# The contribution of a cross-cultural adjustment framework to work-role transitions

Sheryl Ramsay, Liz Jones and Michelle Barker

*School of Management, School of Management, Australia*

## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to highlight the relevance of the cross-cultural adjustment literature in developing an understanding of work-role transitions. The paper takes Anderson's (1994) model of cross-cultural adaptation and argues that her model may address some of the shortcomings of research in the work-role transition area identified in the literature.*

Keywords
Transition, adjustment, culture

## Introduction

Transition periods are commonly recurring features of personal life histories (Fisher, 1990) and arise as a result of changes at the physical, intrapersonal or sociocultural level of the person or the environment (Demick, 1996). Across the life span, many different transitions are experienced, including transitions to work, educational institutions, parenthood, and retirement (Demick, 1996). Although the experience of change and transition is commonplace, Nicholson (1990, p. 85) claims that theories and methods in psychology often incorrectly "embody assumptions of static social conditions", and therefore, provide a limited view. By their nature, however, transitions need to be viewed as experiences through time where a person moves from "the initial point of impact into more strategic adjustments" (Nicholson, 1990, p. 86).

As the employment context becomes more dynamic, the experience of work-role transitions also increases as people change roles and organisations more regularly (Kidd, 1998). During such transitions which often involve entry to a new organisation, there can be "great uncertainty regarding role requirements" (Ashforth & Saks, 1996, p. 149). A work role refers to "a set of expected behaviour patterns attributed to someone occupying a given position in a social unit" (Robbins, 1996, p. 304). Role transitions involve adjustments and can be conceptualised in terms of person-environment interactions (Feij, 1998). Adjustment may be defined as a dynamic and interactive process that takes place between the person and the environment,

and is directed toward an achievement of fit between the two (Anderson, 1994). Adjustment involves learning processes which refer to the ways in which individuals acquire knowledge and skills, essentially enlarging their personal resources to cope with the new context (Boekaerts, 1993).

## Work role transitions

Research has focused on the way the newcomer performs the role and, to a lesser extent, on the changes to the identity of the newcomer as a person in a new environment (Ashforth & Saks, 1995; 1996). Socialisation is the term used in the organisational context where newcomers undergo "the normative process of adaptation of the individual to the values, demands and expectations of the social structure" (Feij. 1998, p. 247). Experiences of organisational socialisation show great variation from very informal, laissez-faire processes to highly structured training courses (Feij, 1998). In this regard, Ashforth and Saks (1996) examined the organisation's role in the socialisation of newcomers and found that a relatively structured approach to socialization was associated with higher job satisfaction, organisational commitment and organisational identification, as well as lower stress symptoms, role ambiguity and intention to quit.

From the more individual perspective, Munton and West (1995) found that lower levels of self-esteem were associated with lower levels of role innovation when undertaking new roles. In addition, the everyday interactions that newcomers have with more experienced people within the organisation are also significant in terms of socialisation (Feij, 1998). Furthermore, it is important to note that people are proactive agents in their new environments (Anderson, 1994). For example, newcomers who seek out information are more likely to experience higher levels of adjustment (Mignerey, Rubin & Gorden, 1995).

A number of researchers have indicated that role transitions need to be conceptualised more broadly and with greater complexity. It has been recommended that macro factors such as the culture of the organisation or sub-unit (Ashforth & Saks, 1996) and dynamics of the work group (Nicholson,

1990) be considered in the understanding of role transitions.  In addition, the importance of teasing out "subjective meanings and dynamic interactions" underlying transitions processes has been highlighted (Ashforth & Saks, 1995, p. 173). Munton and West (1995) suggest that future research could examine the importance of both socialisation processes (e.g. training) and social psychological factors (e.g. social support) on role and personal adjustment.  Kidd (1998) suggests that a promising way forward is to take further account of the emotional and cognitive experiences and resulting actions, which accompany role transitions for individuals, as theorised by Lazarus (1991).

