

# organic

designing communication for environmental values

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Dan, thank you for your help and insight.  
Friends, thank you for your help, hospitality and humor.

This is dedicated to Sebastien and Chloe.

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# Introduction

I began this thesis with an interest in sustainability and how to design communication to educate people on the concept. I didn't know much about the topic but my interest was sparked initially by both the documentary "Food Inc." and by Michael Pollen's book, "Omnivore's Dilemma". I was also influenced by the literature review on sustainability that brought home the reality of how unsustainably we live in the modern world.

It seemed natural to look into food and the agricultural system in order to explore sustainability further. This arose partially from a personal interest in food and partially because sustainability can be understood in terms of the biological systems intrinsic to sustainable agriculture. I sought out a real-world problem that would help scope down such a broad topic, and this led me to organic food.

I ended up working with the Vermont chapter of the Northeast Organic Farmers Association (NOFA). Their job was to market and promote Organic to their community as well as act as the third party organization certifying Vermont Farms based on USDA regulations.

"How can we get people to choose Organic?" was the marketing problem that I wanted to design for. The heart of this is a communication issue, and I argue in this thesis that organic should be the vehicle through which they promote their environmental goals and values.

For NOFA-VT, I believe that this is where their interest lies. The organization's values that drive belief in organic should drive the messaging. Organic ends up not necessarily being the goal, but a means to an end, and that end is helping to instill environmental care among their consumers and hopefully the desire to live more sustainably based on those values.

They also needed to know how to create efficiencies in their marketing strategy. They needed to consider timing, when were people most open to choosing organic. The third need was considering consumer types in order to target their message to an audience.

I wanted to design a framework that would help NOFA VT to better understand how their three needs of communication, timing and audience could work together in order to develop marketing strategies.

What my framework is not intended to do is design a specific marketing strategy. It acts as a compass, pointing at sensitive timeframes and groups of people on which to focus a strong communication based on the values of the organization.

My framework is not informed by cognitive behavioral science as applied to consumer behavior and decision making – a question that was raised during thesis presentation. I did a large literature review on applied research on organic consumption. I focused on what was driving organic consumption in particular and what the results were based on the applied contexts. Behavioral theory would be helpful in providing insight into a larger picture about the complexities of consumption behavior.

## Design Process and Approach

# Goal

I wanted to design a framework for NOFA VT that would help them understand their needs as an organization in order to develop relevant marketing strategies targeted at consumers.

# Constraints

I had some particular constraints to deal with. I live in Montreal and was commuting between Montreal, Vermont and CMU. I chose to work with NOFA VT in Vermont because they are an organization dealing specifically with Organic and they are English speaking. These geographical constraints limited access and collaboration on the thesis project.

# Market literature review

When I began research, I had little idea about the politics around organic. I found organic rather confusing and all I knew was that it seemed to be safer because the food was grown without pesticides and that the main deterrent to organic consumption seemed to be cost. Talking to NOFA VT members educated me more about how regulated organic food production is. I did a literature review on existing market research to get richer analytical data about why consumers were choosing organic.

# How is NOFA currently messaging?

I also wanted to see how NOFA VT was currently explaining their mission as an organization and what kind of material they were putting out into the world in terms of marketing. This would give me a comparison starting point to see relationships between how they were messaging and the market and consumer research I was doing.

# Survey and follow-up interviews

I wanted to do my own test on what I found in the market research and also discuss their survey choices through interviews. This way, I could see whether their responses corresponded to those of the market research I did, or if they did not, I had a group of people to contact and interview in order to discover why. Rather than continually sending multiple surveys based on responses from previous surveys in order to specify results, it was easier and the information was a lot richer if I interviewed them.

# Data analysis

I did a basic statistical analysis of the survey responses to get the general gist of how people in my survey group were responding based on their demographic profiles. Then I enriched these with an analysis of the follow-up interviews I did to find deeper patterns.

## Background Research



# HISTORY AND POLITICS OF ORGANIC

## Background

A good starting point from which to understand some of the complexity around Organic is Julie Guthman's paper "Regulating Meaning, Appropriating Nature: The Codification of California Organic Agriculture" in which she discusses the fundamental paradox of organic agriculture. Organic agriculture started as a counterculture movement in the 60's and 70's when back-to-the-land hippies turned to alternative methods of production. This represented a "resistance to agricultural industrialization and its impacts and incorporated utopian visions with a serious commitment to health and food safety" (Guthman 140). Organic agriculture is a modern version of farming in nature's image where the "design of sustainable food systems should replicate natural ecosystems"(135). In the 70's food became a "left politics" resulting in alternative food institutions like cooperatives and food collectives that provided the first real markets for local organic farmers. The late 1970s and on began the era of organic regulatory standards where initial farms became certified Organic. By 1994 there were 4,050 certified organic farms in the U.S. (136). The 1980s saw the gentrification of organic via health food movements and food related pesticide scares.

This vision of agriculture (long-term environmental and food quality) that seemed so incompatible with the goals of agribusiness (short term productivity and profits) is now not the case (137). Organic exists in this contradictory place where its ethical and environmental goals represent its origins in sustainable principles but at the same time is a branded commodity being sold into the very system it was established to protest.

## Theory and Politics

Guthman argues that the existence of this paradox rests with regulation because the “political construction of the meaning of ‘organic’ and its institutionalization in regulatory agencies has facilitated both the proliferation of agribusiness entrants and their adoption of questionably sustainable practices”(137). This means that regulation has standardized the process of organic through regulation and as a result, has led to organic becoming part of the capital marketplace.

Organic food has come to be defined by its regulation where “the right to claim that any produce was organically produced is contingent upon compliance with legal definitions” (137). In regulatory practice, this is a problem because complex contexts are often oversimplified into technical solutions that focus on inputs and factors of production rather than the complexity of the system. For example, a Huffington Post article on organic quotes Joel Salatin, a sustainable farmer made famous by Michael Pollen’s Omnivore’s Dilemma, who says:

“a broiler [meat chicken] can be fed certified organic feed in a confinement house, without fresh air and sunshine, without green salads, trucked for hours to a processing plant that electrocutes the bird and spills feces all over the carcass during evisceration, and be labeled ‘certified organic.’ In animal production, organic describes primarily diet, and everything else is either not mentioned at all or is secondary.”

Guthman’s point is that regulation has allowed agribusinesses to appropriate organic and pushes those practicing organic agriculture to act like agribusiness firms. She questions whether a technical approach to organic production says all that much about sustainability – either socially or ecologically. Especially when organic exists in mono-cropped fields, using unorganized migrant wage labor and following industrialized processing and dispersal to huge retailers. The differentiator is that the product output is branded “organic” because it results from specified inputs. Guthman says that organic regulation makes

organic agriculture safe for capitalism. This is based on the theory that capitalism has the particular characteristic of self-regulation. Essentially, capitalism self regulates where “civil society-driven regulation works to rein in capitalism’s tendency to overexploit its own resource base, but effectively creates new and different conditions of accumulation” (Guthman 137).

Also, the entrance of “mass organic-food producers and retailers carries with it an inherent tension between the principles of sustainable farming and the imperatives of big business” (Hughner et al 13). Thus the paradox between the values that organic represents and its role as another branded product shuttling through the supply and demand cycle of our economic system creates a contradiction that consumers and organizations like NOFA-VT must navigate.

Nonetheless, Guthman says that regulation is important in producing a product that continues to promote principles that are against industrialized forms of agriculture and its resultant problems. Some experiential aspects that are difficult for the market to appropriate are direct producer-to-consumer sales and personal relationships based on trust. These are difficult to incorporate into the highly industrialized food system. Perhaps, Guthman remarks, “this intensely privatized sort of regulation also points to the inadequacy of regulation based on administrative standards ”(Guthman 142).

To address regulation issues, we must be aware of the consequences of regulatory practices for systems that are built on values and principles of social and environmental sustainability. This is important because, “whether organic production will in the long run pose obstacles or opportunities to agribusiness appropriation is directly related to which product attributes and processes are codified (Guthman 150). If organic is going to more accurately reflect the values on which it was based, regulatory practice must carefully consider what processes are being selected for regulation and why.

This question can really only be considered by going back to the values behind organic. These values are very much at the juncture between economic, environmental and social sustainability and how these concepts are incorporated into the agricultural system. Guthman objects to the state of organic today because it doesn't truly represent the values of social and environmental sustainability that organic was originally established on. Instead these values are appropriated and used to sell organic much like any other branded product in a marketplace, which then results in modes of production that imitate those of industrialized agriculture.

What does this mean in terms of NOFA Vermont?

As an organization that does organic certification for Vermont farms through regulatory practice, NOFA VT is at the heart of the organic paradox that Guthman describes. It is also central to their communication problem when considering how to market organic to consumers. How do they communicate the values of sustainability essential for the environment when they also have to sell it like a brand in the marketplace? Also, how do they make sustainability and environmental values palatable to consumers?

Not only this, another problem of regulation is that of institutionalized interest. Organizations involved in the development and enforcement of regulatory standards are equally susceptible to decision making in defense of its own institutional interests, regardless of the "public good"(Guthman 143).

Thus, each agency has its own interests and stakeholder interests. Therefore the degree of "organic-nests" of what is grown depends on the reputation and interests of the agency that certified the grower (Guthman 143). NOFA juggles the interests of several different stakeholders: local farmers not certified Organic, organic farmers, USDA, and Vermont Organic Farmers. They are also a farmer-oriented organization rather than consumer oriented, as can be seen from their website ([www.noftavt.org](http://www.noftavt.org)).

