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From Ages 27 to 72: Career and Personal Development of a Productive Counselor Over the Life Span

Samuel T. Gladding

Interviews of productive counselors usually do not capture their adult life span in depth. This article examines the life of a prolific counselor over 5 decades in context and through the theories of personal and career development formulated by Erikson (1994) and Super (1980). It looks biographically at his life and its challenges as well as resolutions to difficulties he faced in the process. Lessons that have universal application are highlighted.

Keywords: life span, adult development, career development, Erik Erikson, Donald Super

Life can be serendipitous. Planning and reality often diverge. In examining my life at the age of 72, I am somewhat amazed at what happened. From elementary school to Yale Divinity School, I planned to be a minister. Yet halfway through my studies at Yale, I realized I was on the wrong track. I admired those who were going into the ministry and my maternal grandfather—for whom I was named—who was a minister. However, it was not a good fit for me. By chance and through some examination of my abilities, and specifically through a class assignment requiring me to listen and reflect with a man whose son had been killed in the Vietnam War, I realized counseling was where I belonged. I detected a feeling in my gut different from that I had when I considered being a minister. It was peaceful and calming as opposed to being turbulent and unsettled. In addition, I enjoyed the reading material in counseling, especially the works of Carl Rogers. I even traveled from New Haven to New York City four Tuesday nights to take a class on existentialist counseling with Rollo May. However, as

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much as I liked counseling and embraced it as a profession, I did not see the road of productivity ahead, at least to the extent it happened.

Part of my focus in this article is to document my life over 5 decades (1972 to 2018) from the theoretical perspectives of Erik Erikson (1994) and Donald Super (1980), without repeating what has already been written (e.g., Henderson & Montplaisir, 2013). I particularly want to examine some challenges and struggles I faced that, although unique in content, may be universal in nature. My purpose is to help other counselors, especially those just beginning their clinical journey, understand more thoroughly the nature of adult development. I will frame this life story using Erikson's and Super's contention that self-concept changes over time and develops because of challenges, growth, and experience. As such, personal and career development are lifelong.

In looking at my development, I will briefly discuss the intersection and interaction of wishes, hopes, disappointments, successes, and self-concept. The juxtaposition of these entities affect a counselor's personal and professional growth. The road of life is not linear but rather a series of ups and downs that are dependent on many variables, such as environment, acquaintances, opportunities, and, in some cases, luck or happenstance (Krumboltz & Levin, 2010).

ERIK ERIKSON'S AND DONALD SUPER'S STAGES OF PSYCHOSOCIAL AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Erikson (1994) formulated a theory of eight stages of psychosocial development. His model examines psychological crises that occur and need to be resolved in these stages. He gives an age range for each. The first five of Erikson's stages examine growth from birth through age 18. The last three—intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and ego integrity versus despair—are longer in length, build on the first five, and cover the life span from ages 18 to 65 and above. These stages are especially relevant to the tasks counseling professionals face. They are navigated differently by everyone and yet have common elements essential for each person.

Super's (1980) theory of five life stages, as related to career development and self-concept, is complementary in many ways to Erikson's model. The first two stages—exploration and growth—go up to age 24, with children, adolescents, and young adults developing a self-concept and making tentative choices about a career based on classes, work experiences, and hobbies. The last three stages—establishment, maintenance, and decline—involve entry-level skill development, stabilization through work experience, continued adjustment to improve one's position, and finally, decline or reduced output. These last stages can be thought of as maturing from a new professional to a seasoned or mature one. Ideally, in the process, people make contributions to a profession while

developing new skills, holding their own against the competition, making the most of opportunities, accepting limitations, and finally, finding and developing nonoccupational roles.

There are multiple ways of responding to and resolving some of the crises of adulthood, according to Erikson (1994) and Super (1980). They offered excellent overall guidelines and directions for living a healthy life. However, individuals vary. Thus, the journey of life cannot be reduced to a formula. Actions and reactions of others fluctuate.

MY STORY THROUGH THE LENSES OF ERIKSON AND SUPER

Erik Erikson: Intimacy versus isolation (ages 18–40)—a period that centers on forming intimate, loving relationships with other people or isolation from them.

