



Moving countries: Belongings as central for realizing the affective relation between international shifts and localized micro movements



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ABSTRACT

Transitions as a particular concrete practice across countries have been extensively studied from a sociological perspective, revealing that children who live mobile lives grow up between cultures and may have issues with identity formation, belonging, rootlessness and unresolved issues of loss and grief. However, we know very little about the small day to day movements of families in everyday life as important micro movements, where the demands of moving countries are realized as emotionally charged events. The focus of this paper is on the multiple transitions of an Australian expatriate family moving from Saudi Arabia to Malaysia. In drawing upon the concept of *perezhivanie*, this paper presents new understandings of transitions as a dialectical relation between international and micro movements where children's belongings act as an important cultural tool for supporting the international move. A new perspective on transitions as emotionally charged events is theorized, contributing to understandings of the *concept of transition* as an affective relation between an international shift and a micro movement during the process of embedding personal belongings into the new local context.

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1. Introduction

Over the past three decades there has been an increasing trend in the international mobility of highly qualified workers (Dumont & Le Maitre, 2005). This population includes expatriate families with young children moving countries to fulfill the requirements of an employment package with multinational companies. Some families agree to be 'internationally mobile' where they are offered successive overseas postings depending on which country the working parent's skills are required. Yet little research has been directed to the multiple transitions that are now increasingly faced by families. What has emerged is a theoretical need for better explaining how families experience multiple international transitions across countries. A cultural–historical reading of transitions offers one way to conceptualize multiple transitions.

Hedegaard (2012) using cultural historical theory discusses society, institution and the individual in her cultural–historical model of children's learning and development. In this model she draws attention to the concept of transitions as movements between institutions. Her wholistic model acknowledges the societal laws and policies and the enactment of these at the institutional level, as well as how the demands made through participation in these institutions are realized at the personal level. Hedegaard (2005) has investigated migrant families and their teenage children moving into a host country and how this transition causes a disjunction between

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the differences in societal values and personal motives, as well as expectations and demands of the new institutions in which they participate.

Moving countries is an emotionally charged event, where personal meaning of the new country environment is refracted through how the person feels and thinks about their new situation. In this research, *Vygotsky's* (1994) concept of *perezhivanie* has been used to theorize affect in the context of transitions in a mobile family with young children. *Vygotsky* (1994) put forward the concept of *perezhivanie* to capture the relations between the person and their environment and how they refract this environment through their own social situation of development where emotions become a central part of meaning making. In this paper, the concept of *perezhivanie* is used to better understand how two Australian children who move from Saudi Arabia to Malaysia experience part of this international transition. The aim is to examine how the children meet this experience emotionally and to gain insights into transitions as both an international shift and a personal event. In the study that is reported in this paper, it was found that a different conceptualization of transitions was needed for better understanding the crisis that emerged between the motives, values and practices between the host and previous countries the family had resided in. The findings show how two young children from the same family experience the transition process differently when moving from one country and begin life in a new country. It was found that the process of transitions is emotionally charged and therefore needs to be conceptualized more broadly as a dialectical relation between international shifts and micro movements where some of the affective dimensions of the transition are realized through children's personal belongings. We situate this study in the broader literature, which offers a foundation to draw insights from what is already known.

2. What is known about transitions?

There are many groups of people that transition on a global scale with their families including Military personnel (Ender, 2002); adults who grew up living an international life style (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009); immigrants (Dumont & Le Maitre, 2005); repatriating expatriates (Kano-Podolsky, 2004) and families who move for their children's education (Kim, 2010). Studies that explain transitions in general can be grouped into (but are not limited to) sociological, cross-cultural (biculturalism, multiculturalism) and cultural–historical.

On examining the sociological literature into research on transitions some studies have identified issues that arise from experiencing a childhood where the person spends a large percentage of time outside their country of birth (Useem & Downie, 1976), including challenges with rootlessness and unresolved issues with identity, loss, grief and belonging (Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004). Research into transitions framed from biculturalism, multiculturalism and socio-cultural perspectives offer contrasting findings as these studies highlight that some people live without emotional dissonance as they move across countries (Moore & Barker, 2012), while for diplomats, moving becomes part of their everyday routine (Zittoun, 2009). However, the majority of studies framed from a sociological or cross-cultural perspective are either retrospective accounts gathered through interviews with teenagers and adults or use large scale questionnaires (cf. Lyttle, Barker, & Cornwell, 2011). In addition, this literature tends to focus on the age specific nature of transitions. For instance, studies into transitions for children ten years of age and over (Hviid, 2008a,b), teenagers or youth (Zittoun, 2006), and adults (Märtsin, 2010) feature. Further, there are some studies that research young children experiencing the transition process of starting school in a new country (Ebbeck & Reus, 2005). However, young children experiencing the process of transitions as they move from one country to another and situated in informal learning contexts seems to be absent from this body of literature.

Over the past two decades, there has been an increased attention from a cultural historical perspective on transitions and development within early childhood. Framed from an educational perspective, these studies focus on young children moving between different practice settings of home and school within their country of origin (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013), and these studies include the demands of schoolwork and homework across institutions (Hedegaard, 2014). Other studies concentrate on micro transitions within one concrete setting for example, Fleer (2014b) researches children's transitions between reality and imagination. Some studies focus on children living outside their country of birth and the conditions created by schools for assimilation processes as the children transition between home and school (Sánchez-Medina, Macías-Gómez-Stern, & Martínez-Lozano, 2014). The main focus of these studies is the process of learning and development leaving open the question of how very young children emotionally experience the transition processes while moving countries. Hviid and Zittoun (2008) note that these studies concentrate on “contexts, stages or phases” (p. 122) and as discussed by Crafter and Maunder (2012), focus on outcomes rather than the process of transition.

Zittoun (2014) questions the use of the term transition due to the broad and varied scales and agents researched, advocating for a move away from these “common [sense]” (Hviid & Zittoun, 2008, p. 234) interpretations of transitions. Instead the authors advocate for transition research to identify the “dynamics of change” where transitions are understood as a “spatial metaphor” and a “temporal notion” (Hviid & Zittoun, 2008, p. 123). Due to the term ‘rupture’ originating from different theoretical paradigms (Hviid & Zittoun, 2008) with subsequently different frameworks for studying transition, the authors argue that the term rupture produces a vast and divergent empirical base. A psychologically based theoretical gaze on the process of transitions has informed much of this research for example, peer interaction during a Piagetian conservation activity; youth and their concepts of art and Westerners in Ladakh exploring spirituality (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson, & Psaltis, 2003).

Hviid and Zittoun (2008) conceptualize their theoretical base of rupture from a mix of theoretical perspectives, labeling the process from *Vygotsky* (1998) and *Erikson's* (1968) conception of crisis, and *Piaget's* (1966) notion of disequilibrium alongside other theories (Hviid & Zittoun, 2008, p. 124). Interestingly, *Piaget's* (1966) disequilibrium and *Erikson's* (1968) psychic conflicts are conceptualized as taking place within the child as either functional–cognitive or emotional. In this study we draw on *Vygotsky's*

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