

## Donald E. Super (1910–1994)

"It is more important to have a good path and several alternative goals than to have a good goal." Donald Edwin Super used this maxim to counsel others as well as to guide his own professional life. In so doing, he cut a new path for 20th-century psychology, a path that became synonymous with the psychology of paths or, more precisely, careers.

Super will be remembered primarily for his prompting vocational psychologists to expand the study of how people choose occupations to include how individuals develop careers. Beginning at midcentury, Super focused vocational psychologists' attention on career development. He formulated a life-stage model that conceptually explicated and operationally defined the developmental tasks and coping behaviors that foster occupational choice and vocational adjustment. In so doing, he served the field as a grand architect who left a legacy of innovative ideas about careers, including the views that occupational choice implements a self-concept, individuals differ in their readiness to cope with social expectations about work, and planning and exploration foster career adaptability. These ideas flowed from his compelling insight that maturation and adaptation constitute critical processes in occupational choice and subsequent vocational success and satisfaction.

Super was born in Honolulu, Hawaii on July 10, 1910, the second child of a father who was a personnel specialist and a mother who was a writer. When his father transferred from the Hawaiian YMCA to the YMCA national office in New York, Super and his older brother, Robert, attended elementary school in Upper Montclair, New Jersey. Over four decades later, Super served Upper Montclair as president, both on the board of education and in the Union Congregational Church.

At age 12, Super and his family moved to Warsaw, where his father founded the YMCA in Poland. A grievous life event occurred during his first winter in Poland: Super suddenly lost his older brother Robert to a fatal illness. To cope with this tragedy, Super developed a rational intellect and an iron will as his main coping mechanisms. Logic and self-discipline became character traits that served him well during his life. The next year, he relied on these traits to adapt to life at a boarding school in Geneva, Switzerland. Following graduation from La Chataigneraie, Super enrolled at Oxford University where, in 1932, he took his BA in economic history with a senior honors thesis on British labor movements.

Attending Oxford during the Great Depression and observing his father's career in personnel training sensitized Super to the importance of employment in people's lives. He decided to devote himself to helping people find fitting work. He began his own employment as a job place-

ment specialist at the Cleveland YMCA and concurrently taught at Fenn College (now Cleveland State University). After two years, Super obtained a National Youth Administration grant to form a community-based counseling agency, the Cleveland Guidance Service, that he directed for two years. After four years in Cleveland, Super decided to enroll in a doctoral program in vocational guidance and applied psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University. He enrolled immediately following his marriage, on September 12, 1936, to Anne Margaret Baker.

After completing his dissertation data collection in 1938, Super became an assistant professor of psychology at Clark University, where he also directed the Student Personnel Bureau for four years. In 1940, he completed his dissertation on avocational interests. He published *Dynamics of Vocational Adjustment* two years later. In this vocational guidance textbook, Super characterized occupational choice as a developmental process, not as an event. With this important insight, he urged guidance specialists to concentrate on the social context and personal needs of individuals trying to select and succeed in occupations.

World War II interrupted Super's work at Clark. The Army Air Corps commissioned him as a first lieutenant in 1942 and promoted him to the rank of major by the time he completed active duty in 1945. As an aviation psychologist, he conducted research and directed psychological services at a military hospital. He enjoyed telling the story about attending primary flying school after insisting that if he was to analyze the job of pilot, he needed to experience flight training himself. The job analysis project succeeded in reducing the pilot failure rate by half.

Following World War II, Super began a new job as associate professor at Columbia University's Teachers College (TC), where he worked until his retirement in 1975. He quickly established himself as a leading figure in vocational psychology by publishing an encyclopedic book, *Appraising Vocational Fitness by Means of Psychological Tests* in 1949, the same year that TC promoted him to professor of psychology and education. His membership on the committee that founded the American Personnel and Guidance Association (now the American Counseling Association) and election as its first president-elect further consolidated his leadership position.

After finishing his testing book, Super began his next project, an intensive study of the existing theories and research on personal careers as distinct from social occupations. This project produced three momentous accomplishments. The first was the classic study known as the Career Pattern Study (CPS), which investigated the natural history of careers among a group of ninth graders who participated

in follow-up studies for more than 20 years. The CPS produced four books, numerous journal articles, and three psychometric inventories still used today: Work Values Inventory, Career Development Inventory, and Adult Career Concerns Inventory. The second outcome of Super's study of careers was his most cited article, "A Theory of Vocational Development," originally his 1952 presidential address to the American Psychological Association (APA) Division of Counseling and Guidance that was published in the *American Psychologist* a year later. The third project was an authoritative book that documented the conclusions Super drew from his systematic review of the existing literature about careers. With *The Psychology of Careers* (1957), Super changed the direction of his field by expanding its concentration on occupational choice as a life transition to include career decision making as a developmental process.

