

Anna Wanka

AFFECTIVE PRACTICES IN TRANSITION(S) – LEARNING AS BECOMING IN THE TRANSITION INTO RETIREMENT

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how affects shape life course transitions and processes of learning and becoming. Life transitions involve shifting self-world relations, changing social positions, and reconfiguring boundaries, which can be understood through transformative learning and theories of becoming. Drawing on a qualitative longitudinal study with 29 older adults experiencing work-related transitions (unemployment, retirement, encore careers), I analyse episodic interviews and photographic diaries spanning over a period of three years using constructivist grounded theory and situational analysis. The findings show that out-of-work transitions evoke a queer, erratic affective attunement, moving from exhaustion to restlessness, and eventually to calm and joy. Affects are inherent to transitions, emerging within transitional assemblages and as properties of practices like repetition, recognition, and novelty. They act as connective tissue between practices and practitioners, co-constituting the entities undergoing transition. Affects also materialise in bodily perceptions and specific transitional temporalities. The study highlights how examining affective practices enriches the understanding of transformative learning and becoming in work-related life transitions.

Keywords: *affects, work, transitions, becoming, transformative learning*

AFEKTIVNE PRAKSE V PREHODU(-IH) – UČENJE KOT POSTAJANJE V PREHODU V UPOKOJITEV – POVZETEK

Avtorica v članku raziskuje, kako afekti oblikujejo življenjske prehode ter procese učenja in postajanja. Življenjski prehodi vključujejo spreminjanje odnosa med jazom in svetom, spreminjanje družbenih položajev in preoblikovanje meja, kar je mogoče razumeti na podlagi koncepta transformativnega učenja in teorij postajanja. V članku, ki izhaja iz kvalitativne longitudinalne študije, v kateri je sodelovalo 29 starejših odraslih, ki so doživeli prehode, povezane z delom (brezposelnost, upokožitev, nova karierna pot), je predstavljena analiza intervjujev in fotografskih dnevnikov iz obdobja treh let, ki temelji na konstruktivistično utemeljenih teorijah in situacijski analizi. Ugotovitve kažejo, da prehodi iz dela vzbujaajo nenavadno neenakomerno afektivno prilagajanje, ki prehaja od izčrpanosti do nemira, nato pa sčasoma do miru in veselja. Afekti so neločljivo povezani s prehodi, se pojavljajo kot del prehodov in kot značilnost praks, kot so ponavljanje, prepoznavanje in doživljanje novega. Delujejo kot vezivno tkivo med praksami in izvajalci ter soustvarjajo entitete, ki so v prehodu. Afekti se

materializirajo tudi v telesnih zaznavah in specifičnih prehodnih časovnostih. Raziskava pokaže, kako preučevanje afektivnih praks bogati razumevanje transformativnega učenja in postajanja v življenjskih prehodih na področju dela.

Gljučne besede: *afekti, delo, prehodi, postajanje, transformativno učenje*

INTRODUCTION

In the process of life course transitions, relations between the self and the world transform, social positions are changed and boundaries are reconfigured: couples become parents, children become adults, students become workers. Such processes of change can be understood through the concept of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978; see also Koller, 2012; Nicolaides et al., 2022).

In this contribution, I argue that learning is neither a precondition for navigating life course transitions nor an effect of having experienced them (Stauber et al., 2022). Instead, learning is an integral part of the transitional processes of *becoming* (Braidotti, 2002). Such an understanding has significant implications for both the theoretical conceptualisations of the relations between life course transitions, learning, and social change, and practical interventions: if learning is neither precondition nor effect, educational offers to facilitate the “successful management” of such transitions become arbitrary. Instead, we need a better understanding of educational elements in transitional practices, and these, I will argue, can best be identified through following the affects in life course transitions.

To exemplify such an approach, I first discuss life course transitions as processes of becoming, learning as transformations of self-world relations, and the role affects play in them. Second, I draw on a qualitative longitudinal study to outline how affects can point us to learning within processes of work-related life course transitions, with a specific focus on the end of working life. Finally, I discuss how the study of affective practices and affective attunements can benefit the existing literature on learning and life course transitions and sketch out an agenda for future research in this field.

BECOMING, LEARNING, AND AFFECTS IN LIFE COURSE TRANSITIONS

The life course has often been conceptualised as an ongoing process of becoming (e.g., Ingold, 2015; Pilcher & Martin, 2020). From a relational perspective of “un/doing differences” (Hirschauer, 2014, 2017) while “doing transitions” (Stauber, 2020; Stauber et al., 2022), a life can be viewed as a constant process of becoming (Meissner, 2019). As Boll (2022) puts it:

In the course of their lives, individuals move in and out of categories, move through some, but never leave others. Some transitions are one-way, some go

both ways. Some are considered progress, some a setback. With such passages between categories, and along with their categorial affiliations, individuals change who and what they are, in an ongoing process of becoming. (p. 170)

Approaching life course transitions from such a relational doing perspective implies understanding life stages and transitions between them as open-ended processes of becoming something and someone else – for example, transitioning from child to adult, boy to man, man to woman. As such, transitions emerge from and are enacted in social practices through which the social positions taken before, within, and after them (e.g., adult, man, woman) are also shaped and constituted. Hence, to apply a relational doing perspective of becoming to the study of life course transitions implies understanding them as open-ended processes of practices in which transformations constantly emerge, unfold, shift, and change (Wanka, 2020).

