

***Vocational Designing and Career Counselling:  
Challenges and New Horizons,  
Padua 12-14<sup>th</sup> September 2011<sup>1</sup>***

The University of Padua along with the Italian Society for Vocational Guidance, the University of Bologna, the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP) as well as the Laboratory of Research and Intervention in Vocational Guidance (La.R.I.O.S) organized an international conference on career counselling. The subject of the conference centred on the issues implied by its theme, concerning the challenges and perspectives in the support of professional development faced by counselling science and practice. The purpose of the conference was to search for an answer to the question of how consultancy and career counselling can be practiced in conditions of common uncertainty, deep social and economic crisis as well as the threat of unemployment and marginalization, which are accompanied by an increasing demand for mobility and flexibility in both private and professional life. Therefore, Laura Nota and Salvatore Soresi, the organizers and hosts of the meeting, made questions regarding the future of counselling and the science dealing with its issues, the centre of the conference's attention. The three-day discussion focused on searching for the answer to the question of counsellors' readiness and competence to give their support in the current economic and social situation in the western world, as well as the choice and promotion of a theoretical model of career counselling, which would be adequate for existing and future challenges. The organizers did not try to conceal their ambition to make a breakthrough in the practice of European counselling, which is bolstering up professional development through promulgating the idea of *life designing*, which can be identified with the concept of biographical counselling formulated in our country. The image of Galileo, which was promoted at the Italian conference, was the symbol of this paradigmatic breakthrough. The choice of the Renaissance scholar, who rejected scholasticism as a method of scientific approach, which was commonly used in his time, in favour of empiricism, does not seem to be accidental. The initiation of diverse changes in science has always been noticeable throughout the history of the Paduan University. This is where Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia gained a doctorate in 1678, the first woman to do so, and the Anatomy Theatre of 1594 set the pattern for this type of

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theatre to be copied at other European universities of the time. Jan Kochanowski and Mikołaj Kopernik studied at the University of Padua, which was established in 1222, and is the second oldest university in Europe, after Bologna.

The September conference abounded with events, whose possible significance for counselling science and the very practice of counselling will go beyond some symbolic gestures. Just the day before the official opening of the conference, the European Society for Vocational Designing and Career Counselling, with counselling researchers as its associates, was founded. Among the founder members of this organization were representatives of the Polish scientific community: Alicja and Józef Kargul, Violetta Drabik-Podgórna and Joanna Minta.

The second important (and not only symbolic) initiative was the publication of a book including answers to the questions that the organizers had e-mailed to researchers on several continents. The questions concerned the role of counselling in people's lives and society during times of crisis; the possibilities of preventing marginalization and social exclusion; counsellors' co-operation; the possible objectives and activities of counselling undertaken to help individuals, who find themselves in an adverse life situation; optimizing the influence of counselling on politicians' decisions; counsellors' competence; and finally, the concern associated with the ways of practicing counselling and framing tasks which are possible to be carried out in cooperation with other specialists. The received replies formed an interesting collection of thoughts, beliefs, anxieties and hopes as expressed by both researchers and practitioners of career counselling from many countries in the world. They were trying to outline the challenges faced by career counselling and provide the foundations and objectives for a new paradigm of the assistance that can be related to people's occupational development.

Over 500 participants from Europe, USA, Canada, Latin America, Australia, Japan, the Republic of South Africa and Africa took part in the conference. Judging by the number of people who attended the sessions directly referring to *Life Designing* and theories of counselling, there was the great thirst for knowledge related to the paradigm mentioned above. The participants in the conference included numerous representatives of the research section of the Wroclaw school of counselling science centred on Alicja Kargul and Józef Kargul, who took the initiative to establish the *Naukowe Towarzystwo Poradownicze (the Counsellogical Association)* in 2011. In total, eight researchers from Poland participated in the conference, the organization of which was also marked by the attendance of Violetta Drabik-Podgórna on its scientific committee.

