Super’s Life-Space Theory: A Useful Framework for Achieving Life Balance

As we have noted, more than any other career development theorist, Super (1957, 1980, 1990) recognized that each of us, in large part, balances life differently, due to the contextual affordances life provides to each of us. Super incorporated this fact into his work when he expanded his career development theory to include a “life-space” segment. Specifically, Super noted that people have different life spaces due to personal factors (e.g., needs, values, interests, aptitudes) and situational factors (e.g., family, neighborhood of residence, country of residence, economic policies, the existence of gender and racial bias). These personal and situational factors interact to shape our life-role self-concepts and to present us with career development tasks with which we must cope successfully to manage our career development effectively. In these ways, Super’s life-space theory segment merges with his self-concept and life-span theory segments (1990) to create a career development theory that embraces heterogeneity and fluidity in adult career development.

In describing the life space, Super (1980) identified nine primary life roles: child, student, worker, partner, parent, citizen, homemaker, leisurite, and pensioner. He also noted that each life role tends to be played in a particular theater (e.g., home, school, work, community). Today, just 20 years after Super’s landmark article, we acknowledge that playing individual roles in multiple theaters is a typical occurrence. For example, laptop computers make it possible to work in a coffee shop or at home. The role of student can be played at school or at home as in the case of web-based training courses. Thus, the fluidity of life-role activities has increased to the point that individual theaters commonly contain multiple roles. This fluidity makes balancing life-role activity an even greater challenge. Additionally, because we can now play multiple roles in a single theater, which life role we are playing at any particular point in time may not be readily apparent to others. For example, the person working on a laptop computer in a coffee shop may be engaging in work but observers may assume she is engaging in a leisurely latte. The definition of the role activity depends on the individual’s situation and goals more than the location of the activity or the theater in which the role is played. Thus, balancing life-role activities requires goal clarity on a continuous basis. This level of self-awareness is substantially greater than when the boundaries between life roles and theaters were more clearly drawn than they are today.

The blurring of boundaries between roles and theaters also requires us to be intentional in our life-role behavior and, at times, to communicate our intentions to others. For example, engaging in conversation with a friend may be acceptable when we are enjoying a latte in a coffee shop, but not acceptable when we have chosen the coffee shop as the location for completing a business report in a timely manner. It may be difficult for our friends to know which life role (worker or leisurite) we are engaging in unless we tell them. The blurring of boundaries between roles and theaters requires a greater emphasis
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on assertively communicating our activities to others. There is, therefore, the need not only to possess goal clarity but also to be able to be appropriately assertive in communicating goal intentions related to life-role behaviors.

Understanding Life Roles

Making decision about when, where, and how we play various life roles requires us to have a clear understanding about the life roles we play and the importance we attach to them. Super, Savickas, and Super (1996) noted that the “social elements that constitute a life are arranged in a pattern of core and peripheral roles and this arrangement, or life structure, forms the basic configuration of a person’s life” (p. 128). Usually, a few roles dominate a person’s life structure. Decisions about which life role takes precedence at any point in time depend heavily upon one’s value structure. Work satisfactions and life satisfactions depend on the extent to which an individual becomes established in “a type of work, a work situation, and a way of life” that reflects the roles that previous life experiences “have led one to consider congenial and appropriate” (ibid., p. 125).

Super illustrated the life-space theory segment in his life-career rainbow. The “rainbow” provides “a powerful heuristic in which to consider how various social roles may intersect throughout the life span” (Blustein 1997, p. 262). Individuals can use the rainbow to plot their previous and current life-role activities. They can discuss the values they seek to express in each life role and their level of satisfaction with their current activities. Future scenarios can also be clarified as individuals identify future life roles in which they hope to participate and the values they hope to express in each future life role. The rainbow also highlights the fact that various personal (e.g., values, needs, and interests) and situational determinants (e.g., community, school, and social policies) influence when and how people play particular life roles. Individuals can discuss how these determinants influence their current and, potentially, their future life-role participation. Clearly, crystallizing and specifying current and future life-role goals requires us to operate from a shared definition of “role.”

