Schlossberg’s Transition Theory

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As I flipped through the five-pound ACPA program book, my colleague and I spotted a session entitled “Navigating the Quarter Life Crisis”. I laughed a little to myself and shrugged impartially when it was suggested that we attend the session. “Wouldn’t you rather go to ‘G.I. Joes and Army Hoes: Gender Representations in Greek Life’?” I suggested enthusiastically. Needless to say, I was convinced to attend the former session.

Standing room only! The session room was filled wall-to-wall with young student affairs professionals, some looking for coping strategies to help mitigate the pressures and stress of achieving educational, professional and personal success, others, wanting to find out what kind of ridiculous technical definition scholars have contrived to dramatize a natural process in an individual’s life. The quarter life crisis phenomenon bears many similarities to the midlife crisis—characterized by insecurities, disappointments, and depression, and usually impacts individuals between 25-35 years of age. Yet, as the presenter was explaining some surprising research findings about the difficulties 20-somethings are having in reaching traditional benchmarks of adulthood (which is understandable because of the economy and the highly competitive job markets), I kept bringing the conversation back to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. I understand that society has constructed a certain set of expectations for me in accordance to what age or stage of life I am in; however, the problem does not rest with the unrealistic expectations of society, but with how individuals view and cope with transitions. The workshop lacked a thorough explanation of some foundational transition theory, which provides not only an understanding of how transitions impact all types of individuals, but also, how to cope during them.

Dr. Nancy K. Schlossberg is an expert in the areas of adult development and adult transition. Dr. Schlossberg introduces the transition theory (then called a model) in her article,
“A Model for Analyzing Human Adaptation” in the *Counseling Psychologist* journal (1981). Since then, she has co-authored several books, the most recent being, *Counseling Adults in Transition: Linking Schlossberg’s Theory with Practice in a Diverse World* (2012). The theory has been revisited several times throughout these works, but I focus on her latest publication, so as to capture the full worth of understanding and applying the transition theory to my work as a student affairs practitioner.

The transition theory was created because a “need existed to develop a framework that would facilitate an understanding of adults in transition and aid them in connecting to the help they needed to cope with the ‘ordinary and extraordinary process of living’” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, Renn, 2010, p. 213). While Schlossberg’s theory is labeled as a theory of adult development, many practitioners, including myself, have found the theory also relevant to traditionally aged college students.

**Key Points**

In the most recent edition, Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012) present the transition theory in the context of general adult development theory. The authors start the book with a thorough explanation of adult development theories, which provides a conceptual framework for readers. Then, Schlossberg’s transition theory is fully explained: the transition process, the integrative transition model, and the 4 S system. Transitions are categorized in one of three areas: individual, relationship, and work. The rest of the book connects the transition
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theory to other models, showing how the theory could be effectively used in practice. For example, integrating the theory with Cormier and Hackney’s counseling model (2005) gives practitioners a very useful tool to assist individuals through transitions.

**Moving in, Through and Out**

According to Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg, the framework of the transition theory is centered on the following premises that:

- Adults continuously experience transitions.
- Adults’ reactions to transitions depend on the type of transition, their perceptions of the transition, the context in which it occurs, and its impact on their lives.
- A transition has no end point; rather, a transition is a process over time that includes phases of assimilation and continuous appraisal as people move in, through, and out of it (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012, p. 59).

The first stage, in any transition, is either moving in or moving out. When moving into a new situation, people must become familiar with new roles, relationships, and routines. The authors point out that institutions need to implement orientation programing to help individuals know what is expected of them (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012). Once people “know the ropes” they experience the *moving through* period. “Adults confront issues such as how to balance their activities with other parts of their lives and how to feel supported and challenged during their new journey,” (p. 57). Moving out, Schlossberg explains, is when people end one series of transitions and start to look forward to the next thing. Eventually, the transition becomes integrated and a period of stability is re-established.

**The 4 S System**

Schlossberg identifies 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. Different individuals react differently to the same type of transition and the same person reacts differently at different times.