## Culture

The experiences of the individual within the broader environment can be further  understood through the concept of culture. Culture refers to "widely shared ideals, values, formation and uses of categories, assumptions about life, and goal-directed activities" which occur in large groups with which people have "strong emotional ties" (Brislin, 1990, p. 11). Thus, culture is embodied within  societies, as well as within more specific groups which can include a work group (Unsworth & West, 2000). In the organisational context, Smircich (1983) suggests that one perspective on  culture is through organisational symbolism where organisational members interpret and understand work related experiences, and upon which they base their actions. Essentially, the values, norms and behavioural patterns which make up culture influence daily practices and events (van Muijen, 1998), and therefore impact upon those making role transitions.

## Anderson's model of cross-cultural adaptation

The importance of culture in work role transitions indicates that cross-cultural adjustment theory may offer insights into the study of transitions more generally.  Because cross-cultural research has examined the experiences of people taking up residence in a different country (a new cultural context) there is some  information about the effects of transition to a new environment. Ward, Okura, Kennedy & Kojima (1998), for example, found that both psychological (depression) and sociocultural (social difficulty) adjustment problems were found to be more evident in the initial phases of the sojourns of international students.

It is proposed here that Anderson's (1994) model of cross-cultural adaptation may be used to better understand role transitions because it highlights adjustment and learning processes as it captures the dynamic, ongoing  interactions between the person and the environment.  Essentially, the model proposes that within a new environment people have a series of  affective, cognitive and behavioural responses to obstacles which arise from the self and the environment, and which lead to ongoing change and development within the self and the environment (Anderson, 1994). The model encompasses the concept of person-environment interactions which are particularly important during transition periods (Staton, 1999).  The concept of person-environment fit has been used by researchers to capture the ideas of congruence or incongruence between the person and the environment.  While early research indicated that congruence was generally associated with satisfaction with the environment, and incongruence with dissatisfaction and emotional stress (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985), person-environment fit is now recognised as a much more complex phenomenon (Hampton, 1991).

Importantly, person-environment fit is not a static concept. Rather, it is based on continuous interactions between the person and the environment, wherein the environment impacts on the person, and the person also impacts on the environment. Thus, person-environment interactions need to be considered as dynamic, interpretive and process-oriented (Hampton, 1991). Significantly, "environment" itself is a multi-faceted concept which includes the physical setting, social atmosphere and culture of the organisation (Staton, 1999).  Furthermore, organisations should not be treated in isolation as they are nested within, and subject to, many external forces including wider community values and debates.

In  considering how someone becomes successful in a new work environment, Feij (1998) writes that an interdisciplinary approach is required where three types of knowledge are necessary.  The first concerns personal factors including capacities, interests, values and role behaviours and the way these capacities develop together within the particular environment. It is important to note that role innovation and creative problem-solving, rather than conformity, are attributes often valued by organisations, particularly in professional and management roles (Vogt & Herzog, 1989).  The second type of knowledge needed in a new work environment concerns the particular structure of the environment itself, and the third includes the wider political, social and cultural context which impacts in a range of ways including the effect of government policy on work and training opportunities and circumstances (Feij, 1998).  As further noted by Lazarus (1999), the dynamic, interrelated and complex nature of adaptational processes make them difficult to research and quantify, and should not be treated narrowly.

