

## Transitions Theory for left-behind women during migration

Higinio Fernández-Sánchez,<sup>1</sup> Joanne Olson,<sup>1</sup> Bukola Salami,<sup>1</sup> Jordana Salma<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Alberta, Faculty of Nursing, Edmonton Clinic Health Academy, Edmonton, Alberta, Canadá.

Correspondence: higinio@ualberta.ca (Higinio Fernández-Sánchez)

### Abstract

**Approach:** Meleis' Transitions Theory can help us to understand the transition experiences of women left behind while their partners migrate across international borders. **Development:** This article develops a theoretical foundation for research examining the transition experiences of left-behind women in the context of migration. An analysis and evaluation of Transitions Theory was undertaken using Fawcett's criteria. This theoretical exploration found Transitions Theory suitable to guide future research on left-behind women. However, we argue that the concepts of identity characteristics, systems of domination, and interaction can enhance the theory to help shed light on whether multiple transitions are being experienced and how these transitions interact with one another. **Conclusions:** This article found that examining the experiences of women who are left-behind while their partners migrate across international borders is feasible. The ultimate outcomes of such research may include strategies for promoting health for these women and their families.

**Keywords:** Migration. Transitions Theory. Theory Analysis. Theory Evaluation. Women's health. Left-behind.

### Introduction

Meleis' MTT (MTT) has been widely used in nursing research and practice. This may be the case as nursing professionals are constantly confronted with situations that involve one or more complex situational experiences.<sup>1</sup> According to Chick and Meleis a transition is defined as a "passage from one life phase, condition, or status to another," as "periods in between fairly stable states".<sup>2</sup> Transitions can occur "independently or simultaneously at different stages of life and within diverse contexts, such as transitions during migration processes".<sup>3</sup> There is a special interest in studying left-behind family members across transnational spaces, especially women who are left behind, for short or prolonged periods, while their partners leave their country of origin to cross international borders.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, little is known about the transition experiences of LBW at the time of their partners' departure, during the migration period and then again at their partners' return post-migration.

For the past decade, the separation of families during transnational migration has been an important and emerging area of interest for the global development agenda. This might be due to the number of people leaving their places of origin to live and work in foreign countries. In 2017, the International Migration Report estimated some 258 million international migrants worldwide.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the International Organization for Migration estimated nearly 193 million family members were left behind in their country of origin by migrant workers.<sup>6</sup>

A literature review of 54 studies on LBW (LBW) shows an increase in the women's roles and responsibilities while their partners are away, which may lead to poor mental health outcomes such as stress, anxiety, and depression.<sup>4</sup> However, the partners' absence can also play an important positive role in terms of women's self-esteem, empowerment, and autonomy (i.e., decision-making, freedom of movement, economic autonomy). Furthermore, only a few scholars report theoretical frameworks to guide their work.<sup>4</sup> Most studies have relied upon a transnational migration, stress, family planning, and gender lens. Despite the broad range of literature on LBW, to the best of our knowledge such research to date has not taken a transitional approach. Understanding the transition experiences of left-behind societies during international migration, women, is essential to establish a representation of their existing condition.

Given the importance of facilitating a healthy transition for LBW before, during, and after their partners' migration journey, the purpose of this article is to develop a theoretical foundation for research examining the transition experiences of LBW immigration. First, we offer an analysis of Meleis' MTT. We then provide a thorough evaluation of the theory using specific criteria as proposed by Fawcett: (a) significance, (b) internal consistency, (c) parsimony, (d) testability: middle-range theories, (e) empirical adequacy: middle-range theories, and (f) pragmatic adequacy.<sup>7</sup> Finally, we discuss how and why this theoretical foundation is a suitable guide for future nursing research on LBW.

## Background to Theory Analysis

MTT was developed to understand the transition experiences of individuals, to facilitate transitions, and to promote well-being and empowerment of the effects of change before, during, and after a transition experience.<sup>8</sup> Although this theory has been used to guide nursing research with different populations, no formal evaluation thereof has been published in the context of migration. Therefore, we conducted an analysis and evaluation of the MTT using the framework proposed by Fawcett.<sup>7</sup> This consisted of analyzing and evaluating concepts of the theory; this was appropriate as the selected concepts are those most important for explaining the phenomenon of interest, namely situational transitions experienced by LBW during migration. We employed Fawcett's criteria because they offer detailed mechanisms for analyzing and evaluating middle-range theories.<sup>7</sup> According to this framework, the analysis is based on objective descriptions of theories, while the evaluation allows for judgments about the level to which nursing theories meet certain criteria. The conclusions from this analysis evaluation will later be used as a basis for deciding if the concepts from the middle-range theory can guide future research on transitions experienced by LBW.