When we approach life course transitions from such a perspective, and with an interest in learning, theories of transformative learning are of value. Theories of transformative learning, as first formulated by Mezirow in 1978 and developed further (e.g., Koller, 2012; Nicolaides et al., 2022), understand (adult) learning as changes in the relationship between the self and the world, materialised in the incorporation of new perspectives. Such learning processes are understood to be initiated by people's subjective experiences of change, which challenge their existing self-world relations and perspectives, and have, hence, been criticised for their individualist and person-centred approach to learning, as well as their insufficient consideration of learning processes that go beyond the cognitive, thereby neglecting the affective dimensions of learning (e.g., Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). Building upon practice-theoretical concepts, scholars have therefore advocated for more relational approaches to transformative learning (Hof & Bernhard, 2025; Lave et al., 2026). From a doing perspective, transformative learning can then be understood as relational – that is, going beyond the individual and its reflexive abilities and instead taking place in relations – as well as a constellation of practices. Thus, there is no individual that learns in a transformative manner, but transformative learning emerges in the practices and relations between people, things, discourses, etc.

Life course transitions may pose a perfect example for initiating what Mezirow (1978) called “disorienting dilemmas”, which are supposed to start the cycle of transformative learning, as they often bring along new and confusing situations, expectations, and experiences. For example, a child finds herself in a strange (class)room, with a strange adult (not her parents) telling her what to do, and other strange children (not her siblings or friends) in the same position. This transition from pre-school to school child can pose an utterly disorienting experience and entail the dilemma of not knowing whether to subject to the new expectations or rebel against them. From a relational doing perspective, transformative learning can then transpire in the practices that constitute relations between her and the room, the books, the expectations, the teacher, the other children, and so on.

Finally, the terminology used here already points us to the role of affects: there must be certain affects attached to an experience to be classified a *disorienting dilemma*, able to initiate a transformation of self-world relations.

Studies on learning thereby have a longstanding tradition of concern with emotions in processes of learning and education. Research in this field has understood emotions as, on the one hand, something that can shape educational processes or, on the other, something that is being shaped by educational processes. A first strand of research has been concerned with the role that affects and emotions play in facilitating and contributing to learning processes, particularly in the field of civic education. While studies find that such emotions can be positive (for example, fun or excitement) as well as negative (for example, guilt or shame), the theoretical foundations of the relationship between emotions and transformative learning remain scarce (see e.g., Grund et al., 2024.).¹ A second and more theoretically engaged strand of research is concerned with the shaping of relationships through educational processes, the ways we learn how to feel, or *Bildung der Gefühle*, a German phrase that can be translated both as education or formation of emotions. Research in this field questions the distinction between emotions and cognition and argues that emotions can, and should, be learned as well to make them communicable, manageable, controllable, and potential objects of reflection (see e.g., Maxwell & Reichenbach, 2005; Stenger, 2012). Often, and in contrast to the first strand, scholars in this field focus on what we might call “negative emotions”, that is shame, guilt or disgust (e.g., Schäfer & Thompson, 2009). In a phenomenological manner, they study how emotions are socialised, how we learn to feel, for example, ashamed, and what these micro situations of being ashamed tell us about emotional regimes in societies (Brinkmann et al., 2021).

In this contribution, I argue for a practice-theoretical understanding of affects as neither explanans nor explanandum of transformative learning processes, but as an inherent part of transitional assemblages. My understanding of affects is thereby in line with the “affective turn” in the educational sciences (Boler, 1997; Dernikos et al., 2020; Zembylas, 2021). In their comprehensive volume *Mapping the Affective Turn in Education*, Dernikos et al. (2020) exemplify this difference by drawing on the effects – and affects – that scratching chalk on a blackboard entails: in many people, it triggers immediate, corporeal responses that are hard to control and hard to verbalise.

In that, the affective turn is, as Reckwitz (2017) argues, closely related to the practice turn with its focus on implicit knowledges, the material, corporeal, and thus affective elements of practices. Accordingly, affects have been conceptualised as material – that is, bodily (Pile, 2021), spatial (Reckwitz, 2012), or materialised in things (Jones & Harris, 2019).

1 The concept of pedagogical eros (e.g., Kenklies, 2019) – that is, better learning outcomes through an emotionally laden pedagogical relationship – is another example of research that looks at emotions as facilitators of education. However, it has been heavily criticised for covering, or even justifying, abusive and unhealthy educational relationships (e.g., Gaus, 2011).

For Reckwitz (2017), affects are processes² of physical arousal that are “built into the practices” (p. 116): just as light transpires from a lightbulb and is subjectively perceived through the body/the eyes, affects transpire from practices and are subjectively perceived through the body. This negates the notion that affects arise from, and take place in, the body, even though they are subjectively perceived through the body and the senses. “Affects are then properties of the specific affective ‘attunement’ or mood of the respective practice” (Reckwitz, 2017, p. 119). Lying in bed, for example, usually goes along with feeling tired, and riding a roller coaster produces excitement. The understanding that affects are built into and constituted through practices has important practical implications: if specific affective attunements or moods, as Reckwitz (2017) calls them, are not the pre-condition but the consequence of practices, then one does not need to be concentrated to listen, read, or solve mathematical equations, but concentration *transpires through* the practices of listening, reading, or solving mathematical equations.

Moreover, affects form part of the connective tissue through which practices hang together to form bundles, complexes, and constellations – such as life course transitions – and elements of practices are reconfigured depending on the affects they produce. If, for example, research finds that movement is more likely to stir engagement than sitting still, movement may be integrated in practices of school teaching, rooms might be designed to mellow students down instead of arousing them, and temporal schedules might be adapted to enhance concentration. When affects contribute to connecting different practices to form bundles, complexes, and constellations through their affective attunement, then each practice process – like a life course transition – has a specific “rhythm” that we can reconstruct. Let’s take the transition from work to retirement as an example. Some people work full-time and then stop working from one day to the next; others become unemployed before claiming pension benefits; some people keep doing (part-time) paid work while claiming pension benefits; others stop working for pay completely and instead start doing unpaid work (volunteering), etc. These sequences differ in their affective attunement, and thereby connect more or less easily to subsequent bundles of practices, like an in/active retirement lifestyle, lifelong learning or withdrawal from social contacts.