The term “role” refers to behavior rather than position. Turner (1968) conceptualized a role as follows:

In any interactive situation, behavior, sentiments, and motives tend to be differentiated into units, which can be called roles; once roles are differentiated, elements of behavior, sentiment, and motives which appear in the same situation tend to be assigned to the existing roles. (p. 552)

Thus, it is important to note that life roles are enacted, rather than occupied, because life roles reflect interactions among personal determinants, situational determinants, and societal expectations as well as the individual’s interpretation and expression of those expectations. “Occupying” a role suggests that roles are positions that are stagnant and rigid, which is not the case. Because of their interpretations of the life-role expectations, two individuals can express the same set of life-role expectations differently. Allport
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(1963) addressed this point when he delineated specific life-role aspects that influence life-role participation and represent the interaction between the individual and the environment in life-role behavior.

Life-Role Aspects

Allport (1963) identified four significant aspects of roles that are differential determinants of how we react to given situations: role-expectations, role-conceptions, role-acceptance and role-performance.

Role-expectations are the historical and cultural prescriptions that are generally assigned to a role (e.g., the role of “worker” in the United States in the 1800s was defined very differently than it is defined today in the United States). Role-conceptions involve the way in which we actually perceive or interpret the role-related expectations (e.g., to be a “good” parent, I need to be a good provider, behave in a nurturing way to my children, and be fair and consistent in disciplining my children). Role-acceptance involves the willingness of the individual to become involved in the role (e.g., I realize the importance of leisure for life satisfaction and I choose to be an active participant in this life role). Role-performance involves the actual behavior of the individual in the role situation (e.g., because I interpret being a “good” citizen as being actively involved in local politics, and because I have decided that being a citizen is an important role to me, I choose to run for election to the town council). Collectively, these four meanings provide us with the foundation we use to enact the life roles we play.

Life-role aspects also serve as a complement to more general models of personal and situational determinants of role salience. For example, although Super (1980, 1990) effectively used the life-career rainbow and the arch model to communicate the personal and situational determinants that influence the degree of importance any life role holds for us, these determinants provide only general descriptions of factors that typically influence role salience. We need more specific information when we attempt to understand the life roles that are important to us. Allport’s life-role aspects provide a framework for examining contextual factors (such as culture) that influence the ways in which we understand life roles.

Thus, decisions about life-role participation require substantial degrees of self-reflection, self-understanding, and self-awareness. Although multiple roles are important in our lives, at various times, we must give priority to specific life roles. Sometimes deciding which role takes priority is relatively easy (e.g., giving priority to one’s job when there are low demands from one’s children) and sometimes not (e.g., when the demands from job and family are concurrently high). Life roles interact in ways that can be extensive or minimal, supportive, supplementary, compensatory, or neutral (Super 1980). Life roles also interact to shape the meaning that we attach to the constellation of life roles we play. For example, a parent who works outside the home may do so, in part, to accumulate the financial resources necessary to fund better educational opportunities for her children. Another worker who is not a parent may work, in part, to accumulate financial resources
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for participating in highly valued leisure activities. A parent may engage in community activities to support his daughter’s leisure activities such as when a father becomes a coach for his daughter’s baseball team. The constellation of our life roles contributes to the meaning and purpose we enact in life-role participation. Thus, achieving role balance is a general goal that must be operationalized individually.

Crystallizing Life-Role Identities

As a prerequisite to achieving life-role balance, it is necessary for us to crystallize our life-role identities. The crystallization process begins with the beginning of life as infants are exposed to multiple learning experiences (e.g., having nurturing parents vs. less nurturing parents, engaging in “leisure” activities). Children are exposed to life-role models in the home, community, and school. The accumulation of life-role experiences leads to general life-role beliefs (e.g., “leisure is important,” “being a good citizen is essential to democracy”) and self-referent life-role beliefs (e.g., “I enjoy participating in competitive team sports,” “I enjoy learning,” “being a good parent is important to me”).

Learning experiences also lead children to draw conclusions about which roles are most important. Being aware of which life roles are important and which are peripheral helps to prioritize time and commitments. Super (1980) referred to this as understanding one’s life-role salience. Life-role salience is a cornerstone for balancing life-role activities. Knowing which life roles are important in the present, however, is insufficient. Knowing which life roles will be important in the future helps guide the planning behavior of children and adolescents (e.g., if the role of student will be important after high school, then high school students need to enroll in courses that will prepare them for their postsecondary educational experiences). Because life-role self-concepts evolve over time, adults must maintain a high level of self-awareness pertaining to which life roles are most salient in the present and which are likely to be most salient in the future. The latter also guides planning behavior in adulthood as adults prepare for emerging life-role constellations (e.g., when retirement approaches).

