

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

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Submission Date: 21/07/2021

Word Count: 9065

Abstract

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

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

Lay Summary

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

Implications for Practice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

stage development fails to highlight the unpredictable, individual-specific nature of the process (cf. Drew et al., 2019). For example, an athlete who transitions into the elite environment, fails to cope, and is sent back to the youth squad. A key facet of the extant within-career transitions literature is the notion of a successful or unsuccessful transition outcome (Morris et al., 2017). This concept is difficult to define in relation to the CIT, where athletes are reliant on personal (e.g., their current form for their club) and situational (e.g., the timing of the transition) factors to make the transition on a recurrent basis. Adopting a theoretical framework such as CMRT, which highlights the importance of these person-environment transactions, may help practitioners and researchers better understand this ambiguous transitional experience.

To date, research has demonstrated the complex and dynamic nature of transitions, and their associated, situationally dependant, demands (Drew et al., 2019). Consequently, the multitude of within-career transitions an athlete may experience cannot be considered collectively in terms of the demands these situations place on an athlete and the subsequent support required to facilitate adaptive progressions through different transitions (Morris et al., 2017). We have attempted to address several gaps in the literature by using the CMRT framework to holistically explore the CIT experienced by elite, youth footballers. Specifically, we aimed to: (a) examine both player and coach perspectives of the psychosocial demands players experience when making the CIT; and (b) identify underlying situational properties that affect players' appraisal of the CIT. Given the exploratory nature of our aims, while we adopted the CMRT framework to inform our investigation of CIT demands and their situational properties, we did not use CMRT to predict participants' CIT experiences. Rather, we aimed to offer novel insights into the psychosocial needs of elite youth footballers in an international context. These insights will allow worldwide impact by facilitating more bespoke interventions which football NGB stakeholders (e.g., coaches, sport psychologists) can implement to better prepare elite athletes for transitions they experience along their talent development pathways.

Method

Philosophical Position

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

Participants

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

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

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

Interview Guides

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

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

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

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

Procedure

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

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

Data Analysis and Methodological Rigour

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

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

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

Results

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

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

International Player Demands and Situational Properties

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

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

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

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

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

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

International and Club Coach Perceptions

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

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

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

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

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

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

The “fierce competition” associated with the CIT was thought to be a novel and demanding occurrence, as players needed to make an impact in a short time to retain their place. Consequently, one coach described the CIT process as a “baptism of fire” [challenging experience] where players either “thrive or get limited opportunities to perform at that level.”

Organisational demands. Demands relating to organisational factors were categorised into five main themes: *new organisational culture*; *developing relationships*; *clubs versus international development programmes*; *lack of transparency*; and *club level demands*. These were underpinned by five situational properties: *novelty*; *event uncertainty*; *imminence*; *ambiguity*; and *inadequate preparation*. According to coaches, the novelty and imminence of performing within their *new organisational culture* was a major demand for players, “For a player, at any level, to be wearing that badge and representing your country is a huge pressure. 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

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

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

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

Personal demands. The participating coaches discussed two main personal demands relating to the CIT: *expectations of others*; and *education*. These were underpinned by three situational properties: *novelty*; *duration*; and *timing in relation to life cycle*. The coaches indicated how the CIT affected players' social status and external stakeholders' expectations regarding their anticipated career pathway. For example, "We see it all the time with parents now, putting out that their son has been selected for their national team all over social media. So straight away they're putting more pressure on the boy", and, "Even agents are throwing themselves at players, because if they get an international cap, then their value goes up and the agent makes more money." For players who were new to the international environment, being thrust into the spotlight and "receiving all this unwanted attention, on top of the need to balance football with schoolwork and life outside football" was perceived as extremely challenging. Regarding *education*, coaches discussed their reluctance for players to engage in schoolwork on international duty, and the impact this may have on their long-term future, "Dragging them out of a training session to do something as important as an exam, 'cos they're so vital now for jobs and getting into university. What are their concentration levels like? I'm a bit mixed on that one." Both club and international coaches reported having first-hand experience of the strain personal demands placed on players. Specifically, they emphasised the need for players to stay grounded and balance international football with education in order to repeatedly make the transition to future international squads, "It's about being aware of where you are in your development. Yes, we want you to be an international footballer, but you also need to complete your coursework to get in the international team."

