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Career Transitions: Varieties and Commonalities^{1,2}

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The effects of increasingly prevalent job and profession changing and re-evaluation of work vs. family priorities have led to a growing interest in careers issues. However, aids to understanding and managing career transition phenomena have not yet been developed. Toward that end, varieties of career transitions are identified here, and commonalities across transitions are explored.

In the past 50 years, the norm of holding one job or remaining with one work organization for life has given way to a pattern of periodic job changing [Warner & Abegglen, 1955; Jennings, 1970]. Recently, Driver [1978] has noted a trend toward serial professions — individuals periodically changing professions. The increasing incidence of job and profession changing places greater demands on the recruiting, training, and other human resource development programs of the organizations that individuals leave and join [Gaudet, 1960; Tuchi & Carr, 1971]. Among the outcomes for job changers is significant stress for the individuals and their families [Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974]. And the prognosis is that job and profession changing will continue to increase, at least through the year 2000 [Evered, in press].

Several societal trends have contributed to the increasing prevalence of job and profession changing, as well as other types of career transitions. Yankelovich [1974] and others [Ondrack, 1973; Astin & Bisconti, 1972] have noted a trend toward

broader concern with overall quality of life as contrasted with the more traditional and narrower definition of professional success in terms of climbing the corporate ladder. There has been an increased emphasis in the 1960s and 1970s on personal growth and fulfillment, lifestyle experimentation, and individualism [Hall, 1971, 1976]. Individuals have been re-examining work vs. family priorities and demanding more from all life activities [Fogarty, Rapoport, & Rapoport, 1971]. There is a growing proportion of dual career families, and greater consideration is being given to their special needs [Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1974; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1976]. Trends toward earlier retirement and longer life span after retirement have been documented [Atchley, 1976; Clark, 1966]. A greater proportion of the population than ever before has questioned the viability of materialist and industrial-expansion philosophies — e.g., is more and bigger really better? [Meadows, 1972; Schumacher, 1973].

These trends have led to a growth in the proportion of people who undertake career transitions. Transitions may result in a change of job or profession, or a change in one's orientation to work while continuing in the same job. Associated with any career transition are personal and financial costs that accrue to the organizations, the individuals in transition, and their families. Therefore, it is increasingly important to understand and facilitate career transitions. In the past, people have studied

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particular types of transitions (e.g., retirement, entering a first job). However, no one to my knowledge has examined career transitions per se. Yet there are commonalities among career transitions regardless of the specific situation in which they occur. An appreciation of the commonalities, and the varieties of situations in which transitions occur should enhance our ability to facilitate career transitions.

The aim here will be to develop an understanding of career transitions as a general phenomenon. Toward that end, I will catalog types of career transitions, identify commonalities among many types of transition experiences, and describe transitioners' typical needs and coping processes. I will begin by outlining key working definitions, basic propositions, and features common to all types of career transitions, and in the second section, describe a typology of the varieties of transition situations. In the third section, I will present a framework for understanding how individuals cope with transition experiences, followed by a brief summary of the perspective.

Definitions, Propositions, Common Features

Definitions

As a preliminary step in explaining transitioners' experiences, the terms *career* and *career transition* (CT) will be defined and illustrated. There are undoubtedly almost as many ways of answering the question "What is a career?" as there are individuals willing to address the question. Following Hall [1976, pp. 1-4], *career* will be used here to refer to an accumulation of role-related experiences over time. In addition, several trends in the literature on careers will be reflected in my usage of the term. Although traditionally only occupational or professional roles were considered careers (lawyer, doctor), the concept of career has recently been expanded to include other work and central life roles (secretary, farmer, housewife, peace-corp volunteer). In studying careers, it is now considered essential to examine "the person within the total life space and throughout his lifetime" [Van Maanen & Schein, 1977, p. 46]. Issues at the interface of work, family, and leisure roles are crucial for understanding career dynamics [Bailyn & Schein, 1976].

In addition, past views have focused exclusively on external or objective aspects of careers — that is, on the normal sequence of advancements through a particular occupation (e.g., medicine) or an organizational hierarchy [Van Maanen & Schein, 1977]. However, there is growing recognition of the need to simultaneously consider internal (to the individual) or subjective aspects of careers, including the individual's changing attitudes and values, needs and aspirations, self-assessments and self-concept in relation to the role in question [Hall, 1976; Hughes, 1958; Van Maanen & Schein, 1977].

