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In and out of place: correspondence as a means to understand and redesign complexity

Paul Wilson[a]*, E. Kuure[b] and S. Chivuno-Kuria[c]

[a]*School of Design, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK;* [b]*Faculty of Art and Design, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland;* [c] *Faculty of Computing and Informatics, Namibia University of Science and Technology, Windhoek, Namibia*

* texpw@leeds.ac.uk; School of Design, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT

Paul Wilson is a lecturer in the School of Design at the University of Leeds. His research explores the intersections of language, landscape, community and communication, and much of his work orbits ideas and ideals of utopianism found in manifestations of utopian action.

Essi Kuure is a researcher with the Service Design Research Team and a PhD candidate at the Culture-Based Service Design Doctoral Programme of the University of Lapland, Finland. She focuses on creating new knowledge and methods of service design and applying practice-based design research to social as well as industrial contexts.

Shilumbe Chivuno−Kuria is a computer science lecturer at Namibia University of Science and Technology. She is a PhD computer science candidate at NUST. Her research interests include co−designing technology with underprivileged communities.

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New methods are needed to understand, visualise and work around complexities of socially oriented design research and practice. This chapter reflects upon the experiences of researchers undertaking work for a research and innovation staff exchange project and makes use of a lens of critical complexity to determine scenarios that frame the project's significant moments. The chapter discusses complexities that are related to project work in three scenarios – *institution*, *individual* and *activity* – and reveals how these complexities were experienced and related to in the case of the project Participatory Tools for Human Development with the Youth (PARTY). As an outcome, the chapter presents the people, objectives and methods (POM) framework, a method for identifying and understanding the challenges that complexities can present to designers as they aim to grasp what is to be – in place, out of place and in place with others.

Keywords: correspondence; design anthropology; design research; fieldwork; scenario mapping; situated design; stakeholders

Introduction

This chapter aims to explore ideas and experiences of complexity within the context of multicultural and multidisciplinary project work from the perspectives of three different researchers, each living in different countries and working for three different academic organisations. Complexity is a key characteristic of any design activity and, as design turns towards a social mode of operation and application, such complexities are often located in the details of people's experiences and everyday lives. The increase in collaborative, interdisciplinary design research as a response to both historical and emerging sociocultural problems (and their own respective complexities) is one model through which such complicated and difficult issues can be addressed.

The Participatory Tools for Human Development with the Youth (PARTY) project made use of an approach which utilised globally distributed knowledge and

expertise and the figure of a mobilised, peripatetic researcher, together with intensive moments of co-creation which were based around participants' lived experience to address challenges faced by the San youth in Namibia and South Africa. Such an approach offers up distinct problematics both in terms of its research aim and its practical operation, and this chapter looks to reflect critically upon the experiences of the authors as researchers involved in PARTY. Such experiences form the basis of the development of a series of sensorily informed reflexive mapping activities which establish three broad scenarios of complexity (*institution*, *individual* and *activity*) and their attendant characteristics of people, objectives and methods (POM). By employing the concept of 'correspondence' (Gatt and Ingold, 2013) as a method of analysis, a POM framework is established which identifies significant forms that such correspondence has taken within the PARTY project and reflects upon their value and importance. As design research seeks to address new topics of complexity, such approaches are useful in that they may offer practical tools to both understand and address the tangle of correspondences which naturally emerge in socially oriented design practice.

Design in a social mode

We have seen a shift in design and design research towards ideas of 'local knowledge' (Hunt, 2011, p. 34), centred on ideas of the social in which models and methods of observation – alongside notions of the everyday – allow for a reconsideration of how we can value such knowledge. This shift towards the social is matched by a reappraisal of the motives for such a move on the part of design research. It's clear that there is a drive for 'doing good', and notions of philanthropy and idealism