In terms of navigating the organic paradox and various interests at play, NOFA VT has to go back to the fundamentals and define their purpose as an organization in terms of their values. Why are they promoting organic? What does NOFA VT look like 10, 20, 50 years from now? What will the organization have accomplished ideally during that time? Is promoting organic now essential to the future their organization represents?

Consumer motivations for buying organic

How does the organic paradox play out among consumers? Based on the applied market research of others, several overarching patterns are seen.

Health

One paper that did a comprehensive literature review of contemporary research on organic food motivations concluded that, "the overwhelming majority of studies find 'health' to be the primary reason consumers buy organic foods"(Hughner et al 8).

Guthman gives an interesting account about concept of health in our society. Health, she says is an "important subset of the nature motif" (Guthman 130). In the example of California, this has resulted in capitalizing on images of sunshine, clean air, and the outdoors to sell foods. Organic food, she says, is at the "crux of the idiom that associates nature with health" (138). The health assumption for organic is based on these ideal conceptions of nature and how things are naturally grown.

Consumers regard the health of organic food in several different ways. There is the aspect of preventative health, since it is assumed to be without harmful pesticides and chemicals. In some research, the strongest associations with organic involve personal health, well-being and quality of life, which can be traced back to the intrinsic qualities of organic food, including 'naturalness' in production"(Padel, Foster 615).

Because people perceive organic food to be healthier, it becomes a parameter of quality. The health association is extremely persuasive to consumers because they believe that there are tangible benefits to themselves. Studies “find that health concern is a better predictor of the purchase of organic food than concern from the environment, and conclude that egoistic motives are better predictors of the purchase of organic foods than are altruistic motives” (Hughner et al 8).

## COST

Cost is often cited as the main deterrent for consumers when choosing organic food. Guthman assumes cost as the main barrier for organic purchase, saying that by codifying the meaning of organic and elevating it to a brand name allows “institutions with a questionable commitment to sustainable food provision to have easy access to a niche market” (146). Essentially, regulation by legitimizing organic as a specialty product in fact establishes a type of luxury brand that agribusiness can appropriate and inflate prices for profit. Research shows this can result in a price paradox, where the higher cost of organic is both a deterrent for many consumers but at the same time, the reason why other consumers pay for organic. When things cost more, it is usually assumed to be higher quality and thus “healthier” for you.

Price as it turns out is not an “absolute barrier”(Padel, Foster 623). For example, research shows that someone who falls into an upper income bracket is not necessarily more likely to buy organic food than someone who falls into a lower income bracket. Often, consumers’ willingness to pay depends on knowing what distinguishes organic from the conventional in order to justify the price difference. Choices, the online journal of the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association, had an interesting study on household income levels and organic purchase. Surprisingly, households with an income level of \$25,000 or below spent the most on organic produce in 2001 and 2004. Also, households in the income bracket of \$35,000–\$44,999 spent as much on organic produce as households earning over \$100,000. Their conclusion was that there isn’t a clear association between house-

hold income and spending on organic produce. This implies that purchase is based on more than price. One study, “The Limits to growth in organic sales: Price elasticity of consumer demand for organic food in Dutch supermarkets” showed that strong price cuts in the mass distribution of organic does mean an increase in overall consumer demand for it. If price isn’t necessarily the main way to make changes in consumer purchase, it implies that consumer motivation may lie more in personal conviction and values about food.

Also, if organic becomes another product where its values are marketed like “Diet” or “Sugar-free”, what does it mean in terms of its ethically driven origins? Can the goals of sustainability and environmental values realistically coexist in a market that pushes organic as a product where profit and bottom lines are the measures of success?

## ETHICS

The general pattern of research shows that environmental concern is a positive influence on consumer attitudes but, “it is not a driving factor of organic food purchase. Rather perceptions of good health, nutrients, and taste are more important in the purchase of organic food” (Hughner et al 9). On the other hand, while market studies show that health appears to be the most powerful incentive towards organic purchase, “ethically-based motives relating to the environment and animal welfare” remain an important factor (Padel, Foster 611).

It seems that research knows that the values associated with an environmental ethic are quite important, but research practice is limited in terms of incorporating ethical behavior in consumers because it “stems from a multitude of motivations/ and proves difficult when attempting to predict consumer behavior using multi-attribute behavioral models, as they do not facilitate the measurement of altruistic beliefs and ethical actions” (McEachern, McLean 90). Because it is difficult to quantify and measure, the real impact of ethical decisions may be difficult to apprehend in organic purchasing.

For some consumers ethics plays a large part in their skepticism about organic and perceive the sale of organic in supermarkets and large retailers as incompatible with the goals of sustainability, creating mistrust. As an example, one skeptical responder in a research study said, “they [large retailers] do not support sustainable farming” (Padel, Foster 620). On the other hand, specialty stores, such as Co-ops, farmer’s markets and retailers like Whole Foods that are specialist organic shops are associated with environmental values, trust, and personal relationships. Also, the ethical motivations inherent to buying organic are seen in the market relationships with socially responsible activities like fair trade and animal welfare.

Among organic consumers there are interesting degrees of affiliation with organic that seems dependent on ethical motivations. One research study defines people who have been organic consumers for a while as “classic organic consumers” who have a commitment to environmentally sound products as part of a lifestyle. Newer organic consumers have a “commitment to products that relate to personal health” (Cunningham 3).

There has been some research that has focused on identifying a more psychographic profile (attributes relating to personality, values, attitudes, interests, or lifestyles) of the regular consumer of organic foods. For this group, “organic food consumption is part of a way of life. It results from an ideology, connected to a particular value system, that affects personality measures, attitudes, and consumption behavior (Hughner et al 3). As a result, regular consumers of organic tend to be environmentally oriented and make decisions for values-driven reasons. These consumers are described by the Hartman Group as the “True Naturals” (Cunningham 5). They tend to have strong environmental values and act on their beliefs. They regularly purchase organic food and earth friendly products and are willing to pay premium prices.

## EDUCATION

One of the strongest correlations in consumer behavior and organic purchase has been between education level and organic purchase. The more “educated the respondent, the more likely they are to make organic purchases” (Cunningham, 3). Education level may play a role in a person’s ability to navigate competing claims around organic food (Padel and Foster 623). What is complicated about this correlation is that it means people who can afford to receive higher education are the most likely purchasers and regular purchasers of organic. One of Guthman’s greatest objections is to organic’s role in becoming the realm of the elite urban class. This places organic once again in the paradoxical context where its goals of social sustainability are in fact lost in a marketplace where the elite few have access to it. The research that I read did not clarify why having higher levels of education might give people a greater ability to navigate all the confusing information in the world.

Exploration

When NOFA VT introduced me to their marketing strategy problem around organic, I assumed that I was going to help them design some type of communication to grow organic consumption. One trajectory that I was really interested in was bringing the producers/farmers closer to the consumers during the time of purchase. This was based on several things that I discovered from my research about how important personal networks are in building trust and influencing people's food choices (conclusions based on interviews and shadowing consumers).

If a strong correlation is seen between education and organic food purchase, organic farmers are among the most knowledgeable about organic food production since they practice it. They are also in the strategic position of personal exchange at the time of purchase at outlets like farmer's markets. People who come to farmers markets are also likely to be receptive to information about organic food, since they are already choosing an alternative food venue from conventional retailers.

When I was considering this route for my design project, I interviewed organic farmers about why they choose to farm organically. When I asked them to analyze their consumers' motivations, I discovered they weren't particularly interactive in communicating their knowledge about organic. They also needed a better understanding of consumers coming through the marketplace. It was also clear that the choice to farm organically was one based on their personal experiences and a belief in sustainable agriculture. For me, this stood out as an invaluable resource on which to build trust with the consumer.



Market research and my interviews of consumers show that they trust food at specialty retailers more than conventional ones they trust ethically driven motivations, such as those that I heard discussed by these organic farmers.

The need to open up this information to consumers led to a multitude of design possibilities, from signage at farmstands, albums, to designing a system where organic farmers could have a better understanding of consumers, helping them figure out ways understand types of consumers and thereby adapt their communication. I also had the interesting possibility of designing the conversation between the organic farmer and the consumer.

Even though I was partial to this design direction, I decided to redirect my project for a couple of reasons. One was the politics surrounding organic in NOFA VT. If they were going to support a campaign around organic farmers, they were favoring one stakeholder in their organization over others. This was sensitive because they did not want to alienate their other stakeholders and I found that this watered down messaging because it incorporated various different interests.

Part of this had to do with the understanding that a belief in sustainable agriculture doesn't only exist among those who choose organic. It is a flux that farmers participate in at varying levels. This might mean that there are local farmers who choose to follow some organic precedents but not others and then there are those "beyond organic" farmers who believe that they follow more sustainable practices than the ones set by organic regulations. These farmers object to what Guthman points out as the way organic regulation captures and defines sustainable agriculture in order to standardize it for the marketplace.

The other major constraint for me was geographical. By not living in Vermont, the time, cost and distance constraints were difficult to overcome. I found that the resources it would take to orchestrate relationships with farmers in Vermont and NOFA-VT was unfortunately not within the scope of what I was able to do. I needed to design without dependence on too many externalities.

