

Nancy K. Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Leslie Meyer

Bowling Green State University

Nancy K. Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Nancy K. Schlossberg is co-president of TransitionWorks, a consulting firm, and Professor Emerita, at the University of Maryland, College Park. As a professor of counseling, she has studied life transitions of all kinds. Schlossberg's mission is to help people cope with the difficulties of life. Now that she is retired, Schlossberg writes self-help books on dealing with transitions, lectures at conferences worldwide, and directs workshops on managing change (Schlossberg, 2011).

Schlossberg's transition theory originated because she believed a need existed to develop a systematic framework that would facilitate an understanding of adults in transition and direct them to the help they needed to cope with the "ordinary and extraordinary process of living" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010, p. 213). Often categorized as an adult development theory, Schlossberg's theory is also relevant to traditionally-aged college students (Evans et al., 2010). According to Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006), a transition is "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33). Goodman et al. (2006) explained that to understand the meaning that a transition has for a particular person requires considering the type, context, and impact of the transition. Schlossberg's theory describes three different types of transitions- anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events. Anticipated transitions happen expectedly and include such events as graduating from high school. Unanticipated transitions happen unexpectedly and are not scheduled. Events of this type include being fired, the sudden death of a family member, or getting a divorce. Non-event transitions are ones an individual expected to occur but that did not happen, like the marriage that never took place or the child who was never born. Transitions include both

obvious and subtle life changes. In Schlossberg's theory, a transition exists only if it is defined as such by the individual experiencing it.

Context refers to the relationship of an individual to the transition (one's own or someone else's) and to the setting of the transition (work, personal relationships, and so forth). For an individual undergoing a transition, the impact, or degree to which the transition alters one's daily life is also important. Both positive and negative transitions can produce stress and multiple transitions happening simultaneously can make coping especially difficult.

While transitions may be linked to one identifiable event or non-event, a transition is actually a process that extends over time (Goodman et al., 2006). At first people are consumed by their new role. Gradually, they begin to separate from the past and establish new roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. Transitions may provide opportunities for growth, as well as decline. Goodman et al. (2006) endorsed the idea of transitions having three phases, which they called "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out." People moving into a situation need to familiarize themselves with the rules, norms, and expectations of the new system. Once in a new situation, individuals must learn to balance their activities with other areas of their lives as they move through the transition. Moving out can be seen as ending one transition and thinking about what comes next.

Goodman et al. (2006) described four major factors, known as the "4 S's," that influence the ability of an individual to cope during a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. A person's effectiveness in coping with transition depends on his or her resources in these areas. Individuals have both assets and liabilities as they encounter transitions. Assets may outweigh liabilities, making adjustment relatively easy or liabilities may outweigh assets making the transition more difficult to manage. An individual's appraisal of a transition as positive,

negative, or neutral also impacts how the person feels and copes with the transition. When examining the first "S", a person's situation, it will vary according to what triggered the transition, the timing, the amount of control the person has over the transition, the new roles the individual is taking on, the duration of the transition, one's previous experience with a similar transition, how the individual assesses the transition, and other stresses the individual is experiencing.

Factors considered important in relation to the second "S", self, are personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources. An individual's personal and demographic characteristics affect how they view life and include socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity/culture, age, stage of life, and stage of health. Psychological resources include ego development, outlook, personal values, spirituality, and resiliency.

The third "S", support that an individual has, impacts one's ability to adapt to a transition. People receive support from family, friends, intimate relationships, and institutions and/or communities. Functions of support include affect, affirmation, aid, and honest feedback.

The fourth "S", strategies, refers to the ways individuals cope with a transition. Coping responses include those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the problem, and those that aid in managing stress (Evans et al. 2010). Individuals who want to change their situation or reduce their stress can choose among four coping modes: information seeing, direct action, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior. Goodman et al. (2006) emphasized that individuals cope best when they remain flexible and use multiple strategies.

Student Assessment

Utilizing Nancy K. Schlossberg's transition theory, I assessed the development of three undergraduate college students. My assessment of each student consisted of a personal face-to-

face interview. All three students were asked the same question at the beginning of each interview session. The question was, "What major changes have happened in your life during the past year?" Based on the responses I received to this question, I asked the students additional follow-up questions in relation to the 4 S's- situation, self, support, and strategies. I evaluated each student to determine where they were in the transition process. The next section gives a summary of each student interview, as well as my assessment of the phase of transition each student is experiencing. In order to protect the students' identities, I used the following pseudonyms: David, Eric, and Amy.

