

1 **Psychosocial Demands and Situational Properties of the Club-to-**
2 **International Transition in Male Youth Football**

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Abstract

26 Athletes experience a number of within-career transitions that expose them to a multitude of
27 demands. The club-to-international transition (CIT) is one transition that has received minimal
28 attention. Through cognitive-motivational-relational-theory (CMRT; Lazarus, 1999), we sought
29 to address this gap by exploring the psychosocial demands, and their situational properties,
30 football (soccer) players experience during the CIT. Fourteen age-group international players,
31 and 10 coaches (four club; six international) were interviewed. Using thematic analysis, a range
32 of performance (e.g., competition intensity), organisational (e.g., new organisational culture),
33 and personal demands (e.g., evolving identity), and situational properties (e.g., novelty,
34 ambiguity) were identified. Further, the CIT was perceived as a unique adversity, due to its
35 fluctuating and ambiguous nature. For example, international selection is never guaranteed and
36 is predicated on current performance at club and international level. To positively negotiate this
37 transition, we suggest players need to develop key psychological resources (e.g., mental
38 toughness, resilience) and rely on organisational relationships (e.g., clear feedback processes),
39 which assist them in taking ownership over their development. Our research has worldwide
40 reach through offering international level organisations novel insights to help support players
41 making the CIT and facilitate bespoke interventions that will positively impact both individual
42 player development and long-term performance success.

43 **Keywords:** stressors, youth athlete development, soccer, transactional stress process, transitions

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Lay Summary

46 We explored the psychosocial demands international youth footballers' and coaches' associated
47 with the club-to-international transition. This transition was defined as an ongoing journey, with
48 many ups and downs and no guaranteed outcome. A range of personal, organisational, and
49 performance demands associated with 'being an international footballer' were also identified.

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51 Implications for Practice

- 52 • Relevant stakeholders need to be educated about the demands associated with the CIT
53 and its effective management in order to facilitate a more positive and successful CIT
54 experience.
- 55 • Applied sport psychologists and coaches should convey strategies for the development of
56 personal characteristics in players (e.g., mental toughness, resilience) that facilitate
57 positive adaptations to CIT demands and thus support youth development.
- 58 • National Governing Bodies (NGBs) in international football should develop a structured
59 feedback process, involving clear communication channels between the player,
60 international coach, and club coach regarding players' needs during the CIT.

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76 **Psychosocial Demands and Situational Properties of the Club-to-International Transition**
77 **in Male Youth Football**

78 Across sports and competitive levels, athletes frequently experience adversities, ranging
79 from daily hassles (e.g., physical demands of training) to major “crossroad” moments (e.g., loss
80 of funding), which they must overcome to grow and progress in their careers (Franck &
81 Stambulova, 2018). It is important to acknowledge the potential negative-laden value of the
82 term *adversity* in wider life and its association with traumatic life events. Nevertheless, in the
83 current study, adversity refers to situations that appear common, yet can be taxing, pose a threat
84 to one’s goals, and require individuals to positively adapt to situational demands (Fletcher &
85 Sarkar, 2013). One group of adversities that have received significant attention in the sport
86 psychology literature are *transitions*. Transitions can be normative and anticipated, such as the
87 junior-to-senior transition (JST), or non-normative and unexpected, such as sudden retirement
88 due to injury (Stambulova, 2017).

89 Traditionally, researchers of transitional experiences have focused on the athletic
90 transition into, and retirement from, sport (cf. Drew et al., 2019). However, practitioners and
91 researchers have recently recognised the importance of providing holistic support to athletes
92 during key *within-career transitions* (e.g., JST; dual career transitions in sport and university;
93 Franck & Stambulova, 2018; Henriksen et al., 2020) across all life domains (e.g., psychosocial,
94 academic, financial; Wylleman et al., 2013). These within-career transitions expose individuals
95 to contextually specific demands throughout their careers (e.g., managing the cultural
96 differences between the current competitive level and the level the athlete is transitioning to;
97 Drew et al., 2019). As a result, researchers have highlighted the importance of athletes being
98 able to manage, cope with, and adapt to the stressors linked to the transitional experience, which
99 largely determines whether an athlete transition is successful (e.g., the athlete’s ability to adapt
100 to a new situation and stabilise their position within that new context; Swainston et al., 2020).
101 Consequently, holistic support required to facilitate adaptive experiences, including the

102 development of the psychosocial attributes necessary to thrive during and after the transition,
103 often takes place across prolonged periods with no guarantees of successful outcomes (Drew et
104 al., 2019). Thus, while within-career transitions may appear overtly positive (e.g., an athlete
105 signing a professional contract), if an individual does not have the necessary psychological
106 resources and is not prepared for the new environment they are entering, the transition outcome
107 could be negative (e.g., decreased performance, experience of strain; Stambulova, 2003).

108 Provision of holistic support during within-career transitions is particularly pertinent in
109 male youth football (soccer) in the United Kingdom (UK), where footballers are expected to
110 transition through structured phases in professional club academy systems (e.g., foundation [8-
111 12 year olds], development [12-16 year olds], and professional [16-18 year olds] phases; see
112 Elite Player Performance Plan [EPPP], 2011) before making the JST. These phases are designed
113 to provide a tailored approach to preparing players for the demands of elite, senior level football.
114 Researchers who have explored the JST in elite football have reported physical (e.g., need to be
115 stronger at first-team level), situational (e.g., change of culture), social (e.g., creating
116 relationships with new players/coaches), and psychological (e.g., internal pressure to transition
117 successfully) demands related to the transition (e.g., Morris et al., 2017; Swainston et al., 2020).
118 Further, despite the structure of elite youth football, it is widely reported that youth footballers
119 appear unprepared for the challenges of the JST adaptation process (Morris et al., 2016).

120 Youth football players who successfully adapt to the challenges they face as they
121 progress along their club academy pathways may also encounter other transitions, such as the
122 opportunity to represent their country at international level. This transition, hereafter defined as
123 the club-to-international transition (CIT), which has not previously been explored within the
124 literature, is a temporary within-career transition that occurs when an athlete is selected to
125 represent their country in international competition. During this event, the athlete transitions for
126 a short period from their club to their international team before returning to their club once
127 international duty has been completed. In a UK football context, players make the CIT within a

128 range of different age groups (e.g., at under 15 level), and depending on the situation, the CIT
129 can last days (e.g., training camps) or up to several weeks during international tournaments. For
130 youth players, representing their country at age-group level is widely viewed as positive, as it
131 arguably supports their progression towards professional status. However, the CIT has
132 potentially disruptive elements requiring further investigation. For example, the opportunity for
133 CIT in youth football in the UK occurs approximately five times per year, although even if
134 players have been selected once, future international selection is not guaranteed. The ambiguity
135 of the CIT is, therefore, in contrast with the definitive nature of other within-career transitions
136 and retirement from sport, where at some point the athlete will complete the transition.