And finally, affects, themselves constituted in practices, co-constitute other entities. Karen Barad (2003) calls this process “thingification” or “entification” to refer to the ways in which phenomena (including human subjects) become demarcated, intelligible, and often even naturalised as such. For example, it seems “natural” to most of us to differentiate between apples and pears, between humans and animals, between one person and another. However, demarcating these entities, making them intelligible and separable from one another, requires hard, practical work. Even though such entities may seem stable to us, they are in fact constantly changing. Thompson (2005) has developed the concept of ontological choreography to grasp the fluidity of the ontological statuses of objects and subjects in the process of “producing parents, children, and everything that

2 In fact, Reckwitz (2017) claims that affects are “states of physical arousal” (p. 118); however, I find that this terminology contradicts his point that affects are not (static) properties, but activities.

is needed for their recognition as such” (p. 8). And affects play a crucial role in these choreographies. Building upon Thompson’s (2005) concept, Adrian (2015) developed the term “emotional choreographies” to refer to the changing emotional (affective) statuses that co-constitute these changing ontological statuses. Such a perspective enables us to explore how changes in ontological status in life course transitions – for example, from child to adult or from employee to retiree – are co-constituted by changing affective attunements.

To summarise, I propose an understanding of life course transitions from a relational perspective of “doing transitions” (Stauber et al., 2022) and therefore as open-ended processes of becoming – that is, processes of practices in which transformations constantly emerge, unfold, shift, and change (Wanka, 2020). Affects are part of these processes of becoming; they emerge in transitional assemblages of transformation. Thus, affects are not the consequence or precondition of change, but an inherent part of it. And they play a crucial and active role in the processes of becoming by (i) connecting practices with other practices and their practitioners, therefore forming the affective tissue between practice chains, people, and things, and (ii) co-constituting the entities that are becoming. Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978; see also Koller, 2012; Nicolaides et al., 2022) is constantly accompanying such processes, as the constant transformation of the self (as in becoming) requires constant changes in self-world relations.

Let’s take the process of becoming an academic as an example. With every page someone reads or writes, every lecture they listen to or give, every academic discussion they participate in, a student becomes an academic – even if it is only with the completion of their thesis that they are officially and ritually recognised as such. Such practices entail a range of affects: boredom in certain classes and inspiration in others; anxiety and fear in exam situations and when discussing one’s work; joy and relief when data are collected, and chapters are finished, etc. And they are accompanied by practices and processes of learning: learning to write, to talk, to move, even to dress, learning the names of important people and methodological skills. And with these learning practices, the affects change: anxiety decreases as we get to feel more competent in what we are doing, and boredom decreases when we understand more of what is being talked about. In this process, the boundaries between “academic” and “non-academic” (as in, what is intelligible as academic, a seemingly clearly demarcated entity) are constantly shifting while a person becomes more and more of the former and less and less of the latter, without ever being able to reach any kind of final destination. Transformative learning is therefore not to be understood as an individual, reflexive, and cognitive process that is initiated through affects, but a distributed, more-than-human, material, and incorporated part of becoming (ANON).

Now, this all seems quite abstract. Hence, in the following section, this perspective is put into practice.

EMPIRICAL MATERIAL: AFFECTIVE ATTUNEMENTS IN WORK TRANSITIONS

To explore the role of affects in out-of-work transitions, I draw on empirical material from a qualitative longitudinal study that was conducted between 2017 and 2022 at Goethe University Frankfurt. The study followed 29 people at the ends of their working lives for three years through various work-related transitions: unemployment, retirement, employment after retirement, etc. Sampling was conducted based on the principles of theoretical (contrastive) sampling. It was carried out through notices and the display of flyers in public places (e.g., supermarkets), through businesses as well as social and recreational organisations (e.g., University of the Third Age), and via personal contacts. This resulted in a diverse group of participants, ranging from (former) university professors to entrepreneurs, teachers and shift workers, people with very stable and coherent as well as altogether very precarious employment trajectories.

Table 1

Sample description by socio-demographic variables

Socio-demographic variables	
Total number of individuals	29
Years of birth	1948–1965
Gender	Female (16) Male (13)
Family background	Not married (8) Married with children (15) Married without children (6)
Residential area	< 5,000 inhabitants (3) 5,000–100,000 inhabitants (13) > 100,000 inhabitants (13)
Occupational status	Working full-time (12) Working part-time/marginal employment (4) Passive stage of partial retirement (2) Not working, not yet retired (11)
Former occupations	researchers, teachers, heads of development, bank clerks, IT personnel, self-employed, administrative workers, social workers, shift foremen, mechanical engineers, journalists
Pathway to retirement	Partial retirement (7) Early retirement (5) Disability pension (4) From unemployment to retirement (4) From full-time work to retirement (2) Worked past retirement age (2) Unclear (5)

Each year, episodic interviews (Flick, 2014) were conducted, together with photo and activity diaries that were kept by the participants throughout the years as well as observation protocols. The interviews began with a narrative-generating introduction. In the first wave of data collection, this was a biographical opening question, asking participants to tell me about their professional career, starting with their training, and encouraging them to take their time and go into as much detail as they would like. This introductory narrative, which would last between 20 and 45 minutes, was followed by an inquiry section with more specific questions on their life courses. Subsequently, the participants were asked to think back specifically to their last year at work and tell me more about it. This narration was followed by questions more directly related to retiring, like “When did you first think about retiring? Can you remember a specific situation?” and “Has anything changed since you realised you were going to retire?” Finally, they were asked to draw and narrate a life line, from birth to the moment of the interview, and the tasks of the photo and activity diaries were explained in more depth (the latter are not part of the analysis in this paper). In the subsequent interviews, the opening question inquired into what had happened in the lives of the participants during the previous year, and the photo diaries were used for photo elicitation in this narration. This was followed by more detailed questions about their last month and last day at work, about the changes in different areas of life (e.g., relationships, leisure activities or care work), their subjective definition of work and non-work, narrations about an average week in their current lives, and their plans and advice for other people undergoing this transition. None of the questions directly asked about affects, which emerged from the analysis rather than being an initial aim of the research.

