A Promising Career? The Thriving Transition Cycle

Harris. M. W.[1,*], Myhill M. E.[2], Walker J. H.[3]

[1]Department of Rural Health, University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia
[2]Department of Education, University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia
[3]Department of Rural Health, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract   This study was conducted with 24 young, male, elite athletes who were required to relocate to take up their football playing contracts. It examined the personal characteristics and processes of thriving during a geographically dislocating transition and broadened the traditional vulnerability and coping focus of transition research to one that incorporates positive learning and growth. A partially mixed, sequential design was employed, firstly to identify the features of the participant group. Despite their homogeneity on a range of instruments, the outcome variations were not adequately explained. Subsequently, the particular characteristics and processes that contribute to thriving were examined using a series of semi-structured interviews. From the results, a comprehensive analysis identified a group of 16 characteristics and associated processes. Based on the variations, the participants clustered in one of three categories; those who were thriving, surviving or languishing. Thriving was further examined in relation to a theoretical framework of transition as a cyclic, staged process where the trajectories of passages and adjustment strategies exert a significant influence on the outcomes. This study has important implications for the design of strategies to improve outcomes of those facing dislocating, challenging transitions.

Keywords   Thriving, Transition, Dislocation, Wellbeing, Cycles

1. Introduction

For many young men recruited to elite sport, resolving the challenges of relocation can be problematic. Despite the public acclaim, high levels of motivation and large investments, the failure rate for recruits is often unacceptably high. While the transition is complex, the difficulties experienced by those geographically dislocated are more acute. The present study was designed to make a number of contributions to an understanding of the positive aspects of dislocating transitions, identify trajectories, and inform potential interventions. This study generates a new definition of thriving in periods of dislocation, and a new understanding of the processes involved in transition as a staged cyclic process, rather than a single or linear event. Specifically, it extends and develops Nicholson's[1] research to a new conceptual framework which links transition and thriving into a Thriving Transition Cycle model.

This study examined the transition experience of 24 young, elite sportsmen for whom geographic relocation (a dislocating transition) was a consequence of their contracts. While the move was anticipated, the particular characteristics of their new environment were unknown.
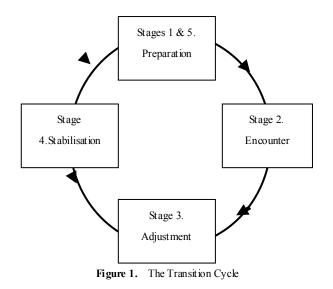
Much has been said in regard to the difficulties encountered in dislocating transitions[e.g. 2, 3], but less has been said about the processes of doing well. As a mixed methods approach, the research employed both deductive and inductive research strategies, where selected instruments contributed to an understanding of the nature of the cohort, and where deeper understanding of the characteristics and processes of thriving was available through an inductive exploration of the data.

Transitions are usually regarded as sources of stress and potential disruption of life-functioning and there is evidence to suggest that geographically dislocating transitions should be regarded as even more potentially disruptive and disconnecting, with a high risk for poor health outcomes[4, 5]. However, there is a growing body of evidence to indicate that negative outcomes might not always be the case, instead positive personal growth and learning: thriving, is possible[e.g. 6, 7]. In much of the literature transition has been described as a linear process[e.g. 8, 9, 10]. These largely linear processes were challenged by Schlossberg[5, 11] who described a more homogenous account where the opportunity to resolve a challenging transition was a product of the character of the individual, previous experiences, support systems and the selected strategies used in the adjustment process. If a more cyclic approach to understanding the response to a dislocating transition is adopted (Figure 1), then positive outcomes in learning and personal growth are indicated[12-14].

Figure 1.   The Transition Cycle

The potential to thrive involves transitions that are sufficiently destabilizing to require the individual to re-examine the self[6], but provide the impetus to function at a higher level. The Thriving Transition Cycle model identified in this paper provides an additional framework to explore and describe the particular characteristics and processes of thriving; identifies particular challenges at each of the stages of the transition; and examines the trajectories for thriving, surviving or languishing through the transition process.

2. Methodology

From a comparatively uniform baseline established by a series of validated instruments, personality (NEO-FFI)[15], orientation to life (SOC)[16] and psychological well-being using (SPWB)[17]; a series of semi-structured interviews were used to explain the variation in the participants' responses to their dislocating transition. The interview data were analysed through an iterative construction of themes and subsequently collapsed into 16 over-arching concepts. The literature on thriving[e.g. 6, 18], informed placement of the 16 concepts within Nicholson's[1] transition cycle to provide a staged process to the participants' experience.