Book

Photo

llc  
Blackwell

observer Portrait narrative

1

2

3

quote

categories

1) Create marketing brief for the NOFA  
2) Focus on one group of producers & see how to market for them

Another Idea

maximize hieny of inpt →  
levels of what's most inpt. to least inpt.  
for how to purchase

Clothing & Food → purchasing is very similar

conventional apple

organic apple

conventional person

organic person

gap

reference milk & cigarette ads

- Linking up w/ talented people  
willing to help → become more global

Survey Questions continued...

what you find the most helpful in making food choices at the store/market? How to create transparency questions

maybe organic farms put up signs showing what's in their food → standardizing the list so people recognize it so that if local farmers copy it's clear that theirs may be different

transparent quality assurance


Selling other organic products  
building trust building NOFA brand  
(Mabarak w/ other organizations that do same thing, involve other industries)



Design Focus

I focused on NOFA VT the organization and the issues that were creating problems for a directed marketing strategy. Three problems stood out to me. First was their communication. It was not based on a very clear and concise statement of the beliefs and values that form the basis of why they believe in organic agriculture. The second issue was one of timing. There wasn't a clear understanding of when consumers were more likely to be open to organic choice. The third issue was population. They needed a clearer idea of what issues were the most important to their consumers.

## **COMMUNICATION**

The key issue here was one of the organization's goals. When I asked them the question "why is organic the better choice?" they told me that this was sensitive issue within the organization itself because people had mixed feelings about this. When asked for the explanations they give to people and consumers, what resulted were confusing responses that were very related to supporting farming practices and processes but nothing that clearly defined the organization's ethics and values about "why organic". On their website, their mission is stated as follows: 

The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont is a nonprofit association of farmers, gardeners, and consumers working to promote an economically viable and ecologically sound Vermont food system for the benefit of current and future generations.

**Why? the values of the organization are implicit by what they “do” but beliefs and values that motivate them need to be explicit.**

**Why are they passionate about increasing the acreage of certified organic land? Why is it their goal to increase access of local organic food to everyone?**

NOFA Vermont was founded in Putney in 1971, making it one of the oldest organic farming associations in the United States. Today, we are proud to have over 1200 members throughout the state and to certify over 580 farms and processors to the USDA National Organic Program Standards. We are passionate about increasing the acreage of certified organic land in Vermont while also increasing the access of local organic food to all Vermonterers. All our programs strive to meet these goals whether it involves working with schools to bring local foods into the cafeteria or providing business planning services to farmers to ensure their businesses stay viable. Whether you are a Vermonter who gardens, farms, eats local food, or enjoys our rural communities, NOFA Vermont welcomes you.

WHY ORGANIC?

While it is implied that NOFA VT believes in organic because it is founded on goals of sustainability, this is stated in terms of their function not their beliefs. If they only had one sentence in which to describe why they do what they do, what would it be?

It is difficult to convince a consumer that she should choose organic food because it increases acreage of certified organic farmland or leads to “economically viable and ecologically sound” farm practices that are somewhat esoteric.

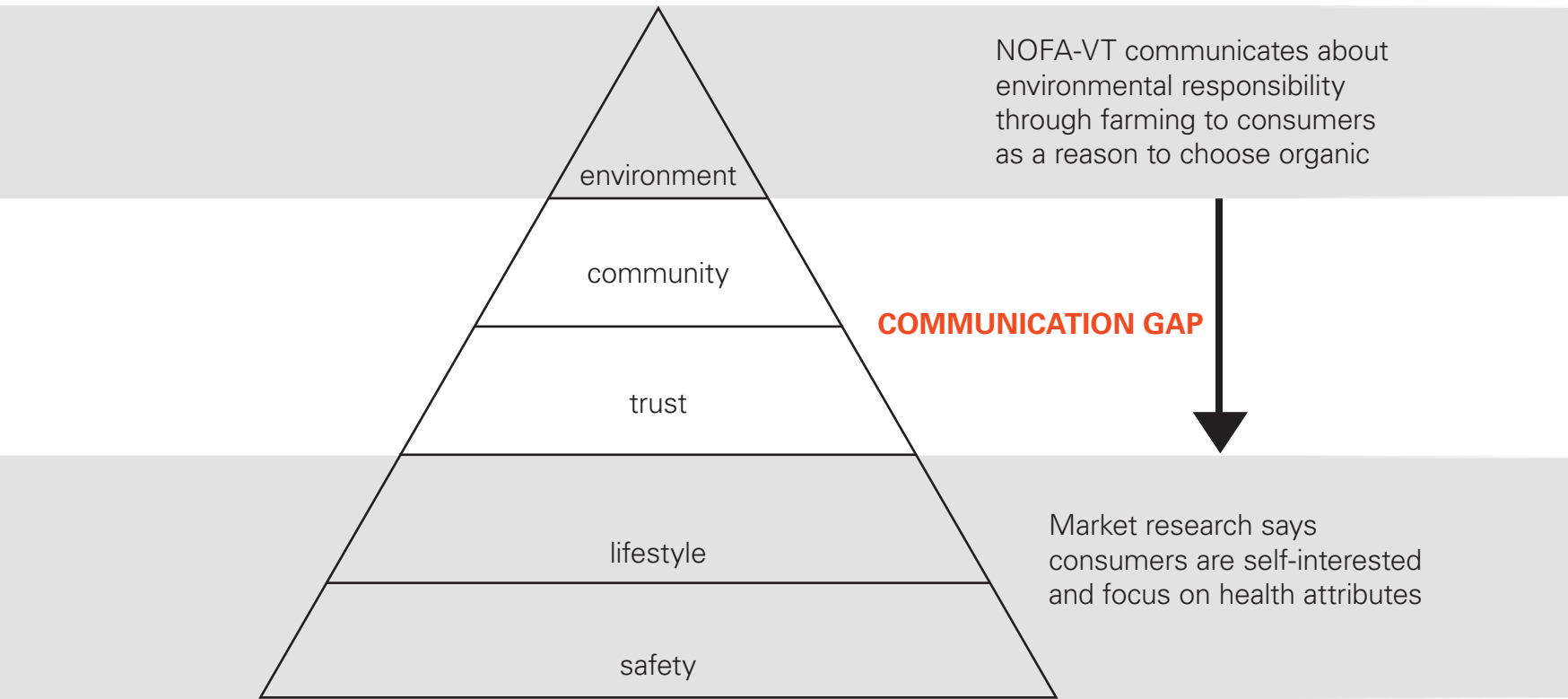
In an example, one NOFA-VT member emailed the group regarding her lecture at a nearby college where, “a student asked me how to navigate the various labels on the shelves and what she should think of organic, and I have to admit that I found myself blabbering on through some complex concepts like the democratic process and the presence of GMO grain in non-organic animals. I guess my bottom line: What are our sound-bites?”