The interviews lasted between 1 and 3 hours. They were fully transcribed and coded using MAXQDA analysis software. The coding procedure was based on the social constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and situational analysis (Clarke et al., 2016). First, the transcripts were completely coded by initial coding; second, the central codes were identified by focused coding; and third, these codes were related to each other in axial coding, which was accompanied by situational analysis mapping. In this analysis process, affects were identified as a focused code, with different initial codes (e.g., exhaustion or envivo-codes such as “punch in the gut”) subsumed under them. In situational mapping, these affects were related to various other elements, practices, and events, and those affects that could be linked to narrations regarding the transition to retirement were selected for analysis. In all three steps, a cross-case and contrastive approach was taken to highlight shared or divergent patterns of practices and affects, rather than individual trajectories.

As outlined above, affects may be experienced through the body and processed through language, but as properties of practices, they remain hard to verbalise. Instead, affects are immediate, volatile, and ambivalent, and we often lack the language to express them. Hence, alternative methodologies have been developed to better grasp and trace affects, from autoethnographies to sensual methodologies and different modes of writing (see Knudsen & Stage, 2015). As this research was not initially carried out to analyse affects in transitions, it cannot draw on data acquired in these new and exciting ways. However,

it does draw on “affect as method”, that is, the Spinozist notion of affects as “aesthetically based research methodology” (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 79), where affects can be drawn upon as a methodological guide to the site of transition.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END: FEELING TIRED, EXHAUSTED, AND BURNT OUT

One of the most intensely experienced feelings participants narrate in the period before they transitioned out of work was tiredness and exhaustion, up to a complete lack of energy or even burnout. Richard,³ a former blue-collar worker who later became a representative for severely disabled people in the company, was laid off at the age of 59. He summarises what many of the participants experience at the end of their working lives as: “I didn’t want to work anymore. I was also drained out.”

Some of the participants attribute this exhaustion to their age and the time they have already spent in their profession. Ute, a former journalist who quit her job in her early sixties, wonders why she felt so much more exhausted at the (voluntary) end of her working life than previously: “Where I thought, yes, there’s actually no reason to be so exhausted anymore. And I hear the same thing from many others who are my age. Perhaps this vigour is waning a little.”

This and similar accounts suggest that the repetition of work practices and routines over many years causes a feeling of exhaustion. Whereas one could argue that this is directly related to energy levels decreasing with age, people continue to find energy to engage in care or leisure practices. Andrea, who retired from her professorship at the statutory retirement age, recounts: “And I’ve been writing applications since I was 25. And I also find that tiring”. Similarly, Dana, a social worker who retired early, says: “I’d rather just put my feet up and read something. I do realise that, this physical moment. I feel exhausted more often than I did ten years ago.”

Dana exemplifies how these affects form the connective tissue between work practices and out-of-work transitions: when people feel exhausted, and work practices fail to engage them affectively anymore, they are more likely to leave the labour market:

And maybe that’s also a point where I say ‘Well, I’d rather go now’ and I’m not as exhausted as I would be in two and a half years and I’m like, ‘Oh [sigh] how awful and so many hours today,’ yeah.

Richard also experienced this lack of being affectively engaged at work, and describes the affective attunement at the end of his working life as follows:

The interest has simply become a little less. [takes a deep breath] If you know that you’re leaving or want to leave, then your motivation also diminishes. If you

3 Participant data was pseudonymised, which included replacing identifying information such as names with pseudonyms to ensure participant anonymity while retaining data utility for research.

go into inner emigration ... I still did my job well, I think, but, how can I put it, I didn't bang on like that anymore. I did what was necessary, what could be achieved, and I did it all in peace. I was no longer so preoccupied with the anger that had previously cost me a lot of nerves with the management. [...] The drive was missing at the end. It was no longer like, 'Yes, hooray, we'll fight, we'll do it, we'll do it,' but it was, 'Yes, I'll do it.' And I think that happens to everyone who is already saying goodbye to their job on the inside.

Hence, years of engagement in repetitive work practices produces, over time, exhaustion, a lack of motivation and drive, and leads to work practices losing participants, or people ending their working life – often before the statutory retirement age via early retirement routes or the transition to unemployment.

While this can be a slow and gradual process for some participants, others experience affects so strong and sudden that they feel forced to stop working immediately. Mia, for example, held a management position in a large international organisation before experiencing burnout at age 59. She tried re-entering her job, but without success, and has since been on unpaid leave. She did not see this coming and often asks herself how burnout could have happened to her despite the fact that she enjoyed her work. In her narration, she recalls three reasons for the burnout: first, feeling “thwarted” (“*ausgebrems*”); second, spending a lot of energy to keep up with her male colleagues; and third, experiencing a loss of autonomy when the management in her company changed, which she affectively experienced as “a hit in the stomach”. Yet she remembers that for a long time, she didn't even realise how “drained out” she was, until she experienced a complete breakdown:

The breakdown, in retrospect I often thought it was a good thing that it happened. Because I wouldn't have got out of it any other way. I'm glad I didn't get ill, well, I mean physically ill now, right. Others get, I don't know, a heart attack or something.

After admitting herself to a clinic, she thought she could re-enter work, but noticed how work again burnt her out: “I went back to work and realised after four weeks [whistles] that it sucks everything out of me again”. Since then, she has been on unpaid leave. She is reluctant to apply for early retirement, to not be “locked down in this status”.