### Analysis of Meleis' MTT

According to Fawcett, analyzing theories involves an unbiased and impartial description of the theories. In this section, we give a summary of the historical evolution of MTT including the theory development approach employed by Meleis, foundational elements of the theory's philosophical underpinnings, and relational statements between the major propositions and concepts.<sup>7</sup>

MTT began its development in the mid-1960s, when Meleis was working on her doctoral education. In the 1970s, her theoretical thinking led her to focus on theories and research focusing on individuals who experienced unhealthy transitions. By the 1980s, her research shifted to immigrants and their health.<sup>9</sup> Meleis established the nursing therapeutic from the role supplementation of nursing. Her theory was subsequently widely utilized to guide research projects, as in the case of Clingerman's<sup>10</sup> work on farm worker women experiencing migration transitions. Thereafter, Meleis initiated a systematic literature review to determine how extensive transitions had been used as a concept or framework in the nursing literature.<sup>11</sup> In 2000, Meleis et al. developed the MTT, built from empirical evidence from several research studies including culturally diverse groups in transition.<sup>12</sup> Meleis established the goals of the MTT "to describe triggers, to anticipate experience, to predict outcomes, and to provide guidelines for nursing interventions"<sup>13</sup> and to "ensure healthy processes and outcomes for the changes that patients and families experience".<sup>14</sup>

For the theory to accomplish such goals, Meleis relied on the lived experiences of individuals to develop the concept of transitions in conjunction with the perceived view paradigm, which produces scientific knowledge from theoretical structures that acknowledge individuals have multiple realities.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, this paradigm assisted her to relate the nature of the life world and the experience of going through transi-

tions.<sup>13</sup> Meleis redefined the concept of transition to broaden her understanding of transitions through different lenses (i.e., race, gender), as suggested by post-colonial feminist theory. This led the MTT to focus on the biopsychosocial and cultural aspects of an individual's well-being.<sup>13</sup>

MTT suggests four types of transitions: (a) developmental transitions, (b) health and illness, (c) situational, and (d) organizational.<sup>8</sup> Developmental transitions are described as significant life events of a person, such as transitioning from childhood to adolescence. Health and illness transitions refer to an unstable period, such as when receiving a diagnosis of chronic illness. Organizational transitions indicate changing environmental states that disturb the lives of individuals. Lastly, situational transitions may include events such as migrating from one place to another.

MTT indicates these transitions can lead to multiple response patterns, showing that transitions may occur simultaneously, sequentially, and be related or unrelated to each other.<sup>8,9,16</sup> For example, the degree to which an individual is engaged with the transition will depend on the extent of their awareness of its arising.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the result or outcomes from transition experiences are dependent on the nature of the transitions, and these can be positively or negatively influenced by the social, political, and cultural context of the person. Even though the major assumptions underlying the theory suggest that an individual will experience different transitions throughout their life span, they also indicate everyone will experience transitions differently.<sup>13</sup>

A final component of the MTT focuses on the conditions (facilitators and inhibitors) surrounding the transitions.<sup>9,12</sup> These conditions can work together to either simplify or obstruct the transition experience. They involve personal meanings, such as cultural beliefs and attitudes, socioeconomic status, preparation and knowledge, the community, society, and nursing therapeutics.<sup>8,17,18</sup> Finally, according to Meleis, process and outcome indicators indicate the patterns of response to a transition experience.<sup>16</sup> Process indicators refer to but are not limited to the feeling of connectedness, developing confidence, and learning to cope with the changes being experienced. Outcome indicators denote an individual mastering learned skills to cope with new situations and experiences. Early identification of process indicators is important to those providing support to persons experiencing transitions as they try to influence positive outcome indicators and thus support healthy transitions.

### Evaluation of Meleis' MTT

According to Fawcett, evaluating theories is important because it allows for critical appraisal of the structure and processes that theorists used to build theories.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, she offers specific steps as to how one might go about doing this, as follows: (a) describe the significance of the theory, (b) reflect on the internal consistency of the theory, (c) assess for parsimony or clarity of statements and phenomena of interest, (d) examine testability of the middle-range theory, (e) explore empirical adequacy of the middle-range theory, and (f) search for pragmatics adequacy. The next section employs these steps to evaluate Meleis' MTT.

