

**Individuals in Recovery and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory: Intersection and
Recommendations for Counselors**

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Abstract

Donald Super's life-span, life-space theory has been a benchmark for over four decades for career counselors and researchers in the understanding of career development through a social-phenomenological lens. Super noted that an individual's career pattern is determined by his or her mental ability, education, skills, personality characteristics, and available opportunities. One way that Super's theory may be applied is through the understanding of how individuals in recovery from drug or alcohol addiction re-enter the workforce after receiving substance use treatment. Individuals with a substance use disorder may face challenges in navigating their sobriety and career development. Often, they may return to address career exploration as they begin to experience themselves as a person in recovery. To date, no studies have examined the intersection of Super's theory with the career development path of individuals in recovery from a substance use disorder. This paper will describe the tenets of Super's theory and apply these tenets to the unique needs of individuals in recovery from a substance use disorder. Recommendations for counselors and clinical supervisors working with individuals with a substance use disorder (SUD) will be offered through Super's framework.

Keywords: substance use, recovery, Donald Super, career counseling

Individuals in Recovery and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory: Intersection and Recommendations for Counselors

Donald Super's pioneering life-space, life-span career theory has been a pillar for career theorist researchers and counselors alike for over forty years. Based on a developmental-social-phenomenological approach, Super's theory acknowledges that individuals differ in their interests, values, needs, and personalities, and these differences drive the qualifications for a variety of occupations (Freeman, 1993; Hartung, 2013; Super, 1980). Super opined that career preferences and abilities are part of a person's ecology, and these preferences and abilities may change over time as an individual progresses through different developmental stages. Moreover, Super's theory contends that dealing with life-career stages depends on individual readiness to cope with the demands of each particular stage (Freeman, 1993; Hartung, 2013; Super, 1980). Coping with these demands may elucidate unique challenges for individuals with a substance use disorder. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, substance use has drastically increased across the United States. For example, the Commonwealth of Virginia recorded its highest number of drug overdoses on record in 2020, according to the Virginia Department of Health (Ponton, 2020). In addition, the highest number of recorded overdose deaths in the United States were documented in 2020 (Foster, 2020). Factors driving the increase in overdoses may be attributed to social isolation, economic hardship, anxiety, and depression secondary to the COVID-19 pandemic. A person with a substance use disorder may experience challenges and barriers in career development depending upon their substance use and related negative consequences. Some of these challenges may include relationship strife, housing instability, physical and mental health problems, and unstable employment (White & Evans, 2013).

Super's career developmental theory intersects with the transition of an individual with active addiction to a person in recovery from a substance use disorder through Super's assumption of the facilitation of maturing of abilities and interests as well as values (Hartung, 2013; Zytowski, 1994). This facilitation is assisted, in part, by reality testing and formation of self-concepts. Furthermore, Super assigns work satisfaction and life satisfaction to the way in which an individual finds reinforcing outlets for their abilities, values, needs, and interests (Hartung, 2013; Super, 1969).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the career development path of individuals in recovery from a substance use disorder from a phenomenological approach to understand the life-span and life-space theory model postulated by Super, which may provide generalized lessons that other counselors consider when working with individuals with a SUD.

Recommendations for counselors working in the SUD field will be offered to support the career growth and development of their clients as guided by Super's theory.

Three Tenets of Super's Theory

Super (1969) pioneered a developmental-social-phenomenological career theory built on 14 assumptions. Some of these assumptions are that people are suited for a number of occupations based on their abilities, interests, traits, needs, and values. Career preferences are determined by the context in which an individual lives and works, and this context can change over time. The combination of life roles an individual plays determines his or her lifestyle, and these sequences make up the life cycle (Hartung, 2013; Super, 1969). Super provides three tenets to his model: life span, life space, and self-concept (Super, 1980). In the next sections, these tenets will be reviewed and applied to individuals in recovery from a SUD.

Super's Life Span and Individuals in Recovery

Super outlines five stages that individuals experience in the lifetime development of a career (growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement) (Super, 1980). In the growth stages (ages 0-13), a child may ask “Who am I?” This stage is marked by sub stages including concern about the future, control over decision making, conviction to achieve, and competence in work habits and attitudes. The exploration stage (ages 14-24) highlights emerging adulthood and tasks of crystallization, specialization, and implementation of self-concept in an occupation role. Establishment (ages 25-44) focuses on stabilization and consolidation of self-concept and career pattern. This may be accomplished by obtaining new positions through competency and acclimation. The maintenance stage (ages 45-64) occurs as the person begins to question future direction and goals. Questions about career sustainability may be raised during this stage. Finally, the disengagement stage (ages 65 and older) consists of major life transitions to retirement, retirement planning, and leisure activities (Super, 1980).