The strength of the participants' responses to each of the concepts was then examined using coding criteria and multiple coding. The four variables used in the blind coding (strong association, moderate association, weak association, no association) were tested for coder reliability using Scott's Pi[19], and a strong coder reliability score of 0.88 was returned. The results of the coding for each concept within the   stages of the Nicolson model were aggregated , and each participant was assigned to one of three categories (i.e. those that thrive, survive or languish) which indicated their overall response to that stage of the dislocating transition. Boundaries were determined by weighted averages.

The qualities and characteristics of those identified as thrivers were examined in detail and their responses to each

of the 16 concepts was used to identify the qualities of a thriver and the processes of thriving at each stage of the expanded Nicolson[1] model. The expanded model was renamed the Thriving Transition Cycle model.

3. Results

Sixteen concepts describing a broad, but separate set of responses to the dislocating transition were identified from the interviews. These were:
   a) readiness for the challenge;
   b) motivation;
   c) positiveplanning;
   d) comprehensibility;
   e) gaining confidence;
   f) sense making;
   g) meaningfulness;
   h) engagement;
   i) role development;
   j) personal development;
   k) manageability;
   l) support systems;
   m) relationship building;
   n) environmental mastery;
   o) trust and commitment; and
   p) discretion.
Each concept was assigned to one of the four stages of the Nicholson[1] model and each participant was identified as a thriver, survivor or languisher, depending on their measured response to each stage of the dislocating transition. The consistent definitional attributes and the incremental totals allowed them to be described as

(a) Thriving: where it recognised the adaptive processes of recovery and growth, including the mastery of strategies to account for the disparity between expectations and experience.

(b) Languishing: where it indicated a lack of mastery, a lack of understanding of process and a failure to learn from the experience, and

(c) Surviving: where it placed the participant between these two polarized positions and where movement is possible in both directions, depending on the resolution of the tasks of the transition.

Four participants (1, 3, 5 and 9) were identified as thrivers, with three additional participants (13, 14, and 21) thriving in some stages and surviving in others. Four participants (2, 11, 15 and 22) were identified as languishers, with three additional participants (7, 12 and 24) languishing in some stages and surviving in others. The remainder of the participants (4, 6, 8, 10, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 23) were identified as survivors (table 1).

The discriminating characteristics indicating thriving throughout the transition cycle are predicated by three assumptions, (a) it is recursive and the possibility of future change remains, (b) it is disjunctive and each stage has its own qualities, and (c) it is interdependent where the

experience of one stage has a powerful influence on the next.

Table 1.   Concept Scores and Categories for Participants

Participant	Prep C/A 0.9005 Range: 0-40 Mean: 22.00 S/D: 7.17	Enc. C/A 0.8171 Range: 0-40 Mean: 20.82 S/D: 7.06	Adj. C/A 0.8918 Range: 0-40 Mean: 21.14 S/D: 7.46	Stab. C/A 0.9069 Range: 0-40 Mean: 21.27 S/D: 8.05	Total
1	33.25	35.00	31.50	32.00	131.75
5	33.00	32.75	31.25	31.00	128.00
3	32.50	32.50	30.25	32.50	127.75
9	29.25	28.00	28.00	29.50	114.75
21	29.00	25.75	28.50	22.50	105.75
14	21.75	24.25	32.25	25.50	103.75
13	27.75	19.50	26.25	25.00	98.50
8	25.75	19.50	25.25	25.50	96.00
19	24.50	20.00	24.50	27.00	96.00
6	23.50	22.50	22.75	27.00	95.75
16	29.00	24.25	21.75	19.00	94.00
10	25.25	23.00	24.25	18.50	91.00
23	19.25	21.00	23.00	27.00	90.25
17	23.25	19.25	22.50	22.50	87.50
20	22.75	25.25	18.25	20.00	86.25
4	17.50	20.00	19.50	24.00	81.00
18	18.25	21.50	18.75	20.00	78.50
7	15.50	16.25	15.25	23.00	70.00
12	16.00	16.50	14.00	21.00	67.50
24	18.25	13.00	12.75	9.50	53.50
22	9.75	13.25	11.50	9.50	44.00
2	13.50	9.00	9.50	10.50	42.50
11	9.50	8.75	7.75	5.00	31.00
15	10.00	9.00	8.25	3.50	30.75

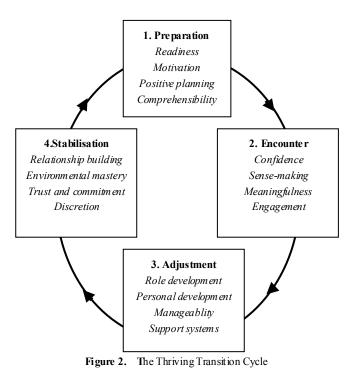| Thriving 110+		Surviving 55-109		Languishing 54-	

In that regard the study suggested a linking/learning characteristic for thriving that connected the concepts (i.e. the concept, if well-resolved behaves as a powerful platform for the following stages of the transition. In this study it is possible to identify the connections through the particular concepts and associated processes. The grouping of the participants was determined by the clarity of their results with three distinct groups emerging and two further groups representing the boundaries

The qualities of those that thrive are indicated in table 2.

