Chapter 2
Theories for Studying Rural Families and Work

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Introduction

Theory helps us form our research questions and therefore, in many respects, shapes our interpretation of data and our findings. Consequently, including an overview of some of the theoretical frameworks used by Rural Families Speak (RFS) is important in the exploration of the various aspects of employment. While this is not a comprehensive overview of all appropriate theories, we address the theories that can be useful in investigating rural, low-income family issues. We also present some of the unique findings to illustrate the use of the theories and frameworks.

What Is Theory?

A theory is an explanation which helps to answer the why and how questions posed by researchers (White and Klein 2008). Doherty et al. (1993) define a theory as a set of interconnected ideas that emerge from the process of theorizing which is a process of systematically formulating and organizing ideas to understand a phenomenon. In the social sciences, a theory provides a baseline for how people behave in a context. The theory can be tested with different sets of data to see if the pattern holds. A theory needs to pose definitions for its properties and categories and identify the relationships among the properties.

A theory must also have a deductive system which provides the explanation of why certain things occur (Homans 1964). White and Klein (2008) indicate that theory is connected to method. They state that “linkages between ideas and data can be organized in different ways” (p. 8). A newly developed theory, or a newly enhanced and expanded application of an existing theory, emerges when the process
goes from data to ideas, i.e., an inductive process. If the process goes from ideas to data with the researcher starting with a theory, developing hypotheses, using data to test the hypotheses, and then discussing how well the observations fit the theory, the process is deductive. Both inductive and deductive uses of theory are applicable for the study of rural families. The ideas and data must fit together in a meaningful process.

In this chapter, we focus on theories and frameworks that have been used in our RFS research on rural families. The theories from various disciplines (e.g., family, economics, psychology, sociology) have been applied to our examination of rural families. The intent of this chapter is to introduce some of the theories that have been used to inform our work and posit each in relation to our findings on rural families and work. Original sources are cited so that the reader can have access to the assumptions, principles, and limitations of each theory. We also have included frameworks, some midrange theories, and ways of using theories in models. For further reading, we suggest White and Klein (2008), Chibucos et al. (2005), Boss et al. (1993), Smith and Ingoldsby (2009), and Bengtson et al. (2005).

**Theories and Frameworks**

**Ecological Theories**

**Human Ecology and Family Ecology Theories** Human ecology theory is concerned with the “creation, use, and management of resources for the adaption, human development, and sustainability of environments” (Bubolz and Sontag 1993, p. 419). The theory focuses on “interaction and interdependence of humans (as individuals, groups, and societies) with the environment” (Bubolz and Sontag, 1993 p. 421). Family ecology theory (Bubolz and Sontag 1993) is a general theory which uses synthesis to integrate “human development and family relationships within a family resource management framework” (p. 424) that is value-based and related to critical science. The focus is on family members as individuals, as well as the family as a whole, and is appropriate for helping to understand “…families of diverse structures and national, ethnic, or racial backgrounds, in different life stages and life circumstances” (Bubolz and Sontag, 1993 p. 424) and is also useful for policy analysis (Zimmerman 1995). The family ecological framework formed the basis of how the RFS project was conceptualized. Understanding changes among these systems was critical to understanding rural communities and rural low-income family outcomes while beginning to build evidence for strong rural communities and strong rural low-income families.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) was one of the first scientists to utilize the nested context for the four identified interdependent systems of human ecology, i.e., the micro-, meso- exo-, and macrosystems. This theoretical framing allows researchers to explore the interdependence of family and work with the exosystem of community
support and networks, and the greater macrosystem that includes the values, norms, culture, and policies that influence the family and the environments.