And finally, newer perspectives no longer consider upward progression through an organizational or professional hierarchy an essential element of a career. In fact, the traditional concept of a career as a hierarchical progression (i.e., a linear career) has been supplemented by new concepts, including the steady-state career (the individual continues to acquire skills within a single field without upward movement) and the spiral career (the individual undertakes a succession of movements through related or even quite different fields) [Driver, in press]. For literature reviews see Dalton [1970] and Van Maanen and Schein [1977].

In sum then, we will consider a career to be a sequence of role-related experiences accumulated over time. The term *career* may refer to a work or nonwork role. Both objective and subjective elements of roles will be considered. As used here, career does not necessarily imply hierarchical or other progression through an organization or professional structure. Any one career or sequence of role-related experiences will be viewed within a framework of several potentially overlapping and interacting life roles. While our definition of career specifically includes nonwork roles, the discussion will focus on work roles.

What, then, is a career transition? The term *transition* suggests both a change and a period during which the change is taking place. The central idea in the previous discussion of career was "role" (i.e., the task and other behaviors associated with a position in an organization or social system). Both subjective and objective aspects of roles were included in career. Therefore, we will define *career transition* as the period during which an individual is either changing roles (taking on a different objective role) or changing orientation to a role already held (altering a subjective state).

The duration of the period of transition depends in large part on how much difference is experienced by the changer between new and old roles, or new and old role orientations. Generally, it takes longer to make the transition to an entirely unfamiliar role or situation than to one that is somewhat familiar.

Despite efforts by some transitioners to anticipate role differences, it can be expected that in most cases, the greater the extent of *objective* newness, the greater the extent of *subjective* newness. This results in large part from the difficulty of accurately and completely anticipating one's own reactions in and to a novel situation. In other words, an inverse relationship between anticipatability and objective difference between new and old roles is assumed here. (For the meaning of *anticipate* in this context, see Louis [1980].)

The transition period is analogous to the encounter period in organizational socialization, during which reality testing by the newcomer and mutual adaptation of individual and organizational unit occur. The encounter period extends from the time of entry into the new situation, or role, until substantial adjustment to and acceptance of the situation is reached by the individual.

Basic Propositions

The following five propositions form the foundation for this approach to understanding career transitions:

- P1: During all types of CTs, individuals are faced with a variety of differences between old and new roles, role orientations, and role settings.
- P2: The more elements that are different in the new role or situation, and the more they are different from those of previous roles, the more the transitioner potentially has to cope with.
- P3: The type of transition undertaken is an indicator of the general nature and magnitude of differences with which the individual will have to cope.
- P4: There is a typical coping process by which individuals interpret and respond to differences experienced during transitions of all types.
- P5: An understanding of the coping process combined with an analysis of the type of transition undertaken can be used to foresee the needs and facilitate the adaptation of individuals during career transitions.

Common Features

All CTs share a number of common features. Among them are differences between the new and

old roles. The transitioner may be able to foresee some of these differences before taking on the new role. Other differences emerge only through experiences in the new role and of oneself in the new role.

The general nature and magnitude of pre- to post-transition role differences can be estimated from the type of transition undertaken. For instance, the typical transition from school to work is likely to entail substantial differences between student and worker roles and role settings. In contrast, we would expect there to be fewer and less significant differences in roles and settings for the individual moving from a position as salesperson in Company A to salesperson in Company B, especially if the product line and sales territory are roughly equivalent.

Several kinds of differences are associated with CTs. There are differences in the objective features of the new role and setting. Such objective differences, referred to here as *changes*, are publicly noticeable and knowable, and are often knowable in advance (i.e., at the time the transitioner accepts a new position). In a move from Systems Engineer at IBM in San Francisco to Senior Consultant at Price Waterhouse in New York, we and the transitioner know, for instance, that title, organizational affiliation, office address, co-workers, and supervisor will differ.

Other differences are subjective in nature — that is, they are personally rather than publicly noticed. These differences, referred to here as *contrasts*, are perceptual products of the individual's experience in the new setting and role (i.e., features identified as figures against the background of a total field). Contrasts emerge from both the objective differences between new and old settings, including changes, and from characteristics of the new setting as perceived by the transitioner. They represent the transitioner's definition or map of the new setting, and are person-specific rather than inherent in the organizational transition (as are changes). Whether a particular feature of the new situation stands out, or emerges as a contrast, depends on its relative importance to the individual transitioner. For two people undergoing the same objective change in role (e.g., graduating from the same law school class and joining the same law firm), different contrasts will emerge. It follows from the definition that contrasts, unlike objective changes, are not generally knowable in advance.