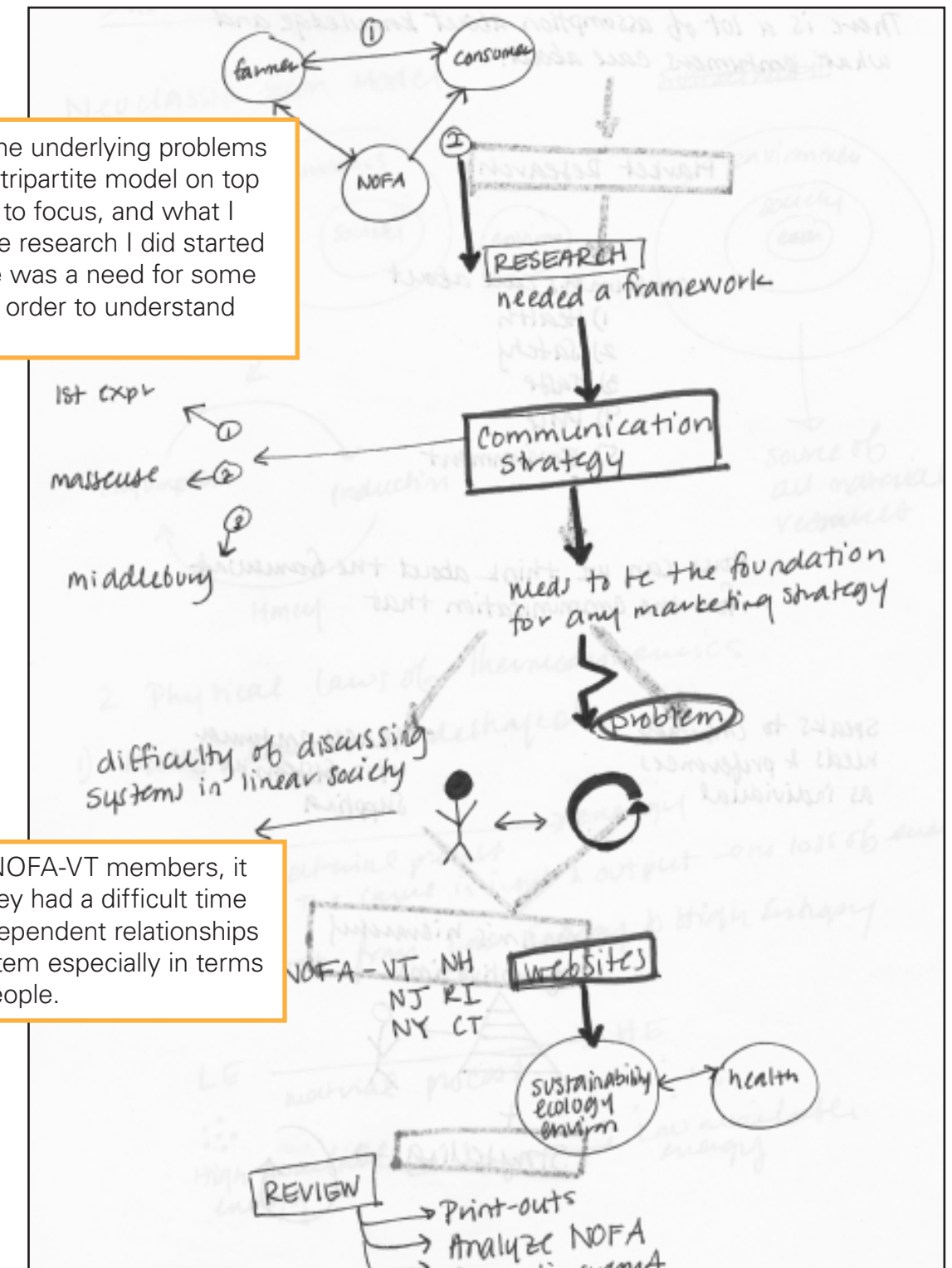
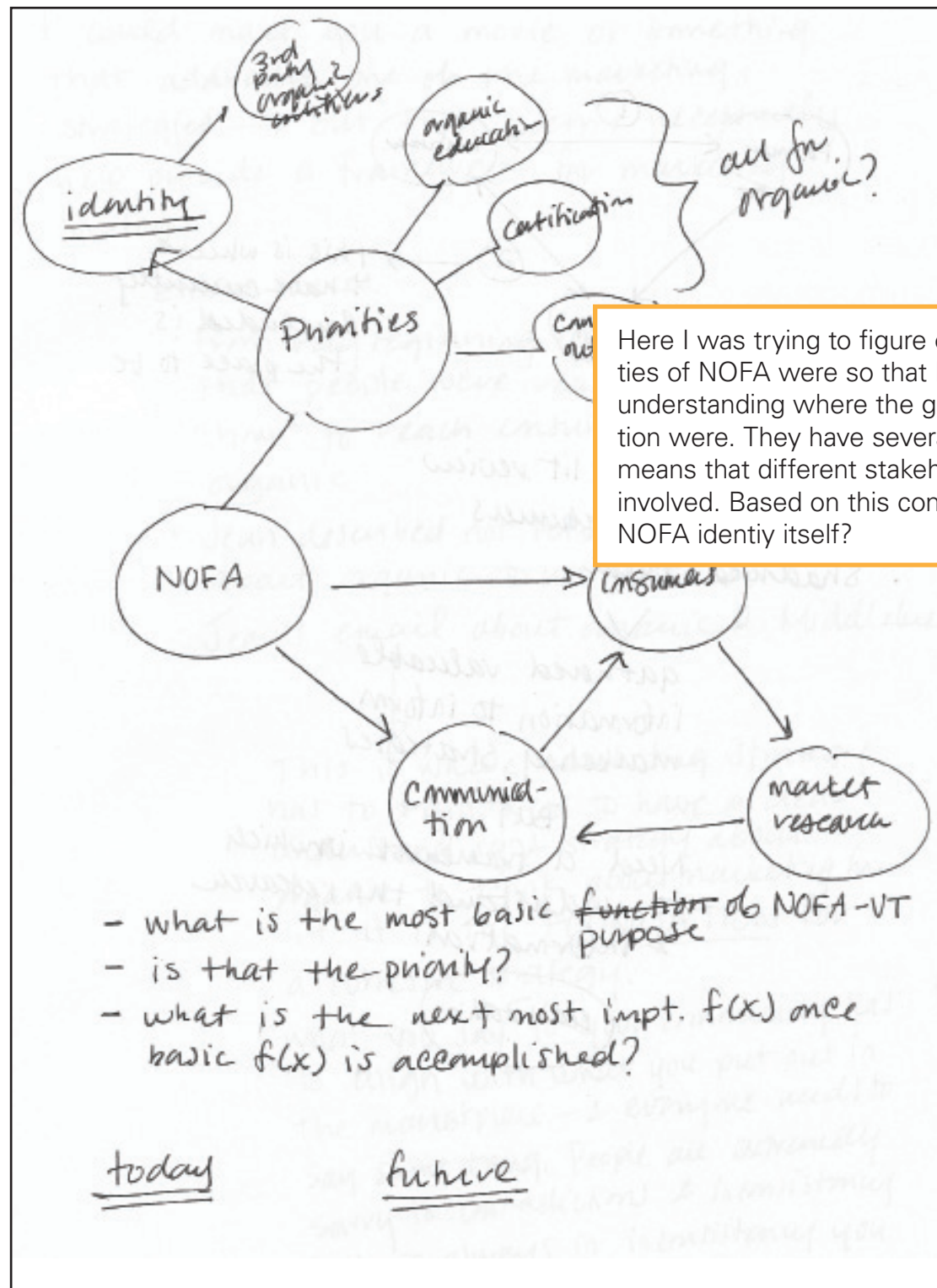
Those sound bites need to be based on the values that their organization is representing through organic. They have to answer the question “why organic” for themselves before promoting it to consumers. It seems that the hardest part lies in how can they discuss ethics and sustainability when it seems incompatible with the position of organic in the market system. Handling this paradox in the real world to other people often leads a defensiveness and justification for organic that is rarely persuasive.

From most of the research I did on NOFA’s communication materials and outlets, they are talking to consumers from the perspective of environmentally sustainable farming when discussing organic. Consumers find the technical details of farming and what the difference between a conventional and a sustainable system difficult to understand.

I used Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as a heuristic to illustrate how the communication gap for NOFA might be happening. Hypothetically, the basic needs are the physiological concerns. Food scares and safety issues relating directly to known and unknown health risks that work against our biology and lead to organic purchase. At this stage, people want a food option that they trust won’t hurt them. This then becomes more about lifestyle health that include goals like eating right.

Once health related motivations are met, a level of trust is established in the tangible benefits of organic food. There is then a sense of advocacy, believers talking about why they chose organic and telling others so that they begin to participate more in the community or organic choice. As they participate in the larger social context of the community, they gain a larger perspective and absorb environmental values which become complementary with their value system.





Based on this heuristic, NOFA-VT communication was asking consumers to care about the environmental farming issues when the consumers were at stages of being concerned about themselves.

I wanted to know more about this communication gap and about the health motivation in order to get a better sense of how help design messaging. I sent out a survey and did followed-up with interviews. The results helped me to understand that health is only a part of the equation. There is a significant relationship between organic and environmental awareness over time that the market research seems to imply but does not explicitly explain. As previously discussed, this is probably because environmental values are based on less tangible and quantifiable motivations. Environmental arguments may prove more effective than market research finds, but as in any case, it depends on how it's designed for particular contexts and particular groups of people.

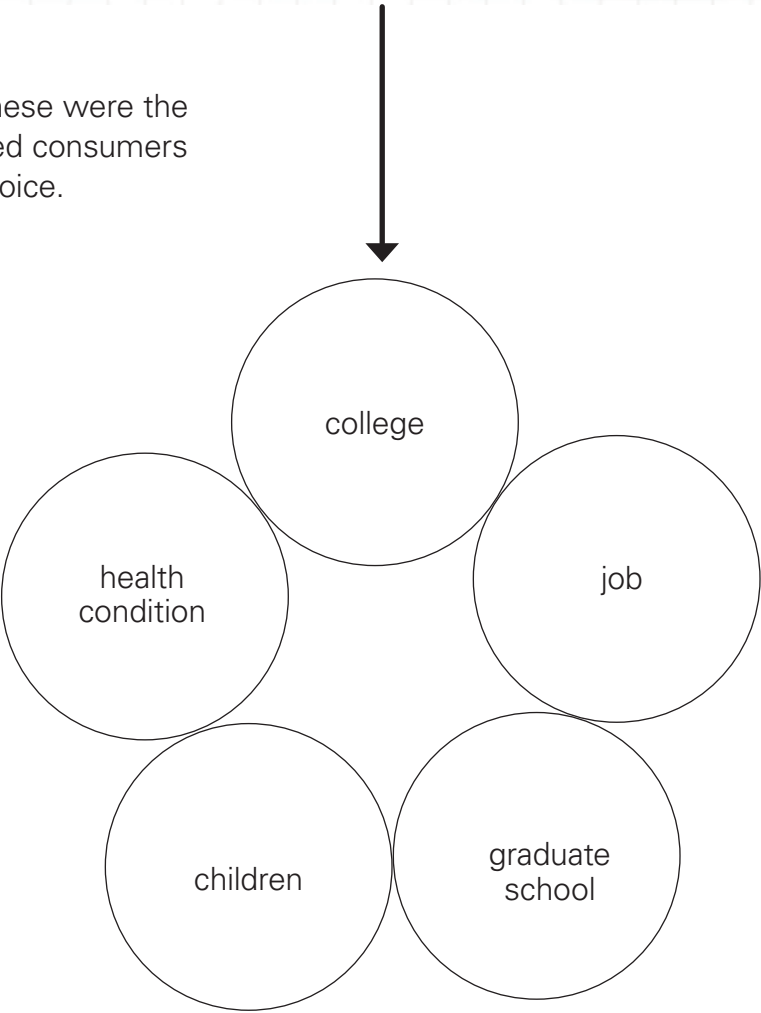
**TIMING**

What I found out through my survey and interviews is that people engage in organic choice differently over time. While a majority of survey respondents did buy organic based on health, a significant number bought organic motivated by environment. When I followed up with in-depth interviews of respondents in both groups, I discovered that with organic, people generally enter organic choice for tangible health benefits, as mapped by Maslow's hierarchy and change over time to have more altruistic and environmental motivations. This seems to be what the market research implies as well. Even though research had consumers defined in unrelated groups of that represent different degrees of participation in organic choice, it seems unlikely that some person arbitrarily went from zero to environmental enthusiast in terms of motivations for buying organic food. There is a development from casual to regular purchaser.

