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Donald E. Super & Edward G. Knasel

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Career Development in Adulthood: Some Theoretical Problems and a Possible Solution

Donald E. Super[1] and Edward G. Knasel

National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling
CRAC & The Hatfield Polytechnic

The use of the concept of 'vocational maturity' in describing adult career attitudes and competences is considered. Its origins in the study of adolescent career development is described, and its extension to the description of adult workers is discussed. It is argued that the developmental model implied by the term may not be appropriate in an adult context. 'Career adaptability' is proposed as an alternative, stressing more appropriately the interplay between the individual and the environment. Some implications for practice are considered.

This paper considers the use of the concept of 'vocational maturity' in describing the career attitudes and competences of adult workers. It arises out of a project concerned with the development of specifications and sample items for a measure of vocational maturity particularly appropriate to young adult blue-collar workers (Super and Knasel, 1979). The detailed findings of this project are to be reported separately. The present paper is concerned with the conceptual problems which arise from the extension of the term 'vocational maturity' (or 'career maturity') from its original adolescent context.

The development of models of vocational maturity for adolescents

During the last twenty years, the concept of vocational maturity has 'become part of the standard vocabulary of career education and vocational guidance' (Jordaan and Heyde, 1979, p.1). It has its roots in the Career Pattern Study (Super *et al.*, 1957) and was put forward by Super, in elaboration of Dysinger's (1950) and Norton's (1953) earlier usage of the term, to describe the coping behaviours necessary for dealing with career development tasks at any life stage (Super, 1955; Super *et al.*, 1957; Super and Overstreet, 1960; Super *et al.*, 1963). But despite being partially derived from Buehler's (1933) study of mature and older adults, the original research from which the concept emerged was primarily concerned with the career development of adolescents (Jordaan and Heyde, 1979; Super and Overstreet, 1960). Given this original adolescent focus, the general definition of vocational maturity was a 'readiness to make the pre-vocational and vocational decisions required by school curricula' (quoted by Super and Kidd, 1979, p.255).

The concept has received a great deal of attention within the literature on career development (e.g. Crites, 1965; Gribbons and Lohnes, 1968; Jordaan and Heyde, 1979; Super, 1974). Two major theoretical models of vocational maturity have been developed: that derived by Super and his associates

directly from the Career Pattern Study (e.g. Super *et al.*, 1957; Super and Overstreet, 1960; Super *et al.*, 1967; Super, 1977); and the model developed from the same study by Crites (e.g. Crites, 1965; 1974). The psychometric operationalisation of these models, notably in the form of the Career Maturity Inventory (Crites, 1973) and Super's own Career Development Inventory[2] (see Super and Thompson, 1979), has enabled the attitudes and competences involved to be measured. This has been an important development for research purposes, and has also provided a valuable resource to be used by vocational guidance and careers education practitioners in the assessment both of individuals and of careers education and guidance programmes.

The need to consider adults

The bias of writers on vocational maturity towards the study of adolescents is by no means unique in developmental psychology. As Hopson and Scally (1980) justly state:

'Modern developmental psychology is notorious for its preoccupation with infancy and adolescence and its neglect of adulthood. To look at a typical textbook in psychology, one would think that human development stopped at age 21'.

In recent years progress has been made towards redressing this imbalance, and many writers have turned their attention towards aspects of adult development (e.g. Levinson *et al.*, 1978; Lowenthal *et al.*, 1975; Neugarten, 1977a; 1977b; Schlossberg *et al.*, 1978; Sheehy, 1976; Vaillant, 1977). These developments have been reflected in work on vocational maturity, and over the past few years considerable attention has been paid to extending this concept to the sphere of adult development. Indeed, Super and Kidd (1979) review three independent models of vocational maturity in adulthood, put forward respectively by Heath (1965; 1976), Sheppard (1971) and Super (1977). In fact, Super's (1957) model of career development has always encompassed the entire time-span of adult careers, and from the perspectives both of the theory of career development and of the practice of careers guidance it was natural and necessary that attention should be given to vocational maturity in adulthood once the groundwork with adolescents had been established.

From a theoretical standpoint, adults differ fundamentally from adolescents in that they are engaged in the world of work, whereas adolescents' experience of work is fragmentary and largely anticipatory. As Super (1977) has pointed out, this implies that the universality of awareness and information needed by the adolescent will crystallise into particularity in the adult. It was important that models of vocational maturity in adulthood be developed to reflect this.

