

Interview with Professor Nadya A. Fouad

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?

My team and I are doing work in three major areas:

- a. The role of family influence in career decision making and how that differs across cultural groups. We developed a scale to measure family influence that has four subscales: informational support (e.g., that my family gave me information about careers and also about career decision making), financial support (my family supported higher education), values and beliefs (my family's values influenced the type of career I chose), and family expectations (my family expected me to go into a certain type of profession, or my family expected me have a certain prestige level of occupation, or my family expects me to not shame them by my choice of career). We have found that, for example, Asian Americans differ from European Americans in their family's expectations in career. We are continuing to validate the scale with other racial/ethnic groups and also studying its construct validity.
- b. We are studying the effectiveness of various types of career interventions, and will do a large study in the fall to assess the effectiveness of four types of interventions with undecided college students. The types of interventions vary in the intensity of counselor-interactions (help with web-based materials, walk-in counseling, group counseling, and classroom interventions), and we will see if they differ in how the interventions affect career decidedness, retention in school, achievement, career decision making self-efficacy and career adaptability.
- c. We are conducting a series of studies on women who graduate from engineering school—investigating if they enter the field of engineering, and what influences their persistence (or leaving) the field. We are extending that study to investigate factors influencing men who graduate in engineering and to both men and women who are currently engineers.

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

I would say this is, for the most part, disappointing. We have too big a gap between those conducting research and those practicing in the field. The reward structures help to maintain that gap- with researchers rewarded for complex studies that are published in journals that have little practical implications, while practitioners are rewarded for the numbers of clients they see, with

little time to conduct research and less time to read those complex studies. I think there needs to be some regular way to communicate the issues that practitioners see as critical to researchers who then need to be able to translate their ideas into studies, and for researchers to write in a way that translates their research into practical ideas.

3. Do you think career counseling contribute (how important and to what extent) to downsize the problems caused by the International socio-economic crisis?

Yes, I think it's imperative that we contribute our knowledge to this issue. A group of us are doing a symposium at the American Psychological Association conference on just this issue in August. First, we can help people develop some perspective about how this occurs within the greater societal context—often when people lose their job, they first blame themselves. So helping them gain a perspective on the context of the economic crisis is important. Then, I think it's critical to help them learn career adaptability skills—both in terms of what they could do when their work disappears (types of work available), and also the resilience needed to look for work in this new economic environment. Types of work, ways of looking for work, the social contract between worker and employer are all changing, and people need to be resilient to find employment in this changing environment. Finally, we need to bring our social justice perspective to ensure that the socio-economic crisis does not disproportionately affect immigrants and clients of color.

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

I think that career counselors need first to be excellent counselors—they need to be able to listen, help to activate hope for their clients that they can help with their problems and conflicts, and develop effective interventions to help their clients. Then they also need additional skills to understand career theories that will help them conceptualize the client's concerns. They need to have a wide repertoire of assessment skills—not just to know interest inventories, but a wider variety of both standardized assessment tools as well as more informal tools to help their clients gain self-awareness and also explore various options. Career counselors then also need to have a very good understanding of the role of the world of work and how that is changing—to help a client make a good choice often means knowing what those various options are for the client. This is particularly critical in the face of all the changes in the occupational environment. Finally, I think it's critical that career counselors have a very good understanding of the client's cultural context, to help the client make the best choice for him/herself. This includes understanding the client's

race/ethnicity, immigration status, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, religion, etc, and how these influence his or her concepts of work and the role work plays in his/her life.

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

I think we need more research on career counseling process—are there some critical ingredients in the career counseling itself that leads to effective interventions? In other words, we need to know what works for whom—and in what context. Do some types of students respond more effectively to some interventions than others? Can we develop interventions to help eliminate barriers for students to complete higher education? Does career counseling need to be different for different types of students?

I also think we need more research on career choice and transition points other than just at the beginning of a career. Career counselors can be helpful as individuals move through their work lives—for example, are there ways we can provide help to mid-career clients? To those contemplating a career change or retirement? Or adjusting to retirement? And are these different for different types of people—do they differ by type of work, cultural context of the client, or socio-economic status?