



2021

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Recommended Citation

Hunt, Andrea N. and Rhodes, Tammy D. (2021) "Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach using Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality," *Journal of College Access*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol6/iss3/8>

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Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach using Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality

Cover Page Footnote

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Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach using Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality



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ABSTRACT

Super's (1980, 1996) life-span, life-space approach of career development has had a major influence on the field of career counseling by shifting the focus beyond a 'singular point of entry' into to careers to one multiple transition points and trajectories. While Super's body of theoretical and empirical contributions to the field of career development are vast, the theory does not adequately address the experiences of Black youth. This article focuses on both theory and praxis by discussing the life-span, life-space approach in the context of career development of Black youth. We describe how critical race theory and intersectionality can be used as key organizing principles in an expanded framework along with Super's life-span, life-space approach to guide practices in college and career counseling. We end with a discussion of the implications for practice.

Keywords: career development, Black youth, life-span, life-space approach, Critical Race Theory, intersectionality

The basic premise in Super's (1980, 1996) life-span, life-space approach is that career development is a process that unfolds over the entire life span. Super's major emphasis is on the self-concept and how it changes over time with experience. His work had a major influence on the field of career counseling – it made counseling move past a 'singular point of entry' approach to careers or the thought that there is one transition point into careers (Herr, 1997). Because of Super's model, career counselors now see career development as a

life-span process with multiple transition points and trajectories. While Super's body of theoretical and empirical contributions to the field of career development are vast, the theory does not adequately address the experiences of Black youth. This article focuses on both theory and praxis by first providing an overview of the life-span, life-space approach and applying Super's approach to the career development of Black youth. Next, we describe how critical race theory and intersectionality can be used as key organizing principles in an expanded framework for college and career counseling. We end with a discussion of the implications for practice.

The Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

Much of Super's (1980, 1996) work centers around self-concept which involves both a personal and social identity. The self-concept is a function and result of one's career development. Super suggested that people have multiple self-concepts that lead to a self-concept system. Our vocational or work self-concept is shaped by the occupational images (i.e., mental schemas around who works in what types of jobs) that we carry around and is shaped by our early childhood experiences.



Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

Super thought that people have abilities, personality traits, and self-concepts which qualify them for a number of different occupations, and that certain occupations are more appropriate for some people although there is variability to accommodate differences.

Life Span Construct

An important concept in Super's theoretical model is the life span construct. Super (1980, 1996) uses the life span construct to account for the predictable or expected stages of development in the career role, one of which is adapting to work and different work environments. The developmental stages and tasks in the life span begin with growth (birth to age 15), followed by exploration (ages 15-24), establishment (ages 25-44), maintenance (ages 45-64), and decline (age 65+). Each of these stages in the life span illustrates the importance of work to self-concept and identity. As people navigate through these stages, they are growing in career maturity which coincides with psychosocial and cognitive development.

Growth Stage

The first two stages are of relevance for this article. The first stage is characterized with growth (birth to age 15) and this is where youth should be exposed to a range of careers and when image norms are formed. Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson (2006) describe image norms as the belief that people must have a certain image that is consistent with occupational, organizational, or industry standards in order to be successful. Image

norms stem from institutionalized beliefs around the "American Dream," meritocracy, and professionalism all of which are constructed in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and ability. For example, Collins (2000) identified how gender schemas such as promiscuous Jezebel, asexual Mammy, breeding Welfare Mama, controlling Sapphire, and emasculating Matriarch which shape image norms of youth continue to serve as an ideological justification for the economic exploitation of Black women. Further, Hunt and Rhodes (2018) suggest that gendered and racialized expectations about appearance in the workplace are often used to convey messages about professionalism and what bodies belong in certain occupational spaces. While Black women are earning college degrees at increasing rates, they are still disproportionately in careers that are social service related (e.g., social work or nursing), which is an extension of their history as domestic laborers and continuing discrimination in hiring practices. Black men are stereotyped as hypermasculine and aggressive with dominant narratives portraying them as unemployable, drug dealers, hip hop artists, or athletes. These stereotypes are upheld by larger systems of oppression (i.e., racism) and continue to perpetuate occupational segregation, which leads to a lack of representation in careers for youth.