Donald Super: Establishment (ages 25–44)—a period of establishing entry-level skill building and stabilization through work experience.

It was 1972. I was 1 year out of a master’s degree in counseling at the age of 27. I was single, held a bachelor’s and two master’s degrees, was working at a rural North Carolina mental health center, and had friends. I had also experienced a recent broken engagement from which I was still recovering emotionally. In addition, I was preparing to go into the Army to fulfill my ROTC (Reserve Officers’ Training Corps) obligation. I had just come back from a trip to Hawaii where the major professor in my counseling master’s program had invited me to present the results of my thesis with him at the annual conference of the American Psychological Association. To my delight, the paper not only had been accepted but had been published in the conference proceedings. I was second author. It felt good to get a byline, especially while wrestling with depression from the breakup and getting my life back on track.

What next? I wondered. I was about to leave for Fort Lee, Virginia. I realized while stationed there I would have comradery with fellow army officers and a great deal of physical activity, but little else. Thus, I steeled myself cognitively and emotionally for the training ahead, and I worked out. However, just before leaving, I discovered while reading the *Personnel and Guidance Journal* (now the *Journal of Counseling & Development*) that they were publishing poetry written by counselors. I had been writing poems in addition to my clinical notes. The emotions in the sessions had spilled over into verse. Thus, I submitted a poem and packed my gear.

While at Fort Lee I was informed that my verse, “Reality Sits in a Green Cushioned Chair,” was going to be published in the journal (Gladding, 1973). I let out a “Hooah!” which was an Army expression for “Hoorah.” (That is about as emotional as it got in the army back then.) It was nice to receive acceptance with acknowledgment. I did not recognize it at the time, but my identity was

about to change from being a first-line clinician to being an author, and not just an author, but also a very productive one.

When my military service was up, my energy returned to being focused on civilian life and the clinic where I worked. I continued to develop skills, but I was restless. I had had a taste of acceptance from two outside sources that differed greatly from my work environment. I was curious if there was more. Thus, I concentrated on seeing clients, dating, and making new friends, as well as writing. I found myself (despite my inability to spell) conceptualizing articles and polishing poems that I scratched out at work or late at night. I read the counseling journals voraciously and, because I thought more knowledge would make me better, I began working on my doctorate. I put my energy into what I could control (i.e., studying and writing) while trying to shape my social environment to promote friendships and intimacy.

Nothing happened on the dating scene. However, I finished my doctorate while working part time, moved to becoming an instructor of psychology at the local community college, and then completed an 18-semester-hour postdoctorate in psychology. In this process of borrowing money and taking time away from some social activities, I achieved academically. My father then reminded me that I could not be a promising young man forever, so at age 32, I applied for positions in counselor education nationwide. It was a process I could control only through writing letters and trying to publish. Persistence paid off, albeit slowly. After almost 2 years, dozens of letters, and a lot of frustration, I landed an assistant professorship at Fairfield University. "Ah," I thought. "I now have an established professional identity that feels comfortable like a good suit of clothes." I had achieved what Super (1980) described in his life career rainbow theory as a worker, citizen, and leisurite. However, other roles I wished to have were missing.

At 34, I still lacked companionship and intimacy, although I had established what Super referred to as entry-level skills and stabilization. The ironic part, I thought, was that although I had moved up the career ladder, it had not opened up social opportunities. I was surprised. I thought one opening might lead to another, and although sometimes that happens, it did not for me. My move to my new position in Connecticut, instead of opening up doors, made the situation worse. I landed in late summer in a community where my neighbors were less than friendly and my departmental colleagues had considerable friction with one another. Thus, I found myself with a house, a car, a dog, and plenty of time by myself as winter set in. In other words, I was alone except for occasional letters and telephone calls from family and friends back home. After trying to deny my circumstances, I realized that I had to find a strategy to survive and hopefully thrive. Otherwise, I needed to give up or go somewhere else. I decided developing a strategy to succeed was the best solution.

