Role Transitions

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A role can be defined as one's position in a relationship or social structure, whereas a role identity consists of the behavioral expectations that are included in that role. While some individuals may view their roles through a fixed set of social standards, others rely on their own subjective perceptions and interpretations of these positions through flexible guidelines. Through the process of a role transition, the literature identifies two types defined as a macro role transition or micro role transition. A macro role transition consists of a psychological or physical change between consecutively held roles. Examples can include career transitions, marriage/divorce, parenthood, immigration, or retirement. A micro role transition is also considered a psychological or physical change, yet between simultaneously held roles. For instance, shifts may occur between one's home and work roles, roles between parent and spouse, or movement between or within social domains (e.g. school, religious groups, social organizations).

Human beings are consistently transitioning from one stage of life to another. In early development, infants gain an understanding of themselves and their environment. Toddlers and young children quickly learn the behavior of social roles that are expected of them through observation and education by parents or other adult influences. As children develop more complex cognitive processes with each age level, they can understand parental roles as well. Thus, depending on the child's individual cognitive level, he/she may understand how social roles can shift, intersect, and expect to include new role identities for the same individual (e.g.

mother can also be a daughter, sister, and wife, or the child may also be a grandchild, cousin, and niece/nephew).

As young children develop a deeper understanding of adult roles, they are simultaneously immersed in their own novel role transitions. Entering school for the first time can be a tremendous adjustment for young children entering a new role as a student, and becoming a piece of the social world of peer relationships. Characteristics of the child, family, and teachers, as well as environmental factors are likely to have an impact on the child's successful school transition. Through adolescence, the dynamics of cognitive, emotional, and psychological development are likely to create divergent pathways for one's discovery of personal identity.

As adolescents prepare for upcoming adult role transitions, how close they are to the transition point affects their perceptions and reactions. Thus, a ninth grade student is more concerned of the transition from middle school to high school and less aware of the steps towards becoming adults. Eleventh graders, beginning to apply to college will experience more of an emotional reaction (positive or negative) to going on to college or moving into adult life, while a twelfth grade student will likely be more overwhelmed or enticed by the actual process of transforming their roles.

Although the majority of individuals experience similar role transitions, it is not an indication that these transitions are experienced equally in regards to one's self-concept. Moreover, role transitions differentially impact the way individuals view their identities. Past research has shown that changes in a social role predicts disruption to individuals' self-concepts, and role exits generally predict greater disruptions than role entries. Individuals who felt less positivity regarding the role transition they experienced predicted a greater self-change and

thereby less clarity, or more confusion about who they were. In addition, studies demonstrated a stronger association between role exits and self-concept clarity.

In consideration of the impact of role transitions, it is important to understand how the person copes with these changes. For instance, women and men may also experience more or less psychological or physical stress depending on their experience. Therefore, research on emerging adult role transitions and gender differences is increasingly beneficial for understanding health outcomes.

Further Reading

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