

# Gender and Work: Assessment and Application of Super's Theory – Career Maturity

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## **Abstract**

The present study discussed the issue of gender and career maturity which operated on Super's Theory of career development. The aim was to examine the effects of gender on career maturity among counseling students in a public university in Malaysia. The Career Maturity Inventory by Crites (1995) was utilized as the major instrument for the study. Seventy-six participants comprising 35 males and 41 females were recruited. Results indicated that females in general exhibited higher career maturity compared to male participants. This supported the notion that gender has significant impact on one's career maturity.

**Keywords:** Career maturity, Super's Theory, gender and work

## **Introduction**

Up until the industrial revolution there was no differentiation of work for both genders; it was the norm in society for males and females to work alongside each other and co-share their home responsibilities. During that time, male and female shared the daily tasks in terms of sourcing for food, farming, hunting or raising livestock as well as home responsibilities to look after children and perform household responsibilities. Zunker (2004) attests to this sharing of life, work, and social roles of both genders over thousands of years and its existence is still observable in some distant or remote part of today's world.

One of the primary factors contributing to changes in life, work and social roles of both genders over the last few centuries arose at the onset of the industrial revolution in the late 18th Century leading to the division of labor by gender as a result of relocation of the workplace. Males were mostly attracted to job opportunities in manufacturing in which they worked in factories while females remained at home attending to household tasks.

Moving forward to the 20th century, this division of labor by gender has continued as a way of life. Hence, females tend to assume a less important position and lower social status as compared to males. Typically, the socially accepted occupations such as teachers, secretaries and nurses were the primary job options for females.

To date, several forces contribute to the changes in the working world for both genders. The forces are known as technological advancement as a result of the industrial revolution, increased application of computer and computer related equipment, and changes in social status in conjunction with other pressures in present-day society. Thus, the impact of these forces in today's society might contribute to the changes of the working world, leading to the changes in terms of career roles for both male and female.

## **Studies on Gender and Work, Career and Career Maturity**

Quek (2003) defined career as the sequence of work related positions, values and roles held by an individual. According to the report 'Equality at work: Taking the challenges' by the ILO, women's employment rate increased in most regions. While there was evidence supporting the increasing employment rate among women, men's employment rate has registered a slight decline in 5 out of all regions particularly in Europe (non-E.U.), central Asia and South Asia. Generally, North America still displays the highest women's employment rate, while the Middle East and North Africa appear to be showing lower employment rate among this population.

According to Patton and Creed (2002), gender differences are evident on work commitment and career maturity. Gender and age seem to be the only two demographic variables that contribute significantly to the prediction of career maturity (Kornspan & Etzel, 2001). Recent research revealed that young women demonstrated significantly higher level of career maturity than young men (Luzzo, 1995; Rojewski, Wicklien, & Scheel, 1995). However, Powell and Luzzo (1998) proposed that young men perceived having more control over their career decision making than young women. Similarly, although women in Luzzo's (1995) study displayed higher career maturity than men, they were more inclined to perceive role of conflicts and barriers as obstacles in their career development process. As a result, women might balance their career preferences with what seems possible, regardless of whether their career behavior is appropriate for their career development stage (Farmer et. al., 1997).

## **Gender and Work in Malaysia**

What is the position of Malaysia in terms of gender and work? According to Malaysia's Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP), female labor force has slightly declined from 47.8% in 1990 to 47.3% in 2004 and subsequently to 45.9% in 2006. In contrast, male labor force has

been consistently reported to be over 80% in the labor force since 1980 (NST 11.5.07). These statistics highlighted the incongruence between female labor force and the significant progress made by females in the area of education as it is widely known that females make up approximately 70% of the student population in Malaysian universities. This might imply that increasing education opportunity among the female population has not contributed to the increasing female participation in the work force.

“A major reason why Malaysian women’s labor force participation and political empowerment remain so low compared to their level of health survival and educational attainment is because neither government nor society has dealt effectively or adequately with the changing roles of women today.” (NST).