After considering options, I thought structuring my time might help. Indeed, as I would read later, structuring your time is one of the best moves a person

can make to be productive and creative (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Tharp, 2006). I taught at night and did not have to be at work until about 3 p.m. and only 3 days a week. With that much free time, I could explore many opportunities. My best option for constructing the time, I thought, was writing because it was something I had a modest record in doing and it was a requirement of being an academic. To make the experience as meaningful as I could, I played a game with myself. I pretended I had been taken prisoner by a foreign entity and the only things the enemy had given me were a notepad, two pencils, and a typewriter (the time was BC—before computers). If I was to do anything worthwhile and make my experience meaningful, I had to write. Therefore, I wrote every day after breakfast, with my dog at my side, and in the early afternoon after lunch, with the dog usually outside. I always took breaks after 2 hours and went for short walks to clear my mind, exercise my body, and reflect. Then, it was off to teach at the university. On the weekends, I gave myself a break from writing and went to athletic contests, attended church, did yard work, watched television, and prepared for classes.

The results of this routine were surprising and gratifying. Although I had published a few refereed articles up to this time, I had six articles accepted for publication in the 1st year of the new routine—three in the flagship journal of what is now the American Counseling Association (ACA). The next year, four were accepted, and in the 3rd year, there were seven. I had found a rhythm and success. I was being reinforced for something I enjoyed doing given that I was writing about topics I knew, specifically family counseling, the creative arts, and humor. I was using the emotional as well as cognitive and behavioral sides of me—something I had not done much since before my army experience and doctoral studies.

I also took time to attend singles events wherever I could find them. At one, I met Claire, my future wife. Thus, scholarly writing and romance became a part of my life. Although rather late in Erikson's intimacy stage, at age 40, I married.

Erik Erikson: Generativity versus stagnation (ages 40–65)—“making your mark” on the world through caring for others as well as creating and accomplishing things that make the world a better place.

Donald Super: Maintenance (ages 45–64)—a continuous adjustment process to improve position.

With a new marriage, I settled into a different lifestyle. Up to this point, I had lived by myself and done as I pleased. Now, there was Claire, 5 years my junior. We both wanted a family. Therefore, we tried and were fortunate. In 11 months, we had a son. We were thrilled, adjusted our routine, and were perpetually sleepy and tired. The same April of our son's birth, I was promoted to full professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where we had moved after 3 years at Fairfield. I had gone from an assistant to a full professor

in 6 years, having published an edited book and written 33 refereed articles during that time. I was amazed at the number of publications I had authored in such a relatively short time. However, I think it was because I wrote what I had an affinity and passion for and I had set up a method for accomplishing it. My drive was internal. Regardless, I had a celebration dinner the night I found out about my promotion, feasting on Captain D's fish with our dog, because Claire was too tired to join me and our newborn was sleeping. It was funny (and I actually laughed) because I thought major life achievements were usually commemorated with Champagne, caviar, and a party.

As time went on, I continued to write and developed different writing games to help me. For instance, I would stop in midsentence sometimes so I would have to complete the thought when I came back to the manuscript. The unfinished sentence was an Ernest Hemmingway technique, and allowed him, and now me, to begin fresh the next day. I also tried to see how many words could describe the same action and then use them all in what I was writing. I employed metaphors to do the hard work of clarifying concepts and to enliven the process of writing as well. I kept a pad and pencil on my nightstand so if a thought came during the night, I could wake up and write it down. Sometimes I laid manuscripts aside to give both them and me a break. Occasionally, I said goodbye to them. More frequently, I reunited with them after some time and gave them a different focus.

However, writing was now only a part of my life. There was much more to it and many other responsibilities. Twenty months after our first child, a second son arrived along with a bit more stress and less sleep. Hmmm, I did not remember Erikson (or any other theorist) mentioning the lack of sleep that goes with starting a family. However, I continued to write for the love of writing more than anything else. It was fun, but with two young children and my much taxed wife in the house, at age 43, I needed a new strategy for being productive. Thus, I decided to structure my writing around times when the children were not active and leave time to devote to the family, such as meals, play, bath, and bed. Some days, I barely wrote two sentences, but other days were better. I was now aided by having purchased a computer that had a spell-check program and by learning a lot of new information, which came with having to teach new courses. (I taught 27 different courses during my first 9 years as an academic at Fairfield and University of Alabama at Birmingham—whew!)

