

A Summary and Critique of
Nancy K. Schlossberg's Transition Theory

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This paper will introduce the reader to the Transition Theory developed by Nancy K. Schlossberg in 1981 and later revised by Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman in 1995. This theory was developed to help frame, and to provide understanding and interventions for helping professionals who work with adults in transition. Also, I will briefly critique this theory based upon its usefulness when working with college students, who are for clarifying purposes, considered adults.

Schlossberg's Transition Model (1995)

To understand the theory, it requires the explanation of several terms (Schlossberg, 1995):

Transition: any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles.

Anticipated Transition: transitions that occur predictably.

Unanticipated Transition: transitions that are not predictable.

Nonevents: transitions that are expected, but do not occur. Can be classified as personal (related to individual aspirations), ripple (felt due to the nonevent of someone else), resultant (caused by an event) or delayed (still anticipating an event).

Role of perception: a transition exists only if it is defined by the individual experiencing it.

Context: refers to one's relationship to the transition.

Impact: determined by the degree to which a transition alters one's daily life.

What do these definitions mean? A person helping a college student through a transition needs to understand the type of transition the person is going through, the

context of the transition, the impact it is having, and most importantly, the person's perception of the transition. Or stated differently, what does this transition mean to this person?

Time is also a component of this theory. The time it takes for a person to process their way through a transition varies. Schlossberg et al. (1995) endorsed the concept of transitions consisting of a series of three phases they call "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out."

Schlossberg et al. (1995) identified four major sets of factors that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies. They are known as the "4 S's". A person's "assets and liabilities" in each of these sets are the determinants for evaluating how well they will cope with the transition, and, why "different individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times."

Again, the role of perception is important during the 4 S's assessment phase. The individual's view of what is happening affects their account of their assets and liabilities. The individual considers the following factors when assessing their Situation:

Trigger: What was the catalyst for the transition?

Timing: Is the transition occurring at a good or bad time? An "off time" or "on time."

Control: What piece(s) of the transition is(are) in the individual's control?

Role change: Has a role been changed? If so, is it looked at as a gain or loss?

Duration: Is the transition seen as short-term, permanent, or unknown?

Concurrent Stress: What other stresses are happening in the person's life?

Previous experience with a similar transition: Has the person been through something like this before? How did they cope then?

Assessment: Who or what does the individual see as responsible for the transition, and how does it affect their behavior?

The second 'S' is Self. The two areas under Self to consider are "personal and demographic characteristics" and "psychological resources." Personal and demographic characteristics include gender, socioeconomic status, stage of life, state of health, and ethnicity, and age. In Schlossberg's theory, age is not looked at through a chronological lens, but as the place you are in life based upon your "functional, social and psychological" age. Psychological resources include tools used to cope, such as ego development; outlook, specifically optimism and self-efficacy; and commitment and values.

The third 'S' is Support. The type of social supports a person has is important to consider. Social supports can include: "intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities." Schlossberg et al. (1995) suggests that assessing Supports involve categorizing the "stable supports, or the ones that are role dependent," and "the supports that are most likely to change."

The fourth 'S' is Strategies. Schlossberg et al. (1995) suggests there are 3 main categories for coping with transition: responses that change a situation, responses that "control the meaning of the problem," and responses that manage stress "in the aftermath." There are 4 coping strategies: "direct action, information seeking, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior."

The 4 S's complete the list of variables for consideration within the Transition Theory. Schlossberg et al. (1995) revised the presentation of the theory to include an example of how the theory can be combined with another model to turn theory results into an action plan. They integrated the Transition theory with Cormier and Hackney's (1993) counseling model. Schlossberg et al. combined the 4 S's into the 5 stages of Cormier and Hackney's model. Cormier and Hackney's model include the following 5 steps: 1). "Relationship building," 2). "Assessment," 3). "Goal setting," 4). "Interventions," and 5). "Termination and follow-up." The integration involves assessing the 4 S's under each 2nd, 3rd, and 4th stages of the Cormier and Hackney model. Stage One simply involves utilizing the basic listening skills sequence. Stage five involves summarizing stages 1-4, and making plans for the next step.