From the standpoint of careers guidance, too, the development of specifically adult models of vocational maturity and the component career attitudes and competences has become increasingly important. The present highly volatile labour markets of many industrialised nations – brought about by a

complex interaction of, amongst other factors, rapid capital-intensive technological change, increasing energy costs, and increasing competition from cheap-labour third-world economies, resulting in increased levels of unemployment and inflation – create a growing need for counselling facilities for adult workers. The development of models and measures of career decision readiness in adulthood such as those proposed by Super and Kidd (1979), and by the present authors (Super and Knasel, 1979), would facilitate the assessment of individual career decision readiness, a potentially important step in the provision of such services.

Writers who have attempted to extend research into vocational maturity to encompass individuals within the world of work have made some real progress, and have begun to appreciate some of the special problems which emerge when this construct is applied to adult populations. Thus the recent paper by Super and Kidd (1979) emphasises the problems of model development associated with the much increased heterogeneity of occupational experience to be found amongst adults. The remainder of the present paper attempts to outline another set of problems which are associated with the use of the term 'maturity' to describe individual differences in adulthood. In particular, it is argued that the use of the concept of 'vocational maturity' implies that differences in the relative career attitudes and competences of individuals may be explained in terms of the process of maturation. While this may be a justifiable assumption in the case of adolescents, more problems are encountered when it is adults who are being described.

Vocational maturity in adulthood?

Maturation has been defined as a 'process of growth from unstable and primitive to stable and highly integrated hierarchic behaviour' (see Critchley, 1970). Essentially, maturation implies a growth process, an ontogenetic pattern which, although highly dependent upon and modifiable by relevant environmental cues and pressures, unfolds according to a general blueprint which is common to all representative members of a species or definable subgroup. Individuals may differ with regard to detail and in the rate at which progress unfolds; and in addition their development may for various reasons be halted at a particular point, whether permanently or temporarily. Hence individuals may differ one from another with regard to their level of maturity. The relevance of this concept in describing developmental models in psychology such as those of Freud or Piaget is clear.

If there is to be any justification for the use of the concept of 'vocational maturity' in describing career attitudes and competences, it must also refer to the same ontogenetic model. This may be appropriate in describing the development of adolescents' readiness to make career decisions, for adolescents are seen as gradually developing, as they grow older, attitudes and competences and as acquiring information which will be relevant to the problems of coping with career decisions. At least for adolescents in the same socio-economic and sub-cultural groups, the need to cope is related to

biological growth, age, and associated social expectations. It seems reasonable to assume that the ability to cope will be acquired and developed by processes common to all representative individuals in the same group. Hence it is logical to compare the progress of particular individuals relative to their age norms and to make statements about them concerning their relative maturity or immaturity. This is a plausible way of modelling the development of 16-year-old school leavers, and of explaining their comparative readiness or unreadiness to make career decisions and to cope with the transition from school to work. Further, in describing this development, assuming it to be normal, there is clearly a progression from a primitive state to a more developed and integrated position. The phenomena look very much like a growth process.

But this model may not also be appropriate for describing the relative positions of two 36-year-olds, or of a 26-year-old as opposed to a 36-year-old. To describe career decision readiness in adulthood as vocational maturity implies that it is something that will increase with age, that the individual will be faced with a reasonably predictable series of tasks, and that his or her ability to cope with them will increase until it reaches a peak, and will then decline. This involves two assumptions, both of which are open to question.

Firstly, we may question the extent to which the career tasks which will confront individuals of varying status and capacity may be predicted, especially given the present changing nature of the labour economy in developed capitalist nations. Although it may be reasonable enough to expect some fairly broad shifts in emphasis, such as a change from exploration to establishment tasks, it should be recognised that a changing labour market confronts workers with novel and unpredicted tasks, many of which are not age-related.

Secondly, it does not necessarily follow that the personal powers necessary to cope with these developmental tasks will be different at different ages. Certainly this *may* be the case, but it need not be. It could well be that the career attitudes and competences required of a 26-year-old are substantially different from those of a 36-year-old, and different again from those of a 46-year-old. But, in the absence of evidence, it may equally be the case that substantially the same abilities and perceptions will carry the individual through at each of these stages. This is an empirical question and one which is highly relevant to the present discussion. Unfortunately it is not one to which empirical studies of vocational maturity in adulthood have been addressed.

