

# The New Vocational Counseling Consumer\*

Sam H. Perlstein

*Psychologist, Jewish Vocational Services, Cleveland*

*Social changes that are encouraging women to enter the labor market, federal legislation which mandates equal opportunity for women and medical advances that lead to longer life are some of the factors influencing the appearance of the new consumer of educational and vocational services.*

Although the title of this paper includes the adjective "new," the client groups I write about are really not new; there is no question that the single parent, the older worker, the mid-career-change client and women clients have come to JVS for services throughout the years. However, we are now beginning to see large enough numbers in each of these groups so that we need perhaps to orient ourselves to there being a group phenomenon rather than an individual or an occasional occurrence. Population demographics are greatly different than they were 20 or 30 years ago, as are the characteristics of different age groups, not to speak of the many environmental, economic and technological changes that have been taking place during the past 20 or 30 years. Although we have never been in a completely static and stable culture, never have there been so many changes as we have had since the end of World War II.

We are now considered to be an aging population with the birth-rate down nearly to the point of zero population growth. More people are living longer at the same time that fewer people are being born. Social changes that are encouraging women to enter the labor market, federal legislation which mandates equal opportunity for women and medical advances that lead to longer life are some of the factors influencing the appearance of the new consumer

of educational and vocational services.

Along with the many external environmental changes, we know that at all ages there are developmental processes taking place and that each individual has a potential dynamic for change and growth. It is sometimes difficult for a counselor to utilize this dynamic process of his client, for the counselor himself, may have been reared in an earlier culture, so different from the new in its demands and opportunities.

The 1960's was a time of the "Greening of America," where it appeared that the work ethic was no longer important, where structure was deemphasized and where liberation to do your own thing was paramount. The culture was youth-oriented, self-gratification minded, oriented to communal living and to an emphasis on individual craft, farming, and preservation of the environment by keeping the ecology in balance. However, although this seemed to be an attempt to deemphasize materialism, itself an important component of the work ethic, the concept of work really never lost its import.

Throughout the ages and in every culture, what and how an individual produced was always one of the means of identifying the person and, therein, lies a major problem, conflict among values which people necessarily internalize. A core issue, I believe, is how the individual integrates what value and balances it with other values already part of himself.

Recently, the Cleveland branch of the National Council of Jewish Women con-

---

\* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Denver, May 28, 1980.

ducted a study of the incidence of divorce. The findings were that in the Jewish community the divorce rate continues to go up and is approaching the same rate of divorce as occurs in the general community. The guess is that there will be a continuing high rate of divorce ranging anywhere from 33 percent to 50 percent. One of the major findings in this study was that the divorced women felt a great need of vocational services as they were faced with the need to support self and often family.

Many of the women were married at a young age, having recently graduated from high school or having left college after one or two years in order to get married. They have no work skills nor job experience. Their orientation was to be a wife, a mother, and a housekeeper. They came from families which encouraged them to get married at a young age and to raise a family with their husband's having the role of breadwinner. And, if the woman's family of origin had a son, the parents preferred to use their means to help the son go to college at the sacrifice of the daughter's further schooling and development of a career.

Although the causes of divorce are myriad, we cannot deny the influence of the women's movement. As women have become more assertive in developing themselves as many faceted individuals, accepting and taking on different roles, marriages began to founder. Many husbands were unable to accept their wives as individuals who were not subservient.

Women have become more outspoken about their work rights, even legislation has guaranteed them equal work opportunities. However, as earlier stated, we are finding that many of the divorced women are not able to accept these new opportunities because of lack of training and experience.

There are several problem areas which we encounter in counseling single parents. Because of their earlier family and social

backgrounds, many of them lack confidence and feel inadequate in developing career goals. They have been indoctrinated to feel dependent. Some of them have begun a severe emotional struggle to develop better self-concepts and counselors find that they need a great deal of supportive help. We find that the counseling process is of a longer duration than with the more "traditional" counseling client.

Many of the recent single parents have young children and resultant problems as to where and how to care for these children when the parents go to work or attend school. Appropriate child care facilities are not yet available in the community to help resolve this problem.

In many instances, alimony and child-care support do not leave very much for career planning, and with the cost of post high-school training continuing to increase, it becomes extremely difficult for the single parent to finance an education. There is limited help through government resources and through some private organizations. However, more resources will need to be developed, specifically for single parents, so that they can begin competing on a more equal basis.

For many of those single parents with some skills and training, who are able to be employed, there are nevertheless difficulties in adjustment. They have been away from the discipline of time deadlines, they have not had the experience of forming relationships with co-workers and supervisors and, at times, find it difficult to submit to supervision. We find, therefore, that it may be only after several jobs and much counseling support, that the single parent is able to develop a work oriented identification.

Educational and training opportunities have multiplied in the Cleveland area, responding to the needs of women, including the single parent woman. Perhaps, because of declining college enrollments of college-age students and, with it, the

continuing need of colleges to maintain tuition income in order to stay in business, the educational establishment has developed programs to encourage adults, and especially women, to enroll in their schools. This is especially true at the two-year college level in Cleveland. In addition, colleges are giving credit for life experience and, in general, are trying to make it easy for the adults to enroll in appropriate training programs. However, we find that, without counseling, the single parent has difficulty making appropriate plans for financing education; selecting a "doable" program; and selecting a career which has employment opportunities.