In addition to changes and contrasts, there are differences that arise from discrepancies between an individual's anticipations (tacit and explicit) of future situations and experiences, and the subsequent real-time happenings. Differences between anticipations and experiences, termed *surprises*, typically stimulate both affective and cognitive reactions. How surprise triggers such reactions and the processes by which individuals cope with surprise and other transition differences is reserved for discussion in a later section.

Surprises differ from contrasts in several ways. Contrasts are subjective appreciations of differences between features of two objective or external worlds, i.e., the old and the new roles and settings. Surprises, on the other hand, are subjective appreciations of differences between a personally forecasted experiential world and the individual's subsequent experience of self in the role and setting. Thus contrasts and surprises differ both in subject (e.g., real world features vs. anticipations of experiences) and source (e.g., externally generated but personally observed vs. self-generated).

Surprises may be positive or negative. They may result from either undermet or overmet conscious or tacit anticipations about the job and organization, and about oneself in the job and the setting. Traditional views of organizational entry, socialization, and recruit turnover have focused exclusively on one type of surprise (undermet conscious expectations about the job [Wanous, 1977; Kotter, 1973]); however, an appreciation of the varieties of surprise, contrast, and change attendant to career transitions seems essential for understanding and managing transition processes. (For further elaboration on surprise, contrast, and change, see Louis [1980].)

A Typology of Career Transitions

When a college graduate begins a first full-time job, when a dentist takes up law, when an engineer enters the managerial ranks, when a housewife re-enters the labor force after childrearing years, and when an executive retires, each is undertaking some type of CT. The purpose of this section is to present a typology or catalog of types of CTs.

Why develop a typology of career transitions? A typology of career transitions offers several potential practical and theoretical benefits. A systematic

enumeration of types of CTs could be used to predict, analyze, and facilitate the experiences of individual transitioners. A typology of CTs could also provide a framework of integrating and generalizing findings from relevant research not previously linked to the careers literature; it could as well aid in detecting theoretical and empirical gaps in knowledge and identifying needed areas of study. Additionally, a typology could be used in disseminating to individuals and organizations the growing body of knowledge concerning CTs.

The typology presented here, and still under development, has been derived from an analysis of case descriptions and a review of related typologies (see, for example, Parnes's [1954] seven types of labor mobility and Price's [1977] discussion of types and concepts of turnover). It differs substantially from earlier typologies in its broadened perspective on the nature of career transitions.

From our definition of CT as the period during which an individual is taking on a different role or changing orientation to a role already held, we can identify two major categories of transitions: *interrole* and *intrarole*. In the former, a new and different role is actually taken; in the latter, a new and different orientation to an old role is taken. Five types of interrole transitions and four types of intrarole transitions have been included to date in the typology (see Table 1); each is identified and briefly illustrated in the following discussion.

Table 1
Varieties of Career Transitions

Interrole Transitions

1. Entry/Re-entry
2. Intracompany
3. Intercompany
4. Interprofession
5. Exit

Intrarole Transitions

1. Intrarole Adjustment
2. Extrarole Adjustment
3. Role/Career-Stage Transition
4. Life-Stage Transition

Interrole Transitions

Individuals undertake interrole transitions when they (1) enter or re-enter a labor pool, (2) take on a different role within the same organization, (3) move from one organization to another, (4) change professions, or (5) leave a labor pool. The interrole transitions are discussed here in the chronological sequence in which they typically occur.

When an individual enters or re-enters the labor pool, there is a change of roles, or an *entry transition*. The college graduate entering a work organization for the first time as a regular full-time permanent employee and the housewife returning to work after raising children are illustrations of this type of transition. A nonwork role example is that of a person marrying for the first time: the individual is taking on a spouse role, a role not previously held.

In entry transitions in which the new role is embedded in an organizational context, the transitioner is faced with several tasks: adjusting to the reality of the organization, learning how to work, dealing with the boss and the reward system, and developing an identity and place for oneself in the organization [Schein, 1978, pp. 94-101].