Super turned 50 in 1961. He was revising his testing book and planning to revise his career psychology book. After questioning his future path, Super concluded that he did not want to spend the second half of his career revising what he did during the first half. Accordingly, he again forged a new path by exploring the relevance of self-concept theory to understanding vocational behavior. He reported his ideas in an influential monograph on *Career Development: Self-Concept Theory* (1963). Looking for new challenges, he also became director of TC's Division of Psychology and Education from 1965 to 1974, and for the last five of those years he headed the psychology department. In addition to theory construction and university administration, midlife renewal led Super to increase his participation in worldwide psychology forums. His international career, which had begun with a Fulbright scholarship at the Sorbonne during his second sabbatical from TC, included visiting appointments at the University of Warsaw, Cambridge University, and Université René Descartes.

Super believed that retirement was no reason to stop doing what he loved. Accordingly, after his retirement from TC in 1975 at age 65, Super returned to England as a fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge University and as honorary director and senior fellow at the National Institute of Careers Education and Counselling. His task was again to break new ground by developing an indigenous career development theory for England. *Career Development in Great Britain* (1981) documents the outcome of this project, which included an innovative new construct, *career adaptability*.

Super retired for a second time in 1979 when he returned to the United States. He continued to work, at a slower pace, emphasizing two major projects. He directed the work importance study (WIS) to examine the relative importance of work, study, homemaking, leisure, and community service in 12 countries. The results of this project comprise his last book, *Life Roles, Values, and Career: International Findings of the Work Importance Study*, published in 1995. The WIS produced two inventories enjoying increasing use: the Salience Inventory and the Values Inventory. The second project, conducted at the Universities of Georgia, Virginia, and North Carolina at Greens-

boro, elaborated his comprehensive model for "Career Development Assessment and Counseling" (C-DAC). Both WIS and C-DAC contributed significantly to the refinements in Super's final statement of his "life-span, life-space theory of careers."

Toward the end of his life, Super's greatest challenge was again to learn to live alone, as he had when his brother Robert died. He lost his beloved wife, coparent, intellectual mate, and travel companion of 53 years when Anne Margaret died on November 6, 1989. He again used rational thought and an iron will to cope with this desolating loss while continuing to work on innovative projects. Full retirement came unexpectedly in August 1992 when a head injury forced Super to stop working.

Super's colleagues acclaimed his accomplishments during his lifetime. The National Career Development Association, of which he was a member for 60 years and served as its 50th president, honored him with its Eminent Career Award in 1972. APA, of which he was a member for 55 years, made him a fellow in three divisions, presented him with the Counseling Psychology Division's Leona Tyler Award (1980) for lifetime achievement, and awarded him the Distinguished Scientific Award for Contributions to Applications of Psychology (1983). The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance, which he had served as president, named him honorary President for Life in 1983. In 1985, TC presented him with the Distinguished Alumni Award and in 1990 the Teachers College Medal for Contributions to Education. The International Association of Applied Psychology honored Super in 1986 with a special diploma for outstanding contributions. Recognition also came in the form of honorary doctorates from the University of Lisbon (1982) and the University of Sherbrooke (1989). Oxford University (1985) awarded Super an earned doctorate based on an evaluation of his scholarly accomplishments since graduating from Exeter College in 1932.

Super constructed an overarching framework through which vocational psychologists may investigate careers. Furthermore, he showed researchers in the behavioral sciences that careers provide a fruitful focus for the study of personality and human development. He helped colleagues throughout the world to introduce vocational psychology in their home countries. A major force in 20th-century psychology, Super's contributions will not be forgotten. On the contrary, his recent ideas about adaptability, values, and life roles may well provide the principles by which vocational psychology reinvents itself for the 21st century. Super's death on June 21, 1994, in Savannah, Georgia continues to provoke a deep sense of loss in his two sons and their families as well as in numerous colleagues and students who remain in Super's debt. They take solace in the knowledge that Super's ideas continue to lead contemporary vocational psychology down a fresh path, one with several goals.

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