**LIFE TRANSITIONS**



Based on interviews, these were the specific contexts that led consumers to engage in organic choice.





This development seemed to depend on specific contexts. Most of the people I interviewed described college or graduate school to be when they first became aware of and participated in organic food. There were also the contexts of having children, profession and the development of a health condition that were significant motivators. One regular purchaser of organic who buys 90% of his food organic described the origins of his organic choice:

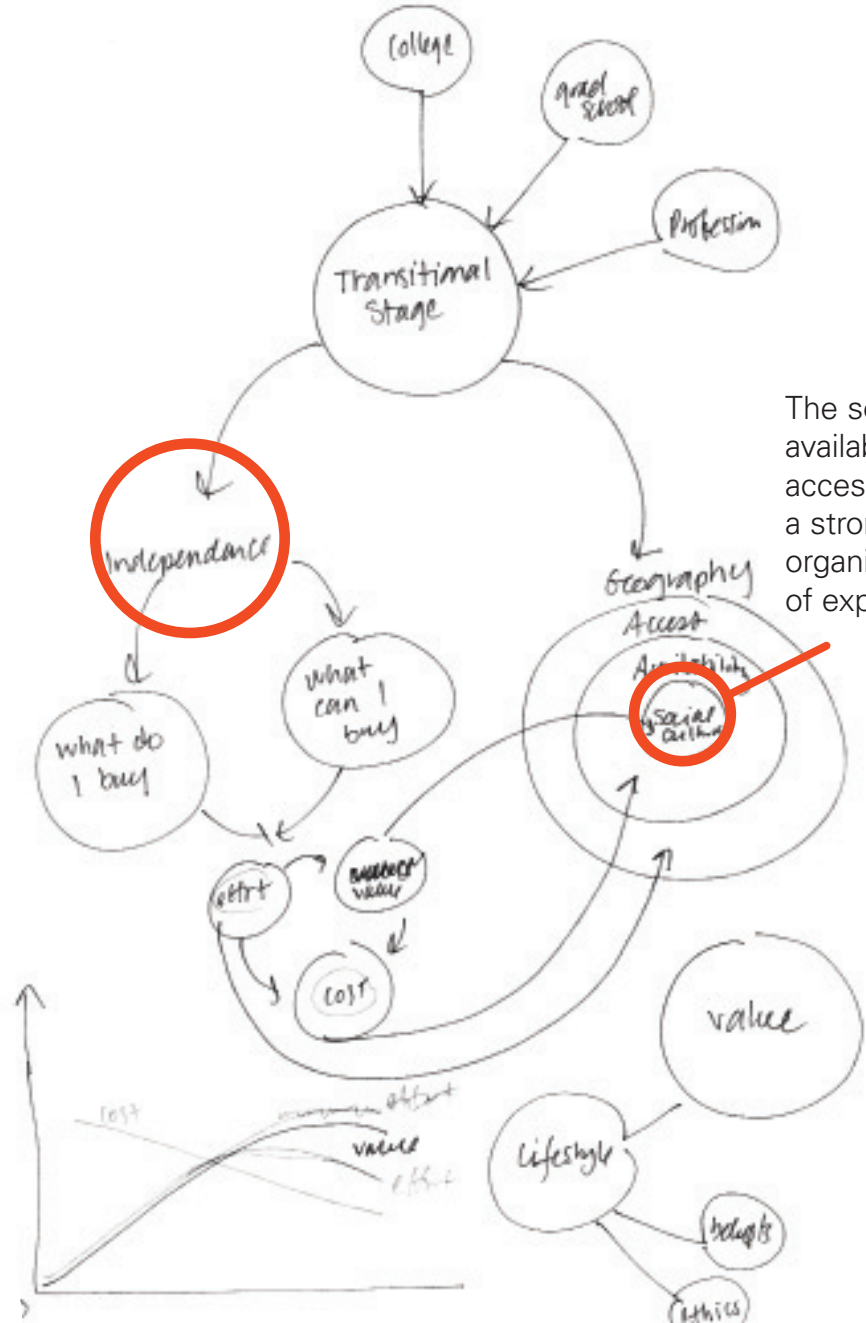
**What does this mean for NOFA?**

Timing for messaging is significant and there are specific contexts for engagement. These are contexts I call “Life Transitions” and they provide a particular set of conditions and opportunities that lead a consumer to organic engagement. For example, the reason that college is a significant life transition has to do with a specific set of personal and social conditions. One essential characteristic was independence. This is the first time that most of my responders had to make conscious food decisions.

“I became more aware of it [organic] when I began to shop for himself regularly which was during grad school”. (John)

“Towards the end of college I started cooking for myself because I was living by myself. I started learning more about organic, and my sister started getting more involved and went around trying to get people not to spray their playgrounds with chemicals. And Ames Iowa was really progressive. They had a Co-op there and a food store that was really good. I trust my husband and my sister is vegetarian for awhile and her partner was all organic and talking to them and learning about how organic agriculture uses alternative methods that are easier on the earth” (Leah)

“Moving to Berkeley for graduate school, I was indoctrinated culturally into organic. Initially I felt strongly against organic because I thought it was a way for first world countries to discriminate against third world production. My research was in development at the time. But I became exposed to lifestyles, opinions and food choices living in the Berkeley community. I hadn’t shopped at grocery stores before then that has had as much of selection as in Berkeley and it was the first time I started hanging out with people who were vegans and who were very restricted in their diets, and talking about their choices made me much more aware of the choices that I was making by default. ” (John)



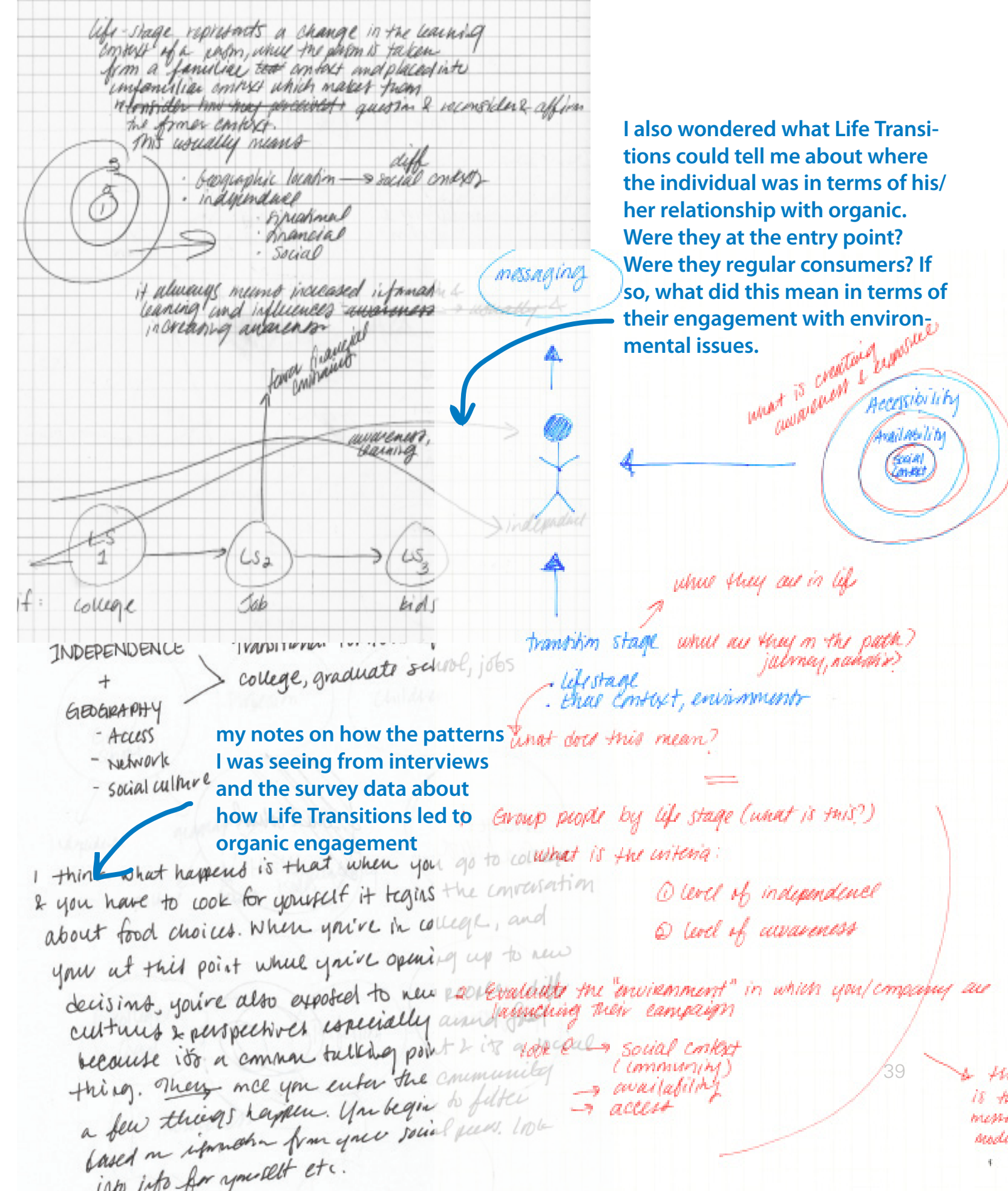
The social culture determines the availability that then determines access. An environment that has a strong social culture supporting organic food provision gives a lot of exposure.