The move from school to work is an entry transition that has received substantial attention recently. In this transition, various elements typically differ between the new and old roles. They include the presence and type of supervision and feedback, challenge and autonomy, accountability, task structure, discretion over time, dress, physical setting, status, salary, and role identity [Kotter, Faux, & McArthur, 1978]. Most writers on the subject have concluded that more and better preparation of individuals for the nontechnical aspects of the job and the transition process itself is needed.

A second type of interrole transition involves a change of role within the same company, an *intra-company transition*. For instance, in moving from one department or division to another, co-workers, tasks, technologies, physical setting, and formal and informal procedures are likely to differ. Even when shifting from a technical role to a managerial role within the same department, responsibilities, authority and reporting relationships, information needs and availability, and work space usually change.

A move from one company to another represents an *intercompany transition*. In such a transition, the

number and extent of role elements altered, and therefore the magnitude of differences that the transitioner must cope with, depends on similarity between new and old task requirements, work group and organizational climate, and industry. All of the possible differences associated with an intra-company transition apply here as well. As traditionally used, *labor turnover* generally refers to voluntary intercompany transitions [Price, 1977].

The fourth type of interrole transition is change in profession, labeled *interprofession transition*. CTs of this type occur, for example, when a dentist takes up law, when a corporate employee leaves to become an entrepreneur, when someone leaves the business world and becomes a government official or an academic, and when a military officer retires and takes up a business profession. A brief but rich account of an interprofession transition experience is provided by Michael Blumenthal [1979] in his description of differences he encountered and the culture shock he experienced in leaving his position as chairman and chief executive officer of the Bendix Corporation to become Secretary of the Treasury.

In essence, each profession change entails a move to a different, or as Blumenthal says, a foreign culture. The interprofession transitioner is likely to encounter a variety of differences, and potential surprises. Often associated with a profession change are differences in language used, norms governing interpersonal interactions (e.g., different norms for lawyer-client, dentist-patient, businessman-customer, professor-student relations), code of ethics, reference group, professional self-identity, and societal response to professional identity.

A final type of interrole CT is an *exit transition*. Several kinds of exits have been distinguished, varying in permanence or duration, and in type and source of initiation. A leave of absence (e.g., sabbatical, pregnancy leave, or travel leave) represents a brief, planned exit, usually of a specified and finite duration. A withdrawal represents a long-term or semipermanent leave usually initiated by the transitioner and often of an indeterminate duration. The stereotypical case is that of a woman who terminates a work role while raising children.

A third kind of exit transition is involuntary unemployment, which by definition represents an organi-

zation-initiated termination of the individual. It is often unanticipated and necessarily unplanned by the possibly unwilling transitioner; at the outset, the duration of the unemployment period may be difficult or impossible to forecast. Retirement represents a fourth and permanent exit from a particular role. It is usually planned by the transitioner, although early retirement may be company initiated and unanticipated by the individual. (For reviews of the sociological and psychological aspects of retirement, see Atchley [1976] and Friedman and Havighurst [1954].)

In planned exits (generally all except involuntary unemployment) the transitioner usually has the opportunity to select or construct a role to immediately replace the role being left. Important determinants of the transitioner's post-exit experience are whether or not a new role is entered, and the characteristics of any new organizational context. In most exit transitions, the individual leaves (even if only on a leave of absence) a familiar and meaning-giving organizational culture and role context. In many exits, the transitioner does not then enter a different organization with a well-developed organizational culture. A CT in which an individual leaves and does not replace a membership role entails a special set of differences associated with organizational membership. For example, organizational membership may have provided the individual with regular social interaction, a sense of purpose, a place to be, a time structure, and, literally, a reason for getting up in the morning (whether it be to make a contribution or avoid a dock in pay for tardiness or absenteeism) [Friedman & Havighurst, 1954; Sofer, 1970; Super, 1957]. Research has shown that physiological deterioration, psychological depression, and even death may be associated with withdrawals and retirements [Clark, 1966].

One final set of differences attendant to many interrole transitions is the passage across organizational boundaries. Schein [1971] has identified functional, hierarchical, and inclusionary boundaries of organizations. When college graduates, for example, enter traditional work settings, they cross all three boundaries: taking on a set of tasks within a functional area (e.g., marketing, finance), acquiring a position in the hierarchy (e.g., middle management), and locating oneself in the organization's information and influence network (usually at a

peripheral rather than a central position). Most interrole transitions involve passage across some or all of the boundaries; at a minimum, one's place in the inclusionary system is typically in flux during transition.