The insertion of the 16 concepts into the Nicholson model forms the basis of the Thriving Transition Cycle model. It contributes to an expansion of Nicholson's[1] model and provides the scaffolding for a detailed profile for those who thrive, survive or languish at each stage of the transition (figure 2).

Table 2.   The Thriving Transition Cycle Stages and Thriving Qualities

Concept	Qualities of those who thrive
Preparation	
Readiness	Purposeful Selective mastery
Motivation	Confident Proactive
Positive planning	Self-assured Positively detached
Comprehensibility	Forward focussed Clear and ordered
Encounter	
Confidence	Positive self-concepts Capacity to learn
Sense making	Clarity of purpose Commitment to process
Meaningfulness	Mindful of components Aware of significance
Engagement	Links with other Accessing resources
Adjustment	
Role development	Awareness of transitions Connectedness
Manageability	Responsive to challenge Attentive to tasks
Support systems	Identifies support systems Accesses support systems
Personal development	Identifies pathways Learns from experience
Stability	
Relationship building	Independent Capable of intimacy
Environmental mastery	Competent Controls complex tasks
Trust and commitment	Willing to be vulnerable Receptive to challenges
Exercise of discretion	Autonomous planning Strategic insight

Figure 2.   The Thriving Transition Cycle

4. Discussion

The identification and examination of the concepts at each stage of the Thriving Transition Cycle model (figure 2) and the measurement of the success or failure of the respondent to each concept within the stage gives an insight into the characteristics of those participants who had a positive experience of transition (thrivers) compared to those who had a negative experience of transition (languishers and survivors). The results also indicate that there is a learning characteristic for thriving that connects the concepts: the concept, if well resolved, behaves as a powerful platform for the following stage of the transition. While this is acknowledged by Nicholson[1, 20], this study identifies the connections through the particular concepts and the associated processes operating at each stage of the transition model.

4.1. Thriving Transition Cycle

The Thriving Transition Cycle model provides a staged process and a systematic framework where the individual characteristics, processes and trajectories can be observed. Thriving is seen as a staged process rather than a static moment, and involves the positive resolution of issues at each stage.

4.2. Stage 1: Preparation

4.2.1. The Thriving Response

Those that thrived were purposeful in their anticipation of the transition and were able to select strategies. This is consistent with the dislocation literature[e.g. 21, 22, 23] where a brief disruption may be overcome when support systems and resources are identified and available. Thrivers were confident and proactive in gathering information, finding the necessary markers to navigate the transition and had the ability to identify resources and respond appropriately[e.g. 24, 25]. This contributed to the positive trajectory for those participants and allowed for them to learn from the experience. Thrivers were self-assured, positively detached, and able to remain objective about the challenges and their capacity to cope. Those who thrived were also forward focussed and had a clear and ordered agenda for the future.

This positive planning augured well against the risks of homesickness[e.g. 26, 27, 28], and allowed the thrivers to be objective about the dislocating challenge and focus on the future. They were able to adapt to the new environment[29] and exercise discretion in the areas where some autonomy was encouraged[e.g. 1, 30].

When well resolved the concepts at the Preparation stage provided a platform for success as the transition continued. A thriving trajectory was observed as one that was forward focussed, clear, ordered and purposeful; and one where the participant was confident, pro-active and self-assured. Thrivers were positively detached from the emotions of the challenging task and used selective techniques to resolve their concerns. Their dominant adjustment strategy[1] was exploratory, where there was simultaneous change in personal and role boundaries. Rather than regarding the challenge as fixed and inflexible, the thrivers were able to shape the new environment to their own needs and experience success through positive planning. This was supplemented by an absorption strategy[1] that recognised the limitations of role change and shifted the focus to individual learning and personal development.

4.2.2. The Surviving Response

Those who survived were only broadly aware of the tasks associated with the dislocating challenge.