are at the heart of much contemporary 'social' design, which, in turn, raises the need for critical questioning around where power is situated and how it is negotiated among and within the range of design activities which are then undertaken. Fuad-Luke (2009) acknowledges design's social turn as an opportunity to challenge previously dominant hierarchies and their established centres of power and that, to be affective, any associated design activities require both top-down and bottom-up approaches which act to 'de-centre' such structures via participation and inclusion. With this, he argues, comes a chance to affect meaningful change through a concurrent renegotiation of an individual participant's own agency within related processes and practices. Hunt (2011) is critical of the speed of this move towards social practices of design, as problematic and potentially superficial approaches to a notional ethnographic method may result. Nussbaum (2010) likewise raises questions about such a philanthropic 'turn', asking whether the shadow of a colonial impulse is still present in fundamental concepts of design, like who defines a problem and frames its solutions, which remain fixed. For all of the good intentions or well-meaning aspirations we might witness, the attendant expertise is still centred in one place and 'shipped in' to the other. Such relationships, Nussbaum argues, are loaded with ideas of power and responsibility and a sense of agency around which ideas of who is best equipped to determine and deliver are positioned. Here, the notion of a design 'intervention' is fundamental – the language itself echoes past histories of colonial power and of a top-down approach which is often manifest in an attitude that excludes local expertise or knowledge (however well-intentioned the activity). For Nussbaum, there is a need to more fully understand such responsibilities in the field and to develop a sense of humility and grace as a counterpoint to the discourse of celebrating the designer's expertise as the object of

most value. To begin such a process, he suggests a focus on ideas of place and position and how we might reflect on the situation of such design activities (the *why* of selecting certain places) whilst also fostering open ideas of collaboration and reciprocity.

For some, such critical approaches are found at the interface between design and anthropology and in the possibility that design might operate in an anthropological mode in the field. Otto and Smith (2013) develop the idea for such a hybrid activity (which largely results from more anthropologists working in the design realm) and argue for design's future-focus and designers' desire to find specific answers to specific questions as things, which can inform such an approach. Change and, in particular, social change seems more viable through designerly thinking and making (Otto & Smith, 2013). Opportunities offered through design's engagement with people's everyday lives (via the things that designers make) and the ways that intervention and transformation might occur because of the collaborative creativity that design fosters are strengths of a design-led anthropology (Otto & Smith, 2013). However, they claim that design can also be informed by features of an anthropological approach: more awareness and willingness to engage with relevant theory, more consideration of cultural interpretation and making more use of the attendant opportunities for sense-making, integrating theoretical approaches more clearly and situating an informed lack of demand via a richer investigation of the past – an anticipation of the future ahead of design's making of it. Here, Otto and Smith also identify the potential opportunities for greater cultural sensitivity to be a distinct feature of a design anthropology (DA), specifically with regard to notions of cultural value. Finding such a balance could emerge from an anthropology inspired by design's focus on practice and by design taking a more critical approach to itself (Otto & Smith, 2013). Put forward here is a

model of DA centred around anthropology's style of doing and being, modified by design's 'ways of thinking and planning' (Otto & Smith, 2013, p. 11) and, most significantly, design's 'relationality' (Otto & Smith, 2013, p. 18) – a complex variety of working with and for, and of 'relationships at different levels', together with their attendant risks and benefits.

Knowledge in and out of place

Pink (2015) provides a useful method which allows for an examination of experience as sensorial and is not limited only to that provided by the 'visual mode of understanding' of documentation that is most common to design methods (p. 96). In the context of the PARTY project, this allows for researchers-as-participants to make reflexive use of their own experiences of the project's complexities. Such experiences constitute a route through knowledge and memory of organisational and institutional practices which are 'emplaced' (Pink, 2015, p. 97) – situated in and through place – which is brought about by the activities and events of the project (the 'place-event').

The 'sensory knowledge' (Pink, 2015, p. 66) that is a consequence of PARTY project participation is situated in an individual's experiences of the people, places and events which constitute the project's narrative of multi-institutional, intra-cultural mobility – a movement of the researcher into and through such activities. Using an individual's sensory memory as a focus for the method of generating useful knowledge suggests three roles for such a methodological approach – understanding the 'meanings and nature of memories' (Pink, 2015, p. 44) generated by research participants, developing a means to examine the potential for sharing such memories between participants-as-researchers, and exploring auto-ethnographic methods of emplaced

sensory memory as experience. Such accounts generate what Pink has termed ‘ethnographic places’ – defining scenarios of non-physical location as a way to conceptualise and represent complex ideas of place-as-knowledge which are created when communicating experiences such as PARTY project mobilities: ‘…the combining, connecting and interweaving of theory, experience, reflection, discourse, memory and imagination’ (p. 48). For Pink, such a conceptualisation allows for a study of meaning to be generated that is relational (among people, place and institutions) and then co-created in the activity of reading and interpretation by audiences of the research (p. 49). Here we are involved in a process which seeks explicitly to understand interrelationships through an active method of representing them as ‘a unique configuration of trajectories’ (p. 49). Such accounts, therefore, ask audiences to imagine themselves as being ‘in place’ of those they are reading or viewing, as generated by the PARTY researchers.