In sum, each of the five types of interrole transition carries the possibility of many differences between new and old roles and settings. The differences may be publicly or personally knowable, foreseeable or unforeseeable, or related to objective role features or unrealized anticipations.

Intrarole Transitions

An intrarole transition represents a change in the individual's relation or internal orientation to a role already held. The intrarole transition differs from interrole transitions in an important way. Although it is difficult to embark on an interrole transition without consciously being aware of doing so, some intrarole transitions may occur without the conscious awareness of the individual. The four types of intrarole transitions identified to date are (1) intrarole adjustment, (2) extrarole adjustment, (3) role/career-stage transition, and (4) life-stage transition.

An *intrarole adjustment* represents an adjustment in orientation to a role that an individual makes in response to experiences over time in the role. For instance, Schein [1978] has documented this type of transition among MBA graduates in new work roles, illustrating how complacency can replace enthusiasm and commitment as recruits encounter the realities of corporate life. The MBAs are responding to differences between their actual and anticipated experiences in the role — i.e., surprises. Their in-role, on-the-job experiences have led them to reconsider and adjust their orientations to the same roles. The formal role itself is not changed as a result of an intrarole adjustment; instead, the transition is an internal change in the role holder's orientation.

Another example taken from a colleague's personal experiences shows a more positive instance of intrarole adjustment. In a research laboratory at a large midwestern university, the senior professor's style was characterized as authoritarian and dogmatic (e.g., he prohibited conversation in the lab during working hours, forbade exchanging information with researchers from other labs). When he

went on sabbatical and a new professor with a more open style was running the lab, both productivity and personal commitment increased; several people reported experiencing the lab as a fun and exciting place to be. The increase in personal commitment represents an intrarole adjustment resulting from reflections on, and, in this case, changes in features and experiences in the role. Often such intrarole adjustments are unanticipated by the individual, who may not be aware of having altered a role orientation.

A second type of intrarole transition reflects the potential interaction and interdependence of an individual's multiple life roles. In *extrarole adjustments*, a change in one life role (e.g., a family role) leads to an adjustment in orientation to another role (e.g., work role). The addition of a new nonwork role, or a shift in the demands of a nonwork role already held, may impinge on a work role, for instance, in several ways. When a professor accepts the editorship of a scholarly journal, it is likely that the new role will require the professor to adjust (downward) the time and energy given to other major roles; there may be less time for students, research, family; it may also be that in the long run the new role enriches other roles. Similarly, when the first baby of a dual-career couple is born, both adults take on new roles as parents that may lead them to devote less time, energy, and (at least temporarily) commitment to their work roles. Here again the transition in role orientation may occur predominantly at the unconscious level.

Some marital difficulties illustrate adjustments to a work role resulting from experiences in simultaneously held roles. An individual may redefine a work role as more central and pour more energy into tasks at work to avoid dealing with difficulties at home. Alternatively, problems at home may distract the individual's attention and energies away from the work role. Extrarole adjustments reflect differences in the relative importance of one role in relation to other roles. The potential for interactions among roles makes it important to consider the total "lifespace" of the individual in understanding career dynamics and transitions [Lewin, 1951; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1978; Bailyn & Schein, 1976].

A third type of intrarole transition is represented by a transition in *role/career stage*. Much work has been done identifying the general stages through which an individual typically passes during an or-

ganizational career [Super, 1957; Miller & Form, 1951; Hall & Nougaim, 1968; Schein, 1978]. A transition of this type represents a normal progression through a sequence of stages in the total career cycle. Even though they may be predictable, or plannable, they often occur without the individual's conscious effort or even awareness. In this respect they differ from the first two types of intrarole transition, which usually represent responses to unplanned and often unanticipatable experiences in work or other roles.

Different issues, personal needs, and organizational opportunities are associated with different career stages. For example, in the typical transition between early and mid career, the individual moves (albeit gradually) from a peripheral to a central role in the informal network of the organization [Schein, 1978; Dalton, Thompson, & Price, 1977].

Although role title, responsibilities, and tasks may change in a career-stage transition as they did in an intracompany transition, the career-stage transition is distinct in three respects: (1) it represents a major passage through the career cycle, as compared with a more minor though official change of role and duties; (2) the formal organizational role need not formally change to mark the stage passage; and (3) the changes are more diffuse, pervasive, gradual, and less conscious.