Life is best when life roles nurture each other and offer opportunities for us to express our values. Life becomes stressful when life roles collide and provide little opportunity for value expression. Today, life roles collide with great frequency. Life-role collisions, like traffic collisions, are often unpredictable and can have very negative outcomes. To avoid collisions, drivers use defensive driving. They try to anticipate potential collisions and take corrective action before accidents occur. Driving defensively requires drivers to be alert, aware, and proactive. When we are alert, aware, and proactive in our life-role behavior, we can also minimize the degree to which our life roles collide and our lives become out of balance.

Being alert, aware, and proactive involves having a future orientation to emerging life-role demands (just as a driver is aware of and alert to emerging traffic patterns). For example, a worker with high salience for work and family needs to be alert to increasing work demands. When work demands increase, the worker who has a future orientation...
can take proactive action by communicating to family members that he or she will be experiencing increased work activity. This communication with family members can include identifying how long this increased demand is likely to last. Family members can also be reassured that the shift in role activity is temporary. By being aware of which roles are salient, being alert to shifting demands in life-role activities, and proactively communicating with others what shifts are occurring in life-role demands, adults take steps to minimize life-role collisions. In essence, these behaviors reflect life-role adaptability.

**Life-Role Adaptability**

Savickas (1997) discussed this sort of proactive action in managing one’s life-role participation when he suggested that Super’s career adaptability construct should be used to bridge Super’s (1990) life-span, life-space theory. Savickas noted that adaptability refers to “the quality of being able to change, without great difficulty, to fit new or changed circumstances” (p. 254). Given the rate of change occurring in the world of work and the life-role demands we experience, moving to conceptualizing career development from an adaptability perspective seems reasonable. The adaptability construct represents the interplay between person and environment within the career development process. It also represents the experience that many people have as they attempt to adjust to multiple life-role demands. The importance of adaptability in coping with life-role demands, or “life-role adaptability,” also raises the question as to how we can achieve adaptability in each of the life roles we play. Building on Savickas’ notion of career adaptability, *life-role adaptability* can be defined as “the quality of being able to change, without great difficulty, to fit new or changed circumstances” pertaining to *life-role demands*.

**Developmental Competencies and Interventions for Fostering Life-Role Adaptability**

Learning to cope effectively with multiple life-role demands is no small task. Achieving life-role adaptability requires knowledge, skills, and awareness pertaining to effective life-role participation. The knowledge, skills, and awareness for achieving life-role adaptability can be conceptualized from a developmental framework. For example, being able to adapt to the demands of multiple life roles assumes that we have developed the knowledge, skills, and awareness required for effective life-role participation. Developmentally, this can be conceptualized as “life-role readiness” (Niles 1998). That is, we must first develop the requisite knowledge, skills, and awareness for effective life-role participation prior to being able to demonstrate adaptability in coping with life-role demands. As noted, evolving life-role self-concepts require us to make continuous choices as to our life-role behavior. Thus, life-role readiness is grounded in life-role salience. Evolving life-role self-concepts are also influenced by contextual factors that influence our role-expectations, role-acceptance, and role-performance.
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Life-Role Readiness

Two topics are useful for addressing life-role readiness: life-role salience and contextual influences on life-role behavior (e.g., family, culture, economics, new occupational options). These topics relate to developing the knowledge and awareness necessary for life-role readiness and life-role adaptability.

Life-Role Salience

Life-role salience is critical to developing life-role readiness because life-role salience provides the motivating force for life-role participation (Super, Savickas, and Super 1996). That is, if a life role is important to us, then it is likely that we will engage in the behaviors necessary to become prepared for taking on that life role. Likewise, when salience is low, there is often little motivation for developing the requisite behaviors for effective participation in that role.

