

Integrating the Segments in the
Life-Span, Life-Space Approach to Careers

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In M. L. Savickas (Chair),
Career Development: A Reappraisal in Honor of Donald E. Super.
Symposium conducted at the 103rd Annual Convention of the American
Psychological Association, New York City, August 13, 1995.

In part, this symposium aims to address the question of "How can Super's segmental models of career development continue to develop? Super's approach to theory construction involved the formulation of discrete segmental models that each addressed core issues in the career choice and development. The major segments of his "life-span, life-space approach" include models that focus on work and life values, role self-concepts, life stages and developmental tasks, vocational maturity, and life roles and role salience. Super hoped that someday he would be able to integrate these major segments into a comprehensive theory. In fact, Super's (1992) last book chapter addressed this very topic and, along with an article by Osipow (1990), inspired a national conference and book on convergence in career theories (Savickas & Lent, 1994).

In the present paper, I trace the development of Super's theory project starting with his approach to and goals for theory construction. This is followed by a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the approach he choose, and a review of the past achievements and present status of the life-span, life-space approach. Finally, I will present ideas about future directions that may be pursued in further developing Super's life-span, life-space theory.

Goals of Life-Span, Life-Space Theory

Life-span, life-space theory is a functional theory, which according to Marx (1963, p. 16) denotes "the modest utilization of organized conceptualizations, with more explicit emphasis upon the provisional and tool character of theory." Functionalism is a system of psychology founded by John Dewey (1896) and James Angell

(1903), and advanced by Harvey Carr, while they were at the University of Chicago. Functionalism was the first American system of psychology and it held sway until the Great Depression (eventually being displaced by behaviorism), mainly through the influence of the University of Chicago group and a group at Columbia University led by Robert Woodworth (1918) and John Dewey who had moved to Columbia in 1904. Functionalism concentrates on the relationship of the organism to the environment in asking two central questions: "What do people do?" and "Why do they do it?" ((Marx and Hillix, 1963). To address these questions about adaptive processes and their outcomes, functionalists generally emphasize empirical research, focus on interrelationships among variables, and avoid constructing logico-deductive superstructures.

Super was well-schooled in functionalism. His mentor in graduate school and beyond, Harry Dexter Kitson (1917), had written a doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago, under the guidance of Angell and Carr, on "The Scientific Study of College Students." Super worked as a professor at Teachers College, Columbia from 1945 to 1975, where he continued to experience the influence of John Dewey's original functionalism and Robert Woodworth's (1918) branch of dynamic functionalism. Clearly, Super's graduate education and work environment strengthened his preference for the functional approach to theory construction, devotion to data, and resistance to premature formulation of explanatory postulates.

Throughout his career, Super was the "empirical integrator" (Underwood, 1957, p. 290-291) for the fields of vocational

psychology and career intervention. In his books on guidance (1942), testing (1949), and careers (1957), Super synthesized what has been learned by researchers and theorists into conceptual models that allowed him and others to note contradictory findings, locate gaps in the research, and attempt explanatory efforts. At midcentury Super formulated his theory of career development, in part, as a response to the indictment that vocational counselors acted without a theory (Ginzberg, E., Ginsburg, S. W., Axelrad, S., & Herma, J. L., 1951). Super's theory, stated in the form of ten propositions, carefully expressed the best of then current knowledge. These propositions are really a series of summarizing statements. They fit Marx's (1963, p. 43) definition of functional theory because they are "more or less informal explanatory propositions which are closely related to data (empirical propositions) and without fixed logical form." Contemporary life-span, life-space theory provides an integrative model for practice and research, aimed at isolating and classifying facts, identifying important variables, and organizing knowledge. When referring to life-span, life-space theory, Super (for example 1981) used the term "theory" in its simplest sense meaning -- to organize.

Strengths and Weakness of the Approach

The strengths and weaknesses of life-span, life-space approach to theory construction are those common to all functional theories. According to Marx (1963, p. 17), the strengths of functional theory involve their close tie to empirical findings, data-oriented propositions, and avoidance of premature attempts at logico-deductive explanatory postulates. These strengths are, in

turn, also a weakness in that functionalists tend to ignore theory construction in their concentration on empirical research. The most serious criticism of functional theories is that they can accept a "vapid eclecticism" which makes no new contribution of its own. Does life-span, life-space theory contribute insights of its own; sufficient to avoid being considered a technical eclecticism lacking in creativity? A review of critiques of the theory by leading scholars in vocational psychology addresses this question.

Present Status of the Approach

Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996, p. 143) concluded that life-span, life-space theory "has the virtue of building upon aspects of the mainstream of developmental psychology and personality theory" and "it has considerable utility for both practice and research in vocational psychology" (p. 143). Hackett, Lent, and Greenhaus (1991) seemed to agree with this last conclusion when they wrote that the theory is a "useful description of the process of vocational development, as providing a systematic examination of important components of vocational behavior, and as having considerable utility and empirical support."

Borgen (1991), in a review of milestones in the field of vocational psychology for a twenty-year period, noted these features in calling Super a superordinate thinker whose theory reflects an encyclopedic approach to scholarship. He concluded that "Super's comprehensive conceptual work has splendidly stood the test of time. The power of Super's overarching thinking is apparent in how readily new ideas and trends are immediately compatible with his work" (p. 278).

