. In my view, career development practitioners and scholars will be more important than ever. In this context, I believe that we also need to take on the role of being experts in how work impacts people's lives. As societies grapple to create enough work, we need to advocate for Decent Work (a concept developed by the United Nations and the International Labour Organization) as a foundation for work. While the issues are daunting and perhaps a bit beyond our current skill set, I think that we will be needed to inform broader policy debates about the importance of work as a human right.

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