137 Due to its nature, much like the transitional experience of Olympic selection, the CIT
138 can be viewed as a *quasi-normative* transition; predictable only for select categories of athletes,
139 such as elite, professional, or transnational (Diehl et al., 2019; Schinke et al., 2016). As a result,
140 it appears necessary to explore the CIT to explain what comprises this unique situation and how
141 a player's personal and professional development may be augmented (e.g., through repeatedly
142 making the CIT) or debilitated (e.g., through experiencing several failures to make the CIT).
143 Such an approach aligns with recent calls for the need to better understand the changing and
144 novel demands across quasi-normative transitions (see Stambulova et al., 2020). From an
145 organisational perspective, supporting positive transitional experiences may impact on
146 international teams' long-term success. Research attempting to clarify the demands and impact
147 of this transition will help develop the evidence-base concerning transitions in football, and
148 assist football National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and those who work with youth footballers to
149 consider the wider implications of within-career transitions.

150 A number of sport-specific transitions models exist that have collectively supported
151 significant developments in understanding the uncertain nature of transitional events, athletes'
152 perceptions of transitions, and their support sources (e.g., Samuel et al., 2016; Stambulova,
153 2010). However, such models focus on definitive within-career and end-of-career transitions

154 (e.g., the athlete either successfully transitions or they stagnate). By contrast, the CIT is
155 fluctuating and ambiguous in nature, with no definitive outcome and so might be better
156 understood through a model that captures this dynamic, ongoing person-environment
157 transaction. One such framework is cognitive-motivational-relational theory (CMRT; see
158 Lazarus' (1999) model). Through CMRT, Lazarus viewed stress as a process that includes
159 stressors, appraisals, coping, and strain, and involves relational meaning between the person and
160 their environment (Rumbold et al., 2020). Specifically, CMRT presents individuals as having
161 capacity to perceive demands in their immediate environment as psychologically facilitative or
162 debilitating, with the situational properties of these demands playing a key role in the appraisal
163 process (Rumbold et al., 2020). Considering the nature of the CIT through the relational
164 conceptualisation of stress may offer unique insights into the personal and situational
165 significance of the event, and account for individual differences in ongoing transition outcomes
166 (e.g., whether the individual continually makes the CIT or not; Morris et al., 2015).

167 Researchers have previously adopted models of stress, as well as integrated aspects of
168 stress models into existing transition frameworks (e.g., Samuel et al., 2019), to examine within-
169 career transitions. For example, Finn and McKenna (2010) utilised the transactional model of
170 stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to investigate elite coaches' perceptions of athletes' JST,
171 reporting a range of stressors (e.g., earning respect of new coaches) and underlying situational
172 properties (e.g., sudden transition into the first team environment) associated with the JST.
173 Similarly, Jones et al. (2014) utilised the jobs-demands-resources model of stress (Demerouti et
174 al., 2001) to explore cultural and organisational demands placed upon Australian Rugby League
175 players transitioning to senior, elite level. Jones and colleague's findings highlighted the JST as
176 an ever-changing process of personal and environmental demands and resources across three
177 stages: *anticipation* (e.g., expectations prior to transition); *encounter* (e.g., taking responsibility
178 to ensure transition success); and *adaption* (e.g., adapting to the club's culture). While Jones et
179 al. used a broad theoretical underpinning, their illustration of transition as a structured three-

206 Philosophical Position

207 Our research is underpinned by ontological relativism. Specifically, each individual's
208 social reality is understood and derived through interactions with other individuals and
209 phenomena in their outer world via a process of "active cooperative enterprise of persons in
210 relationship" (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). That is, the dual nature of the participant-researcher
211 relationship in understanding participants' lived experiences. Therefore, our epistemological
212 position was one of constructivism, and involved engaging in conversations with participants
213 around a phenomenon (e.g., psychosocial demands of the CIT) and utilising participants' voices
214 to portray their meaningful experiences of this subject through detailed quotes, and development
215 of themes to reflect their collected shared experience (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). We recognise
216 that to engage with, and accurately construct the multiple realities of our participants, we must
217 be "passionate participants" during data collection and accept value-free inquiry and theory-free
218 knowledge development are not possible (Krane & Baird, 2005, p. 90). Accordingly, I (author
219 one) kept a reflexive diary throughout data collection, to maintain a sense of self-awareness
220 around my subjective biases regarding the CIT and its associated demands. In this diary, I
221 outlined my interactions with participants in international camps, as well as my coding
222 procedure and thought process in forming descriptive themes. Further, a critical friend approach
223 (Smith & McGannon, 2018) was used to enhance the interpretation of collected data and
224 improve research credibility.

225 Participants

226 Participants were current international players ($n = 14$), international coaches ($n = 6$) and
227 club coaches ($n = 4$) from football (all male), recruited using homogenous purposive sampling
228 (Patton, 2015). Participants were selected from football NGBs within the UK, and from
229 professional football club youth academies who had international representative players. We
230 only selected participants who had played international youth football (players), coached an

231 international team (international coaches), or coached international players in club academies
232 (club coaches) for at least one year, encompassing a minimum of five international camps.

233 To ensure a broad range of views of the CIT were examined, both coach and player
234 participants were recruited from different age groups, including: under 15's (players = 5;
235 coaches = 3); under 17's (players = 3; coaches = 1); under 19's (players = 4; coaches = 3); and
236 under 21's (players = 2; coaches = 3). International coaches were aged between 38 and 55 ($M =$
237 42, $SD = 6.16$) and had between six and 21 years of coaching experience. Club coaches were
238 aged between 25 and 55 ($M = 35$, $SD = 11.8$) and had between five and 11 years of coaching
239 experience. Players were aged between 14 and 21 ($M = 16.9$, $SD = 4.25$) and had between one
240 and six years of playing experience at international level. To gain a wide view of the demands
241 that players experienced, we also sampled players from different playing positions, including
242 goalkeeper ($n = 3$); defence ($n = 2$); midfield ($n = 5$); and attack ($n = 4$).

243 **Interview Guides**

244 Two semi-structured guides (available on request) were constructed, one each for players
245 and coaches, to allow for a thorough examination of the participant experience. In line with our
246 philosophical position, the guides' semi-structured nature afforded the interviewer flexibility to
247 ask a standardised set of questions and explore responses of interest where appropriate (Patton,
248 2015). The questions and prompts were underpinned by CMRT (e.g., transition demands and
249 their situational properties; Lazarus, 1999), whilst also drawing on principles from transition
250 models (e.g., concurrent transitions; Wylleman et al., 2013).

