The place of work in our lives coexists, sometimes peacefully and complementary to, and sometimes in conflict with, roles we perform in other parts of our lives (Super 1982). Along with our roles of employee, colleague, or supervisor at work, we find ourselves throughout our lives playing roles in various other “theaters.” These other roles and theaters include, for example, those of student, classmate, or athlete at school; child, parent, partner, sibling, or spouse within our families; individual or friend at leisure; and leader, volunteer, or neighbor in our communities. The centrality of work, as well as roles in these other life domains, constitutes the fundamental focus of career development.

Theodore Roosevelt stated that “When you play, play hard; when you work, don’t play at all.” As a society, we typically advance President Roosevelt’s dictum by construing work and nonwork domains of human life as conflictual and mutually constraining (Bielby 1992; Savickas 1999). We thereby often disregard the ways in which these domains can and do intersect to contribute deeper meaning to our lives (Bielby 1992). Moving beyond a life-role conflict perspective requires examining how commitment to and involvement in roles in various life domains provide us with a sense of meaning and identity. It involves coming to view the roles we perform as integral and complementary threads of the fabric of our lives that can be mutually enhancing and growth producing. We can also advocate for change in workplace policies and initiatives that accommodate a synthesis among work and nonwork life domains. In so doing, we can support a paradigm shift away from role conflict and toward life-role integration (Savickas 1999).

Developing life-role readiness fosters life-role adaptability; fusing play into life-role activities enhances life satisfaction. When we are able to envision and enact our life roles in complementary rather than conflictual ways, we can more optimally achieve the promise and rewards of life-role balance. Therein, we can better avoid the pitfalls wrought by contention and competition among life roles engendered by the unique and challenging complexities of 21st-century life.

Our examination in this monograph of achieving life-role balance reflects more widespread changes and issues in society. The life-role balance issue extends beyond the parameters of career development, reaching outward to the levels of communities, societies, and nations experiencing and dealing with a range of issues related to changing demographics, increasing cultural diversity, and the challenge of adopting a multicultural mindset (Leong and Hartung 2000). Prompted by social and political action focused on diversity issues, shifting demographics in many parts of the world, fluctuating economic conditions, increasingly sophisticated technology and information systems, and the changing nature of work, scholars endeavor to reevaluate past and present understandings of the very notion of careers (Collin and Young 2000). Examining the future of career as a construct leads to the conclusion that cultural issues figure prominently in efforts to help individuals understand and achieve life-role balance (Leong and Hartung 2000).
Increased attention to social issues has surfaced in discussions about deemphasizing careers and instead theorizing about and helping people to develop the role of work in their lives relative to roles in nonwork domains (Blustein 2001; Richardson 1993, 1994, 1996). This perspective calls for a shift from talking about career development, with its socioeconomic status, educational, and privilege implications, to considering human development through work and nonwork roles, a perspective that may be more relevant to people of diverse social statuses and cultural backgrounds (Niles, Herr, and Hartung, in press). Richardson (1993) suggested that this perspective shifts the emphasis to work as “a central human activity that is not tied to or solely located in the occupational structure...[and] a basic human function among populations for whom work has a multiplicity of meanings, including but not restricted to a career meaning” (p. 427). So conceived, work represents a culture-general human life role, whereas career represents a more culture-specific form of occupational life (Niles, Herr, and Hartung, in press).

Adapting an epistemology that interprets career choice and development to mean human development through a constellation of work and nonwork life roles holds great promise for contemporary career counseling practice and for society (Cook 1994; Richardson 1993; Savickas 2000; Super and Sverko 1995). Some career theories currently converge on this theme. For example, the sociological perspective on work and career development articulated by Hotchkiss and Borow (1996) recognizes that as members of social institutions people play a variety of social roles. Similarly, Gottfredson’s (1996) theory of circumscription and compromise attends to issues of social identity, orientation to sex roles, and social valuation. The Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis 1996) describes career development as “the unfolding of capabilities and requirements in the course of a person’s interaction with environments of various kinds (home, school, play, work) across the life span” (p. 94). As we have noted, the most obvious example—life-span, life-space theory (Super, Savickas and Super 1996)—emphasizes the multiple roles that form the basis of the human life space.

The movement to human development and away from more narrowly defined notions of career development is also reflected in approaches to career counseling. For example, Peavy (1992) and Cochran (1997) present constructivist approaches to career intervention that highlight the client’s narrative life story in constructing career plans. These career interventions approaches rely on card sorts, autobiographies, and other techniques that emphasize the individual’s life-span development rather than relying upon the use of standardized tests that locate person’s interests, aptitudes, and values on a normal curve. The latter approach (i.e., the use of standardized tests) emphasizes career development in a comparative sense. The former acknowledges the individual’s unique life history in composing a life that includes multiple life-role development.

Cross-cultural psychology also articulates life roles as a fundamental element of subjective culture—defined as the human-made part of people’s environments (Triandis 1994). Roles are etic constructs in that all cultures transmit expectations about social role behavior. Individual behavior in social roles differs as a function of the range of behavioral role options a culture makes available to its members. For example, the roles of father, spouse, and worker for a fifth-generation European-American man likely mean
something very different from what these roles mean for a first-generation Chinese-American man. In addition, the changing nature of work, the growing diversity of society, the global economy and marketplace, and occupational and other barriers limit and influence the viability of different roles for people. We therefore must remain cognizant of two facts as we consider the prospect of achieving life balance. First, people differ in terms of which roles are most viable and salient for them. Second, personal, structural, and cultural factors such as gender expectations, social class, discrimination, personal choice, and family expectations influence individuals’ levels of commitment to and participation in life roles (Fitzgerald and Betz 1994; Fouad and Arbona 1994; Niles and Goodnough 1996). Fostering play as a context of human development may offer one way to achieve more optimal integration of life roles. Encouraging the development of life-role readiness (rather than more narrowly focusing on developing occupational readiness) and fostering life-role adaptability will help people to live life in the balance that they define as personally optimal and meaningful.