To make matters more exciting and relevant to my work, I joined a private counseling practice. Then, through persistence, I garnered a contract for my first book (after initially getting turned down quite bluntly by the leading publisher of the day. I might still have a few feelings about that.) While working on the book, my output of journal manuscripts declined. (The average of five or more articles a year during my first 6 years as a professor was excessively demanding). My personal and professional lives informed each other about what needed to be done and when. I also became editor of *The Journal for Specialists in Group*

Work because I realized much of my involvement in intimacy and generativity involved groups, and I thought as an academic and now a writer that it was something I should do. I had a faith tradition that emphasized giving to others, too. Thus, I worked my life into a ritual as much as possible. It was satisfying and productive. Unfortunately, I never knew ahead of time what a typical day would look like even when I had carefully planned it. However, if it did not go as I expected, I adjusted. I kept my energy and focus on what was possible, such as calling friends for help when needed. Life was not always predictable.

Sure enough, a major unpredictable event occurred. It was in the form of a telephone call one Sunday afternoon from the president of Wake Forest University. He invited me to take a position as his assistant. I had earned two degrees from Wake Forest, and so, after talking it over with Claire, I responded, “Yes.” Thus, in 1990, Claire—now pregnant with our third child—and I (at age 45) moved to Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I used my diplomatic and writing skills while working for the university president and also teaching part time in the counseling graduate program. On my first yearly review, the president said I used too many adjectives in the correspondence I crafted for him. Therefore, I cut out adjectives. In the 2nd year, he mildly complained about my use of adverbs. They immediately disappeared from his letters. (Claire thought he might target gerunds the 3rd year, but he did not.) The outcome of this experience was that I learned to be more direct in my writing.

After 7 years, I was promoted to associate provost and used the same strategy for working and writing as I have described, except as the children grew older my writing often occurred between 10 p.m. and midnight. Claire was insistent that we should talk for half an hour a day because she had heard (from me no less) that most couples talk only about a fraction of that. I thoroughly believe a key to a productive life is flexibility mixed with good communication. I think Erikson and Super would back me up, but I do not know how they scheduled their time when they were developing their theories. (It would make an enlightening study—an interesting dissertation!)

After 17 years in the administration, I voluntarily returned to the faculty at Wake Forest rather than move on to another university for a step up in administration. It was a good decision because, although I handled administrative tasks well, I did not enjoy them a lot. Thus, I transitioned to chairing the university’s new counseling department. (It was one I created, having been in the provost office.) I also continued to write (mostly books) as our children grew and my marriage with Claire matured. At the same time, I began taking on more leadership positions, especially in ACA—for example, becoming the association’s president. It made life more fascinating and complete (although it involved a lot of traveling and lost luggage). Although the energy and effort involved with leadership were taxing, the benefits were great. Through these leadership positions, I kept up to date on what was happening in the field of counseling, and that knowledge improved the quality of my scholarly contributions to the literature.

Erik Erikson: Ego integrity versus despair (ages 65+)—reflecting on one’s life and either moving into feeling satisfied and happy with one’s life or feeling a deep sense of regret.

Donald Super: Decline (ages 65+)—reduced output, prepare for retirement.

In 2010, I became officially old enough to retire. However, I realized the young-old (ages 65 to 75) are not that different from people in their early to mid-60s. Therefore, I continued teaching, writing, and providing service to others as a full-time faculty member. It was a good decision because physically and mentally I delighted in what I was doing and was able to do.

My scholarship continued to be what it had been in the 1990s and 2000s in generating articles (this time with some junior faculty instead of just by myself) and writing or revising a stable of books (35 revisions of 15 books). However, a new medium came into my life: video and film. I had made a couple of films before, one for an ACA division and one for my department at University of Alabama at Birmingham, but I had never delved deep into the process. In a serendipitous move, I met the acquisition editor of Alexander Street Press. She footed the bills for the first four films I made on counseling. Then, ACA got into the video business and began to film my sessions at conferences. At about the same time, Wake Forest acquired the documentary film department at the University of Florida. Thus, just as poetry in counseling had come along at an opportune time in the 1970s (I eventually published 45 poems in counseling journals), video and filmmaking came along in the 2000s. I seized the moment, which illustrates how the decade of 2010 grew more fulfilling and cinematic (literally) for me.