Basically, Malaysian women are still trapped by their instilled sense of their traditional role as the homemaker and principal child caregiver. For women, family has always been given priority whenever there are work and family conflicts. As such, this belief reinforces their traditional role and they tend to be marginalized in the workplace as being less effective and productive than their male counterparts. This is applicable to single women who are expected to look after their ageing parents (NST).

Nevertheless, a few policy instruments identified in the Ninth Malaysia Plan include more flexible working arrangements, community childcare or nursery centers as well as retraining opportunities in order to boost women’s labor force participation.

### **Donald Super’s Theory: Women’s Career Development**

Among the career developmental theorists, Donald Super appears to be the first to discuss the career development of women in a serious manner. Super recognized that homemaking is an important issue for women. Thus, he integrated the elements of homemaking, family and career of women in his revised theory where a total of seven categories are used to describe women’s life career patterns:

#### ***Stable homemaker***

Stable homemaker refers to women who get married as soon as they have completed their studies. Their main focus is on husband and children. They do not wish to work and have no working experience.

#### ***The conventional career pattern of women who worked until marriage***

Generally, women in this category have obtained some working experiences and they quit their job once they get married to be a full-time homemaker. The typical choice of occupations included clerical and secretarial work which only required short-term training and minimum commitment.

#### ***The stable working pattern of women who did not marry but who worked throughout their adult life span***

In this category, women have a more stable working pattern and full life attention is diverted to their work. They tend to strive for higher education or professional courses to enhance working ability.

#### ***The double-track career pattern of women who combined family and work***

Women who pick up the responsibility as career women and homemakers fall under this category. They started to work upon completing their education and continue to work even after marriage. This is observable among women in the management or professional level such as lawyers and doctors as well as the blue collars workers. The challenges and attractive rewards from work motivate them to continue working despite the need to juggle between the

heavy workload and their responsibilities as wife and mother. In contrast, some women might pick up this career pattern due to financial needs regardless of their interest in the work.

### ***The interrupted career pattern of women who worked after raising their children***

Women in this category quit their job once they are married in order to raise their children, but they return to the workplace when their children have grown up. Divorcees and widows who return to work to support their living fall under this category too.

### ***The unstable career pattern of women's irregular cycle of movement in and out of the workforce***

Because of uncertainty in economic pressure, some women might need to work on and off to support their lifestyle. This is often observable among women who are in the lower socio-economic status.

### ***The multiple-trial career pattern of an unstable work history***

Both men and women fall under this category whereby they undergo a number of job tryouts before settling down on a permanent job.

## **Donald Super's Theory: Career Maturity**

According to Super, career is enclosed in both the life-span and the life-space, including life roles and lifestyle. His work is a unified set of theories dealing with specific aspects of career development, taken from developmental, differential, social, personality and phenomenological psychology and held together by self-concept or personal construct theory.

Career maturity appears to be one of the major concepts in Super's theory which refers to the successful accomplishment of age and stage developmental tasks across the life span. Specifically, Super defines career maturity as:

*A constellation of physical, psychological and social characteristics; psychologically, it is both cognitive and affective. It includes the degree of success in coping with the demands of earlier stages and sub-stages of career development especially with the most recent.*

Super further explains that career maturity is an individual's readiness to cope with the developmental task with which he or she is confronted due to his or her biological and social development along with social expectations from those who have reached the stage of development. In short, career maturity is known as the peak of one's career. It is possible that there are several peaks or no peak at all for an individual.

The five areas of career maturity are known as planfulness, exploration, information gathering, decision-making, and reality orientation. In addition, Super and Thompson (1979 as cited in Abernathy, 2000) have identified six factors in vocational maturity namely awareness to plan ahead, decision-making skills, knowledge and use of information resources, general career information, general world of work information, and detailed information about preferred occupation. Typically, the nature of one's career pattern is determined by the individual's parental socio-economic level, mental ability, education, skills, personality, career maturity and opportunities available.

## **Super's Life Career Stages**

In Super's Life Career Stages (refer to Table 1), the five major stages are classified as growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline (disengagement). As for transitions, they are the mini stages in which important events take place. While the five stages

in Super's Vocational Developmental Tasks (refer to Table 2) apply to the whole life, these same stages are enacted in a mini-version within each age group. A developmental task is a newly accomplished task or responsibility to be faced at certain point in an individual's life whereby the successful achievement of those tasks lead to happiness and success.