The individual’s perception of what is happening affects their account of their assets and liabilities. The individual considers the following factors when assessing their Situation:

"trigger: What set off the transition; timing: How does the transition relate to one’s socialdock; control: What aspects of the transition can one control; role change: Does the transition involve a role change; duration: Is the transition seen as permanent or temporary; concurrent stress: What and how great are the stresses facing the individual now, if any; assessment: Does the individual view the situation positively, negatively, or as benign,” (p. 67-68).

The second ‘S’ is Self. The two areas under Self to consider are personal and demographic characteristics and psychological resources. Personal and demographic characteristics—gender, socioeconomic status, stage of life, state of health, and ethnicity, and age—“directly effects how a person perceives and assesses life,” (p. 73). In Schlossberg’s theory, age is not defined by how many birthdays people have had, but considers where people are in life based upon their functional, social and psychological age. Psychological resources include tools used to cope—ego development, outlook, and commitment and values.

The third ‘S’ is Support. Social support, which is often viewed as the key to handling
stress, can include, intimate relationships, family, friends, co-workers, and communities.

The fourth ‘S’ is Strategies. Schlossberg cites three main coping responses identified in the Pearlin and Schooler (1978) study: “responses that modify the situation, responses that control the meaning of the problem,” and responses that help the individual manage stress after it has occurred to help accommodate to existing stress without being overwhelmed by it,” (p. 89). There are four coping modes Schlossberg takes from Lazarus and Folkman (1984): “direct action, inhibition of action, information seeking, and intrapsychic behavior,” (p. 91).

**What I Learned and a Little Theory to Practice**

Life would have been so much easier for me had I known about the coping strategies of how to deal with transitions. I gained so many helpful tips and advice from the book that I find it difficult to point out just one part of the whole. “Adults in transition are often confused and in need of assistance,” (Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg, 2012, p. 37). Well, I would say that many people, not just adults, experiencing a transition are often confused and in need of assistance. I like that this theory can be applied to many people of all ages. Of course, the beginning of the book, which addresses adults specifically through some perspective theory framework, would need to be expanded to include other people in different developmental stages or ages, but age does not always have to coincide with a certain developmental stage, and therefore, practitioners should be familiar with Schlossberg’s transition theory and know how to apply it. For example, my work in the Office of Global Programs has really caused me to think about how students face transitions; especially students who choose to study abroad. How do they adapt to a new culture, a new life, especially when their support network can seem so limited? One of the biggest take-aways for me is the 4 S System, because I see the system as a great tool to help people put their situation into something much more manageable. Also, I find
it interesting that a person's perception of an event can have such an impact on how that individual copes with the transition. I think as this is an important distinction we need to recognize in a student and ourselves. A bad mark to a student can mean the end of the world! As student affairs professionals, we know that it is not the end of the road for this student, but what matters is how the student might perceive the low grade. I just experienced the Lion Scouts 2012-2013 elections, and I spent the morning with a student, listening to his concerns about the elections. He was not selected to be on one of the committees, and he was worried that he would not have any more opportunities to be involved with the organization the way he wanted to be. It is not easy to talk students “down from the ledge”. As student affairs professionals we need to be aware of how students perceive the situation so that we can help the students more. I think the 4 S System can help me counsel students more effectively by pointing out the many assets they have and how they might be able to use them.

**Conclusion**

One reason I encourage colleagues to read Schlossberg’s work is based upon the many new editions and improvements made upon her original work. Sometimes, I find theory particularly hard to understand and apply, and that is because theory is often outdated and/or irrelevant to the population of students I am currently working with. Another strength of the book, in particular, is the way it is structured. The book, quite literally, is an easy to use manual for practitioners with the theory and strategies at the beginning, and then application example, after application example for the rest of the book. When explaining a new concept, examples are always provided. Also, the graphics are beneficial for readers to use as quick references. the Transition Theory is a theory I see myself using with all kinds of college students. The theory is broad in a sense and takes in account many different populations of individuals. 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.
References