Jan, 52 years old at the time of the first interview, also lost his job due to mental health issues, however, from a much more precarious position than Mia: with long phases of unemployment, he had last worked as a warden, before he was given notice and claimed a disability pension. He recalls:

Functioning is never automatic, it can be over very quickly at some point and then you have to look at how you [takes a breath], how to get up in the morning not with the duvet over your head but with joy and have a task somewhere [takes a breath], a human group where you look forward to it [takes a breath],

who are also happy, and that you [sniffs] don't cut it off, lose it, leave it or get there again quickly.

He experienced his involuntary transition from work to unemployment and disability retirement as challenging, describing his last working months as “very exhausting”, “very difficult”, “cruel” and, at one point, even as “torturous”, especially when he had to experience colleagues being laid off.

LOST IN TRANSITION: FEELING RESTLESS, AMBIVALENT, AND LOST

After Jan was let off from his last employment, he claimed a disability pension due to mental health problems. While he had suffered at his workplace, he found his status as a disability pensioner similarly difficult.

A disability pension, that's somehow very difficult [takes a breath ...]. No matter how I do it with the background, I can't find the common denominator that I somehow have the strength, the courage, the hope to manage [...] to organise and arrange my life differently [...] I haven't managed it [...] the phases are more or less always there, like depression, mood swings [takes a breath], so the phases are always there, can I manage it, can't I manage it?

The feelings of exhaustion, lack of energy and hope continued across Jan's out-of-work transitions, and were accompanied by what he phrases as “inner unrest”, fears and a perceived lack of care that he did not experience as much when he was still working:

[...] being with people, ‘Good morning,’ ‘Have a nice weekend,’ that's quite nice. It calms you down. It reduces the inner restlessness. [...] And I realised that I need a task, human warmth, and a competence that is called upon. [...] When the fears get bigger and nobody calls, when I have the feeling that somehow nobody knows or nobody cares, friends or employers. You always have a social obligation. When you're a pensioner, you get your pension regularly and then there's an error, there's nothing left. Who's supposed to look after you?

Richard, who was also laid off involuntarily, remembers similar feelings of unrest during his time of unemployment, before he became eligible for a disability pension, especially when he had to deal with the unemployment agency.

Work takes its toll, it's noise, noise, hectic, stress – I'm glad I'm out of it. Only when I was unemployed did I sometimes have those anxious moments where I thought, when will I get another letter from the job centre or what do I have to do now?

While both Richard and Jan experienced different, yet still negative affects throughout their involuntary out-of-work transitions, Mia's experience was more ambivalent and

contingent to change. Sometimes she talks about feeling full of energy and enthusiasm, and at other times hopeless and lost:

Sometimes I feel really good, I'm full of energy and try to look after myself. Sometimes I'm so full of energy that I think, no, I can still do something. [starts to cry; in a weak voice] So sometimes I think, I would just say, lost in transition. That's actually the term that comes to mind for this topic, no. [in a steady voice] That's kind of my state.

The participants' narrations do not only provide examples of how difficult it is to disengage from work practices, but also how difficult it is to (re-)engage in non-work-related practices, especially in the first year after people stop working. The abundance of time that suddenly needs to be filled plays a major role in this kind of failure – the rhythm slows down, becomes more serene and tranquil. Consequently, the participants emphasized the discipline they needed to “pull oneself together”, “stay active” and “get going”, “go out”, and the “lack of intrinsic motivation” they felt to engage in new (non-work-related) practices.

While looking for new ways to establish meaningful engagement with the world – volunteering, meeting new people, and engaging in new activities – Mia also felt cautious of doing so, “because I thought, I'm not going to overload myself with other things again. Because I have to find my own strength again first”. Again, it is ambivalence that characterises her affective relationship to alternative forms of staying active and productive, sometimes feeling “full of euphoria” about volunteering, sometimes thinking, “well, why are you doing all this to yourself, why do you actually want to do all this? And that's the way I feel. So lost in transition.”

A NEW LIFE STAGE: FEELING STRENGTHENED, CALM, AND FULL OF JOY

Sometime after their transition out of work, many of the participants experienced a transition from restlessness and feeling lost to calm and the feeling of having arrived. Richard recalls the affective choreography of his out-of-work transition as follows:

I've really come to terms with the real retirement. I've been retired since [date], before that I was unemployed for two years and I was always a bit restless because you never knew what was going to happen, whether something would come from the job centre or ... and I didn't feel like working back then either, I'll be honest, it's over now.

He describes his predominant mood in retirement as “calm”, and this calmness as increasing the longer he has been retired. He links this affective change to two things: the free time and the economic stability that retirement entails:

I'm just getting more and more relaxed, I realise that, I was already pretty calm at the beginning of my retirement because I knew nothing could happen now, you have a more

or less regular income, even if it's not much, but you can live with it and you automatically become calm.

The calm of being out of work entails many other affects: feeling “strengthened”, “firmer, somehow”, “more structured”, “more composed”, and having the feeling to “live more in the midst of life”. Moreover, it enables him to engage in new practices by freeing up his headspace, giving him inner strength, and therefore allowing him to meet new people, maintain a “warmer” relationship with his wife, engage in new activities, and learn new things:

And that's what's enriching in old age – not just meeting new people but having the opportunity to experience new things. You didn't have that before at work, you were so stressful or stressed and didn't have time [...] instead you had to consciously enjoy this free time. So it's really about realising what kind of time you have at the moment – I can't say it often enough, how happy I am.

It took Mia two years after her involuntary transition out of work to start feeling the calm that Richard describes; she says she needed two years to “top up my energy reserves”. Like Richard, she also links this to a newfound ability to learn new things and engage in new activities, which she feels increases her wellbeing:

[...] what I now do during the day in peace, so to speak, I have arrived at a different rhythm, I do everything much more in peace. I've learnt new things. I've started singing, something I'd totally neglected. So I'm making music really intensively, I'm in a choir, taking singing lessons, that sort of thing. I thought it was all good for the soul.