At the intersections of design, research and practice, complexity appears to be both systematic and human related. In each case of complexity, how it is experienced and managed ultimately affects the decision-making processes, which in turn influence the outcomes of collaboration and project work. At the core of these complexities is a risk that design, research or practice could be harmful or disrespectful to the participants. Ideas and experiences of complexity also present opportunities, however, to challenge the status quo of research practice and collaboration, as through dialogue and an understanding of both individual and communal entanglements of history, the present and ideas of future it becomes possible to reveal and redesign complexities together.

The characteristics of correspondence

> 'The exchange of gifts or words in conversation sets up a correspondence in which each line is continually answerable to the others. To correspond with the world, in short, is not to describe it or represent it, but to answer to it.'
>
> (Gatt and Ingold, 2013, p. 144)

Beginning with Pink's insights, the authors worked to individually visualise their experiences of the PARTY project's complex 'place-events'. From these, three scenarios (*institution*, *individual* and *activity*) and their respective contexts were defined and developed, forming the basis of three single moments of situated complexity experienced by the PARTY researchers. Once defined, these scenarios allow for experience to be mapped according to three further sets of categorisation or characteristics: 'people' (persons participating in or contributing to the scenario's operation), 'objectives' (the aspirational goals or intentions of the scenario) and 'methods' (the means by which the scenario's objectives were met). Each was mapped individually by each researcher and a composite of their experiences of complexity within the scenarios was generated (Fig. 1) to create a formal overview of PARTY's complexities.

Figure 1. Composite scenario map of the PARTY project complexities generated from the authors' experiences.

Gatt and Ingold (2013) have written of their wish to map a relationship between design and anthropology which might further benefit both: '…not of, as, or for design, but an anthropology by means of design' (p. 141). Such an approach allows for an analysis of the experiences of PARTY researchers as a key component of this ongoing

reflection related to design for complexity, with a shift from ideas of description or representation (as the focus of any research activities) towards an idea of correspondence, which can be described as an interweaving of experience or the metaphorical line along which a gift might move: an unfolding path or network of connections along and through which a researcher (and their knowledge, skills and experiences) might move or be carried. More than an idea of or means to discuss interactions between persons, this idea of correspondence is centred around a practice of gift-giving which is open, vital and situated in both time and space. Correspondence, therefore, becomes our method of analysis, applied to the authors' map of PARTY's complexities – where moments of correspondence are also points of exchange. Such exchange, we believe, is more significant than a simple act of giving or receiving something; it is 'the possibility for selves to interpenetrate, to mingle, for each to participate in the ongoing life of the other' (Gatt & Ingold, 2013, p. 142).

As mentioned above, Gatt and Ingold's (2013) concept of correspondence can be used as a model to identify things that pass over, between and through each complexity scenario. It allows for the identification of the matter of any exchange and for describing the bond that is formed as a result (between all parties in any scenario). It results in a mesh or network along which such 'gifts' are exchanged as the basis of each scenario's complexities and their respective correspondences.

Institution – in place

The PARTY project is itself a complex object of knowledge comprising theoretical and conceptual strands together with legal, financial and ethical forces, each of which dictated an institutional response. The experiences of such forces took place across and

within spaces of bureaucracy – the offices and meeting rooms given over to organisational practices – alongside communication spaces of e-mail and telephony. Manoeuvring through such a network required a degree of understanding of the underlying social landscapes in order to generate useful outcomes with the other people whose roles dovetailed with those of the authors. Narratives of personal and professional responsibility existed alongside and in direct relation to the project's meshwork of competing institutional forces, adding further complexity.