251 Both interview guides were split into five sections. First, the interviewer addressed both
252 the players' and the coaches' background in football. Second, players' and coaches' general
253 thoughts surrounding the CIT were explored (e.g., "How do you feel as a player competing with
254 your teammates for a starting position?" or "Based on your coaching experiences, what do you
255 think are the main demands that separate players that manage to progress to the international
256 team from those that do not?"). Third, the interviewer explored specific CIT demands players'

257 experienced (e.g., “How is training structured within your international training camp, compared
258 to club level?”). In the coaches’ interviews, channels of support in place at club and
259 international level to help players overcome CIT demands were also explored (e.g., “How do
260 you as a club/international coach go about making this an environment in which players feel
261 comfortable discussing any transition-related demands they might be experiencing?”). Fourth,
262 the interviewer examined the situational properties of CIT demands and how these impacted on
263 players’ and coaches’ appraisals (e.g., for *duration*, “How do you as a player plan on
264 maintaining your form to keep your place at international level?” or for *novelty*, “How do you as
265 a coach make your players feel comfortable transitioning into a new international
266 environment?”). Finally, the interviewer gave participants the opportunity to provide any
267 concluding remarks on their interview experience.

268 To test the effectiveness of the guide, pilot interviews were conducted with a sample of
269 players ($n = 2$) and coaches (club, $n = 1$; international, $n = 1$). Pilot participants gave feedback
270 on the interview process, relating specifically to the interview structure and phrasing of
271 questions. Players in the pilot interviews reported positive experiences of the process, whereas
272 coaches identified the need for the interviewer to clearly distinguish between the psychosocial
273 demands faced by players who had recently made the transition for the first time, and those who
274 had encountered the CIT on a repeated basis across age groups. Consequently, follow-up
275 questions were added to explore the potential impact of the number of CITs a player had
276 experienced on their perceptions of CIT demands.

277 **Procedure**

278 Following Institutional Ethics Board approval, consent was sought and granted from
279 football NGBs to approach potential participants during international training camps and inform
280 them of the nature of the study. Further, Heads of Academy were contacted at several
281 professional UK clubs, informing them of the nature of our research and asking for permission
282 to contact their age group coaches, all of whom agreed. Players and coaches (club and

283 international) who agreed to volunteer provided written consent. For players under 18 years of
284 age, their assent alongside written consent from parents/guardians was provided. Following this,
285 selected players and coaches participated in individual interviews with the first author, either in
286 person at a suitable location selected by the participant or via Skype™. All participants were
287 fully informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and of their right to withdraw at any
288 time throughout data collection. Interviews lasted for an average of 49 minutes for players ($SD =$
289 12.1) and 67 minutes for coaches ($SD = 15.5$), were audio-recorded and subsequently
290 transcribed verbatim in their entirety, yielding 445 pages of single-spaced text.

291 **Data Analysis and Methodological Rigour**

292 We adopted thematic analysis (TA) to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of
293 meaning within our data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). TA emphasises the active role played by the
294 researcher(s) in the process, where they use their knowledge of relevant theoretical frameworks
295 to construct meaning within and across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). In this way, TA
296 aligned with our philosophical position of ontological relativism (each individual's reality is
297 understood through interactions with their outer world) and epistemological constructivism
298 (multiple realities of participants can only be understood through active engagement with the
299 researcher). Following Braun and Clarke's (2012) recommendations, the TA process followed
300 six steps. First, transcripts were read repeatedly by all authors to ensure familiarity. Second,
301 author one conducted initial coding to identify meaningful ideas within the data related to the
302 research aims (e.g., impact of *being unknown at international level* on the CIT). Following this,
303 comparative analysis and discussion took place between authors one and two, with author two
304 acting as a critical friend to question any potential bias around conceptualisations of CIT
305 demands and the impact of those demands on individuals (cf. Smith & McGannon, 2018). Third,
306 authors one and two collectively organised codes sharing similar semantic qualities into
307 descriptive themes (i.e. second order themes). This involved authors one and two discussing in-
308 depth every code/theme that was created, offering alternative explanations for data interpretation

309 and supporting author one in conducting an in-depth analysis of each interview transcript (Smith
310 & McGannon, 2018). For example, demands relating to uncertainty around the security of one's
311 position in the international setup were organised into the descriptive theme of *squad role*.
312 Fourth, the same authors interpreted the relationship between the descriptive themes to develop
313 overarching interpretive themes (i.e., third order themes). Fifth, to address the rigour of the
314 analysis, authors one and two critically discussed the definition of each theme to ensure it was
315 clear, distinct, and traceable back to the raw data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Finally, themes were
316 presented to the entire research team, who, acting as critical friends, encouraged reflection on
317 the data, actively created themes, and analysis process. The purpose of these discussions was not
318 for the research team to reach a unanimous agreement on the interpretation and presentation of
319 the data, but to challenge each other's thoughts and judgments in a reflexive manner (Smith &
320 McGannon, 2018). Player and coach data were analysed separately due to their differing CIT
321 perspectives.

322 To further improve the rigour of the data collection and analysis procedures, Tracy's
323 (2010) eight big tent criteria were adhered to by ensuring: (a) *a worthy topic* (e.g., novelty of
324 investigating the CIT); (b) *significant contribution* to the literature (e.g., investigating a unique
325 transition through a novel theoretical framework); (c) *rich rigour* (e.g., utilising an appropriate
326 theoretical framework - CMRT); (d) *sincerity* (e.g., discussion of impact of philosophical
327 position on data collection); (e) *research credibility* (e.g., critical friend approach used to
328 enhance data interpretation; Smith & McGannon, 2018); (f) *resonance* (e.g., provision of raw
329 data quotes); (g) *appropriate ethical requirements* (e.g., fully informed, voluntary and
330 consenting sample); and (h) *meaningful coherence* (e.g., clear link between study aims, our
331 philosophical position, method, and findings).

332 Results

333 The results are divided into two main sections: (1) youth footballers' experiences of the
334 CIT demands and situational properties; and (2) international and club coach perceptions of the

335 CIT demands and situational properties. Each section is supported by a hierarchical network
336 (see Figures 1 and 2) and is structured around both the general themes as perceived by players or
337 coaches (the *what*), and the situational properties thought to shape the particular demand (the
338 *why*). A selection of quotes, chosen to represent the views of multiple participants, are presented
339 to allow the reader to immerse themselves in the participants' experiences (Patton, 2015).

340 **International Player Demands and Situational Properties**

341 **Performance demands.** Performance demands can be defined as, "Stressors associated
342 with competition" (Fletcher et al., 2006, p. 329). However, in our study we also found
343 performance demands to refer to stressors associated with training for competition (see Figure
344 1). Players identified a range of factors associated with performance demands when making the
345 CIT, grouped into five categorical themes: *time pressures; squad role; higher standard of*
346 *international football; engaging in a new football education; and intensity of international*
347 *camps*. These were underpinned by five situational properties: *novelty; event uncertainty;*
348 *duration; ambiguity; and comparison of self and others*. Specifically, players highlighted the
349 lack of time spent in an international competitive setting and the temporary nature of the
350 transition to the international level as stressors. For example, "With the national team, you have
351 to be 'on it' even more, because they [the coaches] don't see you a lot, and when they do see
352 you, you've got to be on form to get that call-up again." Further, players reported when moving
353 into the novel environment of international football, they were largely unknown to international
354 coaches and felt uncertain regarding their squad role. As a result, players largely outlined the
355 need to "make an impression" as quickly as possible, "You've got to be on your 'A game' all
356 the time to impress the coaches. If you lose the ball [in a game] you need to win it back quickly.
357 It's about showing that desire that you wanna be here."

