Journal of Vocational Behavior 36, 166–175 (1990)

Developmental Tasks of Career Maintenance

CAITLIN P. WILLIAMS

Russell-Rogat, Transition Specialists, Beachwood, Ohio 44122

AND

MARK L. SAVICKAS

Behavioral Sciences Department, Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine, Rootstown, Ohio 44272

The present study examined the career concerns experienced by employed adults to determine if they coincide with the vocational development tasks postulated in Super's model of the maintenance career stage, relate to age, and reflect a renewal stage which has been proposed as an addition to Super's model. The career concerns stated by 136 maintenance stage workers were sorted by judges into manifest categories which were used to construct a matrix of joint occurrences. A scree test on the principal components in this matrix identified six latent categories which were titled keeping up with new developments, questioning future direction and goals, struggling to hold on, continuing education, preparing for retirement, and shifting focus. The results conform to Super's model, indicate that adaptation not maturation propels development during the maintenance stage, and support the posited renewal task which deals with midlife reassessment of career choice and commitment.

The present study compared career concerns experienced by employed adults to the vocational development tasks in Super's (1957) model of the maintenance career stage. We did this for three reasons. First, we wanted to examine the validity of the vocational development tasks postulated for the maintenance stage. Although there is much empirical support for the tasks that characterize the exploration, establishment, and disengagement stages, there is surprisingly little research on the vocational development tasks described for the maintenance stage of a career, that is, from midlife to retirement. In this study, we examined how the maintenance tasks of holding, updating, and innovating (Super, Thompson, & Lindeman, 1988) coincided with concerns stated by workers in the maintenance stage of their careers.

Reprint requests should be sent to Mark L. Savickas.

0001-8791/90 $3.00

The second reason for the study was to empirically examine the assertion that a new developmental stage should be added to Super's model. On the basis of their interpretation of the literature on midlife adult development, Murphy and Burck (1976) posited "that a career developmental stage may occur in the years between approximately 35 and 45 and that counselors could be assisting individuals to negotiate this difficult and often painful developmental stage" (p. 337). They titled this stage "renewal," placed it between establishment and maintenance, and defined it as "a reevaluation of one's self-concept leading to a readjustment or . . . a reestablishment in one's career" (p. 341).

Third, we wanted to determine if the maintenance tasks identified by Super relate to age. The three tasks within the exploration, establishment, and decline stages each demarcate early, middle, and late periods within their respective stages. Moreover, the three tasks in each stage relate to age because they progress along a chronological continuum, build logically one upon the other, and are reinforced by age-related social norms. In contrast to the other stages, the maintenance stage tasks do not seem to (1) progress in a predictable order, (2) relate to age, nor (3) demarcate periods of early, middle, and later maintenance. Instead of being developmental tasks that arise from maturation and age-related social expectations, maintenance tasks may be novel, nonmaturational problems that arise from environmental changes or inner experiences. To clarify this issue, the present study sought to determne if maintenance tasks systematically relate to age.

METHODS

Participants

To control for organizational culture and to provide homogeneity in occupation, the research participants for the present study were drawn from employees occupying similar positions in one health care institution. We invited all employees (N = 380) who were in upper and middle management positions and who were between the ages of 35 and 64 (from mid-life to retirement) to participate in the study. Of the 380 managers who were asked to participate, 171 or 45% agreed. From the 171 responders, 136 were chosen to participate in the study because they assessed themselves as being in the maintenance stage. The 136 participants' responses to demographic questions showed that 75 (55%) were male and 60 were female. One participant did not identify sex. Regarding age, 56.6% were 35–44, 27% were 45–54, and 16.4% were 55–64. Education was distributed as follows: high school = 27.2%; college graduate = 33.8%; M.A. = 19.1%; terminal degree = 11%; and postdoctoral training = 8.1%. Mean number of years in the labor force was 22.7 (SD = 7.7). Mean number of year with current employer was 12.2 (SD = 7.1). Mean number of years in current position was 6.4 (SD = 4.9).