The individual is at the center of the ecological system which Bronfenbrenner (1989) established as important, and the layers of the system influence and are influenced by the individual. The microsystem refers to the immediate environment of the individual. Although we most often consider the family system as the micro-environment, if the lens is changed to consider the individual in the work-place, the family is only part of the microsystem. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 22) defines the microsystem as a “…pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the…person in a given setting….” The microsystem is experienced by the individual, and the individual is then shaped by that environment. The mesosystem is the social or community environment which encompasses the individual and the microsystem. In the context of rural families, the mesosystem could be the community, the support network of the family, and the employment conditions of the parents. The exosystem is most often described as being apart from the individual and the microsystem, i.e., the individual or family does not have direct contact or interact with exosystem factors. The exosystem encompasses the events or conditions that influence the mesosystem and the microsystem. In the case of rural families, the exosystem factors could be the local economic conditions (unemployment rate, the types of jobs available, etc.); the rules regarding TANF, Food Stamps (now called SNAP—Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), Medicaid, State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP); another family member’s mesosystem; and so forth. Finally, the macrosystem consists of the cultural norms and/or beliefs that influence the other systems. Macrosystem beliefs are often the underlying framework for legislative changes (e.g., “poor people do not want to work”). Ultimately, Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 26) hypothesized that “(A)n ecological transition occurs whenever a person’s position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both.”

RFS researchers have used the ecological framework to guide their work in various ways. Katras et al. (2004) used it to examine how rural low-income families accessed and used child-care resources to meet the needs of their families in the aftermath of welfare reform. The paper conceptualizes family and environmental interactions and relationships with an ecological system of interdependent parts in which family members affect each other, other family members, and the quality of the community. Son and Bauer (2010) framed their inquiry into rural, low-income single mothers’ management of their work and family lives in family ecology theory. The single mothers had constraints and resources across the ecological system. Huddleston-Casas and Braun (2006) used the framework to illustrate the pathways that could either lead to or were barriers to employment for rural mothers across all four systems. Mammen et al. (2009b), modifying Huddleston-Casas and Braun’s work, examined strategies used to cope with and manage food insecurity in both food insecure and food secure states. The microsystem was conceptualized as families and their array of resources, such as human capital and decision-making abilities. The mesosystem was the extended family members and supports, such as food pantries, and was viewed as the bridge between the microsystem and exosystem.
The macrosystem values and larger social and economic forces shaped the extent to which states were either food secure or food insecure. The ecological system of the family influenced the strategies used to cope with food insecurity. Sano et al. (2011) used the theory to investigate how low-income rural Latino, immigrant families succeed or fail to meet the family’s food needs over time. Several ecological levels were found to influence the food needs of the Latino families. Sano et al. presented a table indicating how each of the levels of the ecological system linked to food security systems in the family.

The RFS project, and most papers drawn from RFS data, used the earlier versions of Bronfenbrenner’s theory. He continued to develop and refine his theory, however (e.g., Bronfenbrenner 2005), adding and refining elements to consider time and historical positioning, which he labeled the chronosystem. Bronfenbrenner’s theory has been used, and misused, widely (Tudge et al. 2009). Tudge et al. (2009) offered a critique illustrating both the use and misuse of the theory which may be of interest to readers. As the RFS project enters into a more mature stage, perhaps research team members will begin to use the more mature version of Bronfenbrenner’s theory and consider the role of developmental time.

**Family Systems Theory**

This theory builds on a general systems approach of interdependent parts where the parts are greater than the whole. A family can be viewed as a system in which members “interact with one another, exhibit coherent behaviors, and share some degree of interdependence” (Chibucos et al. 2005, p. 279). Family therapy scholars use this theory to guide interventions and interpret the complex relationships of individuals and their families, as well as for marital and family communications interactions (White and Klein 2008). Family systems theory allows for studies of the processes that exist in families and processes between families and their environments (Chibucos et al. 2005).

No RFS papers have used this theory explicitly for research on family and work. This theory is appropriate for work that is being done from the project on subjects that are more process oriented. Family systems theory would be useful and appropriate for investigating intrafamily communications regarding work and family issues in rural low-income families, especially when considering hypotheses about how job and economic changes of one family member impacts the family system as a whole.

**Capital, Capability, and Family Economic Theories**

This section frames capital and some of the ways it can be viewed from inside the family. Human capability is an expansion of the capital theories. Family economic functioning framework is a model that brings together human and social capital concepts.