For Black youth, these larger narratives along with messages that they might receive from teachers regarding careers shape their image

Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

norms, which are all formed within a larger racialized society. If youth do not have broad career exposure in their everyday setting, it is essential that they have access to career-related programs and interventions in school settings (Mariani et al., 2016). Many interventions such as *Real Game Series* (Anaca Technologies, 2014), *Career Cruising* (Career Cruising, 2015), and *Choices* (Choices Education Group, n.d.) are curriculums that provide students with general information about the world of work with the aim of increasing their awareness of college and career readiness (Pulliama & Barteka, 2018). However, these interventions were not normed with Black youth in mind and reinforce notions of respectability politics, perpetuate the myth of meritocracy, and do not address racialized image norms or social structures that Black youth may experience.

Exploration Stage

The second developmental stage, exploration (ages 15-24), is particularly interesting because this is where high school and college students try out different classes, interests, volunteer activities, and jobs (mostly part-time work) to help narrow down their interests and find possible career choices. School and career counselors working with high school and college students may encounter image norms in the exploration stage that affects students' ability to make effective career decisions. King and Madsen (2007) suggest that low-income Black youth may be more likely to initially consider careers in which they have seen other Black

people who appear to be successful (e.g., athletics). Even in settings (e.g., school or health care) where Black youth are likely to have interactions with professionals, they may not see people with similar identities beyond low-paying entry-level positions. These factors along with the lack of representation in certain fields of study (e.g., STEM) at the collegiate level may shape students' image norms and their desire or aspirations to explore or pursue different careers (Byars-Winston, 2014; Knight, 2015).

It is necessary that career counselors working with high school and college students continue to address occupational stereotypes even beyond the growth stage and how this may affect whether students see themselves as credible or competent in a field or profession. If not, students may not explore careers that are more suited for them or may be funneled into other majors or activities. Alliman-Brissett and Turner (2010) describe a glass ceiling in STEM fields for people of color that is an extension of educational preparation or lack thereof. More specifically, the choices made during middle and early high school regarding math and science classes can limit the opportunities for the more advanced classes that are needed for successful completion of a STEM college degree. As such, school counselors have a significant impact on youth prior to the 10th grade because they serve as a gateway to the course selection process that impacts trajectories beyond high school.

Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

Counselors may inadvertently make assumptions about a students' ability based on their own implicit or unconscious biases and the image norms that they associate with careers, thus encouraging Black students to pursue areas where they are overrepresented and might not need the same level of math and science preparation (and also have low median earnings) such as human services, community organization/development, social work, criminal justice, and human relations. Because of this, Black youth may not feel the same level of support from school counselors as other youth. School counselors need to be well-versed in multicultural (see Byars-Winston, 2014) and culturally relevant practices and use these approaches in facilitating career exploration among Black youth. Career exploration also includes finding opportunities for job shadowing with Black professionals and creating inclusive spaces to discuss structural barriers and discrimination.

Life Space

One of the most fascinating concepts in Super's (1980, 1996) model is the life space. The life space encompasses all of the social positions and roles that we hold in society. The life space consists of the different areas that make us who we are and spaces in life that we occupy (i.e., inhabited social spaces). The life space is an important concept because it is the site of future-orientation and an ongoing career development process over the life span (Diemer & Blustein, 2006). Super (1980) suggests that the roles that people occupy within the life space may have

different meaning to people and that not everyone is going to play all of these roles. However, his research does not specifically address Black youth or how systemic racism affects the major roles or principle theaters that describe the life spaces that people occupy over their life course.

Super (1980) defines roles in terms of expectations and performances, and notes that earlier performances (e.g., roles held prior to an adult career) affect later positions, the way role expectations are met, and how those roles are performed. This shows how roles interact and shape each other. Diemer and Blustein (2006) clarify that taking on a vocational identity which is largely influenced by early life experiences in childhood including positive image norms is connected to the vocational futures and the work role salience in the life space of Black youth.

Super (1980) also provides some further clarification on the relationship between roles and theaters by suggesting that some people do not enter paid employment so home may be the location of their labor (although it is largely unpaid in the typical sense). People live in multiple environments and have many roles and these vary in their demands and significance (Herr, 1997) suggesting role salience (Super, 1996). This can lead to a push and pull factor for Black youth when they have to navigate multiple home, school, and work communities as they enter college and/or future careers that may lead them into other settings. Super's (1957) previous research also supported the notion of role

Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

conflict where the demands of each role compete and/or come into conflict with each other. Role salience and role conflict factor into the decision points (e.g., before and at the time of taking on a new role, giving up an old role, or making significant changes in existing roles) and the myriad of personal and social determinants that have an effect on our decisions about the roles within our life space.

Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

Super provides a detailed description of career development over time. However, this body of research scarcely mentions systemic racism, how this shapes developmental stages, and how people navigate image norms and the life space. This model does not fully capture the lived experiences of Black students and how different aspects of their identities intersect to shape persistence and retention in academic spaces. This requires insight from other theories to help conceptualize a model that leads to praxis. First, critical race theory brings attention to the social construction of race and how this is used to further certain economic and political goals that systematically disadvantage Black youth and shape their career development. Next, intersectionality addresses how systems of power such as racism and sexism intersect to shape people's lives (Crenshaw, 1991). Race, gender, sexuality, and so many other axes of oppression are part of an interlocking system of power that forms a matrix of domination against marginalized groups (Collins, 2000). Insights from social capital

theory are interwoven into the following discussion on critical race theory and intersectionality. Social capital refers to relationships within social networks, common values within these networks (e.g., trust and reciprocity), and how this constitutes a resource that becomes a form of capital. School counselors and advisors should serve as social capital for Black youth. Social capital involves both social support and information, which minoritized youth often lack as they transition from out of high school into college or careers. These theories combined illustrate how systems of power shape the social identities and lived experiences of students and how they navigate and negotiate meaning around careers and postsecondary education.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) was developed by a group of legal scholars who wanted to center the experiences of people of color in a critique of the prevailing notions of colorblindness in the law (Bell, 1995a, 1995b). This critique draws attention to the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The main tenets of CRT include recognizing that racism is pervasive and built into how U.S. society operates and this is through ideologies around White supremacy that are embedded within most social structures and institutions (Lynn et al., 2013). These ideologies create a system of privilege around Whiteness that advantages some people who seem to remain invisible to their own privileges while disadvantaging others. For those who are minoritized, this leads to a

Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

loss of power and creates increased marginalization and feelings of isolation and despair as they navigate major social institutions such as education (Haskins & Singh, 2015). CRT critiques existing scholarship that does not recognize the experiences of people of color and liberalism or colorblindness as the sole pathway for equality.

In the context of career counseling, integrating CRT with Super's life-span, life-space approach draws attention to how structural racism and poverty may serve as barriers for Black youth as they develop their career aspirations, understand the career expectations that people may have of them, and navigate different career trajectories (Diemer, 2007). Alliman-Brissett and Turner (2010) suggest that youth differentiate among the different types of racism experienced across life spaces, and the racism they experience related to career exploration (in schools or by others around them) was directly and negatively associated with math self-efficacy, math outcome expectations, and poor academic performance in math. This also accounts for the gap between early career aspirations and later expectations for Black youth, leading to negative career thinking (Diemer & Blustein, 2006).

The effects of institutional racism that youth experience over the life span perpetuates the racialization of different careers and the myth of meritocracy in careers such as STEM-related fields. This can lead to cultural mistrust between Black youth and White

counselors and educators who work within an educational system organized around Whiteness (Terrell & Terrell, 1981; Bullock-Yowell et al., 2011), thus affecting the acquisition of social capital that often occurs while we are in school. Diemer and Blustein (2006) provide a solution grounded within the tenets of CRT that can help Black youth in the career development process. Their research shows that critical consciousness, namely sociopolitical control (i.e., the belief that actions within social and political systems can lead to change [Zimmerman et al., 1999]) is related to career commitment and work role salience for youth of color. Critical consciousness which can be seen throughout CRT can serve as a tool for Black youth in developing self-efficacy and a stronger racial identity while also analyzing how systemic inequality and oppression affects different roles in the life space and career development over the lifespan.

Intersectionality

The framework of intersectionality, coined by Kimberle' Crenshaw, is the belief that there are specific intersections that co-exist and construct the whole person, which create overlapping or intersecting systems of oppression and disadvantage. While intersectionality has similar roots as CRT (Bell, 1995a, 1995b) and has traditionally explored the ways that different identities intersect within the context of legal studies (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005), it has been expanded to explore various experiences of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) in society. Intersectionality has much

Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

to do with power similar to CRT – who exerts power and who is disadvantaged by it. Exploring the intersections of those who hold the power and wealth in society also sheds light on how systems of privilege and oppression are maintained. Quite often those who hold power do not belong to minoritized groups and they do not have to defend their position in society, which is how inequality is reproduced through racism, patriarchy and sexism, and classism.

