

Donald E. Super: His Influence on Counseling Psychology

Mark L. Savickas

Prepared for presentation in Donald E. Super: Life Roles and Social Contributions, a memorial symposium chaired by Albert Thompson and Winthrop Adkins, Teachers College, Columbia University, November 3, 1994.

## Donald E. Super: His Influence on Counseling Psychology

Mark L. Savickas

Super's monumental contributions to counseling psychology can be thematically extrapolated to fit three phases of his career. During the first phase (1932-1949), Super worked to bring the vocational guidance movement to full fruition. During the second phase (1950-1975), he prompted counseling psychology to move from vocational guidance to career counseling. During the third phase of his career (1976-1992), Super again prompted a redirection in counseling psychology, this time from career counseling to life planning. Currently, his innovative ideas about life planning sustain the career education movement and inform projects to update career counseling for the 21st century.

During the first phase of his career, Super's major contribution to counseling psychology was the systematic integration of existing knowledge about vocational guidance. Super began his career working as a practitioner and a "compiler" of knowledge. In the 1930s and 1940s, he worked as a YMCA employment counselor, founded and directed the Cleveland Guidance Service, directed Clark University's Student Personnel Bureau, and directed psychological services at a World War II military hospital. In his first job, working as an employment counselor, Super compiled information about occupations in Cleveland through his "Compilation Project." His second "compilation" project was to systematically integrate existing knowledge about vocational guidance, resulting in his first book Dynamics of Vocational

Adjustment (1942). In that book Super presented the wisdom he had accrued in eight years as a counselor and advanced the idea that occupational choice was a process not an event. He completed his third compilation project in 1949 with the publication of his encyclopedic textbook on Appraising Vocational Fitness by Means of Psychological Fitness. That year Columbia University's Teachers College, where Super worked for 30 years (1945-1975), promoted him to the rank of professor. The promotion recognized his contribution to improving vocational guidance.

During the second phase of his career in 1950s and 1960s, Super influenced counseling psychology to move from vocational guidance to career counseling. He started the 1950s by beginning a fourth compilation project when he decided to become especially knowledgeable about the existing research and writing on careers. However, this project did not end in another masterful integration of existing knowledge. Instead, Super initiated a new era for counseling psychology. In the process of compiling existing knowledge about careers, Super turned from practitioner and compiler of knowledge to theorist after he concluded that counseling psychology needed a theory of vocational development. Super's work to fill this lacuna produced his most influential article, "A theory of vocational development." The article originally served as his presidential address (1952) to the APA Division of Counseling and Guidance and was published in the American Psychologist a year later. To elaborate empirically his theory of vocational development, Super launched a prospective, longitudinal study that investigated, for more than twenty years,

the natural history of careers among one hundred ninth-grade boys. To analyze the young men's career patterns, Super devised the thematic extrapolation technique to assess the life themes that shape career patterns. Today this technique stands as a seminal contribution in the embryonic literature on the narrative paradigm for life planning. The Career Pattern Study (CPS) produced four books, numerous journal articles, and two innovative inventories that are still in use today, namely the Work Values Inventory and the Career Development Inventory.

Super's investigation of career patterns and his vocational development theory gained new stature with the publication in 1957 of his landmark book entitled The Psychology of Careers. With this authoritative book, Super prompted counseling psychology to address as a central concern developmental counseling organized around the predictable career tasks and coping responses that characterize the life cycle. Subsequently, Super innovated his career development theory and its application in career education and counseling by invoking self-concept theory to explicate how occupational choice implements a self-concept.

During the third phase of his career, Super continued in the 1970s and 1980s to innovate career theory while his earlier contributions conditioned the career education movement. After his retirement from Teachers College in 1975, Super became a Fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge University where he extended his structural model of career maturity in adolescence to include the adult years. This project eventually led him again to update counseling psychology by formulating constructs such as career

adaptability and life-role salience. These constructs along with their operational definitions in the Adult Career Concerns Inventory, the Salience Inventory and the Values Inventory, provide a basis for transforming career counseling into life planning as society moves from the industrial era into the information age.

Super was the rare individual who saw his work profoundly influence his field. In addition to his scientific achievements, Super's contributions to the profession included co-founding the Journal of Counseling Psychology; mentoring generations of TC students who distinguished themselves in their own careers; collaborating with colleague at TC to make substantial contributions to that College; serving as president for each of the professional organizations associated with counseling psychology; and inspiring the development of counseling psychology in countries around the globe. Although he has now left the field of counseling psychology, Super's ideas will remain vital for decades to come. Furthermore, his students, colleagues, and friends in counseling psychology will remember him as they extend his work into a new century.