**Capitals**

Economists may focus on wealth which encompasses the assets or stock of things that can be measured. Several types of capital are present in families, including rural families.
**Human Capital Theory**  Human capital theory was the second theory around which the RFS project was built. The development of the human capital theory is usually attributed to Becker (1975, 1993) and his colleagues at University of Chicago. Human capital theory was initially based on an economic analysis of return to education at a macro (country) level. In later years it has morphed into a microtheory for the individual. Human capital theory has been used most often in the RFS research on rural families and work.

Human capital is defined as those “…activities that influence future monetary and psychic income by increasing the resources of the people” (Becker 1975, p. 9). Human capital equals the function of the physical and mental assets of the individual, the investment in money and/or time to develop those assets, the input rate of other resources, and stocks (accumulation or amount of) that exists in the individual (Becker 1975). Investment in human capital refers to engaging in educational activities, both general and specific job training, that results in the accumulation of assets over the life cycle to increase the potential for higher levels of earnings. For example, an employee who participates in specific job training program adds more value to the employer’s investment in that particular employee in addition to the potential of the employee getting a raise or promotion due to the newly acquired skills or knowledge.

Human capital theory integrates the allocation of time, household production function, and theory of choice. To measure human capital investment, the time related to an investment must be considered; therefore, longitudinal studies are needed to determine the actual level of investment. Becker indicated that human capital included not only investments in education and/or training, but the overall health and motivations of the individual. Household production function is the output of the work from family members in the household. The human capital of family members supports their ability to be employed, thereby increasing family well-being and psychic income. Psychic income relates to how the individual or family feels about their income. Theory of choice assumes the existence of alternatives and assumes that a person knows the rewards and costs of each alternative and decision. Grossman (1972) defined human capital as an individual’s stock of knowledge that influences a person’s market and nonmarket productivity (household production). While “resources” can be broadly construed in human capital theory, generally, they are considered to be such things as the individual’s wealth and stock of assets including education, abilities, and experiences.

Human capital theory was the conceptual framework used in several RFS studies. Berry et al. (2008) examined job volatility among the RFS mothers by examining their employment trajectories. Among other variables, human capital was used to examine three employment groups: Stable employment, intermittent employment, and unemployed. Bird and Bauer (2009) examined the role of mothers’ resources and initial human capital in their abilities to acquire additional education or training. Human capital was viewed as an asset that could be increased with education. Mammen et al. (2009a) examined satisfaction with life among rural low-income mothers over time. They defined overall capital as a “combination of physical stock, personal abilities, and access to the acquisition of various goods and services and
relationships” (p. 376). Human capital was the “embodiment of individual’s skills, abilities, and knowledge” (p. 376), and they used education and parental confidence as variables for human capital. Mammen et al. (2009b) used the community prosperity context to reveal a paradox in which families from states considered prosperous were persistently more food insecure than similar families from less prosperous states. Mammen et al. (2009c) examined employment decisions of those entering employment and number of hours of labor supplied. They used factors of education, risk of depression, being licensed to drive a vehicle, and life skills for human capital in modeling the labor supply decision. Simmons et al. (2007a) developed a better understanding of human capital and social support in the long-term economic well-being of rural low-income mothers. Mothers’ education, knowledge of community resources, and life skills were used to frame human capital of the mothers. Using the human capital theory to examine education and training opportunities (or lack thereof) for rural low-income families enables us to understand how and when decisions are made to either pursue or to forego investments in education.

**Health Capital and Personal Capital Theories** Health capital theory is a variation on the human capital theory. This theory considers the demand for good health and what influences the total amount of time that can be spent in production of earned income and acquisition of various health commodities (Tomer 2003). Personal capital theory is defined by Tomer (2003) as the psychological makeup, health condition (physical), and spiritual functioning of the individual. Becker (1996) considered personal capital as the capacity that leads to satisfaction from acquisition of consumer goods, based on past consumption and personal experiences. Health capital and personal capital theories were used by Mammen et al. (2009a) to frame the satisfaction with life among rural low-income mothers over time. Health and personal capitals were measured through demographic data and objective and subjective socioeconomic circumstances of the mothers. How health and personal capital contribute to the family’s economic or social well-being would enable us to have a better understanding of investments by family and society. If these capitals are influenced, as Tomer states, by the psychological makeup and spiritual functioning of the individual, then research on how to measure these concepts would add to our knowledge.