Super (1980) used a tripartite model in defining life-role salience. That is, role salience is reflected in the knowledge, participation, and commitment that we have for any particular life role. Thus, salience is composed of cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions, respectively. Salience is strongest when we have knowledge about a life role, participate in it, and feel that the role is important. When one dimension is weak, then the implication is that salience is weaker. For example, if we state that a life role is important (e.g., leisure), but we know little about it and spend little time participating in it, then the implication is that salience for that role is weak.

Intervention. We can explore our life-role salience by considering questions such as the following: How do I spend my time during a typical week? How important are the different roles of life to me? What activities do I engage in to learn more about the life roles that are important to me? What do I like about participating in each of the life roles? What life roles do I think will be important to me in the future? What do I hope to accomplish in each of the life roles that will be important to me in the future? What life roles do members of my family play? What do my family members expect me to accomplish in each of the life roles? Answers to these questions help us identify the life roles in which we are currently spending most of our time, those for which we have knowledge, those to which we are emotionally committed, and those we expect to be important to us in the future. With this information we can construct strategies for preparing for salient life roles. For example, if the life role of parent is expected to be salient in the future, we can discuss ways to plan and prepare for that role. We can also begin to examine areas of potential role conflict and discuss strategies for coping with excessive demands from multiple life roles. Finally, we can consider how we are currently spending our time and whether our life-role participation is an accurate reflection of our life-role salience. When it is not, we can consider ways for reconstructing our activities to more accurately reflect what we value.
Contextual Factors Influencing Life-Role Salience

Obviously, patterns of life-role salience are significantly influenced by immediate (e.g., family, cultural heritage, level of acculturation) and distal (e.g., economics, environmental opportunities for life-role participation) contextual factors (Blustein 1994). However, many people lack an awareness of the ways in which contextual factors (such as the dominant culture and the student’s culture of origin) interact with identity development to shape life-role salience (ibid.).

The Influence of the Dominant Culture. Often we simply “inherit” patterns of life-role salience that are passed on from the dominant culture. Such inheritances can be problematic when they are embedded with beliefs based on gender and racial stereotypes. For example, researchers have consistently found gender differences that coincide with traditional sex-role expectations in life-role salience (e.g., women participating more in home and family and expecting more from this life role than men [see Niles and Goodnough 1996]). Women who have high salience for the worker role are placed at an obvious disadvantage in the work force by such traditional expectations. Also, men limit their opportunities for participating in the home and family when they adhere to traditional expectations for life-role salience. By raising our awareness of the influence of the dominant culture on life-role salience, it becomes less likely that beliefs reflecting racist and sexist attitudes will influence our beliefs about life-role salience.

The Influence of Culture of Origin. Considering issues related to the influence of the dominant culture on life-role salience can also lead to focusing on ways in which culture of origin influences our life-role salience beliefs. Different cultures emphasize different values in life roles (e.g., the person from an Eurocentric cultural background who seeks to express self-actualization and autonomy in her career choice or the person from an Asian culture who seeks to express familial expectation in his career choice). By considering the ways in which culture influences life-role salience, we become aware of how our cultural backgrounds influence our life-role salience and we learn about differing patterns in role salience across cultures.

Intervention. Career practitioners can encourage people to identify how they perceive and interpret the role-expectations emanating from their cultures of origin and how these expectations influence their decisions as to whether a particular life role is important. Particular attention can be paid to exploring how these expectations influence people’s understandings of the behaviors required for effective role-performance.

Borodovsky and Ponterotto (1994) suggest one specific activity that may provide opportunities for discussing these topics. They identify the family genogram as a useful tool for exploring the interaction between family background, cultural prescriptions, and career planning. The genogram provides a tool for tracking occupational decisions across generations and identifying sources of important career beliefs and life themes that students have acquired. Specifically, the genogram is a vehicle for constructing a sort of “family tree” in which occupational roles are identified for one’s ancestors. Once the occupational genogram is constructed, discussions can focus on the career beliefs and life themes
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passed down through the generations. This technique can be expanded to address the same topics for other life roles. That is, by using the genogram, people can identify beliefs and life themes pertaining to specific life roles (e.g., parent, citizen) that they have acquired from members of their immediate and extended families. Career educators and career counselors can also use the information provided by their clients to contrast the influences on life-role salience emanating from group-oriented cultures with influences from more individualistic cultures. Terms such as “cultural assimilation” and “cultural accommodation” can be introduced in these discussions. The effects of sex-role stereotyping on life-role salience can also be examined here and challenged in these discussions. The goal of these interventions is to increase awareness as to the factors influencing people’s beliefs about the primary roles of life.

