

# Reflections on a life in careers: 'A kind of search' – A conversation with Tony Watts and Hazel Reid

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**Tony Watts:** In terms of structuring our discussion, I think I may just cluster things: nationally, internationally and then if you like intellectually. I think it is getting more back on to...a kind of search.

**Hazel Reid:** Yes indeed...when you look back at what you have done, what are some of the aspects of your work that give you a kind of buzz?

**Tony:** Starting nationally, I suppose I came into this because I wanted to improve the quality of the help available to people when they make decisions about their lives. It seemed very simple when we started CRAC, but it is actually quite complex which is why it became really interesting and why we started NICEC. Many of the things which I have been really proud of being involved in have been working across boundaries. I have always been interested in what has been happening within sectors like schools and higher education, and I have done a lot of work in various sectors. But I have also always tried to work across sectors and also across the interfaces between practice, theory and policy. So, nationally, I have been involved with a number of initiatives trying to develop some structures, so that dialogues across these boundaries could take place and energies could be harnessed to get synergies flowing.



Going way back, the Standing Conference for the Advancement of Counselling was about that. Initiated by Hans Hoxter, it was extremely interesting and quite creative for a while at least. I think all these things have their time. So for a while they are very fertile and very creative and then things move on. SCAC was an interface between all the different areas of counselling, including career guidance. I chaired the Counselling in Work Settings group, and was involved in other ways too. So that was one. Then there was SCAGES (Standing Conference of Associations for Guidance in Educational Settings), which Stephen McNair and I co-chaired and which was the first major attempt to get the different guidance associations to work together. The Guidance Council was a bigger

initiative, with a much wider range of organisations: I was closely involved in supporting Sir Christopher Ball in establishing that and again I think we did some terrific work. Currently we have the CSSA (Careers Sector Stakeholders Alliance) which is trying to do some of the work that the Guidance Council would have done, but with no resources apart from the voluntary work of Keith Herrmann and others. I am very proud to have been involved in these various initiatives. They are not easy things to do. All have been dependent so much on harnessing the energies of a range of individuals and organisations. So it's about finding people who are committed and interested in working together to do things they couldn't do on their own. So I think there is a kind of

thread there that is partly cross-sectoral, partly cross-professional and partly across interfaces between practice and policy and research and theory.

CRAC and NICEC too, I have been really proud of and pleased at being involved with some wonderful people. We've had to work through some problems, but on the whole we've worked together very well and done some influential work: it has been terrific. And now it's different, with NICEC evolving into a learned society, and looking very viable in its new role. Any organization nowadays that wants to survive must be willing to change and that has been done very well. So I am really proud of being involved with all of that. More recently I've been involved a lot with the University of Derby and I think again that is looking very good. I really admire Tristram Hooley and the work he has been doing since taking over at Derby. So while I am interested in my own work, I am also interested in developing infrastructures which can bring people together to do worthwhile work.

**Hazel:** And what is perhaps more than a national contribution, the book by Watts et al in 1996, was a real milestone for those of us who were training people in Career Education, Guidance and Counselling...

**Tony:** Well, thank you. I am so glad we did it, when we did, because it seemed the right time. When I thought about it, I realised that between us we had covered pretty much everything, but we had not brought it together and we really needed to do so while we were all together. John Killeen died a few years later, and Jenny Kidd became ill, so it was the right time to do it. We were lucky because through Sir Christopher Ball and his contacts we got a grant to support the work. We were all very busy, with demanding income targets, but we were able to pay for the time we spent on our meetings and the writing of the book, which is a very privileged situation to be in. The voices of each of the five of us are quite audible in their own ways, but you can see how we all benefited from our conversations – and in fact, of course, we had worked together for many years as well. There are different instruments at play but they are harmonized. In many ways it complements the book on *Career Development in Britain* which we did some years before, to bring together the work we did when Donald

Super was with us, based on the same principle. That book was concerned with how people develop their careers, and the 1996 book was how we intervene in that process. So for me those two large pieces of work stand as quite important in the sense of bringing together lots of threads and I think that was a good thing to do.

**Hazel:** And it was important that it was a UK text, because most of the literature was not.

**Tony:** Yes, I think we were very clear that we wanted a focus on the UK, but we also hoped that it would be of interest to people in other countries and indeed it was. For example Peter Plant translated quite a lot of it for Denmark, and other people have found it helpful. So a lot of the ideas were written within an international frame, but we were also clear we were designing it primarily to support development in the UK.

**Hazel:** And UK authors I think...

**Tony:** That's true. Well it was NICEC people or those who had worked with NICEC for a long period of time...so yes, it was UK authors. Of course we drew on international material as well. But the fact that we were all from the UK gave the book a coherence that I think it might not have had otherwise. Different books have different purposes. The book I have recently been working on with Gideon and Anuradha Bakshi and Fred Leong, for example, I think is different because it is designed for a much broader, international audience. That is not easy but I think it's very well worth doing. What we did in the 1996 book was a bit different.