In this last decade, I have also been able to travel more, especially as an academic. I have taken graduate counseling students abroad to study Freud, Moreno, Adler, and Frankl in their native city of Vienna. I have been a Fulbright specialist twice (China and Turkey) and have taught a course on creativity in Copenhagen. In addition, I received what is known as the Hatch Prize at Wake Forest to study humor and mental health at Oxford. (Claire’s reaction was “Did anyone else apply this year?”) I have also been invited to keynote or deliver presentations in the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Ireland, and I have been fortunate enough to address every counseling association conference in the United States except one.

Although all of these events have been fulfilling, I now realize that my energy is less than it was and my vision and hearing are not as sharp as they once were. Furthermore, I am aware that while my mind is still good, my body, like an older car, is not running as smoothly as it once did. I have had prostate cancer (treated and cured with radiation), a hip replacement (that seems to have worked just fine), and an intestinal blockage (that required two operations to fix—ouch). Thus, I am not the same person at 72 as I was at 27. However, despite the

decline that Erikson and Super correctly predicted, I am still productive and have projects planned for the next few years. I think I have gained wisdom, which Erikson would say is a virtue of ego integrity. I am as happy and satisfied as I have ever been. I look forward to continuing to nurture and support the next generation of counselors and counselor educators wherever they may be. I look forward to supporting my now grown children in any way I can and, of course, continuing to care for Claire.

CONCLUSION

Erik Erikson's (1994) and Donald Super's (1980) conceptualizations of the life span and career development are idealistic and heuristic. They are idealistic in pointing out idyllically how people develop as they age personally and professionally. They are heuristic in inviting an assessment of how well individuals go through the stages each theory outlines, especially in adulthood when there may be considerable uncertainty and unpredictability in life. In evaluating my own life, I realize that the ideal did not always manifest in reality, some stages were not on time, and there was some overlap of stages. For example, intimacy and generativity definitely overlap. However, Erikson and Super provided guidelines on how life at its best might unfold along the personal journey and the career journey.

I have written this piece because I think it is important to know how counselors experience adulthood and how they adjust given their knowledge of the various developmental theories that they are expected to comprehend and teach. Although my life story is unique, it has universal aspects to it. For instance, the strategies for writing I have laid out are applicable to many counseling professionals. The use of humor and flexibility in dealing with life circumstances, such as having young children and a career, are also universal responses that can be taken away from this article.

I have also written this article because I am interested in contributing to the research literature about strategies for living a productive life as a counselor from a qualitative stance. Knowledge of how individuals handle both the predictable and unanticipated events in life may be helpful for those just starting a career. They can serve as a road map. After all, the reason I applied to be a Fulbright specialist was because I saw one of my heroes in the counseling world, C. Gilbert Wrenn, do it, and I thought it probably broadened his worldview on the multicultural and social justice aspects of life. It certainly did mine!

Theories, happenstance, and accomplishments do not explain or measure a life fully. Rather, more internal processes such as motivation, resilience, ability, planning, and persistence may be more effective in contributing to the adult identities we eventually take on. In some cases, new environments and kind acts of providence allow us to work differently and more productively. Of course, there are also new technologies and theories. I would never have dreamed of

computers (with spell-check, of course) or narrative therapy at 27. However, I am most aware of them at 72—I use them both! Life unfolds, and at any stage or any age, our purposeful responses to events can make a positive difference.

At 72, I can see the past much more clearly, as well as the inevitable. For the most part, I am pleased with the former. I am at peace with the latter. I know death gives meaning to life, and awareness of the finiteness of life can make us more responsible and sensitive to those around us now and to those who will be. Jonas Salk, the creator of the polio vaccine, purportedly said that the best thing we can do in life is to be a good ancestor. I hope that when my time on earth is done, that will be my legacy.

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