Additional Interventions to Foster Life-Role Readiness and Life-Role Adaptability

Obviously, achieving life-role readiness, the precursor to life-role adaptability, requires more than knowing which life roles are salient. We must also acquire the knowledge and skills required for coping successfully with the tasks inherent in a life role. Thus, in addition to the examination of contextual factors that influence life-role salience, there are specific behaviors that facilitate the development of life-role readiness. Specifically, the behaviors of planning, exploring, information gathering, decision making, and reality testing are essential for developing life-role readiness (Niles 1998). These behaviors are also foundational for life-role adaptability.

Super (1957, 1977) linked these behaviors to developing readiness for the role of worker. These behaviors can also be linked to life roles beyond that of worker. For instance, planning requires future-oriented thinking about the life-role tasks we are likely to encounter (e.g., choosing a program of study in high school or college, trying out for a part in a community play, preparing a resume). Exploring requires us to learn about opportunities for life-role participation (e.g., working part time, providing childcare services, volunteering in civic and community agencies). Information gathering requires us to use resources (e.g., printed material, people, and computer programs) to learn about typical role-expectations and acceptable standards for role-performance. Decision making requires us to learn how decisions are made and to practice using effective decision-making skills. Finally, reality testing requires us to “try out” or participate in various life roles (e.g., school clubs, sports teams, volunteer activities, job shadowing) so that we can compare our role-conceptions and role-performance to role-expectations.

For example, to develop readiness for the life role of student, college-bound secondary school students must plan for the academic tasks they are likely to encounter (e.g., choosing a program of study, registering for college entrance examinations, knowing when to begin the process of college selection). They must also engage in thorough exploration of postsecondary school options. In the process of exploring, students must gather information relevant to the academic options they are considering. Once options are explored and information is gathered, students are then ready to make tentative academic plans and decisions. As students implement their decisions (e.g., entering an
academic program intended to prepare them for college, narrowing a list of prospective colleges), they begin the process of reality testing their choices. The postimplementation feedback they receive (e.g., grades) informs them as to the appropriateness of their current plans and indicates ways in which their plans may need to be revised (e.g., a high school student who plans on majoring in engineering in college but earns poor grades in science may need to explore, gather information, make decisions, and reality test options related to nonscience majors). Thus, the sequencing of these behaviors provides the framework by which we become more sophisticated in our understanding of life roles generally and in the crystallization of our life-role self-concepts in particular.

After engaging in planning, exploring, information gathering, decision making, and reality testing, we should be able to make more accurate self-referent life-role statements. For example, a career counseling client named “Anna” noted the following after engaging in systematic planning, exploring, and information gathering: “Leisure is important to me because it provides me with opportunities to manage my stress in a fun and beneficial way. I have tried a variety of leisure activities and do not like most of them. I do, however, enjoy playing golf and engage in leisure primarily through this activity. I make time each week for this activity and, even though I am a mediocre player, I know a lot about the game. I enjoy playing golf with my husband and daughter.” Prior to playing golf, Anna wanted leisure to be more important because she wanted to infuse “more fun” into her life. However, she floundered among a variety of activities, most of which she did not enjoy. Her lack of enjoyment in these activities resulted in Anna’s disengagement from the leisure role. Her career counselor asked Anna why, if she wanted more fun in her life and leisure was important to her, she was not actively participating in leisure activities. Anna and her career counselor developed a plan for her to become more actively engaged in leisure. Anna brainstormed possible activities, explored possibilities with her colleagues, gathered information about leisure options, decided to try golf, and after a few lessons and a couple of rounds, realized she enjoyed this activity.