There is also the social context of the community that the respondents lived in. Colleges and universities as centers of education and as such, students are exposed to new ideas, people, choices etc. This provides fertile ground for alternative communities. Thus it creates a social culture that determines availability and access of organic food. Berkeley's established social culture around food makes it an oasis for alternative food provision. Social culture drives the demand that in turn creates incentives for particular producers, and this creates more product availability that results in greater access and affordability. This was the case in both Berkeley and Ames Iowa.

The interview responder who moved from Ames to her current city, found that she and her husband could eat organic on their small budget in Ames due to social culture, availability and access which led to affordability of organic food. When she moved, the social culture was less driven towards alternative food provision, and as a result, organic was much more expensive and difficult to access. She said, "We go grocery shopping in Plattsburgh New York twice a month and stock up on organic milk, meat and cheese because it's so much less expensive there, and we bring it back."

Similarly, in the case of another respondent, her going from Berkeley to Michigan made her conscious about her organic food choices. She said:

"It was a transition from California to Michigan and finally living on my own because buying and eating organic was something that I grew up with and took for granted. And it wasn't until I went to Michigan until I realized that I had to ask myself where was I going to find the fresh produce and there were no farmer's markets nearby me. This is when I became an independent consumer and had to consider the lack of choice I had in the way I wanted to eat."





Jobs also acted in a similar way to universities. The one important difference was that respondents had more disposable income and could spend more freely on food.

Children were a big factor for choosing organic, especially people having their first child. Having children is one of the main triggers for buying organic according to market research. There were also respondents who chose organic for particular health conditions.

Ultimately, the respondents had a mix of these Life Transitions. A conventional series of life transitions might be college, then job, then children. At each stage, a consumer engages in organic at some level, but knowledge and awareness grows from stage to stage, and usually participation. It could be that a participant becomes a regular consumer during college, or that it was during college that the seeds of awareness were planted making him/her a more receptive consumer when they moved for their job and with more disposable income and a social culture around organic, that they begin to purchase. There are many variations. The main point is that people's relationships with organic develop and change over time and are most influenced at key points during that journey. This is significant for NOFA because it can guide them to focus on targeted points in time for their messaging.

### **Developing an environmental ethic**

The other significant point is that when people participate in organic choice, they become part of the dialogue around environmental problems and issues. Choosing organic makes them more sensitive to these topics. One respondent said, "I think I was aware of the environmental issues before I began organic food, but I feel like especially with this rise in consciousness by buying organic and locally, it's moved from the back burner and up to the forefront." (Amanda)

People who are interested in health are, as market research shows, more interested on the tangible health benefits of organic food, i.e. it doesn't have pesticides. One respondent who buys 95% of her food organic because of health motivations initiated by having

a child told me, "I am hoping that I am getting closer to natural foods, and growing without a lot of treatment, just from the dirt to the food, but I don't really know for sure"(Liz). She has been buying organic for the last few years. I compared her to a woman who has a very similar profile, but who is 20 years older and has been buying organic for the past 19 years. She also began buying organic because she had a child. She said:

"my food choices align with my awareness of environmental issues. I see my food choices and environmental choices as lifestyle choices and I intentionally try to make those decisions. The last car we bought was a Prius. We were willing to pay more for it because we are committed to making pro-environmental choices and wanted to make a statement about who we were and how we lived our lives". I was also changing to eat more locally as well because I started to realize the process behind eating strawberries out of season meant environmental cost." (Courtney)

While health is a very significant motivator and works as an entry point into organic, I find that among my respondents, this motivation begins a more proactive dialogue with environmental issues. This consciousness develops into greater knowledge and awareness about a healthier environment. This interdependent relationship between awareness and education about the environment through organic leads to a greater emotional investment in the environment, and then in turn, builds loyalty towards organic purchase.

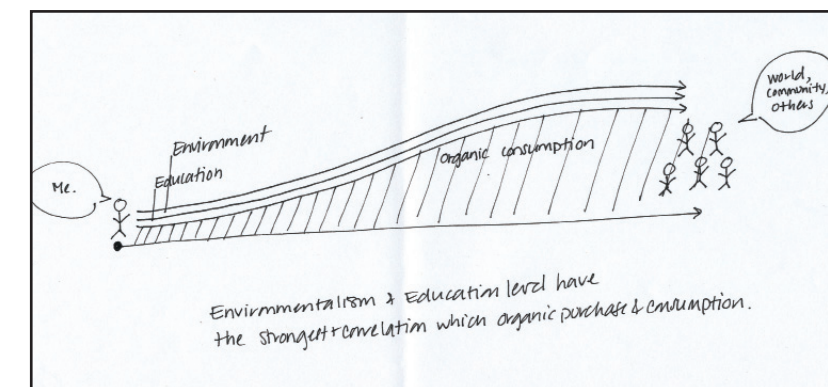
For example, one respondent discussed his journey to environmental awareness and proactivity through food choice. His food purchases during college were based purely on price where "when you only pay attention to prices you don't think about the quality behind it." His initial awareness of organic began at the Life Transition phase of graduate school. He was transplanted to Berkeley where "I was being exposed to food that really looked good and tasted really good, was fresh and not too expensive and organic and local was everywhere. It became a pleasure to shop for those natural ingredients and they made me feel good."

During this time he developed an ethic around food because as he made more conscious food choices, he became more aware of and interested in the media and literature around food. He read Omnivore's dilemma and saw Food Inc. He became more aware of organic in the media.

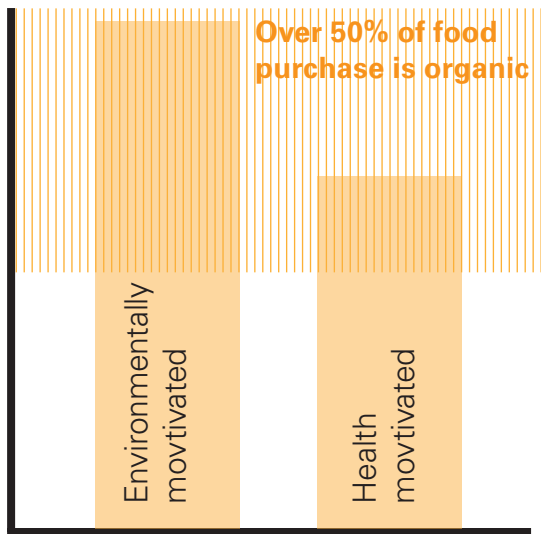
"Now anytime I eat anything, I think about consumerism, how animals were raised, how unsustainable it is. I remember when I used to eat canned food, but now I think about how processed it is. Also throwing away food. It's harder to throw away like chicken, because it makes me feel like I've bought it and not using all of it. It makes me feel wasteful and like a bad consumer." (Jake)

Ultimately what seems to happen is that participation in organic opens the consumer to environmental issues. This means that organic is an effective vehicle for environmental awareness and education.

Sketch of what I think is happening in terms of the relationship between education, environmental awareness and organic purchasing based on interviews.



