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### SUPER, DONALD EDWIN (1910–1994)

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There are two grand paradigms in vocational psychology. The first perspective for understanding vocational behavior concentrates on how individual differences in ability and interests relate to occupational requirements, routines, and reward. This paradigm, called the *matching model*, asserts that the goodness of fit between an individual's abilities and a job's requirements determines the worker's occupational success. Furthermore, the match between the individual's interests and the job's rewards determines the worker's job satisfaction. Workers who are successful and satisfied with their routines, in other words adjusted, remain in the job for long periods of time, thus achieving occupational stability. This paradigm lies at the heart of professional activities such as vocational guidance, personnel selection, and military classification.

In the 1940s, Donald Edwin Super made two major contributions to the matching model for understanding vocational behavior. In 1942 he published *The Dynamics of Vocational Adjustment*, which described his views on vocational guidance. In 1949 he published an encyclopedic tome, *Appraising Vocational Fitness by Means of Psychological Tests* that analyzed the data on the use of tests in vocational guidance and personnel selection. These two contributions secured his stature as a prominent vocational psychologist, and accordingly in 1949 he was promoted to the rank of professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University where in 1940 he had earned



his Ph.D. under the sponsorship of Harry Dexter Kitson and where he worked from 1945 to 1975.

Following his promotion to the rank of professor, Super became more interested in theory construction than in the application of psychology to personnel selection and vocational guidance. A stinging critique of vocational psychology had been published in 1951 by Eli Ginzberg who in effect asserted that the discipline of occupational psychology had been operating without a theory. This critique ushered in the theory building era of vocational psychology during which John Lewis Holland in 1959 consolidated the voluminous research and reflection on the matching model into an elegant theory of vocational personality types and work environments. Super took a different tact. He turned his attention away from how individuals differ from each other in abilities and interest. Instead he concentrated on how an individual differs from himself or herself across time, that is, how individuals develop their careers.

The 1950s was a decade during which hierarchical corporations rose in urban centers of America. The bureaucratic structure of corporations created career paths along which individuals could grow in occupational responsibility and income. Career came to be viewed as the value accompanying bureaucratic form. Rather than remaining in one job for life, many individuals could envision progressing along a predictable sequence of positions. Super became the leading architect of vocational psychology's response to the new social arrangement of occupational lives into career patterns. He added a career development model to the longstanding occupational matching model. His developmental model of how a career progresses over the life cycle became the second major paradigm in vocational psychology, one that, paired with Holland's theory, dominated the field of vocational psychology during the second half of the 20th century.

The first major statement of Super's career development model appeared as a 1953 article titled "A Theory of Vocational Development." This article, published in the *American Psychologist*, presented 10 propositions in what would become known as Super's theory of career development. The conclusions sketched in that article were elaborated in Super's celebrated 1957 textbook titled *The Psychology of Careers*, a title he purposefully selected to highlight the contrast with Anne Roe's 1956 book titled *The Psychology of Occupations*. Dedicated to Kitson, the 1957 book documented the conclusions that Super drew from his decade-long study of careers.

One seminal contribution reported both in his 1953 article and in his 1957 book was a model of career as a sequence of stages. Super conceptualized careers as unfolding in an orderly sequence that begins with a growth stage (ages 4–13) during which an individual formulates a vocational self-concept and rehearses relevant abilities and interests. During the exploration stage (ages 14–25), these occupationally relevant traits are first crystallized during adolescence and then translated into a specific occupational choice that is tried on during early adulthood. After several years of trial and tentative moves, the individual stabilizes into an occupational position. During the establishment stage (ages 26–44), the individual first stabilizes in the position, then consolidates that position through productive and dependable work. If opportunities present themselves, the individual may advance to positions with more responsibility and income. At some point, advancement slows or even terminates, and the individual maintains the success and stature he or she has achieved. During the maintenance stage (46–65), the individual holds onto the position, hopefully by updating and innovating how it is done. The final stage in the sequence is called disengagement because the individual decelerates work activity and gradually turns responsibilities over to younger colleagues as he or she prepares for retirement and in due course begins retirement living.