They experienced difficulty in visualising the journey and struggled to connect the immediate expectations with the organisational 'blueprint' for their future. They failed to thrive because they could not link the opportunities with their struggle for orderliness[30]. They experienced difficulties with priorities and were confused by the feedback they received, where they could not separate the information from the expectations[31]. Similarly they were unclear about the tasks required of them, struggled with the competing interests and resorted to inappropriate coping strategies to maintain some momentum[32]. Their dominant adjustment strategy was absorption[1], where the individual acknowledged the rigidity of the role but worked towards the individual changes that allowed them to fit. There was some satisfaction from learning and personal development, but some participants became alienated through the loss of self. The survivors supplemented this absorption strategy with replication[1] by applying some of the skills and understandings from the time before the transition. However, while these were familiar, they were often frustrated by their inability to innovate. The trajectory for the survivors was unsteady and they moved to Stage 2 (Encounter) with fragile scaffolding that was unlike to support a speedy transition[1].

4.2.3. The Languishing Response

Those who languished lacked awareness and could not readily identify or access the resources that might have supported them[33]. Their dominant adjustment strategy[1] was replication, and they repeatedly applied the strategies of their previous environment to explain the new environment. While there was some comfort in being valued for the skills brought to the experience, they often felt trapped. In some circumstances languishers were able to shift to an absorption strategy, but they were often bewildered and overwhelmed by the expectation placed upon them and were inclined to resign themselves to outcomes[e.g. 1, 34] rather than exercise purposeful decision making. Their fear of failure took a toll on their confidence and their ability to describe a clear and focussed pathway[e.g. 18, 35].

4.3. Stage 2: Encounter

4.3.1. The Thriving Response

Those thriving at this stage had launched themselves from a successful preparation, and as a consequence were focussed and purposeful, confident and pro-active. Their experience at this stage of the transition was facilitated by this structured engagement and the trajectory for adjustment was positive. They now had clarity of purpose and were committed to the process and conscious of the array of components that contributed to the transition experience. Thrivers accessed resources in a timely manner and linked with others who could provide the support required to cope, those who could strengthen their position and those who could provide a shared learning experience. Interestingly, the thrivers linked well with all participants but continued to use selective techniques to glean the more useful information from the experience.

The dominant adjustment strategy continued to be exploratory and this provided the scaffolding for success as the transition continued. Confidence and sense-making at this stage were important as they gave clarity of purpose and fostered the capacity to learn[6]. Similarly the consciousness of the transition components[34] and the timely accessing of resources[e.g. 33, 36] augured well for the process of learning that permitted the participants to thrive[12]. Thrivers had the ability to identify the salient components of the challenge[34] and to regard the challenge as worthy of engagement[7, 30, 33, 37].

The benefits and lessons learned at this stage provided the impetus for an uncomplicated passage to Stage 3 (Adjustment) of the transition cycle. It was also reflected in positive self-concepts and importantly, the capacity to learn from the feedback received as the transition unfolded[25]. The thrivers readily linked with others, accessed the resources needed to cope with the challenges of the transition and attached referenced meaning to the strategies that they employ[e.g. 38, 39-41].

4.3.2. The Surviving Response

Difficulties at Stage 1 (Preparation) manifested in difficulties at Stage 2 (Encounter).Those surviving searched unclearly for direction and had a more haphazard approach to the tasks surrounding the encounter stage. Their dominant adjustment strategy was absorption; they were keen to please[18] but lacked the insight to engage meaningfully with the support systems[42]. Survivors were self-conscious and reluctant to disclose concerns[43] which contributed to a lack of confidence and disconnectedness[e.g. 44, 45, 46].

4.3.3. The Languishing Response

Those languishing lacked a frame of reference for this stage of the transition and their trajectory was already compromised. Their dominant adjustment strategy was replication[1] and their fear of failing was pervasive[e.g. 18, 35]. Their ability to learn from the experience was hampered by their unwillingness to abandon the old environment and old strategies[29].

4.4. Stage 3: Adjustment

4.4.1. The Thriving Response

Those thriving at this stage continued to consolidate their position and as a consequence they were focussed, committed, confident and purposeful. Their experience at this stage in the transition was strengthened by this clarity of purpose and attachment of meaning to the transition tasks and the trajectory for stability was positive. They were now able to demonstrate a vivid awareness of the transition tasks[e.g. 47, 48, 49]. They identified the transition pathways, responded appropriately to the demands of the transition[34, 50] and continued to learn from the experience[e.g. 6, 51, 52]. The thrivers were securely connected, identified the broader networks of emerging support and accessed them appropriately[40].