Institutional complexity can be subdivided into two distinct categories for the PARTY project. First, inter-institutional relationships were developed as a consequence of having six distinct project partners, with the European Union as the lead organisation. Geographical (and temporal) separation creates particular experiences of collaboration and necessitates the development of methods allowing communication over such distances. Likewise, each project partner has its own sets of intra-institutional complexities influencing the researcher's experiences. In comparison to PARTY's network of global connections, home institutions are firmly situated in place and are often organisationally tangled with sets of intricate or elaborate hierarchies, together with respective processes and systems and alongside distinct institutional calendars (of being busy or quiet, open or closed). Satisfying both internal (and external) regulations and requirements (institutional and funder-determined) was an ongoing feature for the researchers and a significant characteristic of the PARTY project over its duration. Complexities also emerged in relation to the potential outlined in the PARTY project aim, which was 'to endorse human development and assist in reducing youth unemployment by increasing the involvement and inclusion of young people in service development in South Africa and Namibia by using participatory and explorative

service design tools'. This allowed multiple outcomes to be recognised over the project's duration, including the concept and experiences of researcher mobility alongside the research knowledge that would benefit San youth.

Notions of capital determine the form that correspondence takes at an institutional level within the researchers' experiences of the PARTY project. The funding awarded by the European Union moved into and through each beneficiary institution, underpinning a range of activities including the mobilities which sustained the key research activities and necessitated the use of the project's other key capital resource: people. Such complexities of money and people create a tangle of institutional relationships determined by the project's timetable and the EU's institutional requirements. The exchange of both funds and humans at an institutional level facilitated the project's development and formed the basis of PARTY's operational model. Such trajectories led to recognition and identification of unfavourable structural hierarchies in terms of the distribution and disbursement of funds, and these impacts were often felt at the institutional level.

Individual – displacement/out of place

One of the key complexities of the PARTY project was the transformation from the network as a community of circumstance (groups of individuals brought together by their relationship to each institution) to a community of action (one defined by a willingness to actively create change). Characteristics of the experiences of complexity at an individual level, therefore, centre upon the activity of the mobility where overlapping groups of individuals from across each project partner were relocated from their home institution to another destination for a period of thirty days. Each researcher

undertook mobilities, which involved travel to other institutional locations, where small teams responded to the objectives of the project and the respective work packages. At an individual level, such displacement (moving across continents, staying in unfamiliar surroundings) was often marked by quotidian matters and concerns (transport and accommodation and their associated bureaucracies) alongside those more clearly linked to, and necessary for, the project's progress – focusing on arriving at a deeper theoretical and conceptual understanding of what to do and how to achieve it. Defining workshop aims, therefore, uncovered new types of complexities and demanded new sets of activities intended to translate abstract concepts into concrete actions; it also required the recognition of ambiguities to co-create meaningful roles and relationships within the team of PARTY participants (taking into account their institutional positions and individual skills and expertise).

Correspondences, therefore, can be identified within this scenario as being constituted through an individual researcher's subject-specific knowledge and skills in relation to others on the mobility and the work package objectives. These were broad and varied and included service design, participatory design, social work, graphic design, industrial design, fashion design, computer science, education and art practice. Having teams from distinct disciplines and fields of expertise (academic, industrial, non-governmental organisations [NGOs]), together with individuals at different points in their careers, created opportunities for social and cultural correspondences and for interdisciplinary knowledge sharing. The relationships which developed as a consequence of researchers being together on mobility resulted in a synthesis of sets of disparate or previously disconnected competencies in response to the mobility's challenges, and this mesh (the giving and receiving of new knowledge among mobility

participants) that developed through mobility work resulted in an aggregation of skills whose potential offered something distinct – new strategies and tools that were created from the correspondence of expertise among individuals. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such co-work among a distinct and complex collection of individuals does result in disagreements regarding approach and direction. PARTY's mobilities placed researchers at a point of complexity clearly marked by both contemporary and historical power struggles between colonial and de-colonial practices which required acknowledgement. In such cases, the spirit of correspondence necessitates a meaningful exchange of values to achieve and maintain sustainable cooperation.