*Significance.* Social and theoretical significance refers to the

relevance of the theory to society and its relation to knowledge development in nursing.<sup>7</sup> This is achieved when special contributions of the theory are identified in the literature. The theoretical significance of MTT relies on its contribution to nursing knowledge development by providing ways of understanding transition experiences. For example, the philosophical roots<sup>9</sup> and the conceptual origins of the theory are explicitly described.<sup>13</sup> The theory was founded under the model that embodies transition conditions (i.e. emotional); indicators of healthy transition (i.e. subjective well-being) universal properties (i.e. change in identity); transition types (i.e. situational); and how nurses can intervene or nursing therapeutics (i.e. promote).<sup>14</sup>

The social significance of MTT rests in understanding transition experiences to design, implement, and evaluate nursing interventions that can positively influence healthy transitions. In the case of situational transitions, many scholars have identified the social contributions of the theory. For example, this concept has been conceptualized and operationalized in different settings, including migration.<sup>9</sup> These types of transitions appear to be congruent with the experiences (i.e. perceptions) of LBW in the sense that these women go through a period of transition when their partners migrate. However, even though their transition experience has a start and an end, the women live, confront, and cope through the event differently depending on their own properties and conditions. Meleis states that “nurses are at the center of the changes and the process of transition and have always supported individuals preparing for and facing changes”.<sup>14</sup>

*Internal consistency.* The internal consistency principle demands congruence between the philosophical statements, concepts, and proposition of the theoretical model and theory.<sup>7</sup> The MTT possesses a small number of concepts, which are clearly defined. For instance, Chick and Meleis defined transitions as “a passage from one life phase, condition, or status to another”, and situational transitions as “experiences and responses to life changes” such as migrating.<sup>2</sup> The theory details the relationship among the concepts and inconsistencies in relational propositions are not evident. For example, the theory incorporates properties that may be influenced by personal, community, societal, or global conditions that can explain the kind of transition being experienced. Those properties are time span (from the moment an event or situation comes to the awareness of an individual), process (the experience is dynamic and fluid), disconnectedness (a sense of loss), awareness (knowledge of the situation), and milestones (turning point).<sup>13</sup>

The theory’s assumptions that can closely relate to LBW are: “a human being’s responses are shaped by interactions with significant others and reference groups”; “change through situations triggers a process that begins at or before and extends beyond the event time”; “outcomes of the experience of the transition are shaped by the nature of the experience”; and “individuals have the capacity to learn and enact new roles influenced by their environment”.<sup>13</sup> The relationship between the concepts and propositions could explain why some of the LBW feel emotionally distressed while others gain more autonomy during the transition periods when their husbands migrate and when they return home.<sup>19,20</sup>

*Parsimony.* Parsimony is the notion that few ideas are needed

to describe the phenomena of interest; however, the theorist should also avoid over generalizing the concepts and propositions.<sup>7</sup> In line with these criteria, Meleis uses diagrams to describe the concepts in her theory in a clear and simple way.<sup>21</sup> MTT provides a theoretical framework for nurse researchers to generate new evidence and knowledge.<sup>14</sup> MTT can assist in explaining the transition experiences of LBW. In addition, it can help us to understand the type of transition, whether healthy or unhealthy, based on the women’s responses and specific properties.

*Testability: Middle-range Theories.* According to Fawcett, theory concepts “should all have operational definitions and their propositions should be amenable to direct empirical testing”.<sup>7</sup> The research methodology used to develop MTT reflects that of a middle-range theory. While grand theories provide an overall conceptual framework for the nursing discipline and cannot be empirically tested, MTT has a limited number of concepts and testable connections.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, MTT covers different types of transitions within numerous nursing situations, whereas situation-specific or practice theories focus only on a particular population within a specific time and place.<sup>13</sup> The MTT was articulated and theorized through inductive methods and using existing research literature, which “provides a map to understand, communicate and interpret what populations experience when faced with changes that influence health outcomes”.<sup>23</sup>

A compilation of scientific evidence is available as many researchers and scholars have used this theory as a framework to explain transition experiences indifferent populations. For instance, Marnocha<sup>24</sup> operationalized the properties of MTT to interpret the experiences of left-behind wives of deployed soldiers. She found these women experienced stressors from the initial news of deployment to after deployment. The women expressed that having to care for their home and family was causing them to manifest physical and emotional symptoms. Marnocha suggests the need for further research on the experiences of the wives on the reintegration of the husband into the family.