Student Interviews

David

David is a 35 year-old undergraduate student currently enrolled full time at Lorain County Community College (LCCC). David initially expressed an interest in attending LCCC after he graduated from high school, but never officially enrolled. At that time, he said he was enticed by a steady income working at a local factory and opted not to pursue a college degree. In the past year, David started taking prerequisite courses for the ultrasound program and is on track to graduate with an associate's degree in ultrasound in 2013. In the future, David has aspirations of obtaining his bachelor's degree in nursing through LCCC's partnership program with Youngstown State University.

David recently went through an unanticipated transition, a divorce, and is currently living with his parents. Both the divorce and the move back home to live with his parents again have had major impacts on David's life. In the past year, David also lost his job, an event he was not expecting, and remains unemployed. While he did not go into great detail about his divorce, he did share that he was still bitter, angry, and resentful about the entire situation. David talked

mostly about how living at home and not having an income have changed his lifestyle. He does not have a steady income to support his desire to do activities with his friends. He performs small carpentry jobs for friends and family, but he said it is not enough to support the social life he used to maintain. In addition, he said that being jobless has affected his ability to date. He described his day-to-day life as mundane, feeling as though he does the same things day in and day out. In addition, he explained that he is anxious about whether or not he will be accepted into the ultrasound program at LCCC, an anticipated event. He said that part of the admissions process to the ultrasound program involves a background check. David indicated that he previously had a DUI on his record, and he was afraid that the DUI might prevent him from being accepted into the ultrasound program.

Regarding self, David considers himself an optimist. He told me that past life experiences have prepared him to handle the “bumps in the road” that he is currently experiencing. He also said that he has a laid-back personality and does not let things upset him easily.

In terms of support, David is the youngest of ten children, and has a very tight-knit and encouraging family. In addition, he said he has several friends who are always there to help him through anything. He explained that he is very close with his sister and that she is the one person in his life who will “tell him like it is” even if it is something that is difficult for him to hear.

David and I talked about strategies he uses for coping with the transitions he is currently experiencing. His strategies primarily focus on managing stress and involve direct action on his part. He felt that he could benefit by setting a goal to motivate him. Working out to alleviate stress is something David said he enjoys, but has not done since his divorce. He shared that he may sign up for a race as an incentive to start training again. He also mentioned that he unwinds

by driving and listening to classical music. In addition, spending time with friends who lift him up is something David appreciates.

My assessment of David is that he is in several different phases of transition: and because he has multiple transitions happening at the same time, he is under a great deal of stress. Regarding his divorce, which happened just over a year ago, I believe that David is in the moving through process. It was obvious to me that he was still dealing with some heavy emotions regarding the divorce and needed more time to process the situation and heal. I think that counseling would be beneficial in helping David work through the divorce. As far as losing his job and moving back home with his parents, I assessed David to be at the moving in stage. He is still in the process of determining how to adjust his lifestyle because of these two events. His desire is to get a part-time job and save as much money as he can to put toward purchasing a house. Lastly, regarding being admitted to the ultrasound program, I assessed David as being in the moving in phase. He is nervous about information he received from other students regarding the background check, yet he has not yet investigated the issue further by contacting a college representative from the program to find out more about the process and how a DUI might impact his chances of being accepted.

When comparing David's assets to liabilities, he has a number of things working in his favor, including a strong sense of optimism, previous experience with multiple transitions happening at the same time, a strong support network of family and friends, and healthy strategies for managing when he encounters stress. I felt that the most challenging liability to David is his inability to find a part-time job. Based on our conversation, I sense that securing employment would boost his self-esteem, allow him to participate in more activities with his friends, and help him begin saving money. While David said he feels fortunate his parents allowed him to move

back home, he mentioned that their serious medical issues greatly concern him and weigh heavily on his conscience.