Of particular interest among the behaviors identified by Super is the behavior of planning. It is important to plan because planning reflects awareness—the first step in coping with the developmental tasks associated with any life role. Lack of awareness often leads to developmental crises as we encounter tasks for which we are not prepared. An excellent example of this occurs when high school students leave school early. Many students who drop out of school encounter significant obstacles (e.g., competition for jobs, lack of skills) in obtaining gainful employment. These encounters often lead students to regret leaving school. Clearly, students at risk of dropping out tend not to realize the impact that decision will have on their lives at the time they choose to leave school. It is after leaving school that they realize that completing high school is essential to gaining employment that will pay a living wage. This lack of awareness leads to a developmental crisis and points to the importance of planning and having a sense of how one’s experiences in the past and present influence and inform future plans (i.e., a time perspective). Anna focused on life-role adaptability by making a plan to integrate golf into her life-space. Playing alone restricted her family time. Playing with work colleagues seemed to extend her work time (something she was not anxious to do). Playing golf with her family members, however, resulted in the opportunity for her to mesh leisure with family in a way
that was enjoyable for Anna and her family members. Knowing that other life roles would make demands on Anna’s time as well as her husband’s and daughter’s time, a realistic plan was developed that would increase the likelihood that Anna and her family could play golf on a regular basis. Having this plan in place made it easier not to participate in other life roles when they conflicted with her family’s golf schedule.

Planning and a future time orientation are essential to life-role adaptability. Savickas (1997) noted that “balancing and sequencing commitments to school, work, family, leisure, worship, and the community requires careful planning” (p. 256). The sort of planning required in this instance suggests that career practitioners need to help clients look beyond a single life role (e.g., work) when helping their clients make career decisions. Holistic approaches turn career planning into life planning and use labels such as “integrative life planning” (Hansen, in press) to describe the career assistance process. Such approaches define career as the total constellation of life roles people play (Super 1980). An obvious strength of these approaches is that they reflect life as people live it (i.e., holistically).

**Life-Role Planning Portfolios.** An effective tool career educators and career counselors can use for helping people develop the behaviors of planning, exploring, information gathering, decision making, and reality testing is a career (or life-role) planning portfolio. Typically, one activity involved in completing a portfolio requires people to identify their interests, abilities, and hobbies. As the portfolio is completed, people also identify activities that are likely to be appropriate outlets for these important self-characteristics. People are then encouraged to participate in these activities to enhance their self-understanding and their understanding of the life role. In completing the portfolio, future plans are identified based on current interests, abilities, etc. In essence, the ongoing use of a life-role planning portfolio forces people to consider key questions related to important life-role behaviors. More specifically, portfolios are intended to encourage people to develop the behaviors of planning, exploring, information gathering, decision making, and reality testing as they relate to their most salient life roles. For example, an adolescent who anticipates one day being a parent can plan for this role by considering how parenting interacts with other roles. Different parenting styles can be explored by interviewing parents about their parenting practices and philosophies. Information can be gathered about the skills required for effective parenting (perhaps by taking a parenting class). Through these activities the adolescent can learn about the factors that are important to consider in making decisions about parenting. Finally, the adolescent can reality test his interest in parenting through participating in childcare activities. A life-role portfolio can be used to guide and document individuals’ planning, exploring, information gathering, decision making, and reality testing for the primary life roles.

The use of a life-role planning portfolio is an example of a career development activity that helps people crystallize their life-role self-concepts. That is, the portfolio helps people cope with the developmental task of identity formation within the context of developing life-role readiness and in the developing life-role adaptability. It also serves as a vehicle for providing students with additional opportunities to discuss life-role aspects related to the various life roles. For instance, an adult worker can focus on her culture of
origin in discussing cultural prescriptions assigned to the citizen role. The influence of these cultural prescriptions on the adult worker’s conceptualization of the citizen role can be discussed and related to the topics of role-acceptance and expectations for role-performance.

**Personal Flexibility and Life-Role Adaptability**

Herr (1990) developed the construct of personal flexibility, which is essential for effective career self-management in the 21st century. Personal flexibility and life-role adaptability are both concepts evoking the increasing importance of change as a constant in the future. Thus, both concepts are also transitional concepts.

Personal flexibility is composed of basic academic and adaptive skills. Academic skills for personal flexibility include skills in literacy, numeracy, and communications. It is difficult to conceive of jobs that do not require the ability to read, use mathematics, and communicate effectively with a wide range of co-workers, supervisors, and consumers (Herr and Cramer 1996). Literacy skills also include computer-based competencies. An increasing number of jobs require basic skills such as keyboarding, word processing, and web surfing.