Activity – in place with others

The PARTY project is a collection and practice of a range of complex design-related activities, and the most significant, in terms of achieving the project's research objectives, is the workshop. Such an activity is focused upon a translation of theoretical and conceptual research aims and trajectories towards a performative experience which seeks to generate new knowledge and research insights. The introduction of other institutions or organisations, and their constituent participants, into this scenario results in new individuals, contexts and complexities with the need to find and utilise appropriate methods and tools through which the knowledge and experiences of those participants can be mobilised. As mentioned, such approaches were generated through the sharing of researcher knowledge and expertise, embracing creative and participatory approaches implemented within the workshop experience. The workshop itself is a complex activity whereby pre- and post-event preparation, planning, reflection and new planning meetings set up and test specific applications of methods, including ideas of

storytelling and speculative enquiry using narrative and visual methods to engage participants in a process of defining themselves relationally (in place, with others, and in terms of an imagined future). The complexity of the workshop scenario often required shifting and fluid practice of a range of roles for each researcher – from facilitator to interviewer or scribe engaged in documentation, for example. As such, the individual researchers themselves often became a site of complexity – where multiple roles and movement between distinct jobs was the norm.

The form of correspondence within the workshop scenario was determined by those points of connection between the project-related knowledge and objectives (embodied in the design research tools) and the participants' own tacit knowledge (defined by the narrative of their experiences). Such correspondences are also shaped by the pragmatic factors of the workshop's duration and location and are marked by the network of relationships and activities which facilitated a flow of information between all parties. Working with other institutions (local NGOs for example) required clear management of interactions and establishment of mutual expectations. The complexity of both power and agency required thoughtful negotiation together with an openness to how notions of respective value were to be identified for all participants. Such correspondences generate intensive knowledge production, and through design practice and methods it was possible to embody knowledge into material artefacts that allowed mutual learning and acknowledgement of capability between stakeholders. By taking sociomateriality of the practices seriously, we can also disrupt the taken-for-granted practices and the roles of the fieldwork period and co-create new ones. This kind of enhancement of local knowledge production should be a key activity in revolutionised fieldwork, where such notions of revolution become a means to engage critically with

the complexities inherent in any such situation and become a signifier for disruption which aims to create a context for change.

As Nussbaum (2010) implies, the framing of a research problem and how its solutions are arrived at is one of the key areas of complex experience that might be studied. By reflexively re-framing such a question (relating specifically to the PARTY project), we have begun a process of uncovering and of attempting to understand the range of questions which are embedded within any research activity of this kind. It is notable that each PARTY mobility was a fluid and complex site of knowledge production and had the potential to redraw approaches and methods according to the skills and knowledge of participants working on it. From Gatt and Ingold (2013) we have been able to develop ideas around the concept of 'correspondence' as a means of reframing the relationships among reflexive researcher, institution, mobility partner and research participant. We have been able to map researcher experience and – tentatively – begin a process for developing a narrative of the research community's distinct models of correspondence, which emerge from PARTY's most notable scenarios of complexity. Such complexities have a tendency to generate problems and challenges which allow us to link to questions of where a notional 'revolution' in fieldwork might be situated or found and who might be experiencing it. Such a revolution can be seen to occur within and as a consequence of the complex nature of PARTY and, in particular, as a result of the particular correspondences afforded by partners from the global south and the participants in the design workshops attended by each author. By using correspondence it is acknowledged that all are present in the complex event and are working '…in accordance with the flow of events…with an emphasis on what is produced during fieldwork.' (Otto & Smith, 2013, p.19) An approach such as the one

outlined in this text – the development of the POM framework – suggests one method for reaching a formalised and deeper understanding of such complexities and sees them as situated within an idea of 'ethnographic place' (Pink, 2013), which we regard as a shifting, agile and context-specific space.

Conclusions

As new situations and contexts for complexity emerge or appear – and as their complexities become more complex – it becomes more important to develop methods to help understand the challenges they present to designers (and design researchers), whose work necessitates close contact and recognition of the experiences they represent and present. This chapter has outlined a framework (POM) emerging as a response on the authors' part to their experiences of the PARTY project and the multifaceted sites of complexity found within such an arrangement of activities. As we have indicated, the project is bound up by an emerging network of ideas and entanglements: from ideals or visions for design's social function, to the recruitment of participating institutions and their respective staff (with their own sets of proficiencies and skills), to the enactment of a project's documentation requirements within workshops, which are embedded within the evocatively named 'mobility'. By identifying instances of 'correspondence' within each of these scenarios, it becomes possible to frame these challenges, identify their key characteristics and, hopefully, manage a response. The analysis within this chapter has recognised ideas of economic and human capital, new networks of subject-specific knowledge and skills, and opportunities for revealing participants' tacit knowledge as those points of correspondence which have the most value within the context of the PARTY project. By realising correspondence as a tactic for reflection and analysis –

through which complexity might be more deeply understood in terms of its intricate arrangement – the POM framework becomes an active tool through which old or unacknowledged hierarchies or sites of power might be further identified, dismantled and designed out via explicit activities of collaboration and reciprocity.