Discussion

Given their frequency and perceived importance in holistic athlete development, researchers have begun to examine the demands associated with within-career transitions (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2020; Wylleman et al., 2013). These investigations have so far provided a better understanding of the potentially adaptive or debilitating nature of within-career transition

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

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

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

International coaches in our study also recognised the importance of acculturation during CITs. They emphasised the need for new international players to adapt to the novel organisational culture quickly through developing coach and teammate relationships, managing performance demands (e.g., higher calibre opponents, a new football education), and gaining international experience. Specifically, from the under 17-age group onwards, players reported balancing their ongoing international development with the need to achieve results and qualify for tournaments. This contrasted with the organisational culture at club level, where competitive 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

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

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

In the current study, we identified the challenge of identity associated with becoming an international footballer as a pertinent factor of the CIT. Specifically, players discussed how the situational properties associated with identity change (e.g., its duration) led to confusion over whether the transition was considered as complete or successful (e.g., whether they could call 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

transition). Encompassing cross-sectional situational properties of the CIT aligns with a CMRT framework (Lazarus, 1999), which is crucial in understanding the transitional experiences and transactional pathways of athletes across all age levels and sports (Rumbold et al., 2020). Our research focused on specific elements of the transition process (i.e., environmental demands, individual perceptions, and situational properties) rather than the overarching experience of the CIT. Nevertheless, in line with Drew et al.'s (2019) recent calls for transition researchers to move beyond "snapshot" approaches to capture the dynamic and holistic nature of the transition process, we acknowledge the retrospective and cross-sectional nature of this study may be considered as a limitation. However, given the unique and unexplored nature of the CIT in comparison to other normative transitions, our approach has facilitated critical insights into the demands that youth footballers experience when attempting to make this transition. Additionally, through detailing the CIT process from multiple perspectives, we aligned with recent recommendations in the transition literature to provide more context-specific knowledge beyond normative transition frameworks (e.g., Devaney et al., 2018; Stambulova et al., 2020).