358 Players also highlighted the higher standard of competitive matches they experienced
359 when making the step up to international football. They reported feeling greater levels of anxiety
360 when making direct comparisons between their own ability and their opposition, as well as

361 identifying a higher intensity in international football, “I was really nervous [during CIT], it’s
362 completely different to playing club football. You make a mistake at your club and the
363 opposition won’t capitalise on it, but with the national team, one mistake costs you.” Players
364 also discussed the physical demands of competing against international opponents, and the need
365 to adapt their game plan during competitive games, “It can be quite hard ‘cos they’re
366 [opposition] physically bigger and stronger than you. So, you have to be quite intelligent when
367 you’re on the ball, not take as many touches and use my speed to my advantage.”

368 In training, the performance demands players experienced largely stemmed from the
369 *intensity of international camps*. This intense nature was reflected in the short, packed, and
370 exhausting nature of international training schedules, “With the national team, you could have
371 three games in five or six days, whereas with your club you could play on the Saturday and have
372 six days to recover. I think that is quite hard to deal with.” These performance demands affected
373 players’ ability to engage in novel international football education (e.g., difficulty concentrating
374 when learning new tactical approaches). Accordingly, players perceived the international
375 training environment as more competitive than club level, with training sessions often taking on
376 a “physical edge” as players competed for a starting spot, “Everybody’s trying to play better
377 than those in their position in training, it gets quite physical. You don’t have much time on the
378 ball, can only take one or two touches, and the intensity of the session gets increased.”

379 **Organisational demands.** Organisational demands can be defined as, “Environmental
380 stressors associated primarily with the organisation in which the individual is operating”
381 (Fletcher et al., 2006, p. 329). Players identified three main organisational demands relating to
382 the CIT: *new organisational culture; managing relationships; and international and club*
383 *communication*. These were underpinned by four situational properties: *novelty; event*
384 *uncertainty; imminence; and ambiguity*. While getting to play at international level made players
385 feel proud, it was accompanied by a novel and imminent sense of burden and responsibility in
386 attempting to perform in a *new organisational culture*, “I was nervous ... it’s the first time

387 playing for your country. You're singing the national anthem; you see your parents in the crowd
388 ... it got quite emotional. You're representing your country, your club, and your family. It's a
389 big responsibility." For a lot of players, this responsibility was considered a novel stressor, and
390 an event they were uncertain they would get the chance to repeat, and so wanted to make the
391 most of, "You've done loads to get in this position [make the national team] and you just want
392 to enjoy the moment." In this way, representing the national team is not a performance demand
393 *per se*, but an organisational demand, inherently tied into players' pride from being a part of the
394 international team culture, and so is different from performance demands faced at club level.

395 When entering this new organisational culture, players struggled to develop and *manage*
396 *relationships* with players from rival clubs. This was especially true with younger age groups
397 arriving at international training camps for the first time, "There was a split in the first few
398 camps (between players from rival clubs) 'cos we didn't know each other. That affected the
399 games as well, 'cos we weren't really speaking much." This demand was exacerbated by the
400 uncertain, changing nature of international squads, making it difficult to maintain relationships
401 over time: "Players are deselected because of injury, their clubs not letting them go, or the
402 national team scouting someone better. It's difficult, playing with different people... they might
403 be new, and you need to understand how they play." With no guarantees of selection for the next
404 international squad, players also emphasised the demand of playing well at club level to keep
405 their place in the national team. Players discussed the links between their international and club
406 coaches concerning feedback provided on their performances during international camps.

407 Players cited ambiguity over the feedback process as being particularly demanding:

408 I always get a copy of my [game] clips [from the national team]. Sometimes I'll go
409 through them with my coach at [club team]. Usually he sees them even before I do. I
410 don't know how he does but that's always a worry if things haven't gone well ... but it's
411 just about taking what I've learned from international duty back to my club.

412 **Personal demands.** Personal demands can be defined as, “Stressors associated with
413 nonsporting life events” (Fletcher et al., 2006, p. 329). All players discussed balancing the
414 demands of playing international football alongside personal demands from other areas of their
415 lives, including: *identity development*; and *social pressures*. These personal demands were
416 underpinned by one situational property: *timing in relation to life cycle*. Players spoke about
417 their *identity development* and sacrifices they had to make in their personal life in pursuit of a
418 career in football. This often involved doing schoolwork while on international duty, “During an
419 international tournament in [country], I had to do my maths exams. So that was tough, ‘cos
420 obviously I didn’t get the right amount of revision in.” For some players, their pursuit of a career
421 in international football meant education started to take a backseat, leading to parental concerns:
422 “My family... I think they’re worried I’m going to throw away my education, because I want it
423 [an international football career] so much.” Even though many players identified as wanting to
424 be professional footballers, they recognised that just because they had made the CIT it did not
425 necessarily mean they were international footballers: “You don’t make it fully until you’ve
426 played X amount of games for your country. You haven’t made it if you’ve made, I dunno, eight
427 appearances for the national team at under 17s.” This need to stay grounded was often in
428 conflict with *social pressures* from friends and family, who encouraged players to brag about
429 being an international footballer: “My parents are encouraging me to brag about it [playing
430 international football]. They asked teachers to put me in assemblies and I just don’t want that. If
431 people don’t know I play for my national team, then they don’t know.”

432 **International and Club Coach Perceptions**

433 **Performance demands.** Coaches reported a range of demands, categorised into five
434 specific performance demand themes related to the CIT: *time pressures*; *adapting to a new*
435 *football education*; *gaining international experience*; *subjectivity of the transition*; and *physical*
436 *demands*. These were underpinned by five situational properties: *novelty*; *event uncertainty*;
437 *imminence*; *duration*; and *ambiguity* (see Figure 2). Coaches discussed *time pressures* of

438 international football and how the short duration of international camps had an impact on a
439 player's ability to develop as an international footballer: "You've only got a limited amount of
440 sessions, so you have to maximise the time you've got with them on the pitch." Specifically,
441 coaches mentioned how players found it demanding to *adapt to an international football*
442 *education* in this limited window. International coaches suggested novel football language used
443 in training sessions (e.g., 'creating overloads'), different learning abilities of players, and the
444 imminent need for players to integrate this education into highly intense and technical
445 international matches as potentially significant stressors. For example, "We have limited time
446 [before an international match], probably two days training. So you are bringing in a group of
447 players, you are bonding them together as quickly as you can, and then you are playing a major
448 European team", and, "The players are under pressure to learn new styles of play and the
449 language we use really quickly when they come into the international team." Club coaches also
450 discussed how players tried to adapt to a new football education, whilst maintaining their
451 development at club level. Club coaches frequently mentioned the need for players to develop
452 both a "club and international mind-set", to overcome the tactical ambiguity and uncertainty
453 they regularly reported experiencing while on international duty:

454 Younger players get confused [about tactics in training]. They say 'I don't understand,
455 when I'm here [club] they ask me to pass out from the back, and when I was with the
456 national team, up until 16, they asked me to do the same. Now they're asking me to do
457 something different.' They have to have the mind-set to switch between both teams.