This complexity is captured by Anderson's (1994) model as it proposes that the learning which takes place during adjustment involves the interplay of emotions and cognitions, followed by associated actions. Anderson's model has four major components, each of which is described briefly here. The model commences with a general "cultural encounter" when the person first enters the new culture. In the second stage, it is proposed that people experience various "obstacles" which are presented either by the environment or the self. Examples of environmental obstacles could include local bureaucratic processes and accommodation difficulties, while obstacles presented by the self could include inadequate knowledge of the local language and difficulty coping with loneliness. In the organisational context, examples of environmental obstacles could include lack of orientation information and less than expected support for new ideas from colleagues, while obstacles presented by the self could include lack o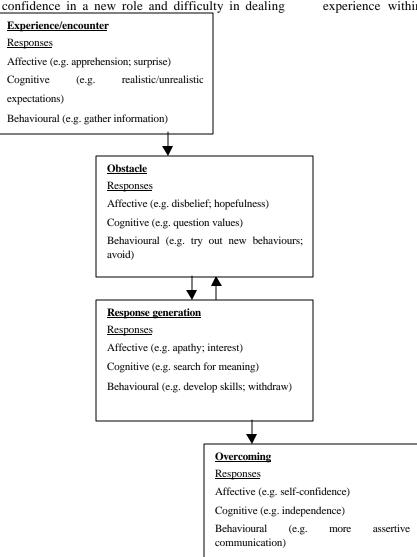f confidence in a new role and difficulty in dealing with lack of social support from familiar workmates. Largely because the obstacles lead to perceptions of personal imbalance or disequilibrium, various kinds of "response generation" actions occur in the third stage of Anderson's model. The aim of these actions is to improve the fit between the person and the environment. Actions can vary widely but could include seeking feedback or changing activities. The fourth stage is the "overcoming" phase where adjustment is usually, but not always, reached.

Although Anderson's model is based on the intercultural transition experience, such a process is directly applicable to other transitions where relationships with others and the environment are also in a state of change (Demick, 1966) . "Being alive at home or abroad means having to cope with disruptive events, adjustive crises…" (Anderson, 1994, p. 299). This approach to adjustment takes an active learning perspective where the significant features of the culture are learned through experience within it. For example, in the work context the value placed on working as part of a team or the prevailing supervisory styles may be important characteristics to learn in the "new" organisational culture. A summary of Anderson's model is given in figure 1.

## *Interplay of affective, cognitive and behavioural responses*

Central to Anderson's model is the idea that adjustment involves learning. In an organisational context, this learning might involve managing and developing a new role in an unfamiliar context, developing different personal networks for task and social support, and understanding the organisational culture including its implicit, though powerful, social rules (Henderson & Argyle, 1986). Learning, however, is facilitated or hampered by emotions, moods and feelings (Boekaerts, 1993). Lazarus (1999, p. 34) lists 15 different emotions and states that "Each emotion tells us something different about how a person has appraised what is happening in an

**Experience/encounter**

Responses

Affective (e.g. apprehension; surprise)

Cognitive (e.g. realistic/unrealistic expectations)

Behavioural (e.g. gather information)

**Obstacle**

Responses

Affective (e.g. disbelief; hopefulness)

Cognitive (e.g. question values)

Behavioural (e.g. try out new behaviours; avoid)

**Response generation**

Responses

Affective (e.g. apathy; interest)

Cognitive (e.g. search for meaning)

Behavioural (e.g. develop skills; withdraw)

**Overcoming**

Responses

Affective (e.g. self-confidence)

Cognitive (e.g. independence)

Behavioural (e.g. more assertive communication)

*Figure 1* Anderson's (1994) model of cross-cultural adaptation

adaptational transaction and how that person is coping with it."

As can be seen in figure one, each stage has affective, cognitive and behavioural responses which occur. These interrelated responses have been recognised as central to human functioning and adjustment processes (Anderson, 1994; Kim, 1995). According to Lazarus (1991, p. 31), the experience of an emotion or a change in the intensity or type of emotion is related to a change in the person-environment relationship or a "change in the status of the business at hand". An organisational example would be the emotions experienced in response to unexpected negative feedback (e.g. lack of support for an innovative idea drawn from previous workplace). Personal evaluations based on cognitions are integral to the experience of emotion because each person appraises the effect on well-being and the person-environment relationship in different ways. In conjunction with such appraisals and emotions, the person may choose different actions or behavioural responses (Lazarus, 1991). In the above example, actions could include presenting the information differently, presenting the ideas to a different audience, asking for more information about the culture from new colleagues, or withdrawing emotionally from the new workplace. Fisher (1986) notes that a perceived imbalance between the person and the environment is thought to provide significant motivation towards particular actions.