**Economic Capital Theory** A variation on the human capital theory is economic capital theory, sometimes referred to as socio-economic or financial capital theory (Ostrove et al. 1999; Wadsworth et al. 1999). The basic concept in this theory relates to income/earnings and occupational status. Mammen et al. (2009a) used this theory to frame the income adequacy concept for the series of capitals that a rural family has in its daily life, as part of a study on life satisfaction among rural low-income mothers.

**Social Capital Theory** Social capital exists in our relationships with others. The function of social capital is in the value of social structure and personal networks as resources that can be used by individuals to achieve their interests (Coleman 1988). When relationships change among people, the social capital for the individual and
family also changes. Social capital, and the resources contained by the networks, can be combined in various ways to produce “different system-level behavior” (Coleman 1988, p. S101). Social capital can exist, then, at the individual and family levels as well as at the community level. A person’s “actions are shaped, redirected, constrained by social context; norms, interpersonal trust, social networks, and social organizations” (Coleman 1988, p. S96). Social capital theory, therefore, encompasses the concept of relationships having value to individuals, and that value can be traded and enhanced. Social capital can help frame how rural low-income families use their social networks to access the resources they need to obtain or maintain employment, such as information to find out about job openings or more tangible resources such as childcare.

Almedom (2005) included social support, social cohesion, and social determinants of health (mental health) as part of social capital. Bradley and Corwyn (2002) used social networks as part of social capital and included occupational status as part of the social capital definition.

Several RFS researchers have used social capital theory for their theoretical framework. Simmons et al. (2007a) stated that social support is defined as the individual’s satisfaction with degree of help received during a time of need (Sarason et al. 1987), presence or number of social relationships (Sanderson 2004), or care resources received from others in contact with the individual (Laakso and Pauonen-Ilmonen 2002).

Social support can come from material, informational, and emotional sources, as well as from practical help (Swanson et al. 2008). Formal sources of support flow from public sources, such as government or social service agencies, while informal sources of support come from friends, family, or other contacts. Swanson et al. (2008) used multiple indicators of program participation for formal support and various social skills as a proxy for informal support to examine food security. The need for informal support has been found to increase when any kind of hardship arises, including those that resulted from changes in policies such as what occurred with the 1996 welfare policy overhaul (Bok and Simmons 2002). Mammen et al. (2009a) also used social capital theory to frame satisfaction with life among rural low-income mothers over time through a satisfaction with social support measure. Using using social capital theory will allow RFS researchers and others to further understand the value of relationships for employed rural low-income parents.

**Human Capability Theory**

Boulding (1985) developed a concept of human betterment as the end toward which we individually and collectively tend to strive. The ultimate good is the end goal toward which humans aim to better themselves, and is comprised of four universal virtues: (1) economic adequacy vs. inadequacy (riches, resources for nourishment, housing, clothing, health care, and other essentials of life); (2) justice and equality vs. injustice and inequality (for access to work, education, and health); (3) freedom vs. coercion and confinement; (4) peacefulness vs. warfare and strife.

Sen (1997) expanded Boulding’s conceptualization of human capability theory, defining capability as the “ability of humans to lead lives and have reason to value
and enhance the substantive choices they have” (Sen 1997, p. 1959). Sen postu-
lated that human capital is included in the more inclusive view of human capabili-
ties. He stated, “Capability serves as a means not only to economic production …, but also to social development” (p. 1960). Investments in human capability
can lead to more overall wealth, which in turn, benefits many individuals through
better health care, educational systems, and so forth, which allows people more
freedom and satisfaction. The capabilities framework conceptualizes human op-
portunities for the good life and well-being rather than merely the accumulation
of resources. The focus is more on people and less on goods (Anand et al. 2005).
Most work using the capability theory has been in the field of education. Human
capability theory has only recently been used in study of rural families. Son and
Bauer (2009) mapped how the theory is appropriate for rural family research. Fur-
ther use of this theory will help advance the understanding of the interface among
individuals’ personal resources, the community’s resources, and the individual
support systems.