I feel that David could benefit from meeting with someone in the campus career services office to discuss potential part-time student employment opportunities that might work around his class schedule. In addition, I encouraged him to schedule a face-to-face meeting with someone in the ultrasound program to further explore his question related to having a DUI and whether or not that would hinder his chances of being accepted into the program. It seems as though the anticipation is causing him unnecessary stress.

Eric

Eric is 28 years old and was originally enrolled part time at Terra Community College in 2001. At that time, Eric said he was young and foolish and dropped out after his first quarter to take a job with his father's trucking company. In 2009, he returned to Terra Community College and is about to complete his associate's degree in office administration, an anticipated event. At some point in the future, he wants to pursue his bachelor's degree in business administration through Terra's partnership program with Tiffin University.

Eric shared that he recently became a father to a beautiful baby boy, an anticipated event. He talked about how having a child has completely changed his life. Eric explained that his life and his schedule completely revolve around his son's needs now. He is currently living with his girlfriend, and he explained that money is "tight" and that he was recently laid off from his job, an unanticipated event.

When asked to describe himself, Eric said that his Mexican family heritage is very important to him. He added that he is the first person in his family to attend college. He said he is extremely positive, explaining that he tends to look at the bright side most situations. He went

on to share that he is quiet, private, and mostly keeps to himself. He said that through any challenge he tries to be grateful for what he has and carries the attitude that it could always be worse. He said that pursuing his degree has given him a sense of purpose and a drive to succeed, and that it is extremely gratifying to be working toward a goal.

Eric shared that he has an “awesome” support system. He explained that his parents have been a huge help in supporting him financially since being laid off from work and are extremely proud of him for pursuing a college degree. He also said that his girlfriend is one of his best friends and that in a few years he hopes to marry her. In addition to having several close male friends, Eric shared that he has three sisters. He referred to them as his “reality check.” He said they do not hold back on telling him what they really think. Lastly, Eric mentioned the impact of mentors in his life. He said that he has a close relationship with several faculty members and advisors who support him at times when he gets frustrated and wants give up. He told me he probably would have dropped out of school on a number of occasions if it was not for their intervention and encouragement.

The situation that Eric went into the most detail about was being laid off from his job. Because he was not anticipating this, he explained that he was not financially prepared when the time came. I assessed that Eric is in the moving though phase of this transition. He talked about his concerns about money and how he hated relying on his parents for financial help. As a father, he explained that he wants nothing more than to be able to provide for his son. He said he invests a lot of time in looking for job opportunities online and is always looking for opportunities to network with others. In addition, he indicated that he applied for several positions, but the employers hired someone with experience. Overall, he said the process of finding a job is discouraging. He is also apprehensive about financial aid and student loans.

While he strongly believes he is making the right choice in pursuing his degree, money is a concern that he said keeps coming up over and over again.

Eric explained that when it comes to strategies for handling stress in his life, he prefers to handle everything for himself. He said he hates to ask others for help and instead, prefers to just keep things to himself. He went on to explain that he does not think that this is necessarily the best strategy, but it is the one that he relies on most frequently.

It was obvious to me that Eric has a positive outlook overall and a great support system. I asked him if he had discussed his challenges in finding a job with any of the faculty members and advisors he respected. He immediately said, "No, I don't want to bother them with my problems." I encouraged him to consider them as a valuable resource and explained that they may be able to assist him in expanding his network. I also suggested he visit the campus career services office. I think one of Eric's biggest liabilities is his lack of strategies for managing transitions. He tends to take all of the stress on himself, instead of seeking support. I feel that he could benefit from meeting regularly with a peer support group made up of other non-traditional students with similar concerns of balancing the responsibilities of work, school, and family.

Amy

Amy is a 23 year old college student who completed an associate of arts at Terra Community College and transferred to Bluffton College during the fall semester of 2010. She is on track to graduate with a bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism in May, 2012. Amy shared that she recently made the Dean's list and that being a good student is important to her.

The transition from Terra Community College to Bluffton College was not smooth according to Amy. She quickly realized she needed to build a rapport with advisors and professors and that it would take time to earn their trust. She said that the expectations of faculty at Bluffton

College were much higher than at Terra and that moving to a residence hall at Bluffton College was her first experience living away from home. She said it was difficult to adapt to a new environment and make new friends. Now she is anxiously anticipating graduation. She said she is “freaked out,” but is trying to take things one day at a time, and cannot help but think about the over \$20,000 in student loans that she needs to begin paying back after she graduates.