Importantly, Ekman and Davidson (1994), claim that most researchers of emotion agree that emotions organise behavioural and physiological patterns to deal with emotion-evoking events, interrupting less important ongoing activities. Emotions may, however, disorganise behaviour and planning when they occur at high-intensity levels (Ekman & Davidson, 1994). While the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses are separated conceptually, "in reality they interpenetrate and influence each other" (Anderson, 1994).

## *Obstacles in the new environment*

While Anderson (1994) highlights obstacles in the environment, it is also proposed that positive events can contribute to learning and adjustment. Positive events from the environment could include such things as direct praise for work accomplishments and attention to orientation needs by the organisation during the transition phase, while positive experiences from the self would include feelings of success and confidence in the new role and perceptions of acceptance from others.

This focus on obstacles or negative experiences (Anderson, 1994) is reflected in the literature more generally, where considerably more attention has been given to negative experiences and subsequent coping responses than to the effects of positive events. The lack of research into the impact of positive experiences has been highlighted by Langston (1994). He argues that positive experiences also impact strongly on cognitive processes. Positive events may be perceived and appraised as opportunities and people may capitalise upon such opportunities in a way which enhances learning and development (Langston, 1994). Moreover positive affect has been shown to foster problem solving and thinking (Isen, 1999). A supportive learning environment, for example, is seen as an important, emotionally positive factor in the adaptable learning process (Boekaerts, 1993). More specifically, and in terms of Anderson's model (1994), critical positive events could be considered as catalysts for emotions, cognitions and actions which contribute positively to adjustment and learning processes.

## *Work role transition cycle*

Anderson's model has some similarities with the process model developed by Nicholson (1990, p. 87) where his "transition cycle" again captures the idea of "experiences through time" in the work context. Nicholson's model was developed to help explain transitions into different work roles. Like Anderson's model it does not prescribe that certain experiences will or will not occur (Nicholson, 1990) but provides a framework within which a wide range of individual experiences could be included. Both obstacles and positive experiences are seen as critical in the adjustment process because they inform people about their skills and abilities through processes of critical self-reflection (Taylor, 1994). Nicholson (1990) proposes four stages which include the preparation stage which occurs in the period before taking on the new work role and may include unrealistic expectations and fearfulness. The next stage is the encounter which occurs in the early days and weeks of the new role and is characterised by "sense-making" and sometimes shock and regret. Adjustment is the third stage where the person finds their own way of working in the role actively finds ways to reduce any perceptions of person-job misfit. Fourthly, the stabilization stage allows both the employee and the organisation more chance to concentrate on performance and future changes. Thus, Nicholson's model (1990), like Anderson's (1994), suggests a staged model which is quite flexible and dynamic in its application. Anderson's model, however, provides more in-depth information about the processes involved, including the affective, cognitive and behavioural responses which may occur over time.

Although some critics have noted that discrete stages of socialisation are somewhat artificial and that, in some ways, the socialisation process does not actually ever end, there is some agreement that entering a new role or environment does offer particular challenges which often take the person through processes of adjustment (Feij, 1998). As noted, the person and the environment both impact in a dynamic way upon each other (Anderson, 1994; Feij, 1998). In terms of the impact that a person can make on their environment, Gudykunst and Kim (1997) claim that people native to a particular society are likely to have at least some success in acting on portions of the environment to make it better suited to their needs. By contrast, "strangers" have little chance, particularly in the short run, of changing their environment especially when compared to the pervasive effect the host culture has on them (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Thus, certain groups and individuals may be less likely to influence their environment because of lack of familiarity with it and the accompanying social rules and roles (Argyle, 1982). Using this same logic, newcomers to an established group (e.g. work group) may exert less influence on the environment than established members. This again indicates the significance of adjustment processes for the individual in a new cultural environment.

## *Further research directions*

As noted earlier, there are a number of shortcomings within the present adjustment literature including the limited information on adjustment processes. Ashforth and Saks 1995) have highlighted the need to examine socialisation processes in more depth. This can include the more formal processes such as training, as well as social psychological factors such as social support (Munton & West, 1995) which may uncover "subjective meanings and dynamic interactions" underlying transitions processes (Ashforth & Saks, 1995, p. 173). As suggested by Fisher (1986), more longitudinal research on a variety of samples is needed in order to map the times and ways in which different learning processes take place during adjustment. This would allow further examination of adjustment experiences and proposed stages within different contexts.