When well resolved the concepts at the Adjustment stage consolidated the trajectory for the thriving participants. The dominant adjustment strategy continued to be exploratory but the personal development of the thrivers at this stage allowed an expansion of supplementary adjustment strategies. Absorption strategies were used to continue the required role learning and some determination strategies began to be used where the confidence developed in the transition process allowed the thrivers to exercise more discretion and to make choices about their transition pathways (for example in selecting support, or in the pacing of tasks). The thrivers were comfortable to be able to exercise some control and feel able to influence change

4.4.2. The Surviving Response

Difficulties at Stage 2 (Encounter) manifested in difficulties at Stage 3 (Adjustment). Survivors experienced difficulty selecting strategies to take them forward and were inclined to conform to pathways of least resistance. They were keen to please and unlikely to exercise discretion that might involve criticism[18]. This lack of understanding hampered their help-seeking behaviour and they resorted to old strategies, or mimicked others to try and obtain some advantage[53]. The problems associated with the work and non-work interface were exacerbated by the relocation concerns[54] and difficulty in gathering understanding from the experience that might facilitate learning[14, 55]. When contrasts from previous experience remained unresolved their adjustment strategies moved from absorption to replication, resulting in feelings of alienation. Those who continued to apply the strategies that had not been successful during Stages 1 and 2 had limited options and felt trapped by the system; they were less able to learn from the experience and struggled for stability.

4.4.3. The Languishing Response

Those languishing struggled at this stage of the transition and their trajectory was substantially compromised[1]. They were disconnected and resigned to the direction given by the organisation[56]. Their only adjustment strategy was replication, but rather than confidently applying the skills and understandings from the past, they were confused by the

apparent lack of direction. They were disabled by criticism[25, 54] and behaved instinctively, rather than through understanding and learning what was required of them[30, 36, 51].

4.5. Stage 4: Stability

4.5.1. The Thriving Response

Those thriving at this stage displayed the characteristics of a well resolved transition. They were prepared for the demands of the organisational structure but behaved independently and with a degree of autonomy that reflected their understanding of the structural constraints in the new environment[29, 57]. They demonstrated trust in the system and in those around them and did not feel threatened by exposure to new relationships[e.g. 58]. Thrivers could control complex activities with strategic insight[36, 53], and they were receptive to future changes that marked their mastery of the current transition cycle and their readiness for the next[1, 11, 30].

When well resolved the concepts at the Stability stage completed one rotation of the transition cycle and established the foundations for the next. The adjustment strategies available to thrivers expanded to a suite of three: exploration, absorption and determination[1]. Thrivers could selectively adjust to meet the demands of the transition or exercise discretion and environmental mastery to shape the transition task to suit their skill set. They continued to learn and were receptive to the likelihood of change in the future.

4.5.2. The Surviving Response

Conversely difficulties at Stage 3 (Adjustment) interfered with the movement towards Stage 4 (Stability). Survivors became trapped in the tasks at Stages 2 (Encounter) and 3 with little advancement. The consequential instability made it difficult for them to resolve the tasks with any confidence. This was particularly acute in their ability to learn, an ability in which the thrivers excelled. The adjustment strategies of the survivors were confined to the replication of the past[1] and they were unsure of the lessons learned, unsure of the connections, and lacked the self-confidence to commit to the next phase[e.g. 6, 51, 55].

4.5.3. The Languishing Response

Those languishing were disturbed by the transition, lacked the strategies to cope[59-61] and their chances of reaching a level of stability were remote. Their adjustment strategy was limited to replication and they remained as outsiders and were unable to discriminate between what did and didn't work. They failed to thrive and their prospects for recovery were limited[e.g. 6, 18, 52, 55].

5. Conclusions

This study expands Nicholson's[1] model of a transition cycle by examining the particular characteristics of thriving in periods of geographical dislocation. 16 concepts are identified that provide a profile of an individual negotiating a geographically dislocating challenge, and particularly one who thrives in the new environment. The processes associated with thriving for each of the concepts, at each stage of the transition are identified.

A trajectory for thriving is also described: those participants who are able to resolve the identified transition tasks at the staging points are on a trajectory for thriving; whereas those, whose tasks are poorly resolved or unresolved, are less able to thrive as the transition unfolds. The staging process provides an opportunity to separate and observe the journey through the dislocating transition.

Thriving is transformative, and allows the individual to examine their sense of self, i.e. the challenge is sufficiently confronting to be a cause for change. This study extends that concept where the 'heat' of the challenge becomes the catalyst for change where three outcomes are possible: thriving, surviving, or languishing. The staged ascription of the thriving characteristics to a transition cycle provides a new position of strategic understanding of thriving as a cyclic process. The indicated process of thriving provides exciting possibilities in regard to the enhancement of positive adaptations and timely interventions.

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