The conference sessions took place in the stately Aula Magna and at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Padua. They were arranged in different ways: plenary sessions, symposia, sessions in small groups and poster sessions. As many as 52 specific sessions were planned by the organizers to take place within two days, which, however, with up to 11 sessions run at the same time, made it difficult for the participants to make a choice about which ones to attend. Some sessions dedicated

to the same problem were timetabled simultaneously, as, for example, was the case with the session devoted to the contemporary challenges faced by career planning. The remaining specialist sessions dealt with the following issues: women's careers, diagnostic methods in counselling, motivational and non-occupational factors determining the course of careers, types and ways of running counselling practice, current challenges faced by organizers of counselling services, the NICE network of co-operation, the analysis of transitions between particular career stages and the part played by counselling in such processes, working with clients characterised by different types of disabilities, ways of giving support to carry out professional goals with the aim of solving problems, theories of career, the role played by the family in making vocational decisions, career counselling for immigrants, the achievement of personal and public goals through counselling and the transformation of institutions providing counselling services. Although the poster sessions of the conference included 76 posters related to diverse subjects, the majority of them presented studies on the factors influencing vocational choices carried out on Italian students.

There is no doubt that the plenary sessions, carried out in a well thought out and consistent manner, were the most important events of the conference. Each session focused on a single subject, which was presented by successive speakers and shown from the perspectives of investigations conducted in different countries. The adoption of such an organizational solution turned out to be extremely inspiring and illuminating, which was demonstrated by the large audience present.

The first plenary session called 'Vocational designing and career counselling: challenges and new horizons', was of an introductory character, and its participants made an attempt to outline the possible approaches to the idea of practicing vocational guidance in the difficult conditions of the contemporary labour market and increasing economic crisis. Salvatore Soresi from the University of Padua talked about the uncertainty and disillusion with the present time, which he defined as 'the past of the future'. He raised questions about the way in which specialists, dealing with professional development, can perform their occupational role, and how their role can be defined. The question of how in the contemporary world counsellors are able to tell people about hope and help them to think positively seemed especially important to me. While continuing the discussion on the problem of challenges faced by counselling, Mary Heppner from the University of Missouri pointed to the unjust treatment of women at work, which even bears the hallmarks of segregation. When she was referring to the phenomenon of marginalization, Laura Nota from the University of Padua pointed out that the social categories we use to describe power and exclusion are in fact a kind of mental state. In this context, she moved on to analyse disability, which was understood as a lack of taking advantage of the mental predisposition that is often referred to as a sense of power. While searching for inspiration in the way contemporary people cope with their occupational difficulties, Puncky Heppner from the University of Missouri, USA encouraged us to look into the past and make use of our ancestors' power and experience. To advance

his thesis, he talked about the need for cultural competence, its positive points and its role in identifying demands, increasing productivity at work, creating patterns of social relations and the abilities to solve problems. He appealed to us to break free from the chains of old habits and discover the new qualities of the future. His passionate speech provoked his listeners to think about whether we are the slaves of the past created by our ancestors. It made the audience ask the question of how to separate from the chain of the past what is useful and positively inspiring from what is only suitable for feeding our pessimism. How to only inherit our ancestors' courage not cowardice? Rosie Philips Bingham, the subsequent speaker from the University of Memphis, paid attention to the 'right size' term meaning the number of workers that assures an organization's full effectiveness and efficiency (actually the minimum employment), as a challenge to the labour market.

At the end of the first day of the plenary session, the idea of the newly established European Society for Vocational Designing and Career Counselling was presented by its president Professor Jean Pierre Dauwalder from the University of Lausanne. He pointed out that the aim of the association of scientists was not only to serve the integration of this social setting in Europe, but was also targeted at promoting the idea of life designing in the practice of provided services.

Two symposiums that took place on the second day of the conference attracted the participants' special attention. The first of them was devoted to the designing of research based on the conceptions of career development, which would favour the optimal advancement of young people. Then the floor was taken by Rachel Gali Cinamon from the University of Tel-Aviv as well as Curtis Richards and Scott Solberg from the United States of America. Rachel Cinamon gave a very interesting speech on the solutions concerning the practice of career counselling in the conditions of Israeli kibbutzim as a part of a project implemented by a non-governmental organization, which resulted in the many-sided development of young people, and made it possible for them to acquire a competence that is useful in many areas of life. Curtis Richards talked about his work with Americans affected by what are broadly defined as disabilities.