When we refer to the single parent, what of the divorced male? In a new development, fathers are seriously being considered for custody of their children. The film, "Kramer vs. Kramer" clearly outlined the adjustments the father has to make in work when he does have custody. While the man has gained just recognition as a father, custody of children does impose limits on his career development. Grave conflicts are aroused for these divorced fathers who perhaps never before had so sharp a challenge, to integrate the "work-self" and "father-self." I anticipate that some of these divorced fathers will be coming to agencies for counseling services perhaps to develop new careers, find different jobs, or to handle their new conflicts in the same jobs.

We are also beginning to see more men who with their wives are receiving marital counseling. Wives' complaints may be that the earnings do not meet family needs or that husbands are not ambitious in their careers. The husband may feel that by getting involved in vocational counseling, he will prove to his wife that he wants to "better himself" and, by so doing, forestall divorce proceedings. We have found it difficult to work effectively with such clients because essentially, the marital difficulties are based more on conflicting personality dynamics rather than on the

specific career involvement of the husband.

Coming for vocational counseling is often the last desperate attempt of a husband to hold the marriage together in that way rather than by trying to resolve the serious personality conflicts between himself and his wife. Oftentimes, we find that the husband is passive, having made a vocational choice based not upon self-evaluation nor long-range planning for growth. This type of situation does require that in order for vocational counseling to be effective, there be a continuing effort at resolving personality conflicts in the marriage.

It is difficult and perhaps unrealistic to put age limits on mid-career counseling and change. People, out-of-college perhaps two or three years, come to us saying that they are dissatisfied with the career that they prepared for in college. People in their thirties and forties, who have been in one career for 10 to 20 years, want to change their careers, and persons, in their fifties, with stable work backgrounds, come to us wanting to explore different careers. The motivations for doing so are different at the various age ranges. The younger person is still in the process of trying out different careers and is living in a social milieu that does not look askance at changing one's career. In the past, such a person would be seen as being indecisive, irresponsible, unable to adjust, flighty and perhaps unstable.

A practical work situation may not match up with what the person expected to find when he was a student. Or it may be that although the person had the academic abilities for the specific career, the day-to-day functioning on the job was entirely different and perhaps not within the abilities of that individual. Or a client may begin to understand that there are limited opportunities for advancement in his career. Finally, a person's values and financial requirements may have changed.

For the 30-to 45-year-old person, who

has had one career for a number of years, a need to change may come from external factors such as the jobs being phased out due to corporate merger, due to technological changes, or due to change in the economy. It may be a result of internal pressures such as having to form different relationships with a new management; his wife's or her husband's career development needs; and/or physical or emotional stresses.

For the 45-year-and-above age group, the need for career change may be a reflection of the individual's desire to lessen the intensities of his involvement in work or his need to decrease the different stresses in his particular career or the personal need for continuing change and growth to maintain a vibrant interest in being productive. Perhaps, it is also a realization that in order to fulfill a long held desire, either it must be done now or else the opportunity may no longer exist as the individual approaches retirement age.

In all of these groups, we have found that in general, the individuals are intelligent, introspective, imaginative and open to change. They have inquisitive minds, they are highly motivated, and are energetic in fulfilling their plans.

We have always been concerned about the older worker, sometimes defined as being older than forty. It has always been difficult to help the person 60 years and older because of the attitudes that the employer community has towards him. We have always to do a "selling" job on an individual basis and it takes more contacts with employers to place an older worker than any job seeker in the "normal" age group. There are at least two groups of older people who come in increasing numbers for vocational services. As the inflation rate continues in double digits, many people find it extremely difficult if not impossible to manage a reasonable

standard of living on social security benefits and they need to earn more money to supplement that income. The other group is from the ranks of the better educated; workers who have experience in management or professions. Also, this latter group of older workers is more likely to be covered by company retirement plans to supplement social security and their needs for work are not so much for financial maintenance as are those of the other older group. These elderly people feel that their skills have not been diminished, that they are still valuable, and that they can make an important contribution to employers. We are finding that employers are much more responsive to this group, but, nevertheless, we still have to continue making special solicitations for them. We are finding too that this group of people can help younger people in planning careers. We use them as consultants for college-level students who need to explore with an experienced person what goes into a specific career and how to go about preparing for such a career.

Sometime ago, I heard Bruno Bettelheim speak about a major problem resultant from children really not knowing their parents. He cited a specific study made at MIT which indicated that the respondent students knew the kind of work their fathers did but only a very small percentage of them knew why the parents chose particular careers. I would venture a guess that this was also true of most of the parents; they probably did not know why they chose their particular careers either. Perhaps, we can help these new consumers know why they chose a career.

I think that these groups are in the process of developing an attitude of I's to complement their concerns of "Who Am I?" "What are my different I's?" and "How can I integrate all of these I's in a constructive, productive manner?"