Moreover, many situation-specific theories have been born from MTT.<sup>7</sup> For example, Im and Meleis proposed the situation-specific theory of Korean immigrant women’s menopausal transition based on the discovery that women prioritized their transitions;<sup>25</sup> for instance, they paid more attention to their immigrant transitions than to their menopausal transition. These authors suggest this might be due to the women’s cultural condition. Furthermore, they found several attributing factors (i.e. gender) that shaped the transition experience for the women.

*Empirical Adequacy: Middle-range Theories.* The empirical adequacy factor for middle-range theories involves congruency between the theory propositions and the findings of studies that have utilized this as a theoretical framework.<sup>10</sup> Many investigators who utilized MTT in their work employed inductive methods.<sup>10</sup> For example, Aroian<sup>26</sup> made suitable use of the theory to guide the qualitative design for her study about psychological adaptation to migration and resettlement. Even though the primary focus of this study was not on LBW, it was conducted in the context of migration. In general, the findings provide a comprehensive overview of how the theory

can help understand transitions within a migration context. Situation-specific theories have also been derived from MTT. For instance, Clingerman proposes a situation-specific theory of migration transition for Mexican-American farm worker women in the United States.<sup>10</sup> She describes how this situation-specific theory provides a practical standpoint on migration transitions that can help health care professionals design health interventions.

*Pragmaticadequacy.* The primary focus of the pragmatic adequacy component to theory evaluation is on the usefulness of the theory in nursing practice.<sup>7</sup> Due to the practicality of middle-range theories, it is feasible to implement MTT to prevent and treat unhealthy transitions left-behind women may encounter. For instance, many scholars report mental health issues (i.e. feelings of abandonment) in women who are left behind while their partners go across international borders.<sup>27,28</sup> Thus, early identification of the nature of the transition will allow the nurse to plan for and implement nursing interventions. This is aligned with the nursing process and, therefore, is compatible with the beliefs of nursing practice. The outcomes in the MTT are assessed through specific indicators (mastery, fluid integrative identities), which allows for differentiating circumstances when the theory is not being used.

### MTT to Understand the Lives of LBW

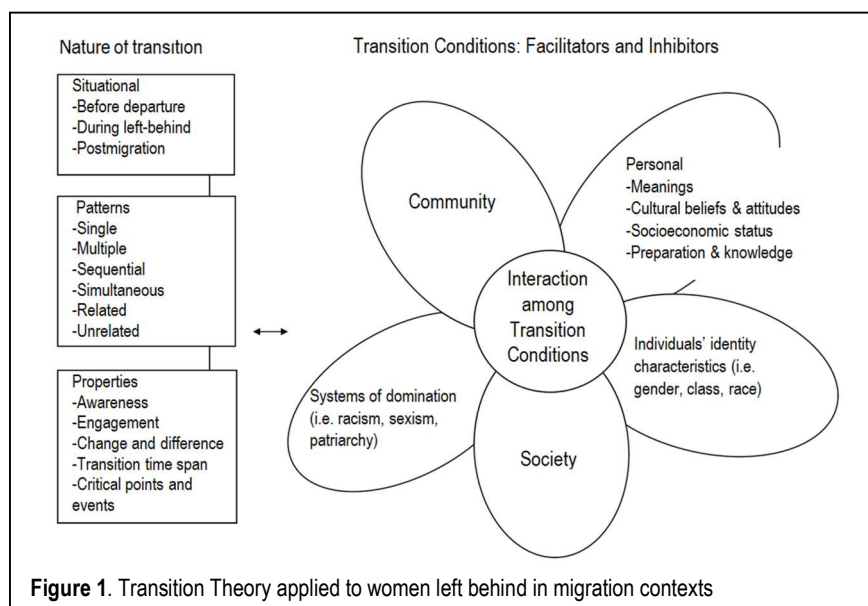
This article develops a theoretical foundation for research examining the transition experiences of LBW. Fawcett's framework was used to analyze and evaluate certain concepts of MTT.<sup>7</sup> Overall, the scope of MTT is consistent with the conceptualization and operationalization of a middle-range theory. Given its simplicity and limited number of variables, MTT has been tested in theory-based research.<sup>8,24,25</sup> MTT classifies the existence of transitions as simultaneous, individual, and occurring in multiples, and notes that transitions may be related or unrelated to each other. This classification allows us to acknowledge that women whose partners migrate across borders may encounter multiple transitions at the same time. Such transitions may be influenced by different properties explained by MTT. For example, women may experience additional transitions, such as being diagnosed with a chronic disease (i.e. diabetes), that could shape the way they experience the left-behind transition. Herein lies the importance of understanding transitions as phenomena that are complex, interrelated, and context based.