The career paths of individuals in recovery align with Super’s developmental approach as a person in recovery from a SUD may need to recycle through the developmental process by revisiting Super’s life span exploration stage. In the exploration stage, an individual will focus on crystallizing, specifying, and implementing their career choices (Super, 1980). A person in recovery may need to explore who he or she is without the influence of illicit drugs. Often clients in SUD treatment will remark that they do not remember what life is like without using drugs or alcohol. Evidence-based psychosocial treatments, such as Community Reinforcement Approach (CRA) take a client-centered and strength based approach toward assisting clients in learning to live a healthy and satisfying, non-using lifestyle (Hunt & Azrin, 1973, Meyers & Smith, 1995). Exploration of values, needs, and interests to crystallize career choices may be a part of this treatment, in line with Super’s life span approach (Super, 1980).

In addition to revisiting the exploration stage, many individuals in recovery have had challenges in maintaining employment (White & Evans, 2013). Furthermore, depending upon the history of the individual, there may be barriers toward their post-addiction career path. For example, if they have legal involvement (e.g., a felony), this may limit job opportunities. If they have lost their driver's license, this barrier may hinder their ability to secure employment in certain careers. During their addiction, if they were convicted of a barrier crime, there may be limits to employment opportunities (White & Evans, 2013). The exploration phase may be guided by these factors, including negative consequences that may have been incurred as a direct or indirect result of past substance use.

Super's Life Space and Individuals in Recovery

People differ in the way in which they ascribe importance to their work, referred to as life space in Super's model (Savickas, 1997). Super outlines nine major life roles: son or daughter, student, leisurite, citizen, worker, spouse (partner), homemaker, parent, and pensioner. These life roles are undertaken in an individual's home, school, workplace, and community (Super, 1980). Super (1984) suggested that career decisions are a reflection of our attempts to make sense of our self-understanding in career terms. These concepts may include both subjective and objective components and may change over time. The combination of these life roles informs an individual's life style. This combination of roles coupled with the developmental life span phases constitutes a person's career pattern (Super, 1980). The relevance that a person ascribes to this combination of roles and phases defines life structure.

A person in recovery may experience different life roles from the nine roles identified in Super's theory. For example, a person may identify as "someone in recovery" as a major life role. This is often supported by treatment models that focus on increasing pro-recovery peers and pro-

social behaviors, including linkage to the recovery community (e.g., support groups, faith-based recovery organizations, etc.) (Hunt & Azrin, 1973, Meyers & Godley, 2001). For many individuals in recovery from a SUD, understanding where they in their life space will inform their counselor's treatment approach. For example, if a client identifies as an individual in recovery as part of their major life roles, the counselor may help the client explore ways in which they can find satisfying outlets for their role. For instance, the client may become a sponsor to support other individuals on their path toward recovery. They may also choose to become a peer recovery specialist (i.e., an individual with lived experience who serves as a role model for clients) (White & Evans, 2013). Counselors may benefit from exploring clients' life roles and values to motivate their service in line with a recovery principle of mutual support playing an important role in recovery (White & Evans, 2013). An individual in long-term addiction may face difficulty with issues of motivation and generativity that have been compounded by extensive substance use. In line with Super's approach, the counselor can orient the client to his or her values in order to facilitate generativity.

Super's concept of career maturity (i.e., a constellation of physical, psychological, and social characteristics) (Savickas, 1997) may also be recycled as the individual transitions from substance using behavior to a sober or drug-free lifestyle. Individuals in recovery may have different social groups in recovery than they had while using drugs or alcohol. Their physical health may have changed with a sober lifestyle. Often individuals struggling with addiction may experience comorbid medical conditions exacerbated by their substance use. In addition, some substances may cause psychological effects, such as depression, anxiety, disruptive mood, and psychosis (Godley et al., 2014). Evidence-based and holistic treatment of a SUD includes a focus on the client's biopsychosocial needs (Hunt & Azrin, 1973, Meyers & Godley, 2001).

Self-Concept and Individuals in Recovery

Super (1984) suggested that decisions regarding a person's career reflect an attempt to translate an understanding of self into career terms. He believed that the idea of self-concept will continue to evolve over time, with career choices and subsequent adjustments becoming lifelong tasks (Savickas, 1997; Super, 1984). For a person in recovery from a SUD, self-understanding may be an integral part of treatment and recovery. While many psychosocial treatments for SUDs will focus on a behavioral or cognitive-behavioral approach to build generalizable skills (e.g., problem solving skills, communication skills, drug refusal skills) (Hunt & Azrin, 1973; Meyers & Smith, 1995), often counselors will work with clients to help them understand antecedents to their substance using behavior (Meyers & Smith, 1995). This approach is consistent with supporting a person in exploration of self-concept. This may include both subjective and objective measures. For example, a person in SUD treatment may have been fired from a previous job for coming to work under the influence. This subjective measure may be supported by the person's concept that they are worthless and unable to keep a job. Collectively, these elements inform the individual's self-concept.