Each career stage implicitly conveys an image of the expected or normal role orientation. (For a more detailed discussion of stages, issues, and role orientation associated with each stage, see Schein [1978]; a comparison of approaches to career stages is found in Hall [1976].)

A fourth and final type of intrarole transition, the *life-stage transition*, is based on passage through normal stages in human development. Erikson's [1959] model of the life cycle suggests a series of stages in psychosocial development through which an individual passes from infancy to death. As in models of career stages, different issues predominate at different life stages; issues implicitly guide individuals' orientations to their lifespace and tasks. Although normal psychosocial transitions are expected to parallel and roughly correspond to transitions in career stage, they may separately precipitate reorientation to one's work role. Additionally, certain career-stage transitions presuppose adequate transition in psychosocial stages.

Erikson suggests, for instance, that individuals who at mid or late adulthood feel they have made a worthwhile and satisfying contribution in their life work may wish to continue to contribute by helping others to develop and by taking on more senior guiding responsibilities (generativity). Other individuals at the same stage may feel discouraged, consider that their efforts have been worthless, and that it is too late to start over (stagnation). The popularized phenomenon of the "mid-life crisis" [Jacques, 1965] may represent a fight to avoid or deny an experience of stagnation. Experiences of stagnation may result in substantially different orientations to work roles than experiences of generativity. The advisability of encouraging individuals to enter new career stages might well depend in part on their resolution of issues in psychosocial development.

However, it is not altogether a one-way interaction. The events and outcomes associated with individuals' career-stage transitions significantly facilitate or hinder their psychosocial development. Organizational roles provide a primary arena in and through which individuals test themselves, work through life issues, fulfill needs for challenge, self-development, and interaction, and otherwise construct self-identities. It should be noted that any particular transition may contain elements from several types of CTs. For example, a shift from a technical to a managerial role could be experienced as simply an intracompany transition or, additionally, as a fairly major interprofession transition; it could also be considered a career-stage transition. How a particular transition is to be classified depends on the specific situation and the individual's subjective experience of the transition.

In understanding, classifying, and facilitating specific career transitions, a number of areas should be examined. In particular, fruitful insights can be gained by exploring:

1. differences between pre- and post-transition roles and settings;
2. the current and historical organizational contexts in which the transitioner's roles have been embedded;
3. the transitioner's larger lifespace, including relationships among extraorganizational roles and work roles;
4. the transitioner's present life stage and relevant events from earlier psychosocial development;

5. the transitioner's current career stage, career development history, and the relationship between current career and life stages.

We now turn to an examination of the process by which individuals cope with their experiences during career transitions.

How Individuals Cope with Transition

As we saw earlier, attendant to most career transition experiences are differences — differences between objective features of old and new roles, and differences between the transitioner's anticipations of and actual experiences in the new role and setting. Coping with the differences represents an important issue during the transitioner's early experiences in the new setting. There are a number of reasons why it is both crucial and difficult for transitioners to appreciate and adjust to the differences, especially differences that represent gaps between anticipations of and experiences in the role (i.e., surprises).

Discrepancy between anticipation and experience indicates an error in the individual's mapping of the situation. Put simply, predictions are not borne out. But predictions in career contexts are usually far from detached speculation, and therefore the errors are not cost-free.

The development of conscious and unconscious anticipations about the new setting are a natural part of any transition. Transitioners generate anticipations to replace voids in first-hand knowledge of the situation with best guesses of what it might be like, often as a basis for personal decision making. In all likelihood, the anticipations have served much like beliefs for the transitioner, guiding in the selection of behaviors and interpretation of events. When disconfirmed, anticipations can no longer be relied on as effective guides in their unamended state.

At the affective level, disconfirmation of the belief-like anticipations on which choices were based may produce a sense of failure, frustration, denial, and regret. At a minimum, disconfirmation threatens the cognitive consistency that many believe individuals are bound to try to maintain [Festinger, 1957; Abelson et al., 1968]. In essence, the discrepancy between anticipation and experience produces a tension state that acts as a "quasi-need," in Lewin's [1951] terms, unbalancing the equilibrium of the individual's psychological field.