Sheppard (1971) attempted to validate his Adult Vocational Maturity Inventory by the rather curious method of comparing the scores of 200 unemployed men, 100 male vocational trainees, and 100 male graduate students, claiming that the inventory clearly differentiated these three groups. This procedure entirely begs the question as to whether his index relates to maturity; for, although we may well have grounds for expecting differences in career attitudes and competences between the three groups, it does not follow that these differences are necessarily *maturational.* We do not know whether the powers possessed by the graduate students and not by the unemployed are

also those which distinguish older workers from younger ones. Yet this latter is what a maturational model implies. An at least equally plausible explanation of the differences would be that the three groups are faced with distinctly different career structures which place different demands upon them, and which, following the logic of Super and Kidd (1979), therefore require different indices of the relative maturity of the individual group members.

To give another example of the way in which researchers have so far ignored this question, Mossop (1977) reports data from 315 British training officers aged 25-60 who completed the Career Development Inventory (Adult Form) and who also supplied certain biographical data. Mossop related age to such factors as salary, opportunities for advancement, thinking about changing jobs, and likelihood of being in the organisation in five years' time. He did not, however, relate CDI scores to age, which might well have provided data crucial to the present discussion.

These studies could hardly be said to provide evidence that the career competences and attitudes required of a 46-year-old are substantially different from those of a 26-year-old. In fact, they do not really address the problem at all. To show that the concept of maturity is applicable to understanding readiness for career decision-making in adults, it is necessary, though not sufficient, to show that the nature of this readiness changes over time. The evidence on this matter is thoroughly inconclusive.

Given the lack of any data to indicate the relevance of the maturational model, to use the term 'vocational maturity' makes unnecessary assumptions, pre-judging an empirical issue. Parsimony requires that the use of the term 'vocational maturity' in describing adult career development be postponed until further data are available.

Career adaptability

The above discussion does not imply that the basic concept of a constellation of career attitudes and competences which generate career-decision-making readiness in individuals is not relevant to adult development. Rather, it illustrates that the label 'vocational maturity' is inappropriate in this context and that, if a suitable alternative could be found, it should be replaced. What is required is a new approach which will describe these psychological factors in career development without making the unnecessary assumptions implied by the term 'maturity'.

Career adaptability is hereby put forward as a term which may be used for this purpose. The word 'adaptability' avoids any reference to maturation or growth, and it has the additional merit of being forward-looking, allowing us to see the individual as behaving proactively. A further important advantage is that the phrase concentrates attention on the interaction between the individual and the environment. It needs to be emphasised that the term 'adaptability' is not to be taken to mean that in the interplay with the environment, modifications will only be made by the individual. Rather, each individual should be seen as engaged in the process of finding a balance

between acceptance of the pressures that come from the world of work and making his or her own impact upon the environment. There is a parallel here with Piaget's model of adaptation based on the two processes of assimilation and accommodation (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969), whereby an individual may assimilate some aspects of his environment into his already existing schemata (and hence make an impact on his environment) but must also modify his schemata to accommodate certain other aspects of his environment (the environment making an impact on him).

Conclusions

The new model based on adaptability, or the process of adaptation, is one which, in addition to avoiding some questionable implications which arise out of the term 'maturity', casts the individual as a responsible agent acting within a dynamic environmental setting. There seem to be important advantages to be gained from such an approach, and the term 'career adaptability' is therefore recommended for use in future research into the career attitudes and competences of adult workers.

Recasting the career attitudes and competences hitherto described as vocational maturity as being instead components of career adaptability has important implications for assessment through psychometric tests and inventories and for the counselling process. Firstly, the new approach places greater emphasis on the competences and attitudes of the individual rather than on some abstract and hypothetical construct of the individual's 'level of maturity'. Concentrating upon the interaction between the individual and his environment stresses the importance of the particular actions of the individual, whereas previously a maturational model emphasised more the ontogenetic process presumed to underlie these actions. This implies that counsellors, and any measurement techniques which they may use, should adopt an operational approach concentrating on the abilities and competences displayed by the individual.

Secondly, the new approach suggests that more attention should be paid to the dynamic nature of the career tasks which confront people in the world of work. In the past there has been a tendency, reinforced by the maturational model, to stress the developmental tasks which confront individuals at a given life stage. Such an approach is particularly appropriate during periods of stability in the labour economy. But it has been argued in this paper that it is less appropriate during periods of social and economic change. One of the major reasons for the introduction of the term 'career adaptability' is that it allows greater emphasis to be given to the novel, non-maturational problems which presently confront many people. It follows that in assessing adaptability, counsellors should pay considerable attention to the individual's ability to cope with such tasks, which may have little or no connection with age.

Footnotes

[1] Now based primarily at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York.

[2] To be published late in 1981 by the Consulting Psychologists Press at Palo Alto, California.

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Correspondence should be addressed to: Edward G. Knasel, NICEC, Bayfordbury House, Lower Hatfield Road, Hertford SG13 8LD.