One of the broadest and most frequently cited definitions of “career” is “all life roles and life events over the course of one’s lifetime.” (Gysbers) In career planning, it is important that students consider their options and make decisions in the context of their vision of all life roles, and in particular in relationship to family and lifestyle choices. This activity provides one way to discuss these ideas and allow students to explore their feelings about them.

Additional information about family and lifestyle issues as related to work can be found in the book, Work, Families, and Organizations (see credits and citations). The theories chosen for this lesson are cited as the “the three main models or theories of the work-family arena” by Zedeck in the introduction of this book. A different researcher specializing in this field authored each theory, and each has strengths and weaknesses that are important to consider. Students may legitimately question whether only one theory can apply to a person at a time, and, indeed, a combination of perspectives may actually influence an individual’s life choices.

Remember, the purpose of a theory, or guiding philosophy, is to simplify something that is complex. Theories help us look at essential elements and compare and contrast these elements across observations. They help us answer important questions within a common and defined framework. The goal of using the theories in this lesson is to be able to help students frame, in a coherent way, what seems to be important to individuals regarding family, leisure and work.

SPILLOVER THEORY: This theory asserts that there is similarity between what occurs in the work environment and what occurs in the family environment. Work experiences influence what a person does away from work and attitudes at work become engrained and carried over in home life. Both provide powerful influences on one another. It is assumed the direction of the influence is primarily from work to family, but each sphere induces similar structural patterns in the other. The career path or direction is important in this theory as work often sets the standards for other life roles.

COMPENSATION THEORY: In contrast to the Spillover Theory, this theory postulates that there is an inverse relationship between work and family such that the experiences tend to be antithetical to each other. Individuals make differential investments of themselves so that what is provided by one makes up for what is missing in the other. Deprivations experienced in work, for example, are made up or compensated for in non-work activities.

SEGMENTATION THEORY: This theory postulates that the two spheres of work and family are distinct so that an individual can be successful in one without an influence on the other. They exist side-by-side, separate from each other. Family is viewed in the realm of intimacy and significant relationships, whereas the work world is more impersonal, competitive and instrumental rather than expressive.

If you do not have anyone interested in each of the models, you may opt to assign students to groups in order to have six groups for the presentations.