Adaptive skills for personal flexibility include coping skills, the ability to tolerate ambiguity, learning skills (e.g., the ability to identify the limits of one’s knowledge, the ability to ask relevant questions, the ability to identify appropriate information resources), the ability to handle data and work effectively with insufficient information, the ability to cope with change effectively, communication skills, and self-awareness (Herr and Cramer 1996). The adaptive skills comprising personal flexibility are especially relevant for life-role adaptability.

**The Need to Develop Personal Flexibility in Life-Role Participation**

If there is any consistency available in the popular media or in the news of the day, it is captured in the continuous litany of political, economic, and social changes transforming societies, social institutions, and work organizations. Societies in Eastern Europe are redefining themselves as free-market economies rather than communist, centrally managed societies. South Africa is terminating its political structures that maintained apartheid, the oppression of the majority of its citizens, and the exclusion of these persons from free choice of job or education. The rise of the global economy is triggering a restructuring of world occupational structures, elevating the importance of advanced technology and education as central instruments of international competition, and essentially reducing the importance of political boundaries or sovereignty. Because of these transformations, persons throughout the world are placed in roles that are governed by change and transition. In this context, the environments in which they live out their lives are no longer stable and predictable. Economic and social institutions are less prone than they traditionally have been to view their roles as surrogate parents for people, as providers of welfare and social safety nets, as the definers of rigid roles and behavioral processes by
which people’s lives are played out in clear and unambiguous patterns. In such circumstances, societies, social institutions, and workplaces are increasingly transferring much of their power to define people’s lives to the people themselves. In essence, as the world’s governments and their social and economic structures undergo significant change, and they engage in transitions to new organizational forms, they implicitly create conditions that form a new psychology of individual adaptability to and accommodation of these changes (Reich 2001).

Within such conditions of uncertainty or ambiguity, persons must be nurtured to maintain a core of homeostasis, stability, and equilibrium and at the same time an ability to adapt their behaviors as contexts require. In this sense, the concept of personal flexibility is congruent with the notion of life-role adaptability. Both can be defined as “the quality of being able to change, without great difficulty, to fit new or changed circumstances pertaining to life-role demands.”

Such views suggest that nations in transition generate a psychology of uncertainty and anxiety for some people and opportunities for others. People who cannot change with change, who do not have a behavioral repertoire that is flexible and able to be applied differentially and purposefully in settings or environments that are in the process of transformation, are at risk. Such perspectives are captured in a vivid fashion in some of the existing observations about career change and related life roles.

Hall and Associates (1996) have spoken of “new careers” as “Protean Careers” in such excerpts as the following:

People’s careers increasingly will become a series of minicycles (or short cycle learning stages) of exploration-trial-mastery-exit, as they move in and out of various product areas, technologies, functions, organizations, and other work environments (p. 33)…this protean form of career involves horizontal growth, expanding one’s range of competencies and ways of connecting to work and other people, as opposed to the more traditional vertical growth of success (upward mobility). (p. 35)

According to Hall and his co-authors, “in the protean form of growth, the goal is learning, psychological success, and expansion of identity. In the more traditional form, the goal was advancement, success and esteem in the eyes of others, and power” (p. 35).

The use of Protean in such quotations means little until one understands its derivation. In Greek mythology, Proteus was a sea god who was said to be able to transform himself at will to deal with changing circumstances (Lifton 1993). In essence, contemporary environments, social and economic, are themselves in flux and they require persons to accommodate such flux by adaptive behaviors, including learning, role shifts, fluid blending of family, parenting, and work roles. The need for such life-role adaptability is seen in other observations about the changing opportunity structure and careers, which suggest that the organization of work and the evolving conceptions of careers in Europe and in
other parts of the world are qualitatively different than the concepts that have been true historically. Arnold and Jackson (1997), two European scholars, have suggested that in many nations—

The changes taking place in the structure of opportunities mean a widening diversity of career patterns and experiences…. more and different career transition will be taking place. One consequence may be that in the future more men will experience the kind of fragmented careers that many women have experienced (p. 428)…. more people will be working for small and medium-sized employers, and there will be more people who are self-employed…. they highlight the need for lifelong learning and an appropriate strategy for career guidance to support people especially during career transitions. (p. 429)