However, Super postulates that not everyone progresses through these stages at fixed age or in the same fashion. The developmental tasks in each stage allow people to function successfully within that stage while preparing them to move on to the next task.

Table 1 Super's Life Career Stages

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Ages</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
Growth	Birth to 14 or 15	Development of self-concept, capacity, attitudes, interests, needs, general understanding of the world of work.
Exploratory	15 – 24	“Trying out” through classes, work experience, hobbies. Tentative choice and related skill development.
Establishment	25 – 44	Entry-level skill building and stabilization through work experience.
Maintenance	45 – 64	Continual adjustment process to improve position.
Decline	65+	Reduced output, prepare for retirement.

Table 2 Vocational Developmental Tasks for a Life Span

<b>Vocational</b>	<b>Ages</b>	<b>General Characteristics/Developmental Tasks</b>
Crystallization	14 – 18	Developing and planning a tentative vocational goal.
Specification	18 – 21	Firming the vocational goal.
Implementation	21 – 24	Training for and obtaining employment.
Stabilization	24 – 35	Working and confirming career choice.
Consolidation	35+	Advancement in career.

Growth Stage refers to the physical and psychological growth which is crucial for self-concept development. One's experiences in this stage appear to be a source of background knowledge regarding the world of work that might be useful in making tentative choice and final selection.

Exploratory stage starts with the individual's awareness that occupation is an aspect of life. The choices expressed during the fantasy phase of this stage are frequently not realistic and associated with the play life. They usually have little long-term significant impact on the individual. Yet, some people might not advance beyond the fantasy phase and the lack of understanding about themselves along with the work hinder them from making an effective choice. In the tentative phase of the exploratory stage, the individual narrows choices to a few possibilities. Due to the ambiguity of one's ability, training available, and employment opportunity, the options might be changing. Later, the individual further narrows the list to occupations that they think are achievable and important during the final phase before entering the working world.

Establishment Stage is related to the early encounters within actual work experiences. At the beginning of this stage, individuals might attempt to validate the choice made through trial and error. Hence, people might accept a job and switch job later once they realize that the job does not fit them. As people attain more experiences and proficiencies, they might be stabilized. Therefore, the aspects of the particular occupation are integrated into their self-concept and their occupation is perceived as one of the best offers that result in satisfaction.

During the maintenance stage, the individual pursues to improve the occupational situation. As both the occupation and individual's self-concept have some fluidity, this involves a continual process of adjustment or change. The individual attempts to preserve the satisfaction while revising or changing the unpleasant aspects of work, which are disturbing but not so disagreeable that they drive the individual from the field.

Decline stage includes the pre-retirement period where people's concern is placed on keeping the job and meeting the minimum requirement of productivity. They are more interested in retaining the position than enhancing their productivity. This stage terminates when people withdraw from the working world.

### **Present Study**

The primary purpose of the present study was to examine the level of career maturity among counseling students in one public university. Specifically, the study aimed at investigating whether there is any significant difference between genders in career maturity. Hence, the study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- a. What is the career maturity level among counseling students in a public university?
- b. Is there any significant difference in terms of career maturity between male and female counseling students?
- c. What is students' opinion on gender issues in career?

### **Methodology**

A survey research design was employed to gather the necessary data with the intention to answer the research questions. The independent variable was gender and the dependent variable was career maturity.

### **Sample**

A total of 76 participants who were first year counseling students in a public university were recruited. Out of the 76 participants, 46.05% (35) were male students and 53.95% (41) were female. Their age ranged from 20-24 years old.