**Hazel:** What about the international work? What comes to mind, without analysing it too much?

**Tony:** No, not analysing! I have worked in a lot of countries and when you work in a country you get to know it better and it is far more interesting than looking at a few cathedrals or art galleries, nice though that is. So I'm not a very good tourist! One of the things which I felt was important right from the beginning was to write something after these trips. So I was invited to give some lectures in Malaysia and I thought if I have to write something, that'll force me

to find out something about Malaysia. I will start on it before I go, through reading, and then try to learn while I am there. I think that's a great discipline, I've done it quite a bit. I always think that you don't know what you think until you have written it. I've been lucky to have lots of opportunities like that. Donald Super was very helpful in opening some doors. I've worked quite a lot with international organizations: Council of Europe, OECD, UNESCO, World Bank. I've also worked a lot with the European Commission and its agencies, and that's been terrific because I'm a fervent believer in the idea of Europe. I've been involved with the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network since its inception, and also with the complementary series of International Symposia on Career Development and Public Policy. I think working with people from different countries is incredibly rich. The OECD has intellectually been the best of the organizations to work with, because its influence lies in the quality of its ideas and its technical work. The others are much more political organisations. OECD is a bit more like a university in some ways, so I've always really enjoyed working with OECD.

I've also always found it particularly interesting to work in 'developing' and middle-income countries because you have to think about how these ideas stand up in societies which are so incredibly diverse in terms of economic development, social structure, culture and other ways. You have to address some fundamental assumptions which we take for granted in the UK, and there is a lot that can be learnt from that. For example, I learnt an awful lot about the informal economies, which have always fascinated me. We don't talk about them, we don't even use the term much here, yet so many of our issues are linked with the informal economies. I learnt that from working in 'developing' economies where the informal economies are enormously important. So much work is managed within the hidden economy on a cash basis, or through exchange, or in communal and family structures. Gideon in India has written some terrific stuff on culture and belief systems. And I have learnt a lot about all this working with Ronald Sultana. So I've worked with some really good people and that has enormously enriched me.

**Hazel:** I wonder what your view is in terms of what we do in career guidance and counselling in the West

and how that fits or doesn't fit with what we might call collective societies?

**Tony:** I've always been very interested in trying to see career guidance in terms not just of atomistic individuals, but of individuals within families or wider communities. Employment and self-employment are an important part of career, because they produce income, based on meeting the needs of other people. I see this as being a modern form of the social contract, through which we do work for other people that leads to income, which we can then use in whatever ways we wish. Some may develop their own identity and their own mission in life through their paid work, and some do this in other parts of their life. I have always thought of career as being about learning and work, both broadly defined. Work is not just employment: it's also self-employment and also all the work we all do in our households and communities. I learnt that from working in developing countries and I think this is very relevant to us as well. We are increasingly at risk of seeing individuals as being atomistic units, focused on personal advancement at the expense of others. Values matter. Career guidance can help clarify those values. I think values should lie at the core of career decision making and of interventions in that process.

**Hazel:** Setting aside all the not so good things that are happening in the UK at the moment, there is a shift that we are experiencing within NICEC and elsewhere, towards Career Coaching. If you looked forward to how things might develop, what's your view about the separation or combination of different types of careers work?

**Tony:** I see coaching as focusing on learning how to do things. It pays more attention to behaviours and perhaps less to reflective processes of decision making. We could have a longer conversation about this, but I think coaching has much to offer. But we have always to look at the social, structural issues as well. In the end it is not just about individuals making and implementing decisions based on their own personalities, but also engaging with the society around them, including the labour market but also wider social realities. So philosophically, I have always thought we must take a multidisciplinary approach. This field tends to be dominated by psychology, understandably and probably rightly, but it shouldn't be totally so, because

in the end it is about helping individuals in relation to the wider society, so sociology is relevant too, as is economics in terms of the labour market. Much can be learnt as well from literature and from history. I think we have often been a bit narrow in the way we think and I have always enjoyed working with people who can work outside these boundaries.

Technology of course is massively important in terms of future interventions. However, we must continue to adopt an approach which is concerned with using technology for humane purposes, rather than thinking of technology as replacing human interventions. There are still huge issues here; becoming even more complex now with social media.

**Hazel:** I know Tony that you have said from the end of this year you won't be engaging in this sector as much. So what is next? What is on your horizon?

**Tony:** I will be 72 this year. I have loved working in this sector, but I would rather end while I still feel reasonably competent. I have got many other things which I enjoy doing and now I have got to a point where I have realized that I slightly resent reading yet another research article or another policy document, when I could be reading a great novel or history. I realise my time is running out, as it does for all of us, and I would rather give more time to other things while I still can. To family and lots of lovely friends. Early music and cricket are huge passions of mine. Cambridge is an amazing place to live, with so much wonderful music and intellectual stimulation of all kinds. I am very interested in politics and history. There is so much going on. I have had one or two friends saying 'I don't think you will be able to retire'. I am determined to prove them wrong! I think I can do this. But it is not easy. It is a big career decision, and not an easy one to make. I have made so many friends through my work in this field and I have always found it absolutely fascinating and I am very committed to it and I want to see it get better. But I feel I have done my bit. Now I want in the final years of my life, to do smaller things. I have agreed to take over as editor of the Handel News [Handel, the composer], which is the newsletter of the Friends of the London Handel Festival, and to run a U3A [University of the Third Age] class on Handel operas and oratorios. I love Handel to bits. But I don't want to take on many

commitments. I think really what I want to do, is not do so much. I want to have more time for reading, watching cricket, listening to music, and spending time with grandchildren, other family and friends. All my life, I have been a doer. Now I think I am at a stage where I am more interested in *being* rather than *doing* and finding out how that can work!



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