Dana describes a similar calm and self-determination that enabled her to rediscover herself in retirement, broaden her horizons, and learn new things. Like other participants, she furthermore expresses strong feelings of joy and enthusiasm:

[...] the joy, yes, I'm happy and grateful every day that I ... have self-determination, that I'm actually healthy for now and can enjoy it so much, yes? [...] I also think it's such a phenomenon, I think it's so great ... that I'm really doing so well, it's really great. [...] Sometimes I can breathe, sometimes I feel light as air or dance alone because I'm doing so well. There's something great coming on, I listen to the radio when I'm vacuuming, something like that, so I think I'll vacuum away and check whether I have my curtains drawn. [...] I'm sure it's happened five to eight times now in my retirement that I've danced my arse off, I think it's great. And I also really like dancing. [takes deep breath] Oh yes, that's new.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, I have discussed the affective choreographies of out-of-work transitions based on the experiences of older adults towards the end of their working lives. In doing so, I have outlined how affects like exhaustion, restlessness, calm, and joy form parts of the connective tissues between the practices of paid work and non-work (or non-paid work), repetition and doing new things, concluding and starting anew. These connections show that practices with a similar affective “tune” are not necessarily more likely to connect to each other – rather, opposite affects seem to attract, and thereby connect practices of contrary affective attunement: practices that carry restlessness with those that carry calm, practices that carry exhaustion with those that carry enthusiasm, etc. Hence, the affective attunement (Reckwitz, 2017) and the respective affective choreographies (Adrian, 2015) of out-of-work transitions are queer and erratic.

This is in line with the theoretical foundation of this paper that emphasizes relationality and processuality, thereby framing transitions as assemblages rather than as linear trajectories. At the same time, approaching phenomena both a) theoretically from a transition lens and b) methodologically in the form of narratives, produces a certain kind of temporal sequence of practices across time. This has often been used to impose linearity and normativity onto the messiness of social lives. Methodologically, the critique of the domestication of queerness has been summarised by Bradway (2021) as follows: “Narrative, it is said, straightens perversity through sequence [...] narrative always works on behalf of the normative” (pp. 711–712). Thus, our common ways of theorising transitions, the ways of collecting (or rather, co-creating) data, and the ways of presenting findings in writing, do force a certain linearity onto research (Goetzke, 2022).

However, I want to argue that assuming temporal relationality as sequence does not necessarily equate transitions with linearity and normativity, as accounts of queer(ing) time and queering age (Sandberg & Marshall, 2017) show. With Bradway (2021), I refrain from defining temporal sequence with “a linear teleology that produces illusory coherence”, and instead highlight the “multiple, braided, and often conflicting temporalities that compose narrative as well as potentially queer temporalities of plot, such as suspense, simultaneity, and surprise” (p. 712). Approaching life course transitions as transitional assemblages instead of linear progresses makes it possible to understand them as “open-ended gatherings” that “allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them” and “show us potential histories in the making” (Tsing, 2015, p. 22). Along with a qualitative, longitudinal methodology, this allows for capturing seemingly contradictory or incoherent findings that change from one year to the next, failures that turn into (interpreted) success stories and vice versa, as well as ambiguity and uncertainty – or, as Mia expresses it, for feeling “lost in transition”. Hence, the affective attunement (Reckwitz, 2017) outlined in the findings above provides one illustrative, exemplary way of telling the story about the affective choreographies that unfold throughout life course transitions, a story that is told at several points in time, but could look completely different if the study was to be continued for the next 15 years (and here, research funding comes into play).

Individual trajectories may not reach a point of calm or happiness or may reach it more slowly than others. And yet, taking this choreography as a starting point allows us to revisit the theoretical propositions on the role of affects in life course transitions:

- Affects are inherently part of life course transitions as open-ended processes of becoming, and therefore learning.
- Affects emerge in transitional assemblages of transformation and are properties of specific practices within these assemblages.
- Affects are the connective tissue that links practices with each other, as well as practices with their practitioners.
- Affects co-constitute the entities that are becoming, that is (among others), the people that experience transitions.

In which practice assemblages of transformative learning as becoming do certain affects emerge and how do they link to (other) affects, practices, practitioners, and entities? Focusing on out-of-work transitions, we might find a choreography of feeling exhausted, restless, and calm. Feeling tired and exhausted emerges within practices that are characterised by repetition, lack of recognition and autonomy. As affective connective tissue, they link practices of work to practices of non-work, and they *unlink* work participants from work practices. Or put more simply: tiredness and exhaustion make people leave work, whether by retiring, going on leave, falling ill, or becoming unemployed. Scholars have coined the term “cooling out” (Clark, 1960; Goffman, 1952) – itself an inherently affective term – for the processes describing how (mostly young) people become more and more detached from education, up to the point of eventually dropping out of the school system. However, research has shown that this concept can also be applied to other transitions and life stages (Wanka & Walther, 2024). In facilitating the cooling out of work practices process, affects like exhaustion “make” subjects that were formerly part of the workforce into retirees, sick, or unemployed people.

Curiously, in the affective choreography of out-of-work transitions, feelings of tiredness and exhaustion link with the contrastive affects of restlessness and feeling lost. These affects emerge within practices of re-orientation and searching – in this stage, the participants tried out a lot of different things and were very active. Their (often unsuccessful) attempt to get rid of the feeling of restlessness was met by a “market” of resonance-promising oases (Bischoff et al., 2021).

Feeling restless, and the resulting desire to stop feeling restless, therefore links to all kinds of practices, and co-constitutes subjects as “lost in transition” (Mia), that is, transitional subjects – people that are “no longer (employees)” and “not yet (retirees)”.

These affects may link to – again – contrastive affects of calm and happiness. These affects emerge within practices that are characterised by a different rhythm and speed – one that is decelerated (Rosa, 2013). It is these decelerated practices that participants describe as sites of learning and acquisition of strength, therefore constituting them as post-transitional subjects that have arrived in a new life stage.