**Family Economic Functioning Framework** Bauer et al. (2000) created the fam-
ily economic functioning framework as a means of assessing families’ financial
self-sufficiency relative to the federal poverty line. Embedded in the model are both
human capital and social support concepts. This framework is not a theory per se
but a tool by which researchers, social workers, policy makers, and others could
determine the extent of families’ needs, and, thereby, the amount of public support
(cash or in-kind) that the families would require. The family economic functioning
framework plots families along a continuum based on their income and the federal
poverty line. Families with incomes below the poverty level for their family size
are labeled as “in-crisis.” Families “at risk” have incomes between 100% and 130%
of poverty. Families are considered “safe” if their incomes are between 131% and
150% of poverty, and “thriving” if their income levels are 151% to 200% of poverty.
Those with incomes above 200% of poverty are termed as “sustaining.” Families
in crisis and at risk both rely heavily on a variety of public assistance programs.
Safe families may use some programs, but generally are less dependent upon pub-
lic assistance than either the in-crisis or at-risk families. Thriving families have
incomes higher than most public assistance programs allow for qualification (the
primary exception being Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)), and are able to live
reasonably well without the assistance. Sustaining families have achieved financial
stability without need of public assistance.

This framework was used by Dolan et al. (2008) in their examination of rural
mothers who got off TANF. Simmons et al. (2007b) used the framework to examine
the contributions of maternal labor force participation and marital status on eco-
nomic self-sufficiency over time. Simmons et al. (2007a) framed their study of the
long-term economic well-being of rural low-income mothers by using the family
economic functioning framework. This framework is especially useful when exam-
inng rural low-income families’ use of welfare benefits and their ability to become
more financially self-sufficient over time.
Resource-Based Theories

Resource management, conservation of resources, exchange, stress, and resiliency are theories focused on the resources available to individuals and families. The resources could be either their own resourcefulness or resources in the environment. Many theories that are applied to the study of rural families are based on the over-arching concept that individuals make choices, i.e., make decisions about themselves, their lives, and their families. The theories in this grouping are about resources and decisions. Some of the focus is from an economic perspective, where the rewards and costs are considered in relation to behavior. Others are from the social perspective relating to relationship and family functioning.

Family Resource Management Theory  A theory that is often related to the human ecology theory is family resource management. This theory focuses on the demands placed upon a family, the resources available to the family, and the decision-making related to the use of those resources for daily living. This theory draws on concepts related to goal attainment, i.e., demands, resources, decision-making, and management by family members (Deacon and Firebaugh 1988; Hogan and Buehler 1984). The demands are the goals or events that require action by a family member. Resources can be “anything that can be used to attain desired ends or goals” (Rettig and Leichtentritt 2000, p. 160) and provide the means by which a family reaches a goal (Rettig et al. 1993). Resources can be human (individual characteristics, such as attitude or sense of humor), nonhuman (outside the individual, such as money, house, job, or material goods), community (schools, churches, parks, etc.), and/or government (cash assistance programs, educational training, food assistance, rural development and improvement, etc.). Decision-making is a process used to evaluate alternatives and make choices. The decision-making process may involve more than one person (Deacon and Firebaugh 1988). Management is how resource use is planned and implemented to meet demands (Deacon and Firebaugh 1988). Paolucci et al. (1977) built on family resource management foundations to develop an ecological framework for family decision-making. Family resource management theory defines many of the functions of daily family life that are often transparent or de facto, i.e., that are automatic or routine.

Family resource management theory was used by Powell and Bauer (2010) to investigate how families caring for children with disabilities use resources to find and keep child care and employment. Bird and Bauer (2009) used it to understand the need of low-income mothers for additional education and training. Resources and demands were discussed in Son and Bauer (2010). Because the decisions that rural low-income families make about their resources can be critical, this theory can be used to help us better understand the decisions that are made about scarce resources, and how decisions are made when scarce resources need to be spread over competing demands of family members.