Amy described herself as a goal-setter who is driven to exceed expectations. She explained that she lives by the idea that “if you want something, you are the only one stopping you from getting it.” Amy indicated that she is an extrovert and said that she loves connecting with others and hearing their unique stories.

Amy has a great support system. She is very close to her parents and has three girlfriends who are there for her through “thick and thin.” She said that she has also has several faculty members who help to challenge her to grow. In addition, Amy shared that she relies on her Christian faith at all times.

To alleviate stress, Amy said that she enjoys running. She also shared that writing her thoughts in a journal and later reflecting on her entries is both a positive and rewarding strategy. Amy mentioned that talking with friends who offer a calming influence proves beneficial when she is frustrated or angry.

Based on our conversation, I assessed Amy to be at the moving out phase of her time at Bluffton College. While she looks forward to her senior year at Bluffton, she explained that much of her time and energy is now focused on her future after graduation. She is consumed by thoughts about where she may end up finding a job geographically. In addition, I already shared that she is anxious about starting to pay back her student loans. In my opinion, Amy's strong personal drive to succeed, along with her strong support system, great attitude, and faith, are

assets that will sustain her through any challenge she encounters. She shared that she is not afraid to seek help from others. In addition, she said that she is a person that always counts her blessings and feels that “everything happens for a reason and things could always be worse.” I think that Amy could benefit from a college or university program designed to assist students with transitioning from college to life as a professional. In addition, I encouraged her to begin arranging informational interviews with professionals working in an area of journalism that she is interested in.

Critique of Schlossberg's Theory

I enjoyed using Schlossberg's theory to explicate the development of the three students I interviewed, and the theory was easy to understand and apply. As an academic advisor, I feel that the framework of this theory will be beneficial in one-on-one meetings that I have with students. One of the strengths of the theory is its applicability to a wide range of individuals. In addition, I think Schlossberg's theory is practical and uses language that makes sense to students. I think it would be useful if the theory actually had a formal assessment tool; however, I created a quick one-page sheet listing the 4 S's, along with highlights of the theory and used this sheet to guide my interview with each student. In the end, though, determining where an individual was in the transition was left to my own interpretation. Also, talking with students about their ratio of assets to liabilities gave them and me great insight into their situation and sparked conversation about next steps to manage the stress of the transition. No matter what, transitions are unavoidable. Everyone experiences both predictable and unanticipated transitions throughout their life, and a theory that provides a framework for understanding transitions and how individuals cope is helpful.

Recommendations for Promoting Student Development

Colleges and universities must first commit to hiring student affairs staff with a background in student development and student development theory. Student development theory, in general, provides meaning and purpose to interactions with students and Schlossberg's theory has an ease of understanding and application that would lend itself to being used by both faculty and staff when working with students. In addition, I think it is important for faculty and staff to engage students in meaningful conversations about transitions throughout their college experience. Programming developed around the 4 S's could help students recognize and draw upon their assets in coping. Many colleges have developed first-year programs to assist students with the transition from high school to college, but I think more attention should also be focused on programs to assist non-traditional students, single parents, international students, transfer students, and students transitioning from college to the professional world.

The 4 S's in Schlossberg's theory provide a basic outline for assessing a students' ratio of assets to liabilities. Student affairs professionals and students can work together to assess this ratio and discuss strategies to help manage the transition. In addition, the student affairs professional can recommend resources within the college/university that would assist the student.

In conclusion, college students are at different developmental stages at various times and it is risky to make assumptions as to what students need. Using Schlossberg's transition theory allows student affairs practitioners to take a student's uniqueness into account. In Schlossberg's theory, the entire transition process of moving in, moving through and moving out can be used as a guide in helping students learn, develop, and grow from their own individual experiences no matter where they are in terms of their own development.

Word Count: 3,895

References

- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. K., & Anderson, M. L. (2006). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory*. (3rd ed.). New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Schlossberg, N. K. (2011). Author, speaker, motivator and life transition guru. Retrieved from <http://www.transitionsthroughlife.com/>