This adds important insight to the study of affects in transitions: while affects have been primarily conceptualised as material – that is, predominantly in the body (Pile, 2021), space (Reckwitz, 2012) or things (Jones & Harris, 2019) – we can see that they are also in a very specific way temporal. Practice theorists have long drawn on different notions of time and temporalities to describe how social practices connect (cf. Blue, 2017; Southerton, 2006; Wanka, 2019).

Drawing on Lefebvre (1984/2004), such temporal connections can be differentiated into processes of *eurhythmia*, connections that are stabilised and strengthened through synchronous repetition, and *arrhythmia*, connections that are weakened or destroyed through asynchronicity. As I've argued elsewhere (Wanka, 2019), people can “sense” *arrhythmia* through what are often perceived as “negative” affects. When we understand transformations – may it be change in the form of life course transitions or in the form of societal change – as the latter, we can presume that they are characterised by *arrhythmia* and therefore sensed through affects. Hence, affects can represent an important signifier for change and can provide a roadmap for transformations and transformative learning across life courses. When it feels strange, it is probably a transition – this has also become clear in the way participants meander and use different expressions that cannot be easily pinned down to one demarcated and clearly articulatable feeling. Tracing affects, as I have done in this paper, can thus be an effective methodological strategy to “track down” change.

What does this mean for theories of transformative learning? Emotions, feelings, and affects have been discussed as significant to transformative learning (cf. Taylor & Cranton, 2013). However, they have often been discussed in functionalist terms – as either enhancing learning processes by focusing attention, providing guidance for learning, or motivating individuals to engage in educational activities – or from a phenomenological perspective, as meaningful objects (and objectives) of education shaped in and through social interactions. The understanding of affects put forward in this paper connects to the latter, but also differs from it by claiming that affects transpire in processes of transformative learning – that is, all processes of becoming – and in a contingent and uncontrolled manner. Transformative learning is, from this perspective, not limited to an individual, reflexive, and cognitive process that is initiated through affects, but encompasses much more – it is a distributed, more-than-human, material, and incorporated part of becoming (Höppner et al., 2024). As showcased in the empirical material, it is not only the individual that transforms, but the world transforms with them.

Certain affects, as I have shown, are connected to certain practices and phases of life course transitions or change in more general terms. They form an important glue between practices and practitioners – thereby linking to the first strand of educational research discussed here – and connect practices with others. They are important actors in life course transitions by facilitating how and in which direction life course transitions unfold – similar to the position of a switchman. And they co-constitute the subjectivities that result from such processes of transformative learning. All of this shows that affects are much more powerful than most educational research has acknowledged so far.

REFERENCES

- Adrian, S. W. (2015). Psychological IVF: Conceptualizing emotional choreography in a fertility clinic. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 16(3), 302–317. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2015.1019541>
- Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs*, 28(3), 801–831. <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>
- Bischoff, L., Franke, A., & Wanka, A. (2021). Resonant retiring? Experiences of resonance in the transition to retirement. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.723359>
- Blue, S. (2017). Institutional rhythms: Combining practice theory and rhythm analysis to conceptualise processes of institutionalisation. *Time & Society*, 28(3), 922–950. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X17702165>
- Boler, M. (1997). Disciplined emotions: Philosophies of educated feelings. *Educational Theory*, 47(2), 203–227. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.1997.00203.x>
- Boll, T. (2022). Becoming ‘(Ab-)Normal’: Normality, deviance, and doing life course transitions. In B. Stauber, A. Walther, & R. A. Settersten Jr. (Eds.), *Doing transitions in the life course* (pp. 169–183). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13512-5_11
- Bradway, T. (2021). Queer narrative theory and the relationality of form. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 136(5), 711–727. <https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812921000407>
- Braidotti, R. (2002). *Metamorphoses: Towards a materialist theory of becoming*. Polity Press.
- Brinkmann, M., Türistig, J., & Weber-Spanknebel, M. (Eds.). (2021). *Emotion – Feeling – Mood: Phenomenological and pedagogical perspectives* (Vol. 12). Springer VS.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage.
- Clark, B. R. (1960). The ‘cooling-out’ function in higher education. *American Journal of Sociology*, 65(6), 569–576. <https://doi.org/10.1086/222799>
- Clarke, A. E., Friese, C., & Washburn, R. (2016). *Situational analysis in practice: Mapping research with grounded theory*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315420134>
- Dernikos, B., Lesko, N., McCall, S. D., & Niccolini, A. (2020). *Mapping the affective turn in education: Theory, research, and pedagogies*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003004219>
- Flick, U. (2014). *An introduction to qualitative research* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Gaus, D. (2011). Wie der pädagogische Eros erfunden wurde: Eine Geschichte von Männerphantasien und Machtspielen. In E. Drieschner & D. Gaus (Eds.), *Liebe in Zeiten pädagogischer Professionalisierung* (pp. 29–74). Springer VS. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-92680-3_2
- Goetzke, L. M. (2022). Doing Gender Transitions. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, 68(1), 82–97. <https://doi.org/10.3262/ZPB2201082>
- Goffman, E. (1952). ‘On cooling the mark out’: Some aspects of adaptation and failure. *Psychiatry*, 15(4), 451–463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1952.11022896>
- Grund, J., Singer-Brodowski, M., & Büssing, A. G. (2024). Emotions and transformative learning for sustainability: A systematic review. *Sustainability Science*, 19(2), 307–324. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-023-01439-5>
- Hickey-Moody, A. (2013). Affect as method: Feelings, aesthetics and affective pedagogy. In R. Coleman & J. Ringrose (Eds.), *Deleuze and research methodologies* (pp. 79–95). Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748644124-006>
- Hirschauer, S. (2014). Un/doing differences: Die Kontingenz sozialer Zugehörigkeiten. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 43(3), 170–191. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-2014-0302>
- Hirschauer, S. (2017). *Un/doing differences: Praktiken der Humandifferenzierung*. Velbrück Wissenschaft.