458 The limited timeframe of international camps also led international coaches to emphasise
459 the importance of players *gaining international experience* by participating in as many
460 international camps as possible, "We want players to have 35-40 international caps
461 [appearances] before they go into the [international] first team. They need to be comfortable
462 being an international footballer, [being able to] manage a lot of information in a small amount
463 of training time." This quote illustrates the demand on players to accumulate international

464 “caps” (players are traditionally awarded a cap to signify a playing appearance in international
465 football) to continue their football education and ability to manage the CIT. Further, this
466 expectation of coaches placed considerable *physical demands* on players, as it required them to
467 engage in highly intense competitive matches against talented opposition, “We’ll play some of
468 the best international opponents in Europe. Technically, if you’re not right in those games
469 you’re not going to see the ball for long periods. Then that becomes a physical and mental strain
470 on you.” However, not all players were afforded the opportunity to gain that level of
471 international experience, with club coaches describing the fiercely competitive and highly
472 subjective nature of the CIT. Specifically, players experienced a range of demands due to
473 making the CIT from different clubs, different academy standards, and at a variety of age levels.
474 Thus, competition for places in the international team was often position and year specific:

475 The team might be short of defenders [in an age group], which gives a player an
476 opportunity to play. There might be a talented player in an age group below, however,
477 who doesn’t get that opportunity because there are more players in their position.

478 The “fierce competition” associated with the CIT was thought to be a novel and demanding
479 occurrence, as players needed to make an impact in a short time to retain their place.

480 Consequently, one coach described the CIT process as a “baptism of fire” [challenging
481 experience] where players either “thrive or get limited opportunities to perform at that level.”

482 **Organisational demands.** Demands relating to organisational factors were categorised
483 into five main themes: *new organisational culture*; *developing relationships*; *clubs versus*
484 *international development programmes*; *lack of transparency*; and *club level demands*. These
485 were underpinned by five situational properties: *novelty*; *event uncertainty*; *imminence*;
486 *ambiguity*; and *inadequate preparation*. According to coaches, the novelty and imminence of
487 performing within their *new organisational culture* was a major demand for players, “For a
488 player, at any level, to be wearing that badge and representing your country is a huge pressure.
489 Forget all the other stuff around it, just actually stepping onto that pitch and listening to the

490 anthem for the first time.” Coaches spoke about how players were aware of the limited time they
491 had within their new organisational culture, and felt they were “on trial” during the CIT.

492 Differences in organisational culture were also evident between the *club versus*
493 *international development programmes*. International coaches described how, as players
494 progressed through the international pathway, the organisational culture shifted from
495 development-based to results-based. Specifically, international coaches mentioned the transition
496 from under 17 to under 19 age group as a focal point for this change:

497 When players move from under 17’s to under 19’s, it gets more competitive, as they’re
498 going to European and World Cup qualifiers. You have to select the right team for the
499 right game. We’re cautious that we’re trying to get results but also develop players.

500 According to club coaches, numerous players from the under 17 age group and above returned
501 from the novel, results-based culture of international duty feeling inadequately prepared and
502 uncertain about their future in the national squad. These players were accustomed to the
503 sheltered, development-focused environment of club football, where teams do not compete in
504 formal leagues until under 23s, and lower-level international football, where focus was on
505 developing ‘principles of play’ :

506 The players can’t grasp that [results-based culture]. At club level, because we don’t play
507 in that competitive environment, we say, ‘Look don’t worry about the result on match
508 day, let’s try and get the performance right.’ At international level, the coaches threaten
509 to leave players out of international camps if they play the wrong pass. When players
510 come back from international duty, they say ‘I got left out ‘cos I made a mistake.’

511 These feelings of inadequate preparation and uncertainty in a new organisational culture often
512 stemmed from a lack of a relationship with the international coach, due to limited interaction
513 time. Consequently, coaches spoke of the demand on players to *develop relationships*, in order
514 to become more comfortable in an international environment: “It’s difficult for children to speak
515 to adults at times and sit-down face to face. Especially when it's a new environment and

516 different person. They need that comfortable person they can go to with any issues.” Coaches
517 also mentioned the need for players to “get out of their comfort zone socially” through
518 developing relationships with their international teammates, “Players are very safe and
519 comfortable in clubs where they’ve been for a long time. International level is a completely
520 different environment. You’ve got to get to know people, the team spirit, and the culture.”

521 The fundamental differences between the club and international developmental
522 programmes were reported to lead to a *lack of transparency* between international and club
523 organisations. Both sets of coaches recognised the need to develop more trusting relationships in
524 order to have more informed discussions concerning player feedback and provide players the
525 best possible opportunities to fulfil their potential. For example, “It’s [player development]
526 dependent on relationships; that trust between the coaches at the club and in the international
527 set-up. What concerns me is maybe that broken loop, where the player isn’t having feedback on
528 the international report from their clubs”, and, “Sometimes there’s a lack of communication
529 about the player between the international coaches and us back at the club, or vice versa ... then
530 the player misses out on opportunities for development and progression and that’s stressful for
531 them.” In accord, international coaches suggested a lack of appropriate national team and club
532 feedback processes resulted in players feeling anxious about their development and questioning
533 the “security of their position in both the club and international team.”

534 The separate perspectives of club and international development programmes were also
535 evident in *club level demands* placed upon players due to go on international duty. Coaches
536 outlined how uncertainty surrounding certain players’ positions within their clubs was a major
537 CIT stressor: “We’ve got an under 21s player and he’s conscious that if he’s starting [at club
538 level], when he goes away for 10 days [on international duty] and comes back, he’ll be
539 deselected, and he’s got to fight for that place again.” This illustrates the ambiguous relationship
540 between club and international football and how without clear communication channels between
541 them, a player cannot successfully make the CIT and continue their professional development.

568 experiences (see Drew et al., 2019). However, one quasi-normative transition that has received
569 minimal attention by researchers is the CIT. To address this gap, we explored the psychosocial
570 demands elite youth footballers experience during the CIT, as well as the underpinning
571 situational properties of those demands through the theoretical framework of CMRT (Lazarus,
572 1999). Exploring the CIT through a CMRT framework is a novel approach in the transition
573 literature and allowed us to examine what demands players faced during this unique, fluctuating
574 transition and why they were considered as demanding. As a result, our findings have
575 highlighted both players and coaches perceive the CIT to involve a multitude of *performance*
576 (e.g., intensity of international camps), *organisational* (e.g., engaging with a new organisational
577 culture), and *personal* (e.g., identity development) stressors. These stressors were challenging
578 due to a variety of situational properties that are contextually aligned to the nature of the CIT
579 (e.g., *novelty* of the international environment). This study is the first to explain CIT demands in
580 football and provides insight to assist football NGBs and those who work in youth football in
581 their attempts to support athletes to have positive transitional experiences.