Measures

First, participants identified their career stage on a checklist that we devised following the format used by Rush, Peacock, and Milkovich (1980). The checklist had five statements. Four of the statements described Super's stages of exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline. Five experts in the field of career development theory, when shown the four statements in scrambled order, identified them correctly. We then added a fifth statement to the checklist to identify a subgroup of maintainers who, although they saw themselves as maintaining their current position, were also considering the possibility of a career change. This statement was added to represent what Super called "recycling" (Super et al., 1988, p. 4). Each statement was written in the first person and participants were asked to check the one statement that seemed most true for them at that time. Second, participants stated their major career concern along with how they deal with that concern by responding to an open-ended item. The item was presented as follows:

> In order to better understand the concerns and issues of employees at midcareer, we first need to know what the career concerns confronting midlife/midcareer employees are. You can help us by reflecting on issues you are currently facing that relate to your career. You, better than anyone else, can answer the following two questions because it is your perception of your current career situation that we are interested in.
>
> What concerns are you currently experiencing that are related to your career? For example, a teenager would probably be concerned with learning about the world of work so she or he might be talking to an adult about what certain careers are like, or deciding what line of work she or he is best suited for. A person preparing for retirement might be concerned with how to ease out of his or her job so he might be cutting back on his or her hours or turning work over to his or her successor. What concerns are *you* experiencing right now as they relate to *your* career? Give an example of what you are doing to work on this concern.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

A cover letter that explained the purpose of the study and the measures were sent through interoffice mail to the potential participants. The cover letter also included an informed consent form following human subjects guidelines. A stamped, return envelope addressed to the writer was included. Debriefing in the form of a presentation in the hospital's ongoing Training and Development Seminars was described in the cover letter.

Fifteen judges, selected for their expertise in adult, vocational, or employee development, independently sorted the concerns stated by participants into mutually exclusive, jointly exhaustive categories that reflected the substantive content of the concerns. To avoid suggesting that specific numbers or types of categories were expected, we told the judges to use the number and type of categories they thought appropriate. After the initial sort, judges were asked to examine the concerns in each

of their categories to check appropriateness of placement and to ensure that each category was homogeneous. The final step in data organization required judges to assign a descriptive title to each of their categories.

Principal component analysis was used to transform the 15 sets of manifest categories generated by the judges into a single set of latent categories. To accomplish this, a matrix of joint occurrences for all possible pairs of career concerns was constructed. Each cell in this 136 × 136 matrix contained the number of judges who placed that particular pair of concerns in the same category. To derive latent categories from the joint proportion matrix, we analyzed the matrix with principal component analysis. We used the scree test (Cattell, 1966) to determine the effective number of large, substantive components accounting for most of the variance while minimizing the number of components. To enhance interpretation, we rotated the components to simple structure using varimax criterion. This analysis produced a single set of principal components, that is, latent categories. We inferred that the latent categories or themes which emerged from these analyses represented the common career concerns or developmental tasks of the maintenance stage of a career. Each latent category was named and the developmental task it defined was interpreted by examining the titles of the judges' manifest categories for each concern that correlated .30 or more with a rotated component.

RESULTS

The 15 judges sorted the 136 concerns to produce 15 sets of manifest categories. They used from 5 to 20 categories (mean = 10; standard deviation = 4.69) to group the 136 concerns. Principal component analysis identified 59 components with latent roots of one or more. A scree test suggested six meaningful components. The six components accounted for 47.6% of the total variance. Table 1 describes each of the six components by giving the component title, percentage of total variance accounted for, number of items in that component, and key phrases from five items that loaded on that component. The complete items and their loading on components as well as the 136 × 136 matrix and principal component analysis may be obtained from the authors.

Three χ^2 tests were computed to determine if sex, age, and career status (i.e., maintaining vs maintaining but thinking of a career change) were distributed differently across the six components. The first analyzed components by sex and yielded an overall χ^2 of 4.98 ($p < .42$; $df = 5$) which offered no indication that the two sexes were distributed differently across the six components. The second analyzed components by age and yielded a significant overall χ^2 of 36.20 ($p < .001$; $df = 10$). As shown in Table 2, cell χ^2 for Component 2 (questioning) and for Component 5 (retiring) composed 55% (19.75/36.2) of the overall χ^2. These cell χ^2

TABLE 1
Latent Category Titles, Variance Accounted for, Number of Items, and Sample Items