It is proposed that Anderson's model could be used to address some of the shortcomings identified in the literature by allowing further examination of the dynamic interplay between the person and environment during adjustment. The model offers a framework which allows for the examination of affective, cognitive and behavioural outcomes for newcomers to a culture, an approach proposed by Kidd (1998). By extending the model to include positive experiences as well as obstacles, it is possible to gain insight into the impact of the organisational culture on people undergoing work-

role transitions. Thus, it is proposed that a qualitative study which mapped people's emotional, cognitive and behavioural experiences associated with positive and negative critical events would allow further examination of the interplay of personal factors (e.g. values, role behaviours), the structure and culture of the environment, and the possible impact of the wider political and social context on the person (Feij, 1998). Learning and adjustment processes, as well as the proposed adjustment stages, could therefore be more fully examined.

As suggested by Feij (1998), the study of adjustment is quite fragmented and can be difficult to generalise. Clearly, the individual nature of organisational cultures, together with differing personal experiences, does make generalisation difficult. It would therefore be important to follow Fisher's (1986) advice to take a longitudinal approach across a range of samples.

In a practical sense, a qualitative study of adjustment using Anderson's framework could heighten awareness of the less formal adjustment experiences of the newcomer and therefore facilitate the development of socialisation programs. Such a study would also allow examination of the effects of organisational culture on newcomers in their quest to adjust to the organisation. Newcomers themselves bring changes to the organisational environment and Anderson's model would also allow an examination of the actions that newcomers take to make an impact on the organisation. Such research could therefore give new insights into the best ways of conducting orientation programs, an examination of ongoing training needs, and the actions that newcomers can profitably take in their new environments. The complex nature of adjustment and learning processes would indicate that such programs would need to be well considered in terms of both the organisational culture and individual needs (Vogt & Herzog, 1989). Potentially, further understanding of adjustment and learning issues could improve recruitment and selection procedures, and allow improved career guidance by organisations. From another perspective, qualitative studies of adjustment would enable further examination of change and development opportunities within organisations.

## *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the paper has argued that Anderson's (1994) model of cross-cultural adaptation is useful in conceptualising transition and adjustment processes. Work-role transitions include the move to a new organisational culture. Anderson's model allows for the examination of specific experiences in terms of affective, cognitive, and behavioural outcomes which can be used to further understand adjustment

and learning processes, with implications for ways in which organisations perceive and conduct socialisation programs, and gain insight into the impact of organisational culture and specific experiences in times of transition.

## *References*

Anderson, L.E. (1994). A new look at an old construct: Cross-cultural adaptation. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 18, 293-328.

Argyle, M. (1982). Inter-cultural communication. In S. Bochner (Ed.) Cultures in contact: Studies in cross-cultural interaction (pp. 61-80). Oxford: Pergamon.

Ashforth, B. E. & Saks, A. M. (1996). Socialization tactics: Longitudinal effects on newcomer adjustment. Acadamy of Management Journal, 39, 149-178.

Boekaerts, M. (1993). Being concerned with well-being and with learning. Educational Psychologist, 28, 149-167.

Brislin, R.W. (1990). Applied cross-cultural psychology: An introduction. In R.W. Brislin (Ed.) Applied cross-cultural psychology (pp. 9-33). Newbury Park: Sage.

Demick, J. (1996). Life transitions as a paradigm for the study of adult development. In M.L. Common, J. Demick & C. Goldberg (Eds.), Clinical approaches to adult development (pp. 115-144). Norwood, N.J. : Ablex Pub.

Ekman, P., & Davidson, R.J. (1994). Affective science: A research agenda. In P. Ekman and R.J. Davidson (Eds.), The nature of emotions: Fundamental questions (pp. 411-430). New York: Oxford University Press.