Great interest was aroused up by a lecture given by Mark Savickas from the University of Northwestern Ohio, who presented the idea of life designing counselling (biographical counselling) and showed its practical implications. The proposed model of the counsellor's work is based on the assumptions of constructivism and the narration approach, and the conversation between the advisor and his/her client is centred on the following four questions: 1. What happened? 2. Why it happened? 3. What is the meaning of what happened? 4. What are the consequences of this event for a person's life? The speaker emphasised that the idea of 'life designing' demands that the counsellor has the ability to edit a story told by their clients, thanks to which their identities are transformed. It is worth noticing that M. Savickas's concept is concurrent with the idea of biographical counselling, which is

being developed by the Wrocław school of counselling science (also represented at the conference in Padua), which raises some hope for close co-operation in future.

Two symposiums took place on the last day of the conference. The first dealt with the paradigm of life designing, and was in fact, a continuation of M. Savickas's lecture. The floor was taken by Maria Eduarda Duarte from the University of Lisbon, Raoul van Esbroeck from the Vrije University in Brussels, Jean Pierre Dauwalder from the University of Lausanne and Laura Nota and Salvatore Soresi as well as Jean Guichard from The French National Institute for Labour, Employment and Vocational Training in Paris. In fact, this event was a display of the ideological framework of the newly established European Society for Vocational Designing and Career Counselling, which was a result of common studies on counselling practice carried out in different European centres. M. Duarte attempted to relate the life designing paradigm to the traditional theoretical, empirical and developmental canons of career counselling. J.P. Dauwalder analysed the consequences of the newly promoted model of guidance, which challenges the competence of advisors. The paper by L. Nota concentrated on presenting the purpose of training counsellors to work within not only the life designing paradigm, but also the ones who follow traditional patterns in a changing world. Finally, J. Guichard, using the examples of two individuals, demonstrated the role of dialogue in designing and re-designing clients' expectations. In his resume of the symposium, R. van Esbroeck stressed that the adoption of a given paradigm of counselling practice (guidance, counselling, or education) depends on a client's needs.

The last symposium, which closed the conference, concerned the mutual influence of work and family life, analysed from a socio-cultural perspective. In his speech, Richard Young from the University of British Columbia accentuated the universality of challenges and the necessity of changes involving both work and family life. He argued for the necessity of following the principle of common activities (shared with others) in life, directed at the purpose of integrating all life projects. He also used this principle to derive from it the directives related to career counselling. He reminded his audience that the counsellor's activities should invariably focus on three goals: giving support to the client's narration, confronting the client with his/her statements and searching for effectiveness. These directives sound familiar to Polish counselling scientists and are described in our literature, e.g., by Marian Kulczycki in his conception of relational (life) counselling.

While looking critically at the views presented at the conference, it cannot go unnoticed that they were not new to Polish research and constitute the basic canon of counselling science knowledge, which was clearly discerned by the Polish participants in this event. The speech by J. Kargul, presenting the development and scientific achievements of counselling researchers as well as their efforts to integrate their professional environment, which resulted in the establishment of the Counselling Association, was also interesting to the American Psychological Association,

who invited the professor to co-operate in international studies on the models of training counsellors<sup>2</sup>.

To sum up, it can be gladly concluded that the vision and concept of career counselling formulated in Poland matches the mainstream of the current theoretical research and everyday practice of counselling all over the world. It is sad, however, that the state of our knowledge still remains unknown to a wider body of experts. Due to the presentation of the idea of life designing, the conference made it possible to integrate researchers dispersed all over Europe and the world and include this paradigm into the mainstream of career counselling, which is likely to result in real changes in organizing counselling services in Europe and popularize Polish achievements in this realm of science.

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(Translated from Polish by Wojciech Gromski)

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<sup>2</sup> Cf.: J. Kargul (2012) *Information on the Activities of the Counsellogical Association*, "Psychology Research", no. 3, vol. 2, p. 201-204.