The concepts identified here suggest that not only are the organization of work and the patterns by which people approach and implement work in their lives changing, but so are other life roles. Because the majority of women with children are now at work, child rearing and the shifting roles of men and women in that process are undergoing considerable transformation. So is the locus of work. More persons, men and women, are working from their homes, either telecommuting in relation to their primary roles in an office someplace else or because they are self-employed. In such cases, their public and private roles in employment and in family life become less distinct and increasingly blended. When men and women have dual careers and children, questions arise about who is the financial provider in the home and how parental responsibilities will be distributed. In the case of responsibility for aging parents for many of these families, who is the caregiver? These and other pressures on life roles and their adaptability reaffirm the increasing complexities related to achieving balance in life, and the need to attain personal flexibility to achieve such balance. Clearly, achieving life-role balance will require new forms of socialization, learning, role modeling, and support systems, including counseling.

The need for personal flexibility and life-role adaptability also highlights the need for new theories of personal development that emphasize self-invention in ways that provide us with some indications as to how we can achieve greater life-role adaptability. Theories such as Super’s (1990) must be extended to include guidance as to how we can develop the ability to scan the environments we occupy and discern demands for change, acquire the emotional stability and intrapersonal security necessary to manage fluid life-role demands, and try new roles without losing core elements of security and consistency of self-awareness.

Among the theories that promise to provide such understanding of human development are those embodying cognitive and constructivist views. Embedded in cognitive theories of behavior are concerns about how individuals think about and label events, how they process information, how they learn to perceive cues around them, and how they construct their belief systems in rational or irrational terms. In short, cognitive approaches are concerned with how we create meaning for ourselves as we interpret environmental stimuli. In this sense, cognitive perspectives view people as activists in constructing their own reality by the decisions they make and by those they avoid making.
Super’s Theory

This emphasis on individuals as meaning makers is also central to constructivist approaches. Although multiple definitions of constructivism exist, in general, constructivists view human beings as more than simply passive recipients of information or as simply persons who share or receive one true reality that is external to them and capable of objective, quantitative analysis. Rather, constructivists view people as creators of a self or of personal constructs through organized patterns of meaning within a world of multiple realities. As proposed by Sexton (1997), constructivism places emphasis on the person’s active creation and building of meaning and significance; constructivists view knowledge as an invented and constructed meaning system rather than a freestanding, stable, external entity.

In the sense that we have used the terms personal flexibility and life-role adaptability here, both cognitive and constructivist theories have important contributions to make to the two concepts. Certainly, from a constructivist view, personal flexibility and life-role adaptability occur within multiple environments and role expectations. Individuals must be able to fashion their personal patterns of meaning within such realities; cognitive approaches would argue that it is important to process information, think about and label both the multiple realities to which one is responding and one’s own ability to differentiate behaviors, and adapt to change, without losing the core of one’s personal constructs or self-concepts. Thus, cognitive approaches would say that attributions of personal flexibility and of life-role adaptability are themselves cognitive concepts as well as ways of making meaning for oneself. It is our belief that such concepts will emerge as key constructs in the career development process as people strive to achieve balance in their life roles.

Interventions. A wide variety of possibilities exists for incorporating cognitive and constructivist perspectives in career counseling and career education programs. For example, cognitive psychology models can be incorporated into career education curricula. Career practitioners can teach basic cognitive concepts related to thoughts creating feelings [see David Burns’ (1999) book, Feeling Good for extensive activities related to infusing cognitive psychology into everyday life]. Lewis and Gilhousen (1981) offer an excellent model for coping with common career myths that keep many of us “stuck” in our career development. For example, those adhering to the “quitters never win” myth believe that career changing is synonymous with failing. This belief ignores the fact that people and jobs change over time. The more useful cognitive alternative to the “quitters never win” myth is to view change as positive development in response to an evolving self and changing work situation. Another common career myth identified by Lewis and Gilhousen is that “anyone can be president.” This myth overemphasizes individual action in achieving career goals. Although achieving career goals requires hard work, other factors (often extraneous to the individual) also influence the degree to which we achieve our goals in life. Denying this fact can lead to inappropriate striving for unrealistic goals and unnecessary self-blame when we are working hard but not able to achieve the goals we set. This is particularly the case in the current situation wherein corporate downsizing often has little to do with the competence and effort of individual workers.