Development of Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg had transitions of her own to manage regarding the development of her theory. She revealed her original theory (then called a model) in 1981. This model was based upon the studies of many researchers; 15 of whose work she mentioned in her paper, and acknowledged that there were many more. Schlossberg (1981) entitled her paper, "A Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition."

In the same volume of *The Counseling Psychologist* (1981) as her paper, Schlossberg received feedback from critiques. Adhering to some feedback, she dropped the use of the word 'adaptation' and began conceptualizing her model instead as a "response to transition." Critics questioned how true adaptation could be achieved.

In 1989, Schlossberg introduced the use of the 4 S's: Situation, Self, Support and Strategy. These concepts were added to structure the helping process for those who

working with adults in transition. The 4 S's provide a guide to analyzing personal and environmental assets and deficits in any given transition.

In the latest conceptualization, Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) presented the Transition Theory in the "context of general adult development theory." They also discussed the use of the theory in different transitions, for instance, involving the individual, a relationship, and/or a work environment. Finally, they showed how the theory could be integrated with Cormier and Hackney's counseling model (1993).

A Brief Critique of the Transition Theory

I chose to write and critique Nancy K. Schlossberg's Transition Theory because I believe it is a very useful and practical model for working with college students, particularly First-Generation college students. The literature about First-Generation college students is peppered with discussion about their transition between non-college life and college life. Howard London (1992) used the term "straddling two cultures" when talking about the transition issues that First-Generation students face. These issues can include: family, friend, and intimate relationships that must be redefined when the student enters college, maintaining academic levels that in many cases students are not adequately prepared for, or making sense of the institutional cultures and traditions that are woven into college life.

I look at the Transition Theory as more of an assessment tool than a theory. It's a great framework for understanding a student's situation. As Evans, Forney, Guido-DiBrito (1998) remark in *Student Development in College*, "student affairs professionals interested in providing a structure for self-assessment for individuals experiencing transitions could easily create a worksheet by taking each of the 4 S's and listing under

each important aspects for the individual's reflection and discussion" (pg. 118). Not only can student affairs professionals provide an assessment sheet for the student but also for themselves when working with the student. In addition to that, student affairs professionals could assess the type, context and impact of the transition.

It was a practical and needed addition that Schlossberg et al. (1995) provided Cormier and Hackney's (1993) counseling model as a way to integrate the theory. Because how can you assume that students or student affairs professionals would know what to do with the information they gather from an assessment? The data the assessment produces needs to be gathered for a purpose. The outcome desired – to learn new and multiple ways of coping with transitions – will be easier to produce if the theory is integrated with the counseling model.

When I first read Schlossberg's original paper, A Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation to Transition (1981), my first impression was, how could a model be valid when it's based on 15+ different author's research studies? How does she know the researcher studies were done well? What determinants did she use to decide they were trustworthy? Why didn't she use her own research before formulating the theory? And why are there so many variables in this theory? Won't that reduce the theory's credibility?

Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998) report "the authors (Schlossberg et al.) have taken a vast array of writings and gleaned the most important concepts from them, added their insights, and created a dynamic model that can provide a solid foundation for practice that is responsive to both commonalities and idiosyncrasies" (pg. 122). How did

Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito decide this was true? I don't have the answer to any of my questions.

Conclusion

Despite my questions, the Transition Theory is a theory I see myself using with all kinds of college students. The theory is broad in a sense it doesn't make assumptions or try to narrowly define any population of people. It's a practical tool that students would think made sense to use when they were looking for help from a student affairs professional. And, I completely agree with Schlossberg that chronological age is not an accurate indicator of a person's development, experience, or ability to cope with transition, and should not be assessed. Every person goes through transitions at different times in their life and they cope with them in different ways. You can base this theory on the individual.

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