

A visual-analytical approach to phases of transition in people's life paths

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RiDESt - Persone in Cambiamento | Menschen in Übergang | People in Transition is an applied research project in the field of service design, mainly carried out from August 2019 to February 2021. The interdisciplinary team aimed to investigate whether and how social services for people in situations of personal change can be designed and established. — Society is changing: individual non-consistent life paths with frequent phases of reorientation are becoming the rule. However, Global North's welfare systems and social services are still based on clearly defined stages of life that seemingly follow one another (Schubert et al. 2013). If one does not react to fit into the designated categories, difficulties emerge, the emotional burden increases and the uncertainty arises

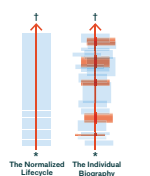
as to whom or to which institution one can turn to (Pfaff 2018). — The project aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the individual experience and resulting social dynamics of life path transitions and, based on this, providing recommendations to social service operators. Besides conducting an ethnographic study in a social service department as well as a statistical investigation, design research methods were used and developed to investigate how public service providers can offer support to people in transition; to explore the general visual-aesthetic design (see figures below), to conceptualize service concepts and to foster the exchange among the different stakeholders. Co-creative workshops and design interventions enable people to reflect on their situation

(Standort & Stappers 2014) and facilitate social service providers as well as municipalities to better understand their structural challenges (Junginger 2017). — The Transition Sheet was developed as a tool for workshop participants that helped them to explore their transition change graphically and to identify action approaches. The form was further used in the course of the project and is part of the final service concepts presented to the municipality and other stakeholders. The transition sheet is to be provided to social service operators as a tool to assess their clients' transitions and therefore will be further tested. The method presented here serves as an example of the visual-analytical approach to the phenomenon of life path transitions.

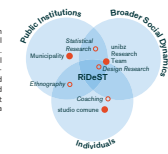


Research Topic

The **normalized lifecycle** as a smooth chain of reversed institutions is what most social service providers understand as the track where people have to be kept or brought back on (Wienhardt & Walther 2016). However, **individual biographies** often are characterized by phases of change that are not necessarily seen as failure but those affected. Yet, to manage these transitions successfully, administrative support is vital.



The project is located in the intersection between public institutions, individual people and the broader social dynamics. These are the spheres that define personal transition phases and potential corresponding service offers. The **different actors** (red dots) and activity fields (red rings) involved in the research project represent and target on specific areas of this field to facilitate a holistic understanding.



Workshop Material

"Transition Sheet"



The **Transition Sheet** how it is presented here was part of a workshop in February 2019 conducted by the unibz researchers and studio teams. Among other tasks it served as a visual analysis tool for the personal transition. The participants completed it mostly independently while support was granted anytime. At first, the purpose of the sheet was mainly to gain an understanding of transitions in general; however, it became apparent that it can also be a beneficial tool for service providers.

1. **The Individual:** The first four tasks fostered a general reflection of the individual change describing the transition, marking the fields and studio teams. Among other tasks it served as a visual analysis tool for the personal transition. The participants completed it mostly independently while support was granted anytime. At first, the purpose of the sheet was mainly to gain an understanding of transitions in general; however, it became apparent that it can also be a beneficial tool for service providers.

2. **The Network:** In this task tools were given to sketch the network that is connected to the transition phase. Participants located involved actors, drew connections, marked referring emotions, defined decision-makers and triggers and added a magic moment for a desirable turn. The analysis of the personal network crucially helps to assess the individual conflicts, changes and problem solving resources (Hill 2002; Rempel et al. 2007).

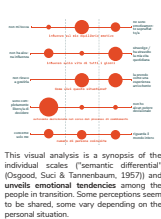


3. **The Next Steps:** The last part referred to a collaborative exercise moderated by the project team members of the social cooperative studio teams (inspired by Feodorwagner, see Goldsmith 2003). The participants defined their goals, asked for suggestions from the others and defined the next steps. This aimed at gaining personal agency through proactively shaping and creating alternative courses of action (compare Raiterhuber 2011).

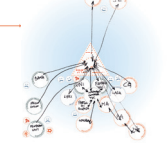
Visual Workshop Evaluation



By overlapping the entries it is apparent that each **individual change** shows a **specific shape** but still certain main areas can be identified. Such a condensed visual format could possibly give a first understanding of the change situation's character and the areas where support might be needed.



This visual analysis is a synthesis of a general reflection of the individual change (Osipod, Suci & Tammenbaum, 1997) and **unveils emotional tendencies** among the people in transition. Some perceptions seem to be shared, some vary depending on the personal situation.



Putting the individual timelines in relation it became clear that every person and therefore every change situation refers to a **different time scale**. Also the degree of detail in the transition depiction varies.

Conclusion & Next Steps

Even if the abstract graphical approach initially seemed to be inconvenient, sophisticated and not very natural for people who are unfamiliar with graphical expression (Vesturani et al. 2019), the transition sheets turned out to be a helpful tool to find more clarity in the complexity of the participants' change situations. When the sheets were applied in the further course of the project, it became apparent that the completion was a

challenging task, yet valuable as a trigger for the examination of intricate life constellations. The concept was brought to discussion in the project's steering committee and as they – from a practical perspective – also considered it as a useful addition to service portfolios, it was decided to further test the sheet with local NGOs that offer social support. The various tasks and the descriptions will be refined. Furthermore, it has to be investigated which settings – especially with or without assistance – enable the most effective completion of the form and therefore a helpful exploration of the personal transition. These investigations aim at understanding how this design approach could

support social service employees to better comprehend the clients' life situations and to identify intervention points.

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