Conservation of Resources Theory  Another framework for viewing family and individual ability to cope with stressful situations is Hobfoll’s (1989) conservation of resources theory (COR). Hobfoll contends that the resources individuals
have will influence their ability to cope with stressful situations and, conversely, the stressful situations may be influenced by the resources available to individuals (Hobfoll et al. 1996). The basic premise of the COR theory is that people will want to preserve resources they already have. Stress occurs when resources are endangered, when resources are lost, and/or when resources do not develop as expected. Hobfoll categorizes different varieties of resources as possessions (assets, belongings, etc.), conditions (relationships, employment, health, etc.), personal (skills, self-esteem, etc.), and “energies” (money, credit, knowledge, etc.). Community resources can help to off-set or buffer a family or individual resource loss or, conversely, exacerbate the loss if the community does not have resources. The social networks of families and individuals can also buffer or intensify a loss, and these networks, what Hobfoll (2001) refers to as “resource caravans,” develop over years. A part of an individual’s or family’s reaction to a loss is the feeling of control over the situation—the more control the less feeling of loss, the less control the greater feeling of loss. Hobfoll (1989) further contends that we tend to conserve and build up our resources when we are not under stress. Those who are unable, for whatever reason, to develop their resources to any extent will be less prepared to deal with a loss. Seiling (2006) used the COR theory in a case study approach to examining the ability of a small sample of low-income rural mothers to cope with stressors. Mothers with support systems and resources were better able to deal with stressors than mothers with few resources and support systems. In her Master’s thesis, Piescher (2004) used the COR theory to measure the family’s economic situation as an indicator of depressive symptomatology. Parenting support accounted for a significant amount of the depressive symptomatology. A combination of the perceptions of economic situation and income adequacy was found to be a better measure than either measure alone. Further use of COR will help us understand how rural low-income families use their resources to manage stressful situations, such as a job loss or reduction in hours.

**Exchange Theory** No single source adequately describes exchange theory. Researchers in economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and family studies have all developed variations on the theme of exchanges. The choices that are presented for the exchange are often labeled as utilitarian, where the rewards and costs are considered in relation to behavior. Individuals maximize utility to get what they value most. When this happens, the behavior for the motivation and the outcome (or decision) is called “rational.” Family scholars call this social exchange, and they assume that behavior is goal-oriented, with elements of power and privilege in social groups. A source for the history of the various exchange theories is Turner (1991). The sources listed at the beginning of this chapter also have sections on exchange theories. No RFS papers to date have used the exchange theory as a framework to study rural families and work. This is an appropriate theory for examining the trade-offs that families make in the interface between family and work or between workers within the family. Using the theory to study the trade-offs for childcare among family members or the decision to work or not work when paying for child care either in the marketplace or by family members would be an example of future work.
Family Stress Management Theory Boss (2002, p. 16) defined family stress as a “pressure or tension in the family system” that creates a disturbance in the stability of the family. A discrete event, or series of events, either positive or negative, can be the stressor. Boss (2002) refined the ABC-X stress model, developed by Hill (1949), by using the context of the family to analyze the family’s ability to deal with stressful events. Poverty is a chronic stressor for families living with limited resources (Boss 2002). The perception (or meaning) of a stressful situation is the central focus of family stress management theory. How much a family pulls themselves together and what assets they employ is a product of the family’s coping ability or strength of the family. Family stress management theory served as the guiding framework for a study of long-term employment patterns, family coping resources, and mothers’ perceptions of financial well-being influence depressive symptoms among rural low-income mothers (Sano et al. 2008). They found that family resources and perceptions play vital roles in the ability to cope with stressors, and thus, support Boss’ (2002) contention. A study that used the words of mothers to discuss their stress and the meaning it has to their situation would be useful for understanding low-income rural families.