Feij, J.A. (1998). Work socialization of young people. In P. Drenth, H. Thierry, & C. de Wolff (Eds.), Handbook of Work and Organisational Psychology (2nd ed.) Volume 3: Personnel Psychology (pp. 207-256). UK: Psychology Press.

Fisher, C.D. (1986). Organizational socialization: An integrative review. In K.M. Rowland & G.R. Ferris (Eds.). Research in personnel and human resources management, Vol. 4, (pp. 101-145). Greenwich, Conn: JAI press.

Grove, C.L., & Torbiorn, I. (1985). A new conceptualization of intercultural adjustment and the goals of training. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 9, 205-233.

Gudykunst, W.B., & Kim, Y.Y. (1997). Communicationg with strangers: An approach to intercultural communication (3rd ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Hampton, G. (1991). Coping with person-environment incongruence. Journal of Applied Psychology, 21 (15), 1277-1292.

Henderson, M., & Argyle, M. (1986). The informal rules of working relationships. Journal of Occupational Behaviour, 7, 259-275.

Isen, A.M. (1999). Positive affect. In T.D. Dalgleish and M.J. Power (Eds.), Handbook of cognition and emotion (pp. 521-539). Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Kidd, J. M. (1998). Emotion: An absent presence in career theory. Journal of Vocational Behaviour, 52, 275-288.

Kim, Y.Y. (1995). Cross-cultural adaptation: An integrative theory. In R.L. Wiseman (Ed.), International and intercultural communication annual: Vol. 19 (pp. 170-193). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Langston, C.A. (1994). Capitalizing on and coping with daily-life events: Expressive responses to positive events. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67, 1112-1125.

Lazarus, R.S. (1991). Emotion and adaptation. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lazarus, R.S. (1999). Stress and emotion: A new synthesis. London: Free Association Books.

Munton, A.G., & West, M.A. (1995). Innovations and personal change: patterns of adjustment to relocation.. Journal of Organizational Behaviour, 16, 363-375.

Mignery, J. T., Rubin, R. B., & Gorden, W. I. (1995). An investigation of newcomer communication behaviour and uncertainty. Communication Research, 22, 54-85.

Nicholson, N. (1990). The transition cycle: Causes, outcomes, processes and forms. In S. Fisher and C.L. Cooper (Eds.) On the move: the psychology of change and transition (pp. 83-108). UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Robbins, S.P. (1996). Organisational behaviour: Concepts, controversies, and applications (7th Ed.). London: Prentice Hall Inc.

Smircich, L. (1983). Concepts of culture and organizational analysis. Administrative Science Quarterly, 28, 339-358.

Staton (1999). An ecological perspective on college/university teaching: The teaching/learning environment and socialization. In A.L. Vangelisti and J.A. Daly (Eds.), Teaching communication: Theory, research, and methods. Mahwah,, NJ: Lawrence Erlbau Assoc. Inc.

Taylor, E.W. (1994). A learning model for becoming interculturally competent. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 18, 389-408.

Unsworth, K. L. & West, M.A. (2000). Teams: The challenges for cooperative work. In N. Chmiel (Ed.), Introduction to work and organizational psychology: A European perspective, pp. 327-346. UK: Blackwell Publishers.

Van Muijen, J.J. (1998). Organizational culture. In P. Drenth, H. Thierry, & C. de Wolff (Eds.), Handbook of Work and Organisational

Psychology (2nd ed.) Vol. 4: Organizational Psychology (pp. 113-131). UK: Psychology Press.

Vogt, J.F. & Herzog, E.L. (1989). Facilitating the new professional's transition to business. Organization Development Journal, Spring, 59-68.

Ward, C., Okura, Y., Kennedy, A., & Kojima, T. (1998). The U-curve on trial: A longitudinal study of psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross-cultural transition. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 22 (3), 277-291.

*Address for correspondence*
Sheryl Ramsay
School of Management
Faculty of Commerce and Management
Griffith University
Phone: (07) 38757460
Email: S.Ramsay@mailbox.gu.edu.au