The quasi-need is for a return to equilibrium, albeit in a new configuration, and a resolution of tension; it triggers a sense-making process.

Sense-making is an essential coping process in CTs. Through sense-making, transitioners revise the cognitive maps that they use to interpret and describe experiences in the new role and setting. Revisions are made in light of newly gained and previously unavailable first-hand knowledge of the situation. Through sense-making, what is new, different, and — particularly — what was unanticipated becomes integrated into the transitioner's cognitive map. In the process, the transitioner's map is tailored to fit the specific individual in the specific real-time context; accuracy and comprehensiveness of the map increase, as does the individual's

interpretive sensitivity. Thus, one result of sense-making is a greater ability to understand, forecast, and interpret subsequent events in the new setting.

At the same time, during sense-making an interpretation of the initial discrepancy that triggered sense-making is developed, meaning is attributed to differences, and the need for corrective actions is assessed. Thus sense-making is both the process by which the transitioner's cognitive map is elaborated and revised on the basis of early experience in the new setting, and the process by which transitioners cope with surprises and other differences attendant to CTs.

According to this perspective, meaning is attributed to surprise through the sense-making process, rather than arising concurrently with the

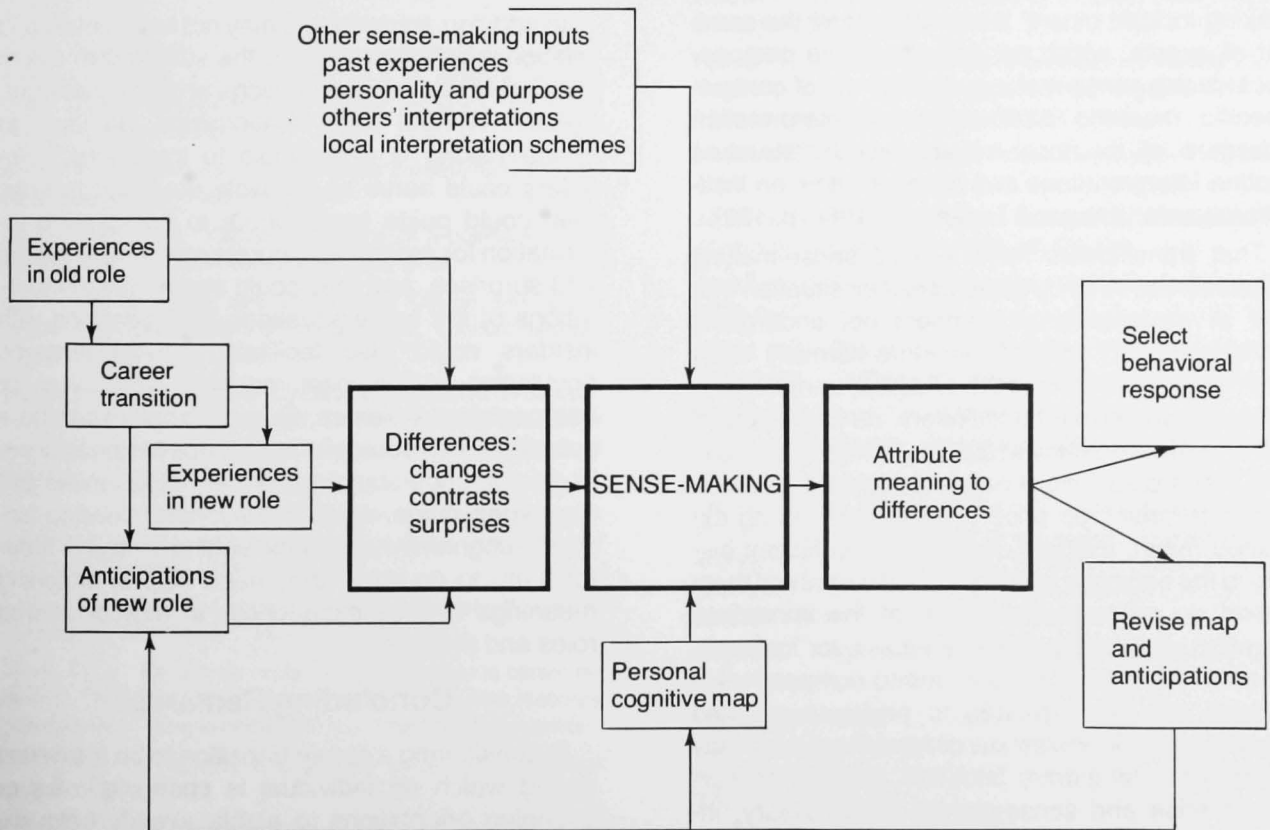


Figure 1
Coping with Career Transitions: The Sense-Making Process

perception and experience of role differences. Figure 1 presents a simplified view of the sense-making process. (The discussion of sense-making is based on Louis [1978, 1980].)

