CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL FOUNDATION

This chapter will provide a more detailed account of the existing literature on the benefits of engaging in multiple roles. In order to contextualize the current study, it will begin with a description of Super’s Life-span, Life-space approach to career development, presenting a graphic depiction and explanation of how he believed individuals integrate multiple roles in their life-careers. Next, it will present previous research on the positive side of occupying multiple roles, initially by differentiating the constructs described in the literature, including enrichment, positive spillover, enhancement, and facilitation, and then by detailing the findings accrued within each category. It will then describe, in greater detail, Greenhaus and Powell’s (2006) theoretical model of work-family enrichment. It will also discuss the first published global measure of work-family enrichment (Carlson et al., 2006). Finally, it will state the research questions of the current study.

SUPER’S LIFE-SPAN, LIFE-SPACE APPROACH AND THE LIFE-CAREER RAINBOW

Super’s (1980, 1990) Life-Career Rainbow was his illustration of the Life-Span, Life-Space approach to career development. The purpose of Super’s graphic depiction was to portray multiple role careers, taking into account an individual’s life stages, the different roles that are salient at certain points in time, and their determinants and interactions. Looking at Super’s theoretical model, the outer band of the Rainbow (1990, p. 212) depicts the major life stages, in a typical but by no means rigid order, and the approximate ages of each. The longitudinal image represents the “life-span” of Super’s approach to career development. The stages included are: Growth (childhood); Exploration (adolescence); Establishment (young adulthood); Maintenance (middle adulthood), and Decline (old age). The second dimension portrayed in the Rainbow is role salience; it is latitudinal, representing the “life-space” of Super’s approach, “the constellation of positions occupied and roles played by a person” (p. 218).

Super’s (1990, p. 212) version of the Life-Career Rainbow encompassed six major roles (a more succinct version of his 1980 Rainbow that involved nine major roles): Child, Student, Leisurite, Citizen, Worker, and Homemaker. In the model, role participation is indicated by the shaded areas; as a person moves through the life stages, the differential shading reflects the addition and abandonment of particular roles. Super (1980, 1990) theorized that as new roles are added, participation in and affective commitment to other roles may be reduced; however, he also noted that the various roles may be “extensive” (1990, p. 218), quite aligned with the role accumulation literature (Marks, 1977; Sieber 1974) and the expansionist hypothesis (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Super (1980, 1990) did not ignore the potential for role conflict, however,
and indicated that multiple role participation can overburden individuals. Nevertheless, he also explicitly stated that enrichment could occur when experiences transfer from one of life’s “theatres” to another. Particularly evident in Super’s conceptualization of life-career is that there is no separation between an individual’s career and the rest of one’s life roles; Super’s is thus a holistic perspective that echoes the sentiments and empirical findings of others who insist that work and family are interconnected as opposed to separate spheres (e.g., Kanter, 1977). What Super never wrote about from a theoretical perspective, however, is how the multiple roles interact so as to become extensive. In other words, while Super (1940, 1980, 1990) acknowledged the potential of work and family roles to enrich each other, the processes by which roles become supplementary or supportive were never articulated in an empirically validated manner.

Super’s theory of role salience (1980, 1990) provides another key contribution to our understanding of the work-family interface, and the Life-Career Rainbow provides a tool to conceptualize and estimate role salience. Super termed role salience to refer to the level of importance that an individual places on a particular role. As noted earlier, researchers agree that role salience is a key determinant of the potential for enrichment, as the more individuals value their work and family roles, and care about their role performance in each sphere, the more they are likely to deploy resources gained in one domain to the other (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

Although Greenhaus and Super have apparently not collaborated academically, their mutual interest in role salience can be traced quite far back; For instance, in Super’s (1982) article addressing the meaning of work, Greenhaus (1971, 1973) is credited with being the first researcher to operationalize the term salience. Greenhaus created a measure of the relative importance of work, compared to other roles one engages in. As Super reiterates, “career salience thus denotes relative importance, the degree to which a given role stands out from others played” (p. 97). Perone (2005) explains, “Super’s life-span, life-space theory (1990) emphasizes the importance of implementing one’s self-concept through a combination of life roles. The work role is addressed in the context of other life roles. Individuals experience varying degrees of participation in, valuing of, and commitment to these roles” (p. 317). If role salience were empirically demonstrated to facilitate enrichment, this would be a highly meaningful finding; specifically, it would suggest that more positive outcomes in both work and family domains could be expected when the roles of each domain are considered very important to the person occupying them.

In terms of career theory, Super (1940) was ahead of his time in suggesting that work and family roles could interact in a positive way; however, he did not provide details as to how this occurs. The current study seeks to deepen our understanding of how individuals’ lives are enriched by occupying work and family roles; Super’s idea that multiple roles can be extensive within the life-space has found a compelling potential explanation in the current theoretical model of work-family enrichment postulated by Greenhaus and Powell (2006). The current study seeks to elucidate the processes of work-family enrichment, with the ultimate goal of understanding the factors that facilitate enrichment among workers with families.