



A Developmental Perspective on Vocational Behaviour: Career Patterns, Salience, and Themes

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Abstract. Donald E. Super's signal contribution to the science of vocational psychology and the practice of career counselling arose from his taking a developmental perspective on occupational choice and work adjustment. He asserted that the individual differences view of occupations and workers ignored the longitudinal vantage point from which one can observe how individuals expand their vocational coping repertoires and move into more congruent positions. From this seminal insight, he elaborated important hypotheses about career maturity, salience, stages, patterns, and themes. Super's models and measures of these constructs remain as valuable today as when he first introduced them in the 1950's.

Résumé: Une perspective développementale du comportement vocationnel: profils, saillance et thèmes vocationnels. La contribution majeure de Donald E. Super à la science de la psychologie vocationnelle et à la pratique du conseil vocationnel est issue du point de vue développemental qu'il a adopté dans son approche du choix professionnel et de l'adaptation au travail. Il a soutenu que l'adoption de la perspective des différences individuelles dans l'étude des métiers et des travailleurs laissait dans l'ombre le caractère fécond du point de vue longitudinal à partir duquel on peut observer comment les individus élargissent leur répertoire de comportements vocationnels adaptatifs et prennent des positions davantage congruentes. A partir de cette découverte originale, il a élaboré d'importantes hypothèses sur la maturité, la saillance, les étapes, les profils et les thèmes vocationnels. Les modèles et les mesures de ces construits élaborés par Super demeurent aujourd'hui une référence aussi sûre que lorsqu'ils ont été introduits dans les années cinquante.

Zusammenfassung: Eine entwicklungsorientierte Betrachtung beruflichen Verhaltens: Laufbahnmuster, Lebensrollen und Themen. Donald E. Supers richtungsweisendem Beitrag zur Wissenschaft der Berufspsychologie und zur Praxis der Laufbahnberatung lag seine entwicklungsorientierte Betrachtung der Berufswahl und der Laufbahnanpassung zugrunde. Er wies nach, dass die andere, an der Betrachtung individueller Unterschiede zwischen Berufen und Erwerbstätigen orientierte Sichtweise, den Blick auf die Veränderungen im Zeitablauf übersieht; erst aus dieser neuen Perspektive ist zu beobachten, wie Individuen ihr Verhaltensrepertoire im Umgang mit beruflichen Situationen erweitern und in für sie stimmigere Berufspositionen wechseln. Aus diesem befruchtenden Grundgedanken entwickelte er wesentliche Hypothesen über Berufsreife, die Bewertung unterschiedlicher Lebensrollen, Laufbahnphasen, -muster und -themen. Supers Modelle und Methoden für diese Konstrukte sind heute noch ebenso wertvoll wie in den 50er Jahren, als er sie erstmals einführte.

Resumen: Una perspectiva evolutiva sobre la conducta vocacional: patrones de carrera, importancia y temas. Adoptar una perspectiva evolutiva con respecto a la elección vocacional y el ajuste al trabajo constituyó la contribución primordial de Donald E. Super a la ciencia de la psicología vocacional y a la práctica de la orientación profesional. Él afirmaba que si se consideran las ocupaciones y los trabajadores desde una perspectiva centrada en las diferencias individuales se pierde la ventaja de observar longitudinalmente cómo los individuos van ampliando su repertorio de estrategias frente a las decisiones vocacionales y avanzando hacia posiciones más congruentes. Desde esta visión evolutiva y perspicaz, formuló diversas hipótesis importantes sobre la madurez vocacional, relevancia, estadios, patrones de carrera, y temas. Los modelos de Super y las medidas de estos constructos continúan siendo tan importantes hoy en día como cuando los introdujo por primera vez en los años '50,