Super's C-DAC Model

Super's life span, life space, and self-concept tenets served as a catalyst to develop the Career-Development Assessment and Counseling (C-DAC) model. C-DAC is an intervention that may be used by counselors, including SUD counselors, that blends the differential, developmental and self-concept portions into a four-step model (preview, depth view, data assessment, and counseling) (Super et al., 1992). C-DAC reflects a narrative approach transitioning from career assessment to career counseling. Assessments used include the Career Development Inventory,

Adult Career Concerns Inventory, Salience Inventory, Values Scale, and Self-Directed Search (Super et al., 1992).

Consistent with the model's directive and non-directive approaches (Super et al., 1992) developed a thematic extrapolation method that allows for an individual to use his or her own experience to explore career development through a narrative approach. Counselors play the role of historian by inviting the individual to construct their autobiographical stories of development. These life stories are explored to identify themes that help the individual understand his or her past and construct a blueprint for the future. For example, exploring the problem and the individual's attitudes and feelings are addressed through a non-directive approach. Conversely, setting the topic and outlining factual data take a directive approach by the counselor.

Individuals in recovery from a SUD may find parallels in the C-DAC process and their own treatment and recovery. Often SUD counselors will assist clients in exploring life patterns and themes that were associated with their substance use. This method is used in developing relapse prevention plans with clients in order to identify salient triggers and high-risk situations that may put clients at higher risk of relapse or continued use (Meyers & Godley, 2001). Like thematic extrapolation, SUD counseling has a focus on development of a blueprint for the client's future.

Implications for SUD Counselors Based on Super's Theory

Donald Super's life-span life-space theory offers several insights for counselors and clinical supervisors who work with individuals with an SUD. Super asserts that work satisfaction depends on the extent to which a person can find outlets for their needs and abilities (Super, 1969). Counselors and clinical supervisors working with clients with a SUD may benefit from understanding the importance of exploring an individual's pro-social behaviors and activities

through the life roles outlined in Super's theory. During the treatment process, counselors may benefit from assisting clients in ways to find healthy, non-using outlets for their needs. This may be accomplished through sampling or trying out different pro-social activities based on the client's stated interests.

Super describes the life-span approach toward career as a progression between different stages, including growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement (Super, 1980). Although this progression is not necessarily linear, individuals in recovery from a SUD may need to revisit the exploration stage in the life-span approach. Counselors and clinical supervisors working with individuals with an SUD may benefit from revisiting the exploration stage with their clients in their counseling sessions and should not assume that the individual will resume a previous life-stage post recovery. Furthermore, while individuals are in treatment for their SUD, counselors may benefit from understanding the exploration phase of Super's model in order to support client reflection and decision-making as the client progresses through treatment into recovery. Counselors are uniquely positioned to assist clients in crystallizing their needs, goals, and values through a strength-based approach that involves walking alongside the client to support their self-concept.

Self-concept, according to Super (1984), develops over time and informs career choices through lifelong tasks. These choices include adjustments relating to an individual's efforts to translate self-understanding into career terms (Super, 1984). Counselors working with individuals with an SUD may benefit from assisting their clients in a process called thematic exploration. In this role, counselors invite clients to outline their autobiographical stories. The counselor assists the client in identifying themes from their past that may aid in their understanding of the present. These themes may serve as a roadmap for the client's future (Super et al., 1992). Counselors

working with clients in SUD treatment may benefit from use of Super's thematic exploration as a means to elucidate a career path. Super developed the Career Development and Assessment (C-DAC) model that can serve as a guide for counselors (Super et al., 1992).

Summary/Conclusion

Overall, Super's theory has served as a seminal model for career theorists and counselors due to its understanding of career in a social-phenomenological-developmental context. In addition, Super's theory provides a basis for counselors to assist clients in exploration of their own values, interests, and goals. Super connected work space and life space in a meaningful way to highlight the interconnectedness between these two constructs (Freeman, 1993). For persons in recovery from a SUD, Super's theory is particularly salient as it underscores the journey from treatment to recovery in a rich and deep manner. Counselors can glean important lessons from Super's model to increase their ability to engage clients seeking SUD treatment in meaningful career exploration as they transition from an individual with active addiction to one in recovery. Counselors may help their clients by exploring new skills and interest areas, correcting faulty thinking, and learning skills to cope with changing work tasks and interactions between work and life roles. Future areas of study in connecting Super's theory with individuals in recovery from a SUD may include phenomenological or ethnographic research to develop a deep and expansive understanding of the experience of individuals in recovery as they transition from addiction to recovery using Super's model as a framework.

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