This article also provides insight into how distinct properties or indicators may shape the models people use to react to transitions. The concept of awareness can indicate that women who are conscious of a future transition may begin to prepare themselves physically, socially, and psychologically for the transition. This preparation could allow them to become more engaged during the transition process. We can theorize that women who become aware of the upcoming migration process

of their partners may gather useful resources that would ultimately help them be better prepared for the transition.

MTT enables us to recognize the political, social, and cultural factors surrounding an individual that may influence how a situational transition is experienced. For instance, community resources available to individuals who live in an urban setting as compared to those who live in a rural setting can impact how they live through transitions. This assumption of MTT leads us to deduce that the absence of community-based health services may result in unfavorable health outcomes for LBW, while its provision may support favorable health outcomes. This is crucial, as research on LBW has emphasized on the mental health (i.e. stress), and the sexual and reproductive health problems of these women while their migrant partner is away.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, the concept of *Transition Conditions* as proposed by MTT lacks the complexity in which the personal, community, societal, and global conditions of a person may interact to shape the left-behind transition experience. Living in marginalized contexts (community) may interact with the women's social economic status (personal) to impact the left-behind experience. In addition, these conditions do not include the individuals' identity characteristics (i.e. class, gender) nor systems of domination (i.e. racism, patriarchy). This is essential as literature shows that women are often left-behind in patriarchal societies.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, we propose new concepts to MTT to fully capture the transition experiences of LBW. Figure 1 shows the concepts suggested to MTT (a) identity characteristics, (b) systems of domination, and (c) the interaction among transition conditions. Our suggestions are in line with the research of Im and Meleis, where the authors refined a transition model for low-income Korean immigrant women in the US.<sup>25</sup> The authors saw the need to include additional Transition Conditions, such as gender and context. Chang and Im developed a theoretical model to explain the relationship between immigration transition to the USA and midlife women's physical activity.<sup>29</sup> This model involved seven new concepts, including transition time, length of stay in the USA, the level of acculturation, and women's physical activity. Similarly, Clingerman proposed a situation-specific theory based on MTT to study the migration transition of Mexican American migrant workers.<sup>10</sup> Faith-based, community outreach resources, community respect and documentation status to transition conditions were among the proposed concepts. Im developed a situation-specific theory on physical activity experience of Korean immigrant midlife women with its development process.<sup>3</sup> It involved 11 additional concepts, including English as second language curricula-based programs, and other related outcomes (i.e. body mass index). Overall, the MTT has proven to be suitable for research across contexts and populations, however, adapting this theory has been necessary to better understand the transition experiences.



Based on this analysis and evaluation, our proposed concepts can help enhance MTT to better inform a program of research about LBW. By adopting these concepts, MTT can aid in answering research questions regarding this specific population, for instance, what are the transition experiences (before and after) of LBW? What is the transition(s)' properties (i.e. time span, process), and how do they influence the transition(s) experience? What are the women's transition conditions and how do they interact to shape the transition experience? We suggest that by providing answers to these questions through a transitional lens, we can enrich the research agenda for this specific population and help design nursing interventions to ensure women cope with the health changes they encounter during the transition(s). Furthermore, a nursing care program can be developed to help women prepare for the transition(s) and to care for their wellbeing before, during and after the transition of being left-behind. Designing, implementing, and evaluating health interventions can allow healthcare professionals to facilitate LBW's transition(s) experience.

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The proposed changes are in line with other researchers who have advanced theoretical models and theories across global settings. Some have developed situation specific theories to increase the use of contraceptive methods for the prevention of unplanned pregnancies in young women.<sup>30</sup> Others have created models to explain health behaviors, nutrition and exercise.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, middle-range theories have been constructed to study the resilience for alcohol consumption in schoolchildren.<sup>32</sup> Research requires a solid theoretical foundation, hence the importance of producing models and theories that can help inform and guide research processes.

## Conclusions

This theoretical work demonstrated that examining the experiences of LBW through the lens MTT is feasible. The transitions framework has proven to deliver a clear and direct tie between research and nursing practice, thus allowing nurses to focus on the factors that may directly influence the transition experiences of individuals. Furthermore, we argue that MTT is suitable for use as a guide for transnational research, by providing a theoretical framework that may serve as a basis for exploring the socio-political, cultural, and historic environments surrounding LBW. However, to entirely capture the left-behind experience, we propose three additional concepts: identity characteristics, systems of domination, and the interaction among transition conditions. This can generate significant knowledge that can later be translated to the communities where migration is an issue.

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