Family Economic Stress Theory Family economic stress theory postulates that economic stress impacts family relationships, specifically parenting skills, i.e., parents under economic stress engage in harsher parenting methods (Conger et al. 2000; McLoyd 1990). Economic stress also has impact on perception of the quality of marriage because economic stress tends to reduce the supportive behaviors of spouses. In one study of rural couples, Whitbeck et al. (1997) reported that in addition to economic strain, fathers’ working conditions also played a part in parenting and marital behaviors. For the rural mothers, only economic strain was related to parenting behaviors. While this theory has been used by others in their studies of rural families, no one on the RFS research team as yet has utilized it. The theory would be useful for looking at parent–child relationships in rural low-income families.

Family Resiliency Theory McCubbin et al. (1997) discussed the family protective and family recovery factors that play critical roles in family functioning when the family is challenged by risk factors. Risk factors emanate from a misfortune, trauma, or a transitional event that calls for a change in the family’s pattern of functioning. The family’s ability to withstand a risk event is often labeled as family elasticity or family buoyancy and forms the basis of the research on resilience. Most of the research using the family resiliency theory has focused on single-parent households, remarried family units, and interracial married couples, as well as longitudinal research on children, children at-risk, and inner city risk.

RFS papers that use family resiliency theory as a guide were reviewed in Braun (2009). Vandergriff-Avery’s (2001) dissertation and Vandergriff-Avery et al. (2004) assessed the stress-protective and crisis recovery resources of Maryland mothers who had experienced chronic economic stressors. Waldman’s (2008) thesis expanded the conceptual framework over time with a study of the strength of resources and the hidden costs of resources. When the strength of resources is not included in stress theory, the protective nature of resources may be overestimated. This theory
Life Perspectives

Life Course The life course perspective “incorporates temporal, contextual, and processual distinctions”… and “refers to age-graded life patterns embedded in social structures and cultures that are subject to historical change” (Elder 1996, p. 31). Elder states that life course perspective grew out of the melding of several other theoretical frameworks of social structure, individual, and social change (Giele and Elder 1998). The basic factors in the life course perspective are cultural background and social integration. The key concepts of life course perspective are time and place, human events, transitions, and trajectories. These concepts support analysis of the RFS study in which we have welfare reform issues, rural residence, where some people receive welfare while others live with the transitions of the changes around them. Elder’s (1994) work identified an association between the financial difficulties of the families and family friction and depression, as well as family resources serving as key moderating factors in crises (Elder 1998). Life course perspective was used by Reschke et al. (2006) to frame the mother’s perceptions of their child care arrangements and the influence of the adult daughter–older mother relational context. Life course perspective could be used to study the impact of economic differences with factors, such as unemployment, recession with the financial distress, or depression of family members over time.

Behavioral Life-Cycle Theory Proposed by Shefrin and Thaler (1988), this theory is based on how households view their assets. The basic assumption is that households do not view the various aspects of their wealth as interchangeable, and the current income will be spent most quickly and future income will be reserved, creating a life-cycle approach to saving. The theory is helpful in looking at household consumption behavior because it encompasses the factors of self-control and mental accounting. Mammen and Lawrence (2006) used this theory in their investigation of the use of the EITC refund looking at how the families planned to spend the refund and whether or not they took the refund as a lump-sum rather than as current income. Behavioral life cycle theory would be appropriate for studying rural low-income families’ saving behavior, including their interest in, and use of, Individual Development Accounts (IDAs).

Employment/Output Theories

This is a group of theories have been used to examine the individual’s or family’s ability to generate income to support the family. These theories support work in the marketplace and work in the home. The theory of planned behavior and household
production examines intentions, attitudes, and behaviors in relation to actions taken. Many of these theories use some of the concepts and theories previously mentioned. However, they were used in unique ways to study rural families and work, so they are included here.

**Theory of Planned Behavior and the Household Production Theory** The theory of planned behavior, developed by Ajzen (1991), frames the examination of behaviors in terms of attitudes toward that behavior, and has been well supported by research (Ajzen 1991). The basic premise is that intent can be predicted by attitudes toward a particular behavior and associated subjective norms, as well as the perceived control over the planned behavior. The individual’s attitude toward the behavior is defined as the degree to which the individual has positive or negative feelings about the behavior under scrutiny. The subjective norms are defined as the amount of social pressure the individual perceives to engage in or abstain from the behavior. Finally, the perceived control is the level of ease or difficulty to actually engage in the behavior.

