Super’s Life-Span, Life-Space Theory: High School Applications

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Abstract

This brief essay describes the basic tenets of Donald Super’s Life-Span, Life-Space career development theory. The essay also looks at several advantages and disadvantages of the theory, its use in a high school setting, and multicultural and diversity issues.
Super’s Life-Span, Life-Space Theory: High School Applications

Professional ethics require school counselors to develop a working knowledge of career development theory so they can strive to fulfill all of the requirements of the ASCA National Model. In particular, the Foundation, one of four squares in the ASCA National Model graphic, states that “Beliefs and Philosophy” are crucial components of a strong school counseling program. Ideally, these programs are staffed by counselors who understand career development theory and have an awareness that “what we believe about students, families, teachers, and the educational process is crucial in supporting the success for every student” (ASCA, 2004, p. 27).

Before examining any one theory in detail, it is important to understand that career development theory reflects two primary schools of thought. According to Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey:

Savickas (2002) notes that theories emphasize either “individual differences” related to occupations (viewed as describing how people can find their fit within the occupational structure) or “individual development” related to careers (viewed as how people express behavior across time). For example, developmental theories (e.g., Super, Gottfredson) highlight the expression of career behavior over time. Person-environment theories (e.g., Work Adjustment Theory, Holland) address the essential ingredients (i.e., occupational and self-information) for choosing an occupation (2005, p. 43).

Since career development theories complement each other, with no theory emerging as ideal, each counselor must determine for themselves the adequacy of each theory in addressing issues such as the challenges presented by diversity issues, the career development process in general, the numerous factors involved in choosing a career, the empirical support for the theory, any
gaps in the theory, and what each theory offers school counseling practice (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005, p. 44).

**Theoretical Model**

Although most counselors and psychotherapists practicing career guidance and general counseling and psychotherapy take an integrative approach when it comes to theory, this brief essay will focus solely on Donald Super’s “life-span, life-space theory” (Corey, 2009, p.449). Indeed, as the leading developmental approach, Super’s multi-faceted theory offers a hard-won synthesis of ideas from “diverse theoretical perspectives (e.g., trait-and-factor, developmental, social learning, and psychodynamic)” (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005, pp. 48-49). At its heart, Super’s work emphasizes career development as a process that occurs over a lifetime.

What Super called his “‘differential-developmental-social-phenomenological career theory’” consists of three interrelated ideas: Life Span, Life Space, and Self-Concept (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005, p. 48). Echoing the spirit of Erik Erikson’s stages of Psycho-Social Development, Super contends that certain career development tasks occur during the following stages: Growth (ages 4-13), Exploration (ages 14-24), Establishment (ages 25-45), Maintenance (ages 45-65), and Disengagement (ages 65 and Beyond) (Corey, 2009, pp. 48-49; Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005, pp. 50-53). As people move through these stages, they also play certain roles, creating, over time, what he termed a life-space. According to Super, “the ‘simultaneous combination of life roles we play constitutes the lifestyle; their sequential combination structures the life space and constitutes the life cycle. The total structure is the career pattern’” (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005, p. 53). Although people give these life roles different meanings, they tend to play the following nine roles: “(1) son or daughter, (2) student, (3) leisurite, (4) citizen, (5) worker, (6) spouse (or partner), (7) homemaker, (8) parent, and (9) pensioner (Niles and
Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005, p. 53). People perform these nine roles in the following theaters: “(1) the home, (2) the school, (3) the workplace, and (4) the community” (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005, p. 53). Finally, Super argues that through their career decisions people attempt to fulfill their self-concepts, or “picture(s) of the self in some role, situation, or position performing some set of functions, or in some web of relationships” (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005, p. 54).

**Advantages and Disadvantages**

One primary advantage to Super’s model is that it is supported by most other research into the career development process. According to Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, “Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996) noted that Super’s theory ‘has the virtue of building upon aspects of the mainstream of developmental psychology and personality theory and has considerable utility for practice and research’” (2005, p. 62). Nevertheless, counselors using Super’s career development theory must train themselves to be sensitive to the various meanings attached to life roles, since these meanings tend to reflect different genders and cultural contexts.

**K-12 Applications**

Applying Super’s Life-Span, Life-Space Theory is relatively straightforward since he developed assessment tools that reflected his concepts. For example, a high school counselor could use the Career Development and Assessment and Counseling (C-DAC) assessment instruments available through vocopher.com. The Career Development Inventory (CDI), the Salience Inventory, the Strong Interest Inventory, and values card sorts are several other counseling tools available to high school counselors that reflect Super’s career development theory.

**Multicultural and Diversity Considerations**
As mentioned earlier, several researchers have articulated the following concerns about the use of Super's work in career guidance counseling:

First, life-role salience and values must be viewed within specific developmental and cultural contexts. Second, in diverse settings, and with different groups, there are sex differences related to the relative importance of life roles and values. And, third, in order to facilitate their clients’ career development, counselors must attend to life-role salience and values issues in career counseling (Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005, p.62).

In sum, the ASCA multi-cultural standards apply equally in the contexts of general and career guidance counseling.
References


### COUNS 516--Career Theory Paper

**Evaluation Rubric**

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<td>● Addresses the advantages and disadvantages of the theory</td>
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