

## Surviving and thriving: how transition psychology may apply to mass traumas and changes<sup>1</sup>

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Professor Thomas Miller from the University of Connecticut has compiled an extensive guide to the emerging field of transition psychology in his new ***Handbook of Stressful Transitions Across the Lifespan*** (Springer, 2010)<sup>2</sup>. This is a synopsis of Chapter 27 which illustrates several mass transitions in organisations, communities and governments from 1997 to 2009. It explores the psychological aftermath of political and economic events, wars and natural disasters including the 9-11 attacks, financial crises, the US Presidential transition and implications for recession and recovery. This and other chapters from the Handbook are now relevant to managing the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake.

Transitions appear to be an innate human ability to adapt to trauma and change - not only to survive but to thrive and grow through adversity<sup>3</sup>. The paper illustrates tracking mass transitions in organisations, communities and governments from 1997 to 2009. These explore the aftermath of political and economic events, wars and natural disasters including global financial crises and the US Presidential transition. The chapter included events up to spring 2009 and scenarios to autumn 2009. It has implications for communities traumatised by major events and illustrates transition analysis tools for practitioners and researchers.

The economic, political and environmental challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century require greater insights into how individuals, communities and countries can survive, co-exist and thrive in adverse and rapidly changing conditions. Since 2007 the twin threats of global financial collapse and climate change have made the dynamics of mass transitions an increasingly urgent area for coordinated research and professional practice.

The chapter updates topics presented to the 1999 BPS Occupational Psychology Conference in Blackpool in a symposium on *Transition Psychology - The Waves of Change*<sup>4</sup>. The chapter explores the application of transition psychology to mass transitions in three stages:

**1) Basic principles of transition theory for individuals and groups** with examples from 600 career clients illustrating the psychological tasks and phases of transition. Enabling and inhibiting factors for moving from crisis to recovery also apply to groups in transition crisis - important to transition management.

**2) Potential dynamics of mass trauma or change in larger populations** with observations, forecasts and reviews since 1997. These include the effects of mass stress: fear and violence in stressed populations, and aspects of trauma and change such as transitions and terrorism including the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks in the USA in 2001<sup>5 6</sup>. Mass transitions may also have delayed impacts on individuals and communities - a psychological *tsunami effect*.

**3) Practical transition analysis techniques** for practitioners and researchers from different disciplines and cultures to test on past, current and future events. Transition analysis can be applied to recent and future mass traumas. Potential mass transition trigger events include political, economic, wars, unrest, terror and disasters from 1998-2009.

Two main **transition analysis tools** are offered: **Transition Tracking Timeline** charts and the **Transition Tracking Checklist**. The Timeline charts events before and after a critical episode plus potential periods of hazards and opportunities in the post-trauma transition period.

**Transition analysis** uses the transition tracking Timeline and Checklist to identify key events and people or groups affected. It includes stages for assessing the psychosocial context and potential stages of reaction and adaptation. This can be used to develop scenarios and to identify transition management or intervention options.

### **Professional development and research implications**

Organisational psychologists were some of the pioneers of transition psychology and its twin research area - culture shock. My explorations of potential mass transition events and periods highlight exciting opportunities for multi-disciplinary analysis of large-scale trauma and change.

There is scope for dialogue with historians, biographers, and other professionals with direct experience of mass transitions e.g. ex-military personnel in peace negotiations and scientists in relief operations. The mass transition proposition applies to emerging ideas in peace, political and community psychology <sup>7</sup>.

The large scale effects of trauma, stress and change need correlating with other psychological and organisational processes, medical practice and epidemiological research. This applies to the psychological effects of recession and more dramatic traumas of war or disasters.

The possibility that mass transitions may emerge from thousands of individual post-trauma transitions raises strategic issues in the psychology of government. Transition management may help to understand the impact of trauma or large scale change on governments and communities. They indicate a need for transition awareness in governments and communities and to recognise and encourage transition management skills in politics. They highlight the importance of reducing stress and fear to stabilise organisations and communities in crisis. They emphasise the need for vigilance to avoid strategic errors by key individuals and organisations in crisis. They are relevant to the timing of strategic decisions or initiatives e.g. elections and peace agreements.

How does transition psychology apply to strategic change management and mass transitions? Transition analysis using the transition tracking timeline and checklist offers methods that can be tried and developed by practitioners and researchers.

### **References (updated with PDF download link\*)**

- <sup>1</sup> *Surviving and thriving: how transition psychology may apply to mass traumas and changes*. Chapter 27 in the *Handbook of Stressful Transitions across the Lifespan*. Miller, Thomas W. (Ed.) 2010, Springer NY. <http://www.springerlink.com/content/g5n367034m728v44/abstract/> \*
- <sup>2</sup> Online extracts from the Handbook including Contents and Index are available online at: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Handbook-Stressful-Transitions-Across-Lifespan/dp/1441907475>
- <sup>3</sup> *Life events and career change: transition psychology in practice*. Williams D. Eos. 1999 <http://www.eoslifework.co.uk/transprac.htm> and see 3) p 288-293.
- <sup>4</sup> *Transition Psychology - The Waves of Change*. Symposium papers by Peter Herriot, Ashley Weinberg, Richard Plenty and author in BPS Occupational Psychology Conference, Blackpool, 1999. Proceedings p 202-303. Summary at [www.eoslifework.co.uk/futures.htm](http://www.eoslifework.co.uk/futures.htm)
- <sup>5</sup> *Psychological aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> - Is there a 9-11 Transition?* Williams D. 2002 [www.eoslifework.co.uk/pdfs/911transition23J.pdf](http://www.eoslifework.co.uk/pdfs/911transition23J.pdf)
- <sup>6</sup> Williams, D. 2004. *Managing stress, trauma and change in the airline industry: human and psychological factors*. IATA Aviation Security Conference AVSEC 2004, Vancouver. [www.eoslifework.co.uk/pdfs/AVSECeospaper5.pdf](http://www.eoslifework.co.uk/pdfs/AVSECeospaper5.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> *Fear and violence in stressed populations*. Williams D. 2<sup>nd</sup> Conflict Resolution Society Symposium on Psychology of Peace & Conflict, Goldsmiths College, London, March 2009.