Goods, defined as market, household, and/or leisure time, are consumed by the household to achieve satisfaction in a maximizing manner. Households allocate time to market work, household work, and leisure to gain satisfaction. The amount of time that is allocated depends on the market wage rate, family size, and family composition (Bryant 1990). Kim et al. (2005) used both planned behavior and household production theory to study the employment and mental health of rural low-income women.

**Comprehensive Employment Model** Urban and Olson (2005) proposed a comprehensive employment model that includes human capital, individual, and community factors. The Comprehensive Employment Model widens the lens of examining the influences of obtaining and maintaining employment by including the barriers to the development of human capital, such as physical and mental health issues and the family environment (Urban and Olson 2005). This model is useful for thinking about unique barriers that might hamper employment in rural communities. While they found that education was key to securing and maintaining employment, low-income mothers with significant disabilities were significantly less likely to be employed. Sano et al. (2010) used this theoretical framework in their examination of low-income rural mothers who were intermittently employed over time. Their analysis found support for Urban and Olson’s theory, i.e., the mothers’ individual characteristics, their family circumstances, and their communities’ resources all appeared to play a role in the mothers’ ability to maintain employment.

**Occupational Organization and Regulation of Task Performance Theory** Commonly called the framework of work systems, the theory developed by Herzenberg et al. (2000) describes the factors endemic to rural low wage jobs. The theory uses the US Department of Labor’s organization of production and regulation of task performance in various occupations. Four categories of work systems were identified: tightly constrained, unrationlized labor-intensive, semiautonomous, and high-skill autonomous.
Tightly constrained system jobs have very controlled work environments, high levels of supervision with low-skill-level requirements, with little training provided. Most of these jobs are fast-paced and high-stress, which result in little advancement opportunity and high turnover of workers. Tightly constrained jobs tend have low pay, and nonstandard hours of work are common. The service sector is the most common type of employment for tightly constrained jobs. Unrationalized labor-intensive system jobs are characterized by a fixed set of tasks to complete, the quality and quantity of which is difficult to measure. The job characteristics are not all that different from the tightly constrained system jobs, i.e., nonstandard hours and low pay are common. Jobs may not require many skills, and thus advancement to higher paying positions is difficult. Experienced workers, however, are desirable for employers. Unrationalized, labor-intensive jobs are those like custodians, truck drivers, and nurse’s aides.

Semiautonomous system jobs require skills and training for the complex work and workers are not highly supervised. The wages are higher than the previous two categories and advancement is possible. Police officers, security guards, and hotel clerks are examples of semiautonomous jobs. Finally, high-skilled autonomous system jobs require formal training and education with screening processes for hiring. The job tasks are often complex and difficult to evaluate by supervisors. Persons in these jobs have greater advancement potential, and the cost of replacement for the employer is greater. Teachers, managers, and professional positions are examples of high-skill autonomous jobs.

This framework was used by Dolan et al. (2006) to examine the employment concerns of rural mothers in service sector jobs. Dolan et al. (2009a, b) widened the lens to couples who were both employed in all three waves of data collection, and their ability to manage both work and family when jobs offer little flexibility.

Summary

Although the RFS project was framed in the family ecology theory and human capital theory, research team members have utilized a variety of theoretical frameworks as they seek to explain the phenomena observed through our data. No one single theory is adequate to help us understand the complex lives of the rural low-income families who were RFS participants.

Some of the theories presented in this chapter will be further addressed in subsequent chapters. In other chapters, a variety of the aforementioned theories will be referenced and explained only in the context of the research findings being described.

Discussion Questions

1. Choose a research topic about rural families and work. Which theory or theories do you feel would be the most useful in the investigation of rural low-income families and work? Why?
2. How could you to use more than one theory to view the context of rural low-income families? Give an example.
3. Are there theories other than the ones listed in this chapter that could be used to study rural, low-income families and work? How would these expand our understanding of rural families?

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References


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