### **Instruments**

Two primary instruments were employed, namely:

- (i) General information questionnaire  
Preliminary information about participants and their opinion regarding gender issues in career were collected.
- (ii) Career Maturity Inventory (Crites, 1995)

The Career Maturity Inventory consists of 50 items whereby participants stated whether they 'agree' or 'disagree' with each item. Career Maturity Inventory is separated equally into two parts, the Career Maturity Inventory Attitude Scale (CMI-AS) and the Competence Test (CMI-CT). The Career Maturity Inventory Attitude Scale contains 25 items designed to test the 5 dimensions (Decisiveness, Involvement, Independence, Orientation and Compromise) of career decision making. On the other hand, the Competence Test measures knowledge about occupations and the decisions involved in choosing a career; it consists of 5 sections namely Self Appraisal, Occupational Information, Goal Selection, Planning and Problem Solving. The score of Career Maturity Inventory ranges from 0 to 50. Norms established with the Pennsylvania ninth grade students (Herr & Enderlein, 1976) showed a mean 34.39, a standard deviation of 4.93 and a range from 19 to 47.

## Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed by using SPSS. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized for data analysis. Descriptive statistics in the form of frequency, percentage distribution and mean were used. Independent *t*-test was conducted to examine the effects of gender (male and female) on participants' career maturity.

## Results

### Career maturity level among students

Based on the literature review of local studies on career maturity (Guan, 2004; Teo, 2005), the suggested mean score for career maturity was 28. Thus, for the present study, students who scored higher than 28 were considered as exhibiting high career maturity. In contrast, those who scored lower than 28 were considered as displaying low career maturity (refer to Table 3). Result showed that 59.21% of the students scored more than 28 items correctly.

Table 3 Career Maturity Level

Career maturity level	Frequency	Percentage
High ( $\geq 28$ score)	45	59.21
Low ( $< 28$ score)	31	40.79
Total	76	100

Note: N = 76

### Gender differences in career maturity

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare career maturity between male and female students. The result revealed that there was a significant difference for the career maturity scores of male ( $M = 27.39$ ,  $SD = 4.08$ ) and female ( $M = 31.46$ ,  $SD = 4.12$ ) participants;  $t(74) = 4.31$ ,  $p = .021$ . Specifically, the results suggest that female students exhibited higher level of career maturity in comparison to male students.

Table 4 Comparison of Career Maturity Score between Male and Female Students

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Career Maturity	Male	35	27.39	4.0826			
	Female	41	31.46	4.1224	4.306	74	0.021

### Students' opinion on gender issue in career

Table 5 shows students' opinion on gender issue in career. The majority of students (57.9%) agreed that gender is an important issue in career for several reasons such as: 1) certain careers are not suitable for certain gender, 2) male and female play different roles in career, 3) male and female generally have different personality, and 4) there are different career needs for male and female. However, 26.3% of the students mentioned that gender is not an issue in career by providing reasons such as: 1) everyone has opportunity to succeed in career including male and female, 2) ability is more important than gender when considering one's career and 3) women can do any job they want in today's society. Lastly, 15.8% of the respondents did not provide any opinion.

Table 5 Opinion of Students on Gender Issue in Career

Item	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Is gender and important issue in career?	Yes	44	57.9
	No	20	26.3
	Unanswered	12	15.8
Total		76	100.0

### Discussion

Based on the results, more than half or 59.21% of the students scored more than 28 items in the Career Maturity Inventory correctly. This suggests that students' answers reflected sufficient level of understanding regarding the statement listed in the Career Maturity Inventory. The fact that the respondents were second year counseling students might provide an explanation for this phenomenon whereby they were able to respond appropriately on the guidance decisions and career choice based on their knowledge of career information. Thus, the present study suggests that the career maturity level among the year two counseling students was generally high.

By comparing the career maturity score between male and female participants (refer to Table 4), female participants demonstrated higher career maturity than male participants. This finding is consistent with a number of past researches which supported that females have certain advantages over males in some aspects of affective or cognitive career maturity due to sex differences in overall maturational rates (Luzzo, 1995; Rojewski, Wicklein, & Schell, 1995).

Most studies conducted over the past two decades have found that females in several age groups demonstrate higher score on career maturity measures than males (Alvi & Khan, 1983; Herr & Enderlein, 1976; King, 1989; Lokan, 1984; Luzzo, 1995; Westbrook, 1984). As for three Malaysian studies conducted by Chin (1988), Rokiah Karim (1992), and Md Suhaini Haji Sabilan (1998) respectively, they concluded that female students showed higher career maturity level compared to male students.