Future Directions

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

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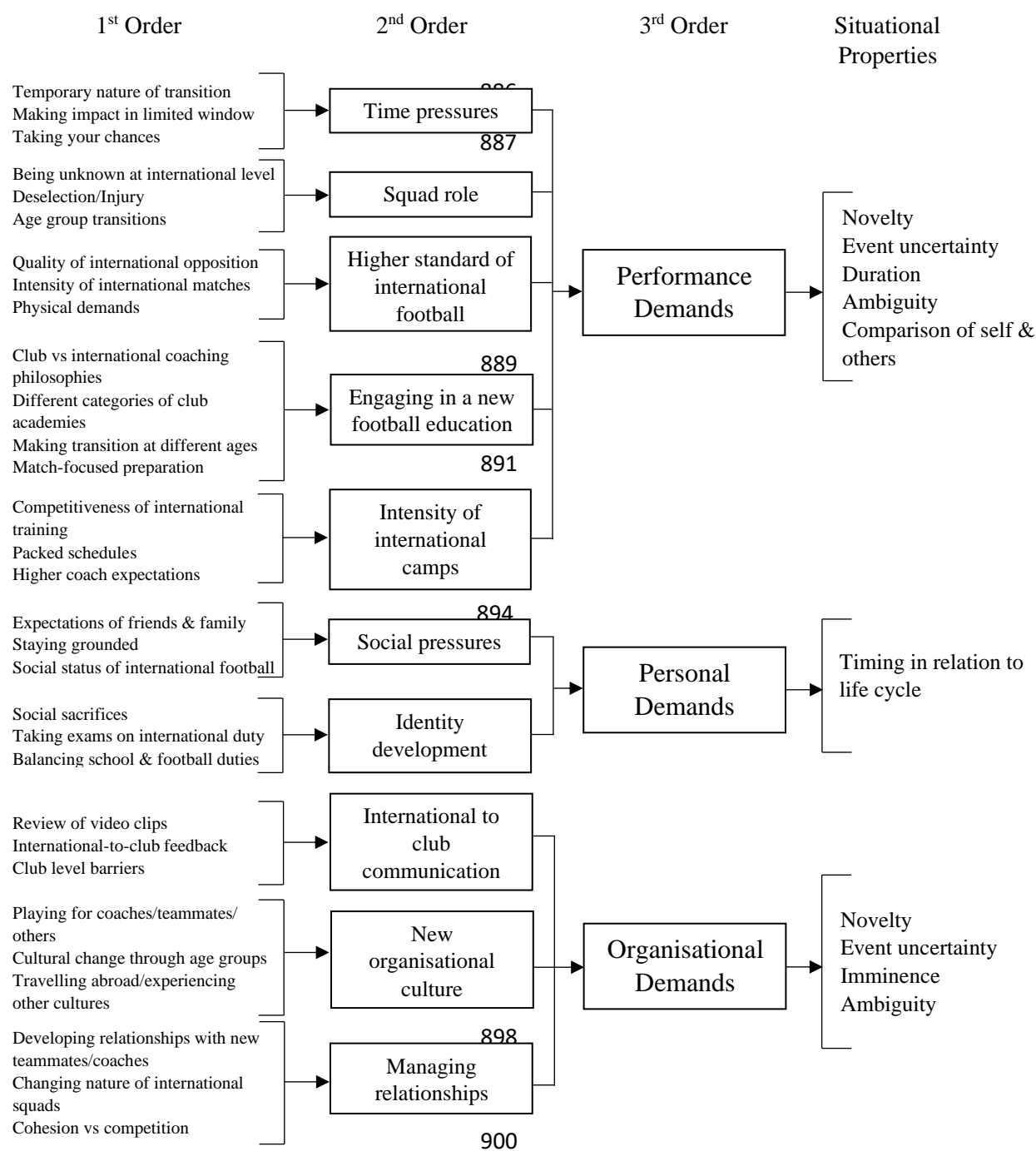
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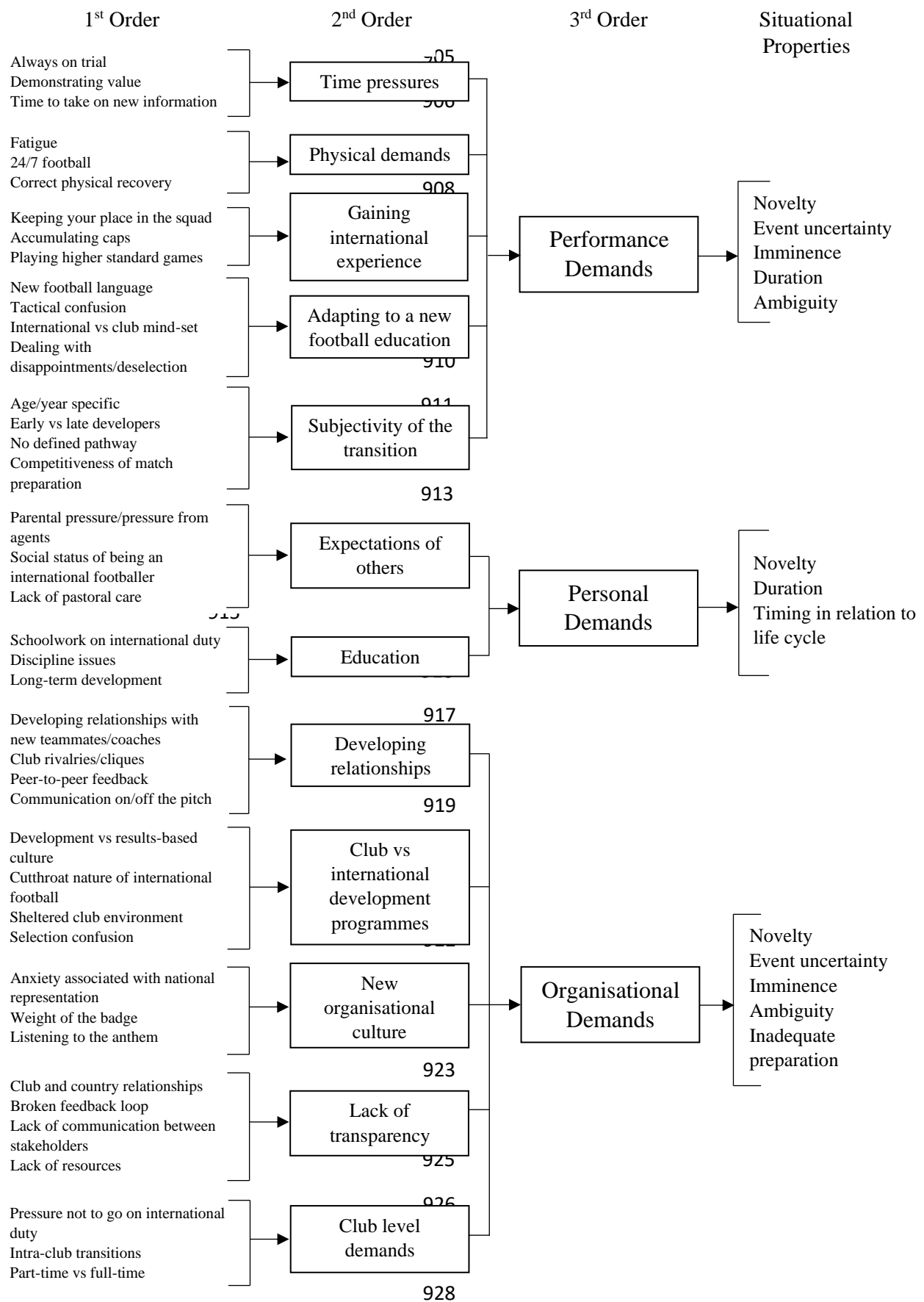


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902 *Figure 1. Club-to-international transitional demands and situational properties: Players.*

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