Donald E. Super's signal contribution to the science of vocational psychology and the practice of career counselling arose from his taking a developmental perspective on vocational choice and work adjustment. In the middle of the twentieth century Professor Super asserted that the individual differences perspective on occupations and workers ignored the longitudinal vantage point from which one can observe how individuals improve their vocational coping repertoires and move into jobs which provide increasingly better opportunities to use their abilities and gratify their needs (Super, 1953). He prompted vocational psychologists to expand the study of how people choose occupations to include how people develop careers. To do so, Super (1990) formulated a 'life-span, life-space' model that conceptually explicated and operationally defined the developmental tasks and coping behaviours that foster occupational choice and work adjustment. In so doing, he served the field as a grand architect who showed researchers in the behavioural sciences that career provides a fruitful focus for the study of personality and human development. His innovative ideas also helped the field of vocational guidance break new ground and transform itself into the field of career counselling.

Super's seminal insight occurred as he shifted his thinking from how individuals differ from each other and fit into diverse occupations to how individuals develop their work roles throughout their lives. The psychology of occupations concentrates on fitting individuals into jobs whereas the psychology of careers concentrates on fitting work into individuals' lives. Super's (1985) longitudinal view of careers started with a consideration of the natural course of careers as revealed in individual biographies. From this developmental perspective on work histories, Super elaborated important features of careers, including their salience, maturation, stages, patterns, and themes. His reflection and research on each of these facets have already significantly influenced career theory and practice. Now, at the beginning of a new era in

the world of work (Super, 1974a), these career constructs are more important than ever before; and, they merit review and reaffirmation in this volume which examines Professor Super's legacy. Accordingly, the present article explains how each of these career constructs helped to form the foundation that supports the discipline of career counselling.

The cornerstone idea that emerged from Super's thinking about differences between personal careers and social occupations was the distinction between career choice *content* and *process*. Choice content deals with the occupations and answers the question, 'Which occupation are you interested in?' The answer specifies a particular occupation, say for example 'counsellor'. Career choice process answers the question, 'Why are you interested in entering that occupation?'; or for our example, 'Why do you want to become a counsellor?' Thus process resembles an assembly line and content resembles the product that is assembled. Super (1985), through his monumental Career Pattern Study, spent decades examining the process dimensions that form choices and shape careers. To comprehend the processes by which youth ready themselves to make suitable and viable career choices Super concentrated on the constructs of salience and maturity. The readiness to make a choice Super (1955) labelled career maturity, and explained that the interests and choices of immature youth, if they can articulate a choice, should not be taken too seriously. Instead, their further development should be fostered so that they can overcome confusion and indecisiveness and, in due course, make wise and realistic choices.

Salience

One major reason that youth might display career immaturity is that they lack awareness of or concern about the choices they will soon encounter. Working with youth who lacked concern about impending choices caused Super (1982) to propose the construct of career salience, meaning the importance of the work role relative to other life roles. If an adolescent cares or knows little about the world of work, then interest inventories that use occupational titles or activities may produce misleading scores for that individual. If a student has given little thought to occupational choice or to the unfolding of a career, then they are not ready to use interest inventory data and ability test results in planning the next life stage. Super implemented this idea by assessing how salient the work role was for a client. The work role, albeit a critical role in contemporary society, is only one among many roles that an individual occupies. Usually two or three core roles hold a central place and give focus to a life whereas the other roles are peripheral or absent. If the work role is peripheral in an adolescent's life structure, then counsellors can expect that he or

she has not yet developed the maturity to make realistic occupational choices. Make no mistake, immature youth will make choices but their choices have a higher probability of being distorted by family members, peers, intuition, impulses, and serendipity. Clients with low career salience may benefit from education, and experiences that increase the relative importance of work in their lives.

Maturity

Youth who value the work role and commit themselves to participate actively in it soon realise that they have to prepare themselves to become productive workers in general, and eventually train themselves for an occupation in particular. This preparatory process characterises the adolescent and young adult years, the period Super referred to as the Exploration Stage of career development. The main coping behaviour of this stage is exploratory behaviour, that is, action and reflection that increase self-knowledge about work values, vocational interests, and occupational abilities as well as produces a broad fund of occupational information and knowledge about the world of work (Super, 1963). Super's research indicated that this important exploratory behaviour is conditioned by an individual's attitudes toward planning and exploring the future, or as Super often said, 'looking ahead' and 'looking around'.