582 Players in our study reported trying to “make an impression” on coaches and perform
583 optimally in training camps and international matches. This “need” to demonstrate value to
584 coaches is linked to the concept of *acculturation*, where an individual attempts to fit into a new
585 sub-culture through adapting their behaviours in response to specific demands (cf. Tibbert et al.,
586 2015). During this acculturation process, players transitioned from familiar club environments
587 with strong coach and teammate relationships, into a novel international environment, with
588 different tactics, coaching philosophies, and players. Similarly, researchers studying the quasi-
589 normative cultural transitions experienced by athletes have found many of these individuals
590 struggle to adapt to their new ‘cultural reality’, develop new relationships, and adopt a new
591 playing style (Ryba et al., 2020). These cultural transitions are context-specific, dynamic, and
592 have no definitive timescale, much like the CIT (Schinke et al., 2016). . However, cultural
593 transitions research has largely focused on the individual’s narrative in navigating their career

594 pathway (i.e. what are the demands? What do they mean to me?). By contrast, we found the
595 acculturation process of CIT to align with CMRT (i.e. why is it demanding?), where the
596 personal goals or resources the individual brings to a situation (e.g., desire to make an
597 impression) interact with their environmental demands (e.g., international football culture) and
598 its situational properties (e.g., novelty) to produce a behavioural response (Lazarus, 1999).
599 Further, researchers have outlined the competitive nature of within-career transitions, and the
600 need to provide athletes with a stage-based progression plan, and appropriate social support,
601 when transitioning from a lower to higher-level sporting environment (e.g., Stambulova et al.,
602 2017; Swainston et al., 2020). However, such recommendations do not consider situational
603 properties of transitions with no definitive outcome. For example, during the CIT, the duration
604 of time the athlete spends engaging with their new environment is short and does not guarantee
605 future international selection. These time pressures can contribute to threat or harm appraisals
606 (Lazarus, 1999). For example, Didymus and Fletcher (2017) outlined how hockey players
607 appraised maintaining a place in the team during the transition from amateur to elite level as
608 stressful due to the novelty of the event (i.e., they had not experienced the level of intra-team
609 competition before) and its duration (i.e., they were uncertain how long they would keep their
610 place), rather than due to specific stressors *per se*.

611 International coaches in our study also recognised the importance of acculturation during
612 CITs. They emphasised the need for new international players to adapt to the novel
613 organisational culture quickly through developing coach and teammate relationships, managing
614 performance demands (e.g., higher calibre opponents, a new football education), and gaining
615 international experience. Specifically, from the under 17-age group onwards, players reported
616 balancing their ongoing international development with the need to achieve results and qualify
617 for tournaments. This contrasted with the organisational culture at club level, where competitive
618 football is not played before under 23 level (see EPPP, 2011).

619 Recently, researchers have begun to move beyond individual-focused models of
620 transition (e.g., Wylleman et al., 2013) and investigate wider organisational culture or *athletic*
621 *talent development environments* (ATDEs; Henriksen et al., 2020) in which transitions occur
622 (e.g., JST; Morris, Tod, & Oliver, 2015). They have found in football organisations where the
623 academy and senior team's talent development philosophies are incongruent, players do not
624 receive the required psychosocial support to make a successful transition (Morris et al., 2015).
625 This lack of preparation resulted in players being unaware of the attitudes and behaviours
626 required to survive and flourish in the senior environment (Morris, Tod, & Oliver, 2016). By
627 contrast, in organisations with close links between the academy and senior team environments,
628 emphasis was placed on giving players ownership over their development and the importance of
629 a dual career (e.g., balancing education and football), and several players made the JST
630 successfully (Pink et al., 2018). However, the CIT does not involve a transition between two
631 sub-cultures of an organisation (e.g., academy to first team), but a continuous switch between
632 two separate organisations with different talent development philosophies. Therefore, for
633 holistic development to occur during quasi-normative transitions such as the CIT, all elements
634 of an athlete's ATDE (i.e., club coaches, international coaches, parents) need to work together
635 as a coherent whole (Henriksen et al., 2020). In the current study, however, there was a "lack of
636 transparency" in the working relationship between club and country, as both organisations
637 sought to achieve individual successes. Specifically, participating coaches reported issues with
638 communication between the club and the national team, meaning players often received minimal
639 feedback regarding their international performances. This broken feedback loop led to players
640 feeling ambiguous regarding the security of their place in future international squads. Therefore,
641 progression through the CIT, in line with CMRT, involved players facing environmental
642 conditions that were novel (e.g., tactical changes), ambiguous (e.g., what do I need to improve
643 to get selected again?) and for which they were inadequately prepared in a club environment

644 (Thatcher & Day, 2008). This often led to a threat appraisal, as players were confused as to how
645 to “fit” into both club and international environments and continue their development.

646 Perhaps due to this fragmented working relationship, club coaches stated they had
647 minimal knowledge of selection processes international coaches used to choose international
648 squads, leading to them viewing the CIT as highly subjective, based on age and position-specific
649 factors. The subjectivity of the CIT can be explained by CMRT, which outlines how due to the
650 unique psychological resources and experiences individuals bring to an encounter, everyone
651 reacts distinctively to the same environmental stimulus (Franck & Stambulova, 2018; Lazarus,
652 1999). Specifically, these environmental stimuli are contextualised by their situational
653 properties, such as timing of CIT (e.g., a shortage of players making the transition in a specific
654 age group) and players’ psychological readiness for CIT (e.g., a player being called-up last
655 minute and being inadequately prepared). Nesti et al. (2013) defined these situations and their
656 properties as critical moments and suggested that athletic career development relies on their
657 successful navigation. That is, it is not critical moments *per se* that lead to a successful
658 transition, but rather an athlete’s ability to use acquired resources (e.g., contextual knowledge of
659 the transition) and develop the necessary psychological strategies (e.g., emotional control) to
660 engage in adaptive behaviours (e.g., effective communication with teammates; positive
661 approaches to overcome setbacks). Indeed, Nesti et al. argued these critical moments can be
662 either psychologically facilitative or debilitating, and thus a key determinant of successful
663 progression from one environment to another. These critical moments are, therefore, likely to
664 involve a change in identity in one’s athletic and/or personal life (Nesti et al., 2013).