However, in another study done by Fouad (1988), females only scored higher on certain subscales than males. Achebe's (1982) study in Nigeria reported that males scored higher than females in career maturity. This indicates career maturity research shows conflicting results when examining gender differences in this aspect. The complex interaction of other influences and one's career planning might contribute to the difference in terms of career maturity development between male and female.

In the present study, out of the total 41 female participants, 30 of them consulted career counselors whereas only 18 out of 35 males consulted career counselors. Therefore, from the total of 48 students who had seen career counselors, 30 of them were females.

As predicted by Super, higher career maturity signifies students have more information that guided and helped them in making their future career choices. In other words, they are showing higher capability in planning their career. Hence, the fact that female students in the present study showed higher career maturity might be partly attributed to the notion that more female than male students had consulted career counselors. This might assist them to pick up more specific career information which is helpful in making their career choices. This is in accordance to the opinion of Chin (1988) who expressed that female students demonstrated higher career maturity level due to their involvement in career counseling projects along with their willingness to meet and consult career counselors. Similarly, Md Suhaini Haji Sabilan (1998) proposed that students who participate in career counseling programs tend to exhibit higher level of career maturity than non-participating students.

In contrast, Davis and Horne (1986) reported small group counseling activities and career counseling courses do not produce significant differences in relation to career maturity level. Nevertheless, it can be said that these activities and courses do create some form of impacts on students.

Furthermore, the present study suggests that the lower score of answers to the Career Maturity Inventory items supported Super's Life Career Stages. The lower scores serve as an indicator that

students might have no idea on what to answer, probably due to the lack of information to make the decisions. As such, they were lacking in readiness in terms of future career decision making.

Based on Super's Life Career Stages, participants whose ages ranged from 20 to 24 years fall in the Exploratory Stage which reflects the start of students' awareness "that an occupation is an aspect of life." At this stage, their career choices tend to be uncertain, nebulous and temporary. The Life Stages and Sub stages – The MAXICYCLE also shows that students were in the Trial Transition and Trial Stabilization stages where tentative choices and related skill were developed. Generally, they were at the entry-level skill building and stabilization though work experience. In terms of vocational development stages, the students were in the specification and implementation stage whereby they were grappling and in the process of firming their vocational goal as seen in their subject majors.

### **Students' Opinion on Gender Issue in Career**

In the present study, students' opinion concerning gender issue appears to fit the commonly known global gender stereotypes whereby some students expressed their opinion that some work is not suitable for certain gender. This point of view is further verified by the supporters who take biological factors into consideration when determining one's behavior or ability. The existing gender differences can be viewed from the nature or nurture theory too. Typically, the nurture approach perceives social-environmental factors as primary forces in influencing human behavior and believes that biological sex has little to do with how people behave.

### **Conclusion**

The result of the pilot study revealed significant gender differences on career maturity whereby females demonstrated higher career maturity than males. As females have become very much fully incorporated into the labor force and are occupying leadership roles in traditional and non-traditional occupations, greater attention to gender issues in role salience and career decision making needs to be applied in life-space as well as life-span perspectives.

Although the findings of the present study appear to be useful, certain noteworthy limitations remain. As the sample of current study was not randomly selected, the external validity is limited. In addition, the influence of other variables on students' career maturity level was not taken in to consideration in the present study. For instance, other variables such as intellectual capacity (Lawrence & Brown, 1976; Westbrook, Sanford, & Donnelly, 1990), locus of control, self-esteem (Bernardelli, DeStefano, & Dumont, 1983; King, 1989; Ohler, Levinson, & Sanders, 1995), age (Stern, Norman, & Zevon, 1991), parental support, socioeconomic status, educational access, and opportunity seem to impact on the construct of career maturity (Luzzo, 1993).

In a nutshell, future research should take into account the various variables when examining career maturity in order to strengthen the knowledge base of career maturity among students. At the same time, increased attention needs to be paid to the cross-cultural applicability of the various segments of Super's theory of career development.

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