Category titles	Variance accounted for	Number of items	Sample items and loadings
Keeping up with new developments	18.5%	24	Keeping abreast of new developments (.92) Keeping up with new technology (.91) Keeping informed of changes (.88) Maintain knowledge of advances (.83) Preparing to meet challenges of change (.82)
Questioning future direction and goals	10.2%	27	Does my work have a long-term future (.81) Do I do this for the next 25 years (.74) Where do I want to go (.72) Not very clear regarding my direction (.72) Have I peaked (.70)
Struggling to hold on	6.1%	32	In dead-end position (.72) Not enough security (.71) No career advancement (.63) Boredom, no challenge (.61) Current position being phased out (.58)
Continuing education	5.2%	15	Attain educational goals (.87) Need further education (.87) Would like to finish school (.87) Need degree to maintain position (.85) College degree now a prerequisite (.80)
Preparing for Retirement	4.2%	13	How to remove self from work force in orderly fashion (.97) Preparing for retirement (.93) Whether to take early retirement (.86) Training for post-retirement career (.82) Training a successor (.63)
Shifting focus	3.4%	25	Shifting from clinical work to administrative tasks (.69) Shifting emphasis to management (.62) Expanding responsibility (.55) Developing new ideas (.54) Reorganizing department (.53)

suggest that questioning was a task faced by the 35–44 age group more often than expected by random and faced by the 55–64 age group less often than expected by random. The third χ^2 analyzed components by career status (maintaining vs maintaining but thinking of a career change). The overall χ^2 of 20.27 ($p < .001$; $df = 5$) indicated that status was distributed differently across the six components. The cell χ^2 for Component 2 (questioning) and for Component 6 (shifting) composed 66% (13.37/20.27) of the overall χ^2. Participants who were considering a career change were more often than expected by random facing the questioning

TABLE 2
χ^2 Tests for Tasks by Age Groups and by Status

Task	Age groups			Row totals	Status	
	35–44	45–54	55–64		Maintain	Change?
Keeping up						
Observed	16	5	3	24	20	4
Expected	13.6	6.4	4.1		16.1	7.9
Cell χ^2	.43	.29	.28		.97	1.96
Questioning future						
Observed	23	4	0	27	11	16
Expected	15.3	7.2	4.6		18.1	8.9
Cell χ^2	3.89	1.39	4.57		2.76	5.59
Struggling to hold on						
Observed	17	10	5	32	20	12
Expected	18.1	8.5	5.4		21.4	10.6
Cell χ^2	.07	.28	.03		.09	.19
Continuing education						
Observed	11	3	1	15	12	3
Expected	8.5	4.0	2.5		10.4	5.0
Cell χ^2	.74	.24	.93		.38	.78
Planning retirement						
Observed	0	6	7	13	6	7
Expected	7.4	3.4	2.2		8.7	4.3
Cell χ^2	7.36	1.90	10.49		.84	1.69
Shifting focus						
Observed	10	8	7	25	22	3
Expected	14.2	6.6	4.2		16.7	8.3
Cell χ^2	1.22	.29	1.82		1.66	3.36
Column totals	77	36	23		91	45

task and less often facing the shifting task. Taken together, the results from the χ^2 analysis of age and career status indicate that 35- to 44-year-olds, more often than expected, described themselves as facing the questioning task and as considering a career change. Inspection of the raw data for the 27 participants who were facing the questioning task showed that 13 of 23 in the 35–44 age group were maintaining but thinking of change and that 3 of the 4 in the 45–54 age group were maintaining but considering a career change.

DISCUSSION

The first purpose of the present study was to determine if the maintenance tasks postulated by Super coincided with the career concerns experienced by employed adults in the maintenance stage of their careers. Three of the six tasks of maintenance identified in the present study match closely the three tasks which compose Super's model of career maintenance. The task which we named "keeping up with new developments" matches the task which Super called "updating." A concern shared by some of the participants in the present study seems to be aimed at doing a better job presently and at preparing for future change. The task which we named "struggling to hold on" matches Super et al.'s (1988) "holding" task. In this study, struggling to hold on reflects a passive maintenance in that the goal is securing what one has or avoiding stagnation in a plateaued position rather than actively keeping up with the current position. The task we named "shifting focus" matches the task that Super and his colleagues called "innovating." For these participants, shifting focus involves more than holding on or keeping up, it reflects the theme of developing new competencies, expanding, reorganizing, and redesigning.

The task which we named "preparing for retirement" also matches closely a task in Super's model, but not a maintenance task. Some participants in this study shared a common concern about the next chapter in their lives in that they were thinking of retirement, considering early retirement, training a successor, and stepping down gracefully. Coping efforts related to the anticipation and preparation for retirement seem to be aimed at decelerating one's career and making an orderly transition. This task matches what Super called "decelerating." Super et al. (1988, p. 11) described this first task in the disengagement stage of a career as looking ahead based on an awareness of the need to slow down, taper off, and eventually stop working. They noted that this awareness can arise during the late 50s especially among workers who have some control over their work situation. The 13 participants in this group were divided between the 45–55 and 55–64 age categories. Thus the focus on retirement may have been a premature concern for the younger participants.