# survey results



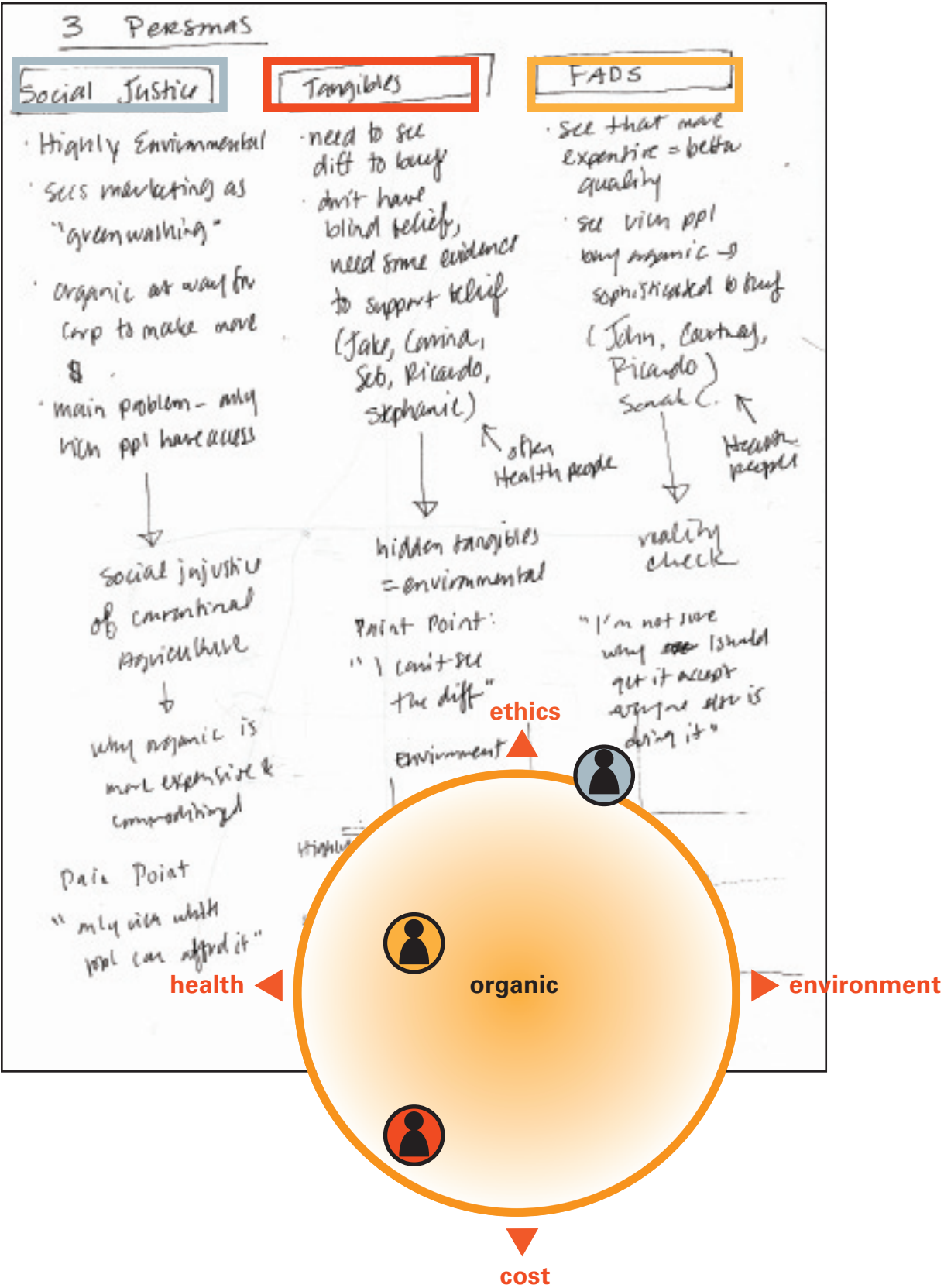
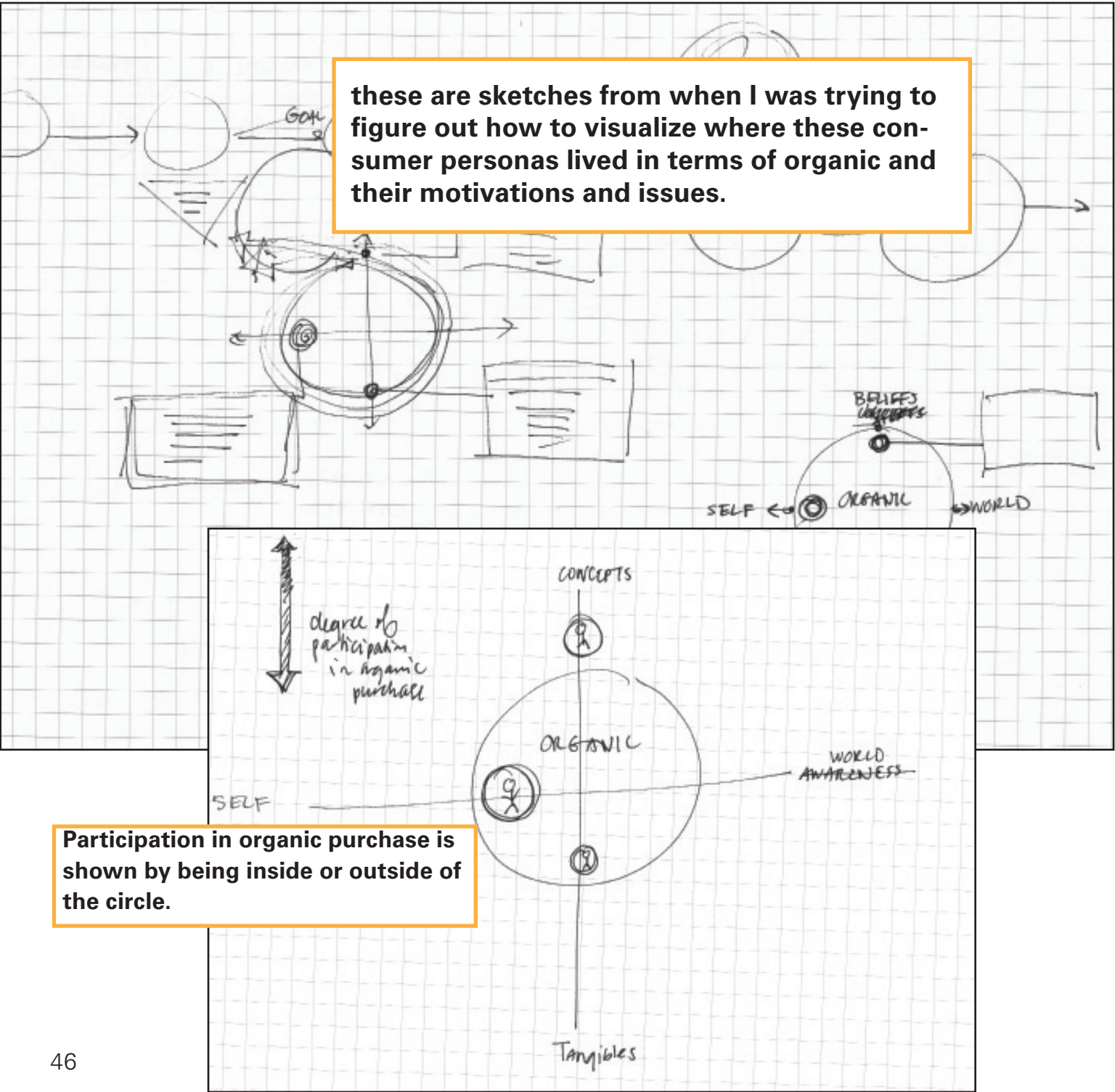
Also, when I did a basic statistical analysis of my survey participants, I saw that while the majority of people were buying organic for health reasons, there was a group of people who were buying organic for environmental motivations. They were not an insignificant group since they represented 37% of the respondents (43 in total).

When I looked into their purchasing habits, I found that among the environmentally motivated, 50% of them purchased over half their food purchases organic. Often significantly over half (70-95%). Among the health motivated people, only about 38% purchased over half their food organic. Environmental ethic seems to push people not only buy more of their food purchase organic, but based on interviews, the they have been buying organic for a longer period of time.

The combination of the interview and survey results made me consider the relationship between environment and organic more. People arrive at environmental awareness and values through different channels. Food choice is one of them and consequently organic because, for better or for worse, has been standardized through regulation and marketed enough that people know it as a product even if they don't know about its mode of production.

This ties back into NOFA-VT's communication goals about why they're promoting organic. If their values as an organization rest with ideals established by sustainable principles, it seems that organic is a vehicle for them to promote those values. To me, their goals are those principles and organic is their means to engage people in those values. This goes back to Guthman's organic paradox. Are they promoting organic for the sake of a greater market share, or is it for the values that originated the system? My framework, I hope, will support the latter.

# Who should NOFA target?





Based on market research responders and the people I interviewed, I put together 3 profiles of consumers that are useful in two dimensions. One is that they represent important talking points because they describe three main issues for consumers around organic. The second is that they provide good opportunities for promoting environmental issues and values behind organic.

## Type 1

This type really wants to see a tangible distinction to justify what he is paying for, because if he does, then he'll pay for it.

He likes facts and data comparisons and his main reason for being a low organic purchaser is that he really can't see the difference between organic and other types of food provision, including conventional retailers.

"If I were Oprah Winfrey and had her money, I would buy everything organic, but I have other priorities for the money I make."

"For organic food, it's really hard too see the difference. You can look at two cars and one is 1000 dollars more because of the leather interior, but with food it's different - it's based on belief because there isn't much of a difference. Sometimes I taste the difference, but that's not even that benefit because when I go to the farmer's market everything tastes good."

"At the farmer's market everything is healthy and I'm doing good for my body. If it's organic than it's a little step above because it doesn't have pesticides and it's grown in a certain way, but everything at the market is good for you so I don't always need the extra organic factor."

This is an important talking point because it comes up frequently among consumers. For this group, convenience and return on investment are very important. This is also an opportunity group because they are buying organic, even though purchases may be more arbitrary. They also care about the health factor that is why they're shopping at alternative food venues.

For NOFA, the way to really reach this group is by creating very data related, clear comparisons between non-organic and organic. As an organization with a lot of agricultural knowledge, this would probably a good opportunity for information design related marketing. They could show information like the carbon footprint of a conventional product versus an organic product, or the fossil fuel cost of each, or how many animals go through an industrial processing plant versus that of an organic system. There are a lot of good examples that exist in the world of this type of strategy. There isn't necessarily proof per se that organic is biologically healthier than conventional, but ultimately, it's not about finding foolproof scientific data but rather designing their message about the organic system and showing that it follows particular principles and ethics - in a fact-speak related way. Comparing the particulars of each the systems can help engage this group in environmental issues and values, and give them evidence for why they're buying organic.

## Type 2

This type cares a lot about health and is willing to spend a large portion of disposable income on food. High organic purchasers in this group say, “I don’t care what I spend on food, it’s worth it for my health and it tastes better”.