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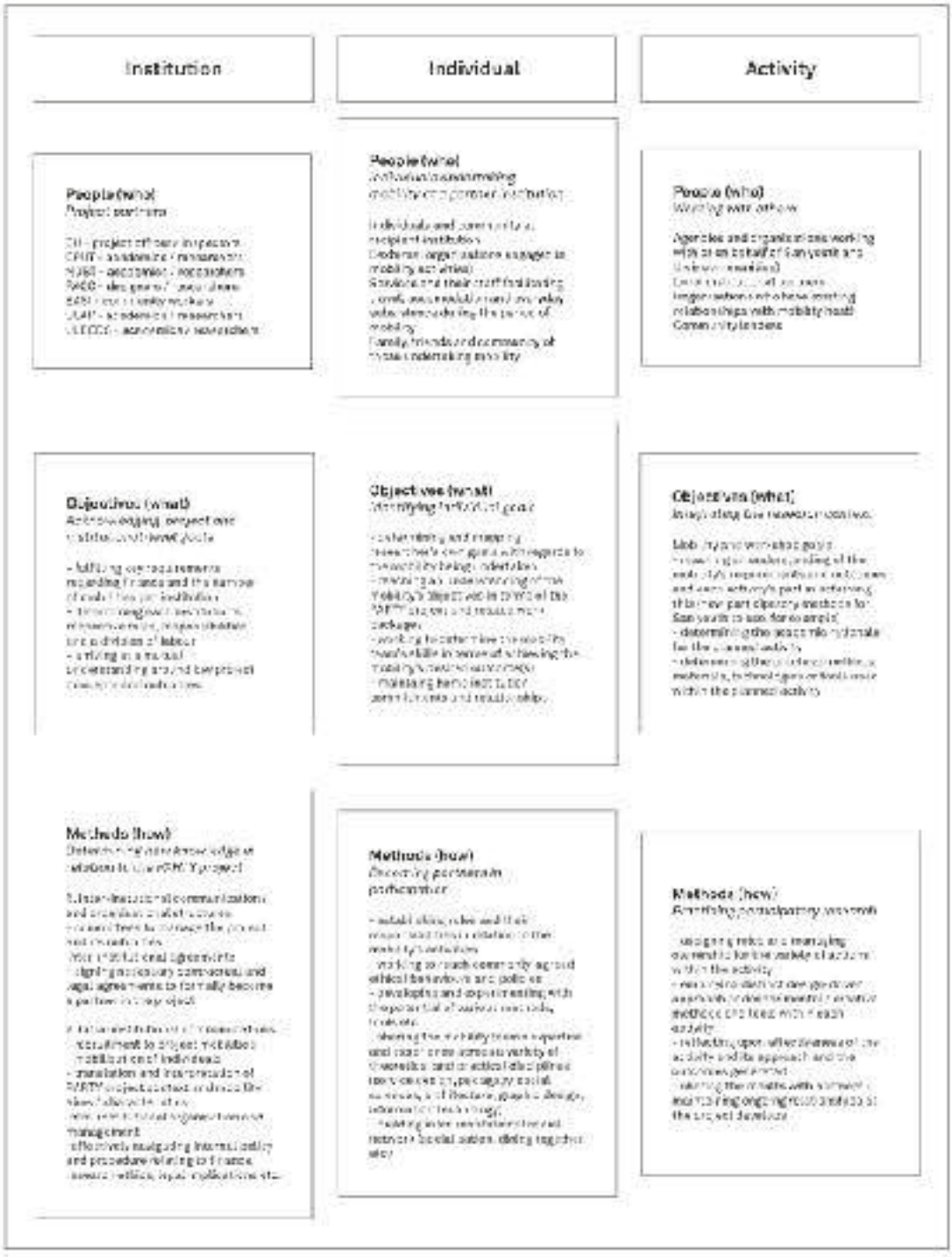
Fig. 1


Institution
Individual
Activity
People (who)
Project partners
People (who)
Working with others
People (who)
Objectives (what)
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