- Hof, C., & Bernhard, M. (2025). Navigating change: Theoretical perspectives to relate research on transitions and learning. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 16(1), 7–20. <https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.4791>
- Hoggan, C., & Hoggan-Kloubert, T. (2022). Critiques and evolutions of transformative learning theory. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 41(6), 666–673. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2022.2164434>
- Höppner, G., Schadler, C., & Wanka, A. (2024). Process ontologies and the many potential ethnographies: New materialisms and shifting boundaries between humans, animals and things. In J. Budde, A. Wischmann, G. Rißler, & M. Meier-Sternberg (Eds.), *Novelty, Innovation and Transformation in Educational Ethnographic Research* (pp. 163–173). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032629384-16>
- Ingold, T. (2015). *The life of lines*. Routledge.
- Jones, S. H., & Harris, A. M. (2019). *The queer life of things: Performance, affect, and the more-than-human*. Lexington Books.
- Kenkies, K. (2019). The struggle to love: Pedagogical eros and the gift of transformation. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 53(3), 547–559. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12376>
- Knudsen, B. T., & Stage, C. (Eds.). (2015). *Affective methodologies*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137483195_1
- Koller, H.-C. (2012). *Bildung anders denken: Einführung in die Theorie transformatorischer Bildungsprozesse*. Kohlhammer. <https://doi.org/10.17433/978-3-17-042796-9>
- Lave, J., Hof, C., & Bernhard, M. (2026). Adult learning in everyday life: A conversation on social relations and situated practices. In M. Bernhard, S. Billett, C. Hof, K. Kraus, V. J. Marsick, & P. H. Sawchuk (Eds.), *Adult Education in Changing Times: Learning at the Nexus of Life, Work, and Transitions*. Routledge.
- Lefebvre, H. (2004). *Rhythmanalysis: Space, time, and everyday life*. Continuum. (Original work published 1984)
- Maxwell, B., & Reichenbach, R. (2005). Imitation, imagination, and re-appraisal: Educating the moral emotions. *Journal of Moral Education*, 34(3), 291–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240500206089>
- Meissner, K. (2019). *Relational becoming – Mit Anderen werden: Soziale Zugehörigkeit als Prozess*. transcript Verlag.
- Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education*, 28(2), 100–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202>
- Nicolaides, A., Eschenbacher, S., Buergelt, P. T., Gilpin-Jackson, Y., Welch, M., & Misawa, M. (Eds.). (2022). *The Palgrave handbook of learning for transformation*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-74433-9>
- Pilcher, K., & Martin, W. (2020). Forever ‘becoming’? Negotiating gendered and ageing embodiment in everyday life. *Sociological Research Online*, 25(4), 698–717. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780420942464>
- Pile, S. (2021). *Bodies, affects, politics: The clash of bodily regimes*. Wiley.
- Reckwitz, A. (2012). Affective spaces: A praxeological outlook. *Rethinking History*, 16(2), 241–258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2012.681193>
- Reckwitz, A. (2017). Practices and their affects. In A. Hui, T. Schatzki, & E. Shove (Eds.), *The nexus of practices: Connections, constellations, practitioners* (pp. 114–125). Routledge.
- Rosa, H. (2013). *Social acceleration: A new theory of modernity*. Columbia University Press.
- Sandberg, L. J., & Marshall, B. (2017). Queering aging futures. *Societies*, 7(3), 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc7030021>
- Schäfer, A., & Thompson, C. (2009). Scham: Eine Einführung. In A. Schäfer & C. Thompson (Eds.), *Scham* (pp. 7–36). Schöningh.

- Southerton, D. (2006). Analysing the temporal organization of daily life: Social constraints, practices and their allocation. *Sociology*, 40(3), 435–454. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038506063668>
- Stauber, B. (2020). Doing difference by doing transitions: Differenz(ierungs)theoretische Grundüberlegungen für die reflexive Übergangsforschung. In A. Walther, B. Stauber, M. Rieger-Ladich, & A. Wanka (Eds.), *Reflexive Übergangsforschung: Theoretische Grundlagen und methodologische Herausforderungen* (pp. 231–252). Barbara Budrich.
- Stauber, B., Walther, A., & Settersten, R. A., Jr. (Eds.). (2022). *Doing transitions in the life course*. Springer.
- Stenger, U. (2012). Bildung der Gefühle in der frühen Kindheit. *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 15(16), 25–29.
- Taylor, E. W., & Cranton, P. (2013). A theory in progress? Issues in transformative learning theory. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 4(1), 33–47. <https://doi.org/10.25656/01:7705>
- Thompson, C. (2005). *Making parents: The ontological choreography of reproductive technologies*. The MIT Press.
- Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton University Press.
- Wanka, A. (2019). Change ahead—Emerging life-course transitions as practical accomplishments of growing old(er). *Frontiers in Sociology*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2018.00045>
- Wanka, A. (2020). Grundzüge einer praxistheoretischen Übergangsforschung. In A. Walther, B. Stauber, M. Rieger-Ladich, & A. Wanka (Eds.), *Reflexive Übergangsforschung – Theoretische und methodologische Grundlagen* (pp. 185 – 206). Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- Wanka, A., & Walther, A. (2024). In and out of the labour market: A LinkingAges perspective on labour market transitions in early and late adulthood. In A. Wanka, T. Freutel-Funke, S. Andresen, & F. Oswald (Eds.), *Childhood and Ageing Research: A Linking Ages Dialogue* (pp. 190–203). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003429340-21>
- Zembylas, M. (2021). The affective turn in educational theory. *Oxford research encyclopedia of education*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1272>