Implicit in Super's stage model of career development lies the construct of maturity. Career maturity means possession of the readiness and resources needed to cope with the developmental tasks inherent in each career stage. Mastering these tasks, which can be viewed as social expectations, develops the individual and leads to increased success and satisfaction. Difficulties in adapting to these tasks result in failure and frustration. Super conducted a 30-year longitudinal investigation called the Career Pattern Study to examine how adolescents cope with the career development tasks of the exploration stage.

He conceptualized three tasks to linguistically explain the exploration stage. The first task was to crystallize general preferences for a group of occupations at a similar ability level and within similar fields of work. After broad exploration of these general preferences, the individual must select a few for in-depth exploration and finally specify an occupational choice that implements his or her self-concept in a work role. The third task of the exploration years is to convert that occupational choice into a reality by securing a position in the chosen occupation. The initial years in



the chosen occupation are considered a period of trial because the choice is still tentative until the individual decides to stabilize in a position. During the trial period individuals may drift between positions and even flounder in a job or two before stabilizing. This movement is preferable to stagnating, which means stabilizing in a poorly fitting position.

Progress through the tasks of crystallizing preferences, specifying a choice, and implementing that choice can be used to index an adolescent's career maturity. Super conceptualized maturation as dealing with age-appropriate tasks. He viewed career maturity as handling the tasks as well as one's peer group. To examine how well individuals handle the tasks, Super crafted a model of career maturity during adolescence. He operationally defined this model with an instrument known as the Career Development Inventory.

Super's model of career maturity, or career choice readiness, has five components. The fifth component is called realism and occurs later in adolescence or early in adulthood. Thus, he does not use realism in indexing the career maturity of adolescents. The other four dimensions of maturity are divided into two groups. The first two dimensions are attitudinal, and the second two dimensions are cognitive. Super viewed looking ahead and looking around as two critical coping behaviors. Therefore, he conceptualized attitudes toward planning for the future and toward exploring possible selves and occupational opportunities as the two key dimensions in his model of maturity. Knowing what choices need to be made and having explored self and occupations, the individual must apply the resulting fund of information in making life-shaping decisions. Accordingly, the two cognitive dimensions or competencies in the maturity model are information about occupations and skill at making decisions. Stated simply, the idea is that individuals who have planned ahead and explored possibilities have the information required to make fitting decisions in choosing an occupation. Typical variations in the development of these attitudes and competencies lead to predictable problems including unrealism and undecidedness, whereas atypical deviations in their development lead to severe difficulties including apathy and indecisiveness.

Near the end of his own career, Super realized that the social organization of the work was radically shifting as the world began the age of globalization and digitalization. No longer can an individual expect to work 30 years for one employer, progressing along a

predictable career path until it is time to draw a pension. Contemporary workers can expect to occupy 10 or more positions during their careers. Super addressed the decline of organizational careers by explaining that his model of career stages, with minimal modifications, fit the postindustrial career if it is viewed as a sequence of tasks through which individuals recycle as they move from organization to organization and from job to job. Thus, an individual at age 45 who, after working in a job for 10 years, loses that position to outsourcing then needs to recycle through the tasks—not stages—of growth in awareness of new opportunities, exploration of these possibilities, transition to a new position and stabilization in it, followed by a period, say 5 to 7 years, of maintaining or managing that position before disengaging from it and recycling through the tasks once again.

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*See also* Adult Career Concerns Inventory (v4); Adult Development (v1); Aging (v1); Career Construction Theory (v4); Career Development Inventory (v4); Career Exploration (v4); Career/Life (v4); Career Maturity (v4); Career Maturity Inventory (v4); Crites, John O. (v4); Holland's Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environments (v4); Super's Theory (v4)

### Further Readings

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