To denote attitudes toward planning the future, Super (1974b) coined the word 'planfulness', which has not yet entered the dictionary although planlessness is defined in several dictionaries. Planfulness means an awareness that educational and vocational choices must be made eventually and an inclination to prepare to make these choices. Attitudes toward exploration mean an inclination to actively use environmental opportunities and resources to discover more about the world of work in general and preferred occupations in particular.

Attitudes toward planning and exploration constitute the first half of Super's (1974b) model of career development in adolescence. The other half of the model is comprised of two cognitive competencies involving information and decision making. Informational competence refers to knowledge about work, occupations, and career. Well-developed competence in occupational information suggests that the individual is sufficiently knowledgeable to apply occupational information to self and to begin to crystallise preferences for occupations in a particular field and level. *Crystallizing preferences* constitutes the first developmental task in the Exploration Stage of a career.

The second competence in the structural model of adolescent career development is knowledge of the principles and practice of decision making. Indi-

viduals with well-developed decisional competence know what to consider in making educational and vocational choices. They apply these decisional principles in making choices that match their interests and abilities to corresponding occupations. The developmental task of matching oneself to suitable occupations Super called *specifying a choice*. According to his model, individuals are mature or ready to make important career choices when decision-making knowledge is supported by an adequate fund of occupational information based on planful exploration. With this level of maturity, individuals are ready to discuss meaningfully the content of their choices. Aptitude tests, interest inventories, and value surveys have meaning for mature clients because they already know about the world of work and how to make vocational decisions. In other words, the mature individual displays the attitudes and competencies needed to benefit from traditional vocational guidance, namely the trait-and-factor approach that emphasises the use of interest inventories and aptitude tests to match individuals to congruent occupations. After specifying a choice, the third and final task of the Exploration Stage is *implementing the choice* by securing a position in the chosen occupation and working at it for a trial period. This initial trial can be followed by stabilising in the position or by another trial position, with an eventual zeroing in on a permanent position.

Stages

In elaborating the construct of career development, Super did not stop with adolescence and the 'Exploration Stage'. Super (1980) charted a life-span model consisting of career stages with their characteristic developmental tasks and recommended coping behaviours. The elementary school and junior high school years are a period of growth, so Super named the stage preceding Exploration the 'Growth Stage'. This stage occupies the attention of career educators who concentrate on helping children and pre-adolescents learn adaptive work habits and attitudes and develop the positive self-esteem that prepare them to become planful explorers and knowledgeable deciders.

After choosing an occupation and trying on several jobs for fit, the young adult ends years of exploration and trial, around age 25 or so, and starts to settle into a permanent job. This begins about a 20-year period called the 'Establishment Stage' during which the individual stabilises, consolidates, and advances in a congruent occupational position. Each of these three developmental tasks requires corresponding coping behaviours. *Stabilizing in a job* requires both adaptation to the organisation's culture and adequate job performance. *Consolidating one's position* in an organisation requires friendly co-worker relationships and productive work habits and attitudes;

sometimes these coping behaviours are called getting along and getting ahead. *Advancing in a career* requires that one continue career planning and exploration by looking for the next best position both within the organisation and in other organisations. Many workers skip the advancement task and stay in the same position the remainder of their careers. Super did less research on the final two career stages, 'Maintenance' and 'Disengagement', although he did identify the developmental tasks for each stage and construct an inventory to measure attitudes toward these tasks. The challenge for older workers, ages 45 to 65, is to maintain a position by *holding on*, *innovating*, and *breaking new ground*. As workers inevitably grow older, they must eventually disengage from their jobs by *decelerating* the pace or load of work, *planning* for retirement, and enjoying *retirement living*.