665 In the current study, we identified the challenge of identity associated with becoming an
666 international footballer as a pertinent factor of the CIT. Specifically, players discussed how the
667 situational properties associated with identity change (e.g., its duration) led to confusion over
668 whether the transition was considered as complete or successful (e.g., whether they could call
669 themselves an “international footballer”; Drew et al., 2019; Samuel et al., 2019). Researchers

670 have recently found there is significant pressure on athletes to adapt their behaviours to the
671 expectations of their new organisational cultures when making a transition, to the detriment of
672 their own identity, beliefs and long-term well-being (e.g., Champ et al., 2020). This pressure
673 was exacerbated for players in our study, as the CIT was viewed as incomplete until a player
674 reached senior level. Consequently, players had to commit themselves fully to the pursuit of
675 becoming an international footballer, while acknowledging the unpredictable outcome of their
676 chosen career path (e.g., “when do I become an international footballer?”). Further, McDougall
677 et al. (2019) suggested athletes derive their identity from multiple sources (e.g., family life,
678 meaningful experiences) and are unlikely to entirely give their identities up in pursuit of
679 adapting to a new organisational culture. In our study, the uncertainty surrounding a successful
680 CIT led to players struggling with their multiple sources of identity, including their social lives
681 (e.g., friends and family often viewed them differently and referred to them as an “international
682 footballer”) and education (e.g., parents pressured players to perform well in school whilst not
683 throwing away their opportunity in international football). Many players were reluctant to
684 entirely give up their old identities and be viewed solely as an international footballer by their
685 friends and family. Players’ identity struggles align with CMRT, where environmental demands
686 from several sources (e.g., performance demands of coaches, personal demands of family),
687 which occur simultaneously, are appraised in relation to one another (Lazarus, 1999). If the
688 individual lacks the personal resources to cope with the myriad of demands, such an encounter
689 can potentially lead to the experience of role strain (e.g., trying to compete as an international
690 footballer, retain your position at club level, and perform well in school; van Rens et al., 2019).
691 Coaches in our study also felt uncertain regarding sacrifices players had to make in their
692 academic and personal lives during adolescence while pursuing an international career (e.g.,
693 doing school exams whilst on international duty). Both sets of coaches emphasised the need for
694 players to be able to switch between a “club and international mind-set”, reflecting the

695 fluctuating nature of “being an international footballer”, and the need for players to perform
696 consistently in both environments to continually make the CIT.

697 **Practical Implications**

698 From an applied perspective, we suggest relevant stakeholders (e.g., international
699 coaches, players, parents) need to be educated about the nature of the CIT (e.g., uncertainty of
700 ‘being an international footballer’) and the effective management of its situational properties to
701 facilitate a more positive and successful CIT experience (e.g., coach education on early coach-
702 athlete relationship development to reduce ambiguity associated with the CIT). Further, if
703 players are to make the CIT successfully and repeatedly, coach education programmes need to
704 focus on conveying strategies (e.g., autonomy-supportive behaviours) for the development of
705 personal characteristics in players (e.g., mental toughness, resilience), which allow them to
706 adapt effectively to CIT demands. From an organisational perspective, our findings have
707 worldwide implications through identifying the need for NGBs in international football to
708 develop clearer communication channels with clubs regarding players’ needs during the CIT
709 (e.g., structured feedback process involving communication between the player, international
710 coach and club coach). The aim of this is to reduce players’ feelings of ambiguity surrounding
711 their performances on international duty and enhance role clarity, thus providing them with a
712 sense of ownership over their development (e.g., behaviours during international camps,
713 schoolwork). By implementing these strategies, we believe NGBs in football will improve the
714 transitional experiences of their players and positively influence both individual player
715 development and their national teams’ long-term success.

716 **Summary and Limitations**

717 We found the CIT to involve a multitude of performance (e.g., intensity of international
718 camps), organisational (e.g., engaging with a new organisational culture) and personal (e.g.,
719 identity development) stressors. These stressors were considered challenging due to a range of
720 situational properties contextually aligned to the nature of the transition (e.g., novelty of the

721 transition). Encompassing cross-sectional situational properties of the CIT aligns with a CMRT
722 framework (Lazarus, 1999), which is crucial in understanding the transitional experiences and
723 transactional pathways of athletes across all age levels and sports (Rumbold et al., 2020). Our
724 research focused on specific elements of the transition process (i.e., environmental demands,
725 individual perceptions, and situational properties) rather than the overarching experience of the
726 CIT. Nevertheless, in line with Drew et al.'s (2019) recent calls for transition researchers to
727 move beyond "snapshot" approaches to capture the dynamic and holistic nature of the transition
728 process, we acknowledge the retrospective and cross-sectional nature of this study may be
729 considered as a limitation. However, given the unique and unexplored nature of the CIT in
730 comparison to other normative transitions, our approach has facilitated critical insights into the
731 demands that youth footballers experience when attempting to make this transition.

732 Additionally, through detailing the CIT process from multiple perspectives, we aligned with
733 recent recommendations in the transition literature to provide more context-specific knowledge
734 beyond normative transition frameworks (e.g., Devaney et al., 2018; Stambulova et al., 2020).

735 **Future Directions**

736 Given its fluctuating and recurrent nature, researchers wishing to build on our findings
737 and gain further understanding of the CIT are encouraged to adopt longitudinal designs. Such
738 approaches will help researchers to explore the fluctuations both coaches and players experience
739 between each transitional period, as well as examine how CIT demands and the resources
740 players develop to cope with the CIT alter over time and differ across age groups. In addition,
741 the role strain international players potentially experience from balancing the demands
742 associated with pursuing education qualifications alongside a football career is a topic that
743 warrants further investigation (van Rens et al., 2019). However, while acknowledging the
744 importance of the burgeoning dual career literature, a broader discussion of this topic was
745 beyond the scope of this paper. Such a discussion would have diluted the key messages we have
746 tried to convey regarding the novel CIT in a stress-based context. Further, while it is clear that

747 international youth players occasionally have to balance education and playing international
748 football (e.g., complete exams on international duty), the issue of pursuing a dual career in
749 football and school/university is one that needs to be explored in a club football context, rather
750 than an international one. Such insights could lead to greater support for dual career
751 development in club level football and contribute towards adaptive CITs. Finally, researchers
752 adopting CMRT as a framework to study the CIT should consider the entire stress process. In
753 particular, the factors that help players to cope effectively with CIT stressors and their
754 situational properties, as well as the strategies coaches use to assist players in developing these
755 coping mechanisms.