Together with the life-span, life space approach and CRT, intersectionality highlights the importance of Black youth having a critical awareness of sociopolitical structures (racism, sexism, etc.) and how these systems intersect to shape their life chances. Without this awareness, Black youth may internalize their experiences and see a lack of opportunity as solely tied to their agency and individual merit. Black youth who are successful are often seen as “tokens” and have to defend their presence in spaces that are racialized and gendered. Students who do not have to defend or explain their presence are at an advantage in exploring different career opportunities, which is to say that taking up space without having to explain or prove that one belongs there removes some of the barriers related to aspirations, possibilities, and success. For example, Mayes and Hines (2014) suggest that the experiences of gifted Black girls are shaped by their racial and gender identities along with the larger cultural stereotypes and expectations surrounding those identities, which in turn

affect career aspirations. Because of this, they often do not see themselves represented in the curriculum, school-based programs, or in some careers. This can lead to feelings of isolation, academic disengagement, and changes in career aspirations. Howard et al. (2011) found a clear gender preference for occupational aspirations by race, and girls aspired to careers that required more education than did boys but that would result in similar median salaries.

While in college, Black students who attend predominantly White institutions (PWI) may potentially choose a major where they are likely to be the one student of color in their department, which could also eventually make them one of the only few persons of color in their career fields. Black students have to not only consider their race when entering into these spaces, but also how their other identities (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, social class, or ability) may intersect to create additional psychological, emotional, and social barriers along their educational and career paths. Unfortunately, the onus is often on BIPOC students and future professionals to learn how to best prepare, handle, and support themselves when faced with possible anti-intersectional sentiments in college and their everyday lives. While identity is important and creates a sense of empowerment, fighting to establish a sense of belonging can be defeating and rid youth of embracing all of their identities, especially when some identities are shunned in some spaces. This is why it is essential for

Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

counselors on college campuses to provide services rooted in multicultural and intersectional frameworks that are not only for direct care, but that focus on advocacy and social change.

Implications for Practice

Various professional organizations and their corresponding standards for career counseling provide guidance for practice that aligns with the life-span, life-space approach. These practices along with work grounded in CRT and intersectionality provide a more holistic approach to career development for Black youth. The American School Counselors Association (ASCA; 2019) divides a school counselor's work into three areas (i.e., personal/social, academic, and career development) and suggest that career education should begin as early as kindergarten and be cumulative resulting in successful postsecondary or career transitions (Pulliama & Barteka, 2018). The National Career Development Association (NCDA) (2004) has guidelines for school counselors that increase a student's self-knowledge; encourage educational and occupational exploration; and focus on career planning. The College Board National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) also set standards in their *Eight Components of College and Career Readiness Counseling* (NOSCA, 2012) that provide a systematic approach for school counselors beginning in elementary school. These include emphasis on college aspiration early in childhood; academic planning for college and career readiness;

enrichment and extracurricular engagement that build leadership skills; college and career exploration and making informed decisions about the future; college and career assessments; college affordability planning; understanding the college and career admission processes; and making a successful transition from high school graduation to college enrollment (NOSCA, 2012; Pulliama & Barteka, 2018).

Based on these professional guidelines and the expanded life-span, life-space approach proposed in this article, school counselors at the elementary, middle-school, high-school, and college levels are all vital in the development of positive image norms and career exploration, both of which are connected to later college and career readiness. Knight (2015) provides a litany of recommendations for practice that include university and K-12 partnerships; a specific focus on elementary-school career development; more collaboration with stakeholders; the use of data-driven and developmentally appropriate interventions; and more training for counselors to deliver classroom guidance sessions around career development. Byars-Winston (2014) suggests expanding the boundaries beyond traditional career development activities and partnering with organizations that serve Black youth (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs of America) and organizations that often have career awareness programming such as historically Black sororities and fraternities and local trade unions. At the collegiate level, more federal funding is needed for community

Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

colleges and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) along with raising public awareness (and student awareness) around the importance of these institutions as viable educational pathways. Black students attending PWIs need more specific career resources that address their multiple identities such as those provided by Rice University's Center for Career Development and access to trained career counselors which are often not found in student counseling centers or career services at many institutions.