Patterns and themes

Super (1954), using the longitudinal perspective on worklife provided by stages and tasks, drew attention to two other important career constructs: patterns and themes. The construct of career patterns originated in industrial sociology where it was viewed, objectively, as the number, duration, and sequence of jobs in the work history of individuals. Super used his career stages and vocational development tasks to define four types of career patterns: stable, conventional, unstable, and multiple trial. The patterns basically differ in the number of times a worker recycles through the vocational development tasks of 'crystallizing', 'specifying', 'implementing', and 'stabilizing'.

Even more important than his work on objective career patterns was Super's work on subjective career patterns, or career themes as Super called these psychological patterns. Career themes reflect personal needs and concerns that form the plot in a work history. While the sociological career pattern is more or less objectively observable, the psychological career pattern requires counsellors to recognise and extract the theme from the work history. Having identified themes, the counsellor then extrapolates each theme into the future to provide a basis for career decision making and planning. Super's thematic-extrapolation method for career counselling attempts "to project trends into the future, to extrapolate, modifying each 'theme' in light of the others, in order to predict future development and behavior" (1954, p. 14). The theme represents in words the problem or set of problems that preoccupy the person throughout his or her life. An individual realises his or her potential when work implements a self-concept and allows the person to develop his or her theme(s) in the occupational arena. When work manifests a self-concept, the individual has moved from preoccupation to occupation.

Therein tension becomes intention as the occupation enables workers to actively master what they have passively suffered, thereby becoming people they themselves like.

Although Super (1949) was adept at clinical diagnosis using inventories and tests, he preferred to make vocational appraisals that emphasised data from structured interviews, autobiographies, card sorts, and projective techniques such as sentence completions and the Thematic Apperception Technique. Counsellors may use these qualitative methods to identify career themes that, when extrapolated into the future, clarify the choices to be made in the present. Super encouraged counsellors to use the thematic-extrapolation method to help clients become interested in relevant occupations. Rather than interpreting an interest inventory in terms of what occupational group the client most resembles, Super preferred to help clients understand how they could develop interests that implement their self-concepts and choose occupations wherein they could use the job to advance their life project. Agreeing with his mentor, Harry Dexter Kitson (1942), Super believed it was the counsellor's job to create interests not diagnose them, especially given that a client who takes two or more interest inventories may receive quite different results from each inventory. Super did not want his life-pattern method to replace the actuarial method of measuring interests and abilities, rather he wanted his qualitative method to complement the quantitative method. In today's language Super might say that counsellors need both *life stories* and *test scores* to help clients plan the next chapter in their autobiographies.

Satisfaction

Satisfaction was the final career construct to which Super drew attention. Of course job satisfaction was a well-known construct when Super was just a student, his first publication actually dealt with job satisfaction (Super, 1939). But, Super used the construct of career satisfaction to distinguish attitudes toward the current job from attitudes toward career progress. He knew that an individual might hate his or her current job, but if it was a stepping stone to a desired position then the person could still experience high career satisfaction. This distinction is easily evident in graduate students/assistants who may detest their current job but relish where it is taking them in their career.

Conclusions

Super's concentration on careers, rather than on occupations, has made and continues to make his theory and its constructs highly useful in diverse cultures and countries. Almost everyone around the globe has a career in which they make decisions about the salience of the work role, cope with developmental tasks and societal expectations about how they should live their lives, and construct a life pattern with a personal theme. Although the specific content of social occupations and personal careers varies widely across countries and cultures, Super's theory about the general processes of career development remains relevant to comprehending vocational behaviour and fostering human development.

Counsellors, today more than ever, need to use Super's ideas about career salience, maturity, patterns, and themes to help clients impose meaning on their vocational behaviour. Occupational matching based on trait-and-factor guidance is becoming increasingly difficult to do because the occupations in post-industrial societies change so rapidly, making Super's (1974a) call for a concentration on individual careers and fitting work into a life sound strikingly up-to-date. Now, as counsellors face a new era, they can continue to benefit from Super's theory by adapting his global constructs to their local contexts and changing situations. *Donald Edwin Super, fama semper vivat.*

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