756

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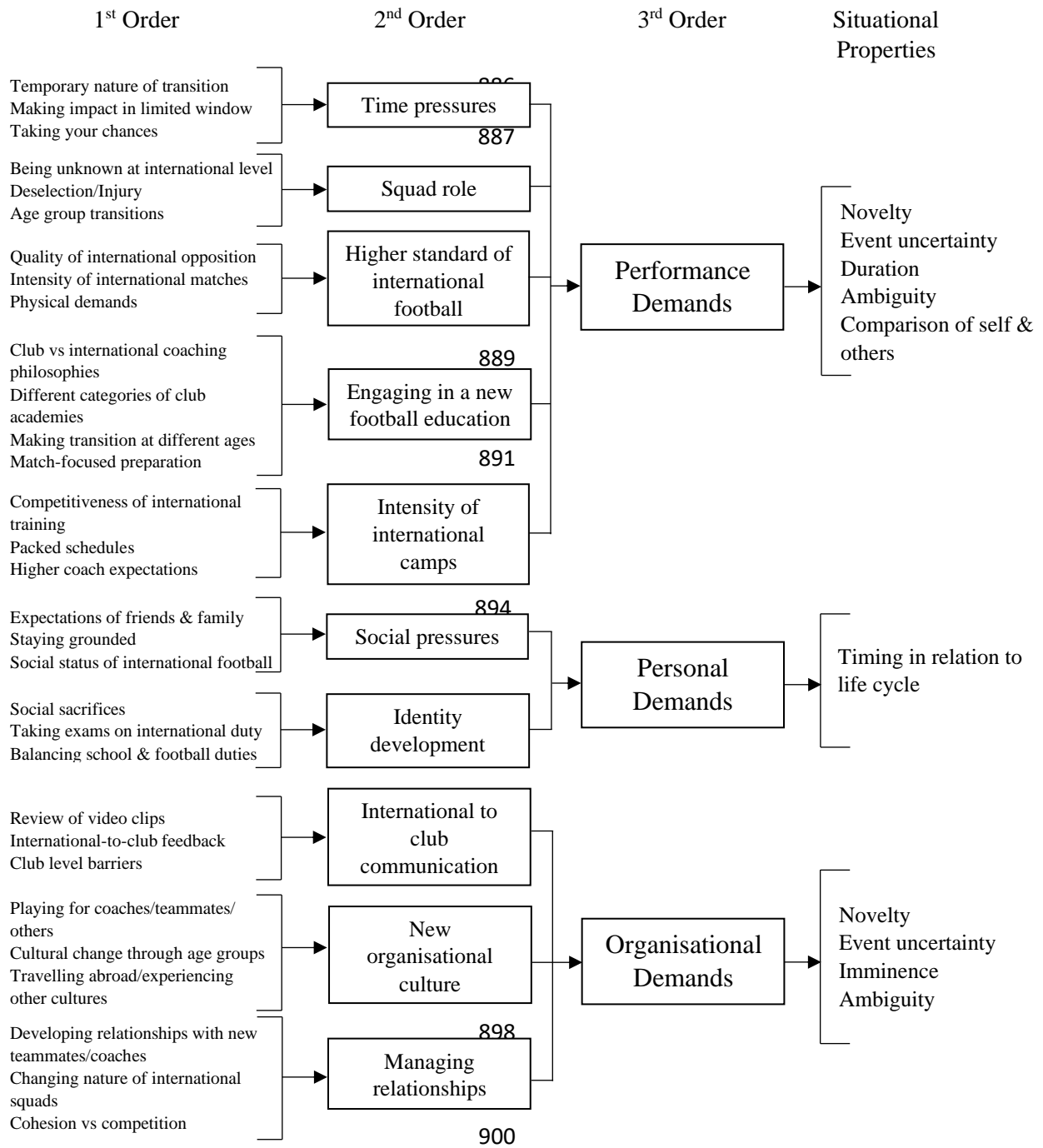
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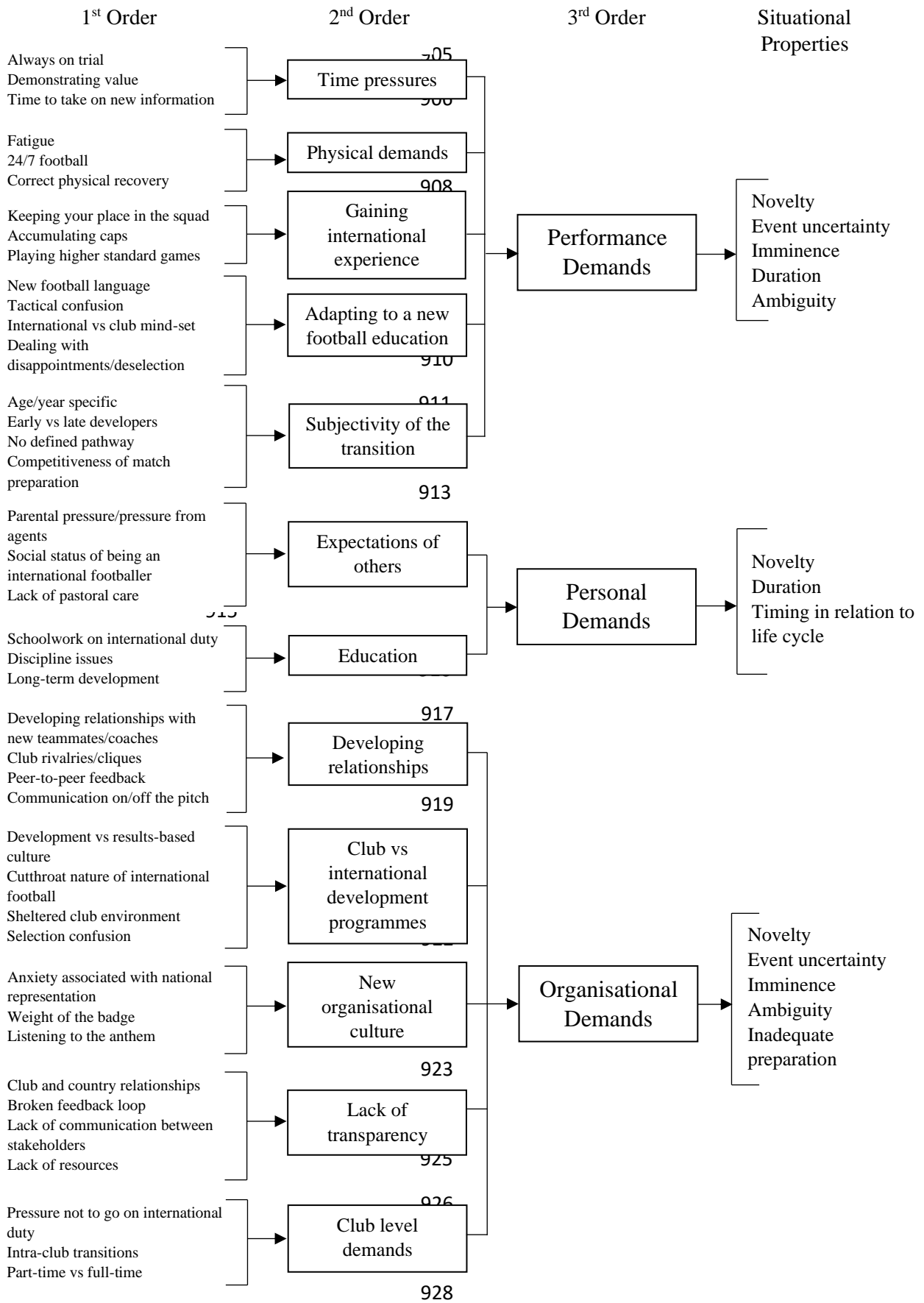


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902 *Figure 1. Club-to-international transitional demands and situational properties: Players.*

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929 *Figure 2. Club-to-international transitional demands and situational properties: Coaches.*