The figure shows several inputs to sense-making in addition to the individual's cognitive map and the surprise or other role difference that initially triggered the process. During sense-making, individuals draw on their past experiences in similar situations to understand their immediate experiences. The sense-maker's general personality predispositions (e.g., locus of control [Rotter, 1966]) and orienting purposes [Lewin, 1944] also help guide the individual in attributing meaning to experience; personality is a particularly influential input in unfamiliar situations or when there is little information available from other sources. Both past experience and personality are sense-making inputs from within the sense-maker. External inputs to sense-making include others' interpretations of the same set of events, which provide alternative perspectives during sense-making, and the set of context-specific meaning dictionaries, or interpretation schemes of the local culture, which "structure routine interpretations and conduct within an institutional area" [Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 138].

That transitioners have special sense-making needs can be seen by comparing their situation with that of organizational members not undergoing transitions (i.e., insiders). Insiders normally know what to expect in and of the situation; transitioners, particularly interrole transitioners, do not. Insiders' anticipations are fairly accurate. Therefore, there is little that is surprising or needs to be made sense of. When surprises do arise (e.g., not getting an expected raise), insiders usually have sufficient history in the setting to interpret or make sense of them based on relevant knowledge of the immediate situation. An insider probably knows, for instance, whether the denied raise is due to company-wide budget cuts or is related to performance, and whether it is an indication of how the future may unfold or a temporary situation. And, when surprises arise and sense-making is necessary, insiders usually have other insiders available with whom they can test their perceptions and interpretations.

This comparison suggests that transitioners probably do not have adequate history in the setting

to appreciate as fully as do insiders why and how surprises have occurred. When surprises occur, transitioners most likely attach meanings to them using interpretation schemes developed in previous roles and settings, resulting in inappropriate or dysfunctional interpretations. Interpretational errors, in turn, lead to inappropriate behavioral and attitudinal responses. For instance, Weiner [1974] has shown that attributions to stable rather than temporary causes lead more frequently to behavior changes (e.g., "the boss is always like that" vs. "the boss is going through a rough period"). Thus, transitioners' lack of context-specific interpretation schemes may lead to surprise itself (resulting from inaccurate anticipations), to misinterpretation of surprise during sense-making (relative to interpretations based on broad historical knowledge of the situation), and to inappropriate behavioral and attitudinal responses.

In addition, transitioners may not have developed relationships with others in the setting with whom they could test their perceptions and share interpretations. Without such relationships, an input to sense-making is unavailable to transitioners. Insiders could serve as valuable sounding boards; they could guide transitioners to background information for assigning accurate meaning to events and surprises, and they could share their interpretations of the same situations. Relationships with insiders could also facilitate the transitioner's acquisition of the local meaning dictionaries or interpretation schemes. Overall, insiders can be a potentially rich source of assistance to transitioners in gaining understandings of their experiences and the organization. Until transitioners develop accurate cognitive maps of the setting — and in order for them to do so — they need help in attaching meanings to their experiences in new or altered roles and settings.

Concluding Remarks

In considering a career transition to be the period during which an individual is changing roles or changing orientations to a role already held, we have identified nine types of transitions. Transitioners experience differences between old and new roles, role orientations, and settings, and between anticipations of and experiences in their new situations. Such differences vary in nature and magni-

tude depending on the type of transition, and the career and life background of the transitioner. Transition-generated surprises and other differences are coped with through the sense-making process. However, the sense-making resources available to the transitioner are often inadequate.

Transitioners need accurate historical and broad contextual information about the setting; they need help in acquiring setting- and role-specific interpre-

tation schemes; they need relationships with insiders who will serve as sounding boards for reality testing during transition; and they need to realize and take action to fill these needs.

By integrating knowledge and research about the various types of career transitions, and by studying the processes by which individuals cope with transition experiences, we can develop greater understanding of career transitions and facilitate the transition process.

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