While these recommendations are extremely helpful for practitioners, one of the primary areas of concern is that very little career programming occurs at the elementary level with counselors reporting they spend the least amount of time in career development activities (Knight, 2015) and especially in schools with low resources. As a result, students attending under-resourced schools often report being unsure of how to navigate the many college and career choices that they have to make throughout their education (King and Madsen, 2007). These experiences can further exacerbate the cultural mistrust that Black students may have in predominantly White spaces or with White counselors. One way to remedy this is to connect college and career readiness in elementary and middle-schools to instruction in content areas such as literacy, which encourages school counselors and teachers to collaborate on initiatives in creative ways. Turner (2019) offers a Freirean-inspired approach that integrates literacy skills with college and career readiness, critical thinking,

and sociopolitical consciousness. This model provides multiple opportunities for Black youth to explore career aspirations with peers by reading different materials including books on successful Black adults, conducting research on future careers, and presenting on their career goals using multimodal strategies. This is a more culturally relevant approach to college and career readiness because it encourages the leveraging of Black students' community knowledge and career aspirations; center Black students' racial literacies and conventional literacies; and promote liberatory literacies through different forms of writing and sharing of knowledge (Turner, 2019).

Anctil, Klose Smith, Schenck, and Dahir (2012) found that school counselors are more likely to engage in career development when they believe it to be important. Counselor education programs need to integrate more multicultural career development training for school counselors at all levels that stresses the importance of career development for the overall well-being of youth (Haskins & Singh, 2015). Career development training also needs to move away from a deficit approach when working with Black youth to one that identifies more protective factors for positive career development such as stable and supportive extended family, kin, and community networks that provide social capital; a strong ethnic and/or cultural identity that is developed through critical consciousness (Diemer & Blustein, 2006); and community resources that support psychosocial and physical development. In

Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

doing so, school counselors are able to more effectively engage Black youth in career exploration that increases their flexibility and career adaptability, helps create a vocational identity and future orientation, and encourages career self-efficacy and an internal locus of control (Knight, 2015). Most importantly, it teaches Black youth how to examine their lives and careers within the context of larger sociopolitical structures (Diemer & Blustein, 2006).

One way of doing this is by using career development group counseling in school settings with strategies that extend Super's model and reflect tenets of CRT and intersectionality. For example, Falco and Shaheed (2021) show how career decision making is an intentional process through their work with young women in high school by focusing on increasing general self-efficacy, career decision self-efficacy, and STEM self-efficacy. They use the first four sessions to focus on interests, social support, barriers, and beliefs all of which are linked to STEM motivation. The other four sessions focus more specifically on sources of self-efficacy and setting goals for after the group. Mostly importantly, the sessions highlight the larger sociocultural and sociopolitical context, how this affects STEM self-efficacy, how this creates systemic barriers for STEM engagement, and how to address all of this. Students complete reflection prompts, which are designed to increase self-efficacy, in a weekly journal about their reactions to the group discussion and how the group

discussions affect their decision-making regarding STEM careers.

Barclay and Stoltz (2016) use a similar narrative approach in their Life Design Group (LDG) with college students to see how the clients perceive their own strengths, interests, overall life goals, and career identity. They use the Career Construction Interview (CCI) (Savickas, 1998, 2011) which was influenced by Super's work. What is important here is paying attention to how the CCI can be used to guide group sessions with diverse populations through its focus on authoring a co-constructive story of identity and meaning. An approach like the LDG and CCI is further strengthened by considering how CRT and intersectionality can inform the collaborative and reflective process between a facilitator, individuals, and group members in addressing the varying cultural aspects of each students' story and the institutional or systemic barriers (e.g., discrimination) that have shaped their early life experiences. Insights from CRT and intersectionality along with the LDG and CCI used by Barclay and Stoltz (2016) can empower students to identify career pathways, make adaptive life decisions, and connect with campus and community resources that encourages their sociopolitical consciousness of education and the institutions that they are currently navigating while also increasing their likelihood of graduation.

Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

Conclusion

Career counselors have long recognized the importance of Super's (1980, 1996) life-span, life-space approach because of its developmental focus and emphasis on how the self-concept changes over time with experience. Super's work changed how counselors thought about career transition and trajectories. However, the theory does not directly address the experiences of Black youth. This article sought to integrate CRT and intersectionality with the life-span, life-space approach for a more thorough framework of career development for Black youth. This framework is not only applicable for the career development interventions that are used in schools, but also can help redefine how we train career counselors and encourage increased reflexivity among White counselors who work with Black youth. CRT and intersectionality shift our thinking to systems of advantage and disadvantage and the ideologies that sustain those systems. This framework is also useful in critiquing existing practices and scholarship in counselor education that are often based on Eurocentric models and helps practitioners recognize that colorblindness does not lead to equity, inclusion, or justice for Black youth. As such,

this expanded theoretical model not only guides everyday practices with students but serves as a framework for how we conceptualize career counseling as social justice/change work in the 21st century.



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Expanding the Life-Span, Life-Space Approach

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