Contemporary career development is no longer linear, as more adults nowadays combine work and family, which makes it more challenging to devote one’s energy predominantly to work. Although the structural factors that constrain or facilitate the continuity and discontinuity of people’s work involvement are well documented, relatively less is known about the underlying processes involved in thriving work and family lives. Some work-family researchers have
recently started to acknowledge the importance of understanding the processes of work-family experiences (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Poelmans, 2005; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010; Powell & Greenhaus, 2012). The present study used the Motivational Systems Theory (Ford, 1992) as a framework for understanding people’s work and family pursuits. Ford (1992, p. 78) conceptualized motivation as “the organized patterning of an individual’s personal goals, emotions, and personal agency beliefs.” Consistent with the theoretical framework, the study’s data analytic methods also employed a pattern approach. Using data from the Youth Development Study (n = 451), the present study investigated the motivational patterns associated with work and family lives and their changes during the time from adolescence to early adulthood. Further, it tested whether stronger motivation patterns were actually associated with the achievement of work and family goals. A stronger motivational pattern was more likely to be associated with the achievement of desired outcomes than was a weaker motivational pattern. Also, findings suggest that motivation is better understood as a pattern of related components than as a sole indicator.