Brown (1990) discussed the negative and positive features stemming from the theory's comprehensive scope. The broad scope allows consideration of the full complexity of vocational behavior in diverse groups across dissimilar settings. However, lack of integration among segments thwarts the formulation of parsimonious and succinct explanatory postulates suitable for empirical test. This may be why empirical investigations of life-span, life-space constructs have, more often than not, been performed without using the theory as the specific source of hypotheses. Nevertheless, the authors of such studies often present their results and, in the discussion section of the article, link those results, after the fact, to the theory. It can be difficult, as stated by Hackett, Lent, and Greenhaus (1991, p. 8) to determine "whether studies examining concepts like self-concept, career stages, or career exploration actually tested Super's model or some alternative conceptual scheme." .

Literature reviews of the empirical research on life-span, life-space theory generally present similar conclusions. The data generally support the model (Hackett & Lent, 1992; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996, p. 143); the developmental segment is "well documented" and data relative to the self-concept segment "generally agree with the theory." The data about success in earlier tasks predicting success in later tasks have been viewed as more equivocal (Hackett & Lent, 1992) yet the problems in selecting appropriate predictive validity criteria for these studies suggests that the results are stronger than first believed (Savickas, 1993). Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996, p. 144) expressed concern that "in recent years relatively few new empirical tests

of the theory have been conducted."

Future Directions for the Approach

Reviewers seem to generally concur in identifying future directions for theory elaboration and empirical research. Swanson (1992), who reviewed more recent research on the life-span and the life-space segments of the theory noted that life-span research still focuses on the exploration stage and initial choice whereas life-space research concentrates on the establishment and maintenance stages. She encouraged more life-space research on adolescents and young adults and more life-span research on adults. Even more importantly, she astutely called for a greater integration of the life-space and the life-span lines of research. Swanson's suggestion can be generalized to advocate research on the interdigitation of all three theory segments to empirically examine the interrelationships among the constructs in the three segments; such a focus on interrelationships has always been a central goal in the functionalist approach to theory building.

A means for investigating the precise makeup of these interrelationships, and for binding the theory segments together, may lie in the career development processes of learning and decision making. Processes are the mechanisms of action; they are distinct from the developmental tasks that prompt them and the attitudes and competencies that condition them. The potential role of learning theory in advancing life-span, life-space theory has been highlighted by Krumboltz (1994) and by Lent and Hackett (1994), who have articulated the growing consensus that research on learning should be incorporated into life-span, life-space theory (for example, Hackett and Lent, 1992), especially if it

focused on how individuals acquire the attitudes and competencies central to career maturation and adaptation. The same would be true if the theory incorporated advances from the cognitive and decisional sciences (Brown, 1990; Gati, in press); especially if it concentrated on how individuals actually make decisions and dealt with non-rational factors such as intuition (Phillips, 1994).

Integrating the Segmental Models

Certainly learning or decision making may serve as unifying constructs. However, the life-span, life-space approach may not need to go outside of itself to identify a construct capable of cementing together its major segmental models into a comprehensive theory. Super's own construct of adaptability seems worth exploring in this regard. His use of adaptability as a theoretical construct evolved from his construct of career maturity.

Super (1955) invented the construct of career maturity to provide a basis for describing and assessing the stage of career development reached by students of differing ages and grades and their readiness to make educational/vocational decisions. Super viewed maturation as the central process in adolescent career development because career choice readiness clearly increases with chronological age and school grade (Crites, 1965). Having chosen a term from biology forced Super to repeatedly explain that although career maturity increases with age, the impetus is not biological; the impetus is psychosocial in the form of expectations, in the curriculum and in the minds of family and teachers, for students who are approaching the end of their

schooling. Once out of school, the psychosocial impetus for individual career development shifts to changes in work and working conditions. Thus, in studying adult career development, Super concentrated on adaptation, not maturation, as the central process and career adaptability, not career maturity, as the cardinal construct.

Super turned to the construct of adaptability late in his career as a resolution to insolvable problems encountered as he tried to extend to the adult years his structural model of career maturity in adolescence. Nevertheless, he did not replace adolescent career maturity with adolescent adaptability. But what if he had? Then adaptability could be used parsimoniously in the life-stage/developmental task segment that focuses on the work role. Furthermore, adaptability could be generalized to other life roles such as family, citizen, and leisurite and easily linked to the construct of role salience. Life role adaptability would include three major elements: planfulness (or foresight), exploration (or curiosity), and decision making. Adaptability would also provide an integrative focal point for linking self-concept development, translation, and implementation to role outcomes such as personal success and satisfaction and contributions to the community. Greater adaptability may relate to individuals becoming the type of people they want to be and fostering movement to positions that allow more congruent interaction with the social environment.

A first step in examining the potential of adaptability to integrate the major segments in the life-span, life-space approach involves a consideration of whether planfulness, exploration, and

decision making (as a structural model) can be exported from the work role to other major life roles. For my part in this examination, I will concentrate on planfulness. For decades, planfulness had served as the bedrock of Super's theorizing about career maturity. He conceptualized planning attitudes as the prime component in career choice readiness. Later empirical work in the Career Pattern Study and on the Career Development Inventory supported this insight. In attempting to extend the model of career maturity to the adult years, planfulness again emerged as the critical variable. Accordingly, planfulness became the core construct in Super's model of career adaptability in adults and subsequently was operationally defined by the Adult Career Concerns Inventory.

As the life-span, life-space approach to theory construction continues to develop, planfulness may again emerge as a leading construct; this time in investigations of whether adaptability can be used to integrate the major segments in the life-span, life-space approach to the understanding of careers.

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