A fifth task identified in the present study did not match any construct in Super's model. The continuing education component reflects the view of education as a way, in the words of one respondent, "up, around, or out." We interpreted the continuing education task in two different ways. First, the continuing education component may represent a developmental task for workers, like those in the present study, who occupy administrative, professional, and technical positions in which "one's particular technology changes abruptly, leaving one with an increasingly obsolescent set of skills" (Hall, 1986, p. 148). An alternative interpretation of the continuing education component is that it represents not a task but rather a coping behavior used to deal with maintenance stage tasks. The participants in the present study may have pursued education as a means of holding, keeping up, or innovating. For example, some participants sought the knowledge, degree, or credential needed to enter, hold onto, or keep up with the position which they currently occupied, while other participants continued their education as a means of innovating or advancing. Maybe the judges placed any response that mentioned education into the same category regardless of the participant's motive in pursuing education. Additional research should evaluate these two interpretations and determine whether continuing education and learning is a task, coping behavior, or either depending upon the circumstances.

A sixth task, which we called "questioning future direction and goals" did not match any task in Super's model. Participants dealing with this task were considering their long-term futures, examining their life direction, reorganizing their priorities, and exploring the possibility of changing occupational fields. Coping efforts seemed to be reflections aimed at getting to know oneself better and setting new goals. One interpretation of the questioning component is that it represents recycling. In Super's model, recycling represents not a single task, but rather a return to exploration tasks as people involve themselves in "reassessment of life-career plans, by a reexploration of values, interests, and abilities and by the seeking of what may be different opportunities and outlets" (Super et al., 1988, p. 4). However, only 13 of the 23 "questioners" who were in the 35–44 age group indicated that they were considering a career change.

A more plausible interpretation of the questioning component is that it reflects Murphy and Burck's (1976) renewal task. The fact that "questioning future direction and goals" was encountered primarily by younger maintainers coincides with the characterization of the renewal task as a transitional period between the establishment and maintenance stages. During this period individuals may reassess their careers and lives before becoming preoccupied with caring for what they have established. This reassessment may result in (1) reaffirming commitment to current position

and then keeping up or innovating, (2) reordering priorities to devote more time to family or leisure and then holding on or keeping up, or (3) redirecting into a different field and then dealing with the establishment tasks of stabilizing, consolidating, and advancing a new occupational position.

This interpretation of the questioning component as a renewal task reminded us of a developmental task that Vaillant and Milofsky (1980) empirically identified and added to Erikson's life-cycle model. They stated that the task of career consolidation follows establishment of intimate interdependence and serves as a basis for generative care. Career consolidation requires that an individual (1) evolve a specialized identity or role valued by both self and society and (2) achieve occupational satisfaction, commitment, and skill. It seems to be a task of men in their 40s; Vaillant and Milofsky (1980) reported that 68% of 400 innercity men achieved career consolidation by age 47. Further research on the questioning component may lead to a useful refinement of Super's model of vocational development and an additional scale for the Adult Career Concerns Inventory (Super et al., 1988).

In regard to the third issue addressed by the present study, the results indicated that developmental tasks of career maintenance probably arise from adaptation rather than maturation. The distribution of age groups across the tasks suggests that the tasks do not relate to age nor form a continuum or set sequence. Only two of the six tasks had age distributions that differed from what was expected by the row and column margins on the χ^2 test. One of these was "preparing for retirement" which is the first task of the disengagement stage and should have been faced by older participants in this study. The other task was the interpreted as a renewal task, which precedes maintenance or occurs in early maintenance. In addition to the lack of relation to age, the content of the maintenance tasks suggests that they are developmental tasks associated with adaptation not maturation because they reflect responses to change and common inner experiences not age-related social expectations encountered in a reasonably predictable series. Over 40% of the participants used the word "change" in expressing their major career concern. Given the present results, adapting to change may be the core task of career maintenance, in that coping with change is required to maintain equilibrium.

In sum, the empirically determined concerns of people in the career maintenance stage (1) fit closely with the model of maintenance stated by Super, (2) support the transitional task or stage posited by Murphy and Burck (1976), and (3) indicate that development during the maintenance stage is propelled by adaptation not maturation. However, the generalizability of the present results is limited by the fact that the study participants worked in one occupation in the same institution. The in-