*“When I first became aware of organic it seemed like those who were buying it were more sophisticated and they cared about what they were putting into their bodies. I feel that I’m getting something more natural and grown without a lot of treatment. It’s just dirt and the food coming out of the dirt.”*

*“I do wonder sometimes whether I am actually buying organic sometimes. I am hoping that I am getting closer to natural foods, and growing without a lot of treatment, “dirt and the food’ but I don’t really know for sure.”*

Why should NOFA-VT consider them in a marketing strategy when they seem to be purchasing organic already. This goes to the question, does organic promotion end when a consumer begins to purchase? The issue with these consumers is that they often don’t understand the production and provision process behind organic. Because of this, they will understand organic not as a system driven by specific ethical goals, but as a branded product whose quality is determined by its price point as an indication of its healthiness. How does this make organic different from an expensive bag? This describes the organic paradox that Julie Guthman discusses.

Respondents from my survey show that environmental ethic increases the percentage of organic food making up food purchase, and that organic purchase is sustained over time. Also, environmental values leads to a conviction about why they are purchasing, which means that these consumers will be better able to navigate through the information in the world because they will already have established filters based on their values.

Health oriented purchasers, based on the people I interviewed, are open to proactive environmental engagement. In terms of communication, NOFA’s message based on their beliefs and values as an organization for organic will need to be tailored to the interests of this group. Since this group is already engaged in purchasing organic, they are more open to learning about why their food is healthier. They provide a real opportunity group to educate beyond personal health to the ethical motivations behind organic as reasons to purchase organic.

## Type 3

This type is engaged in the political discussion around organic and central to that is the organic paradox. This is someone who cares about the environment, and especially cares about how this relates to social justice. She is ethically driven, but needs to see the “why organic” is an ethical decision. She views organic are hypocritical because it is being marketed to her like any other product, and feels that the ethical initiatives behind organic production have been appropriated to make a profit. The higher price makes her feel like its directed only at the socioeconomically elite. She does not want to support this by buying into it.

I feel like there is a lot of green washing and what I see in organic packaging and marketing is a lot of oversimplified messaging and missing what organic is suppose to be about. What you see is a fractionalized organic messaging. When I look at something, I’m trying to find overall intent, not “no antibiotics” like a bullet point, I want to see a more holistic approach. Also, there’s a lot of legislation around organic, and what is considered organic may not be any healthier than conventional food.”

“Organic is a luxury, and for consumers it’s sort of a mental reprieve offsetting your environmental guilt. Organic doesn’t fly everywhere, it flies in areas where people can afford it - affluent middle class people. You have to be cautious towards overload about organic, because there’s a lot of green washing, but it can’t be accessed by everyone.”

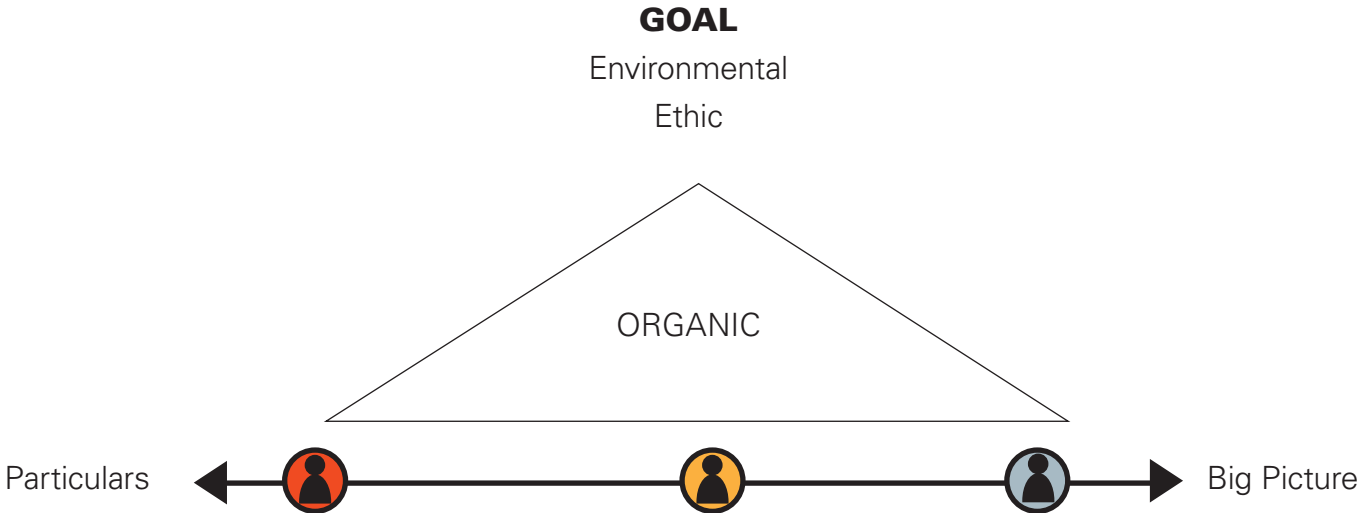
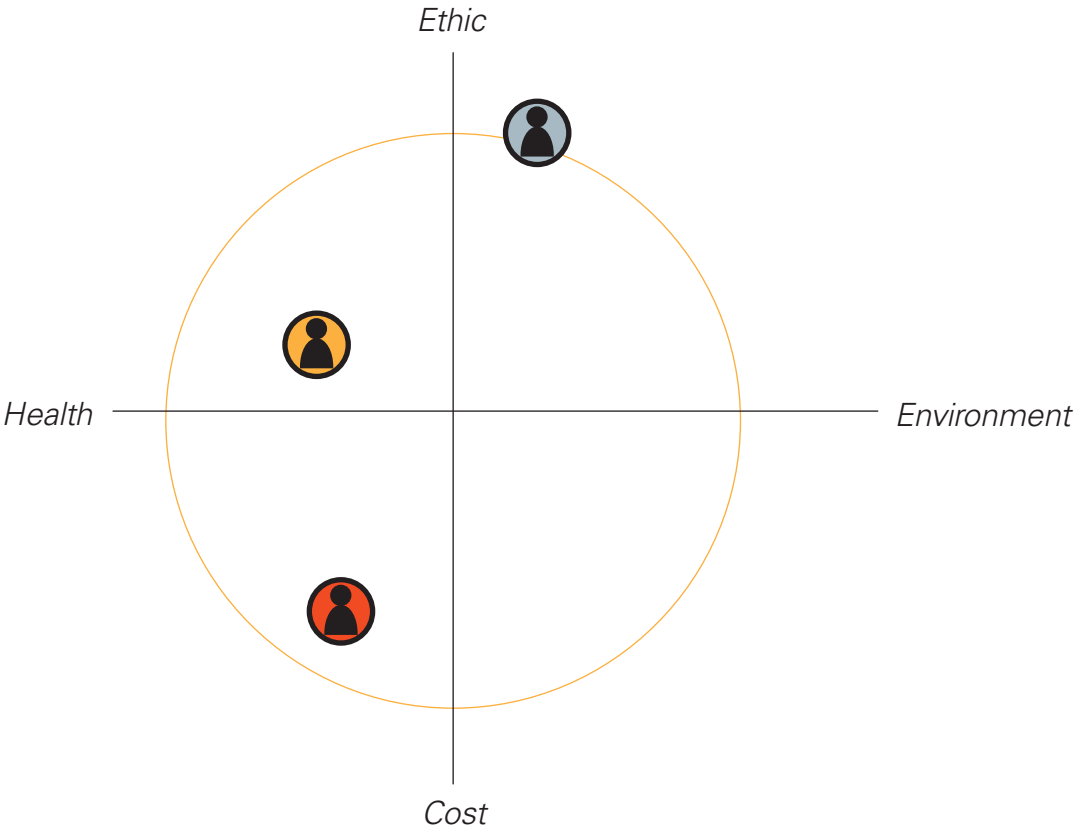
This is an ethically driven person, which means that she’s going to act on her beliefs. Cost and health are not as important to her as her values, and if she were to believe in the organic system, she would be a loyal and high purchaser.

In terms of communication, she is someone who NOFA will have to engage at a political and philosophical level. Why is organic more ethical? Again, this is where NOFA’s own belief and value system as an organization will form the basis from which to communicate with this group. Thinking about this communication is a good exercise from which NOFA can figure out why they themselves believe in organic, how they navigate through the politics and the contradictions as an organization. This means that NOFA will have to really understand the political dialogue around organic described by Guthman, and to be able to discuss it.

On the other hand, this consumer will also have to answer the questions about the social justice of the conventional agricultural system. This is perhaps the best way to engage this consumer, by redirecting the focus from the organic paradox and make her answer the social justice about the conventional food system, and why organic seems to her to be no better. Each is founded on different values and goals. This will also require a good knowledge of the conventional agricultural system and its social impact.

This is also someone who will find the ethical motivations of others affective. A valuable resource would be those stories of organic farmers and others in the food production system who have made decisions based on their ethics.

These general types that I have put together describe three major issues around organic that consistently arise among consumers. Putting them in the form of people with different needs will help give NOFA some direction about how to design their message to communicate to each issue. Most consumers are blends of each of these types, and being able to communicate for each means that NOFA can communicate on varying levels, from the particular to the general in a cohesive way to most consumers. All messaging of course will need to be founded on NOFA VT's goals based on the ethics and values driving the organization.



If we were to translate this into an essay format, it might look something like this:

**Given question:** Why Organic?

**Thesis statement:** NOFA's goals based on ethics and values of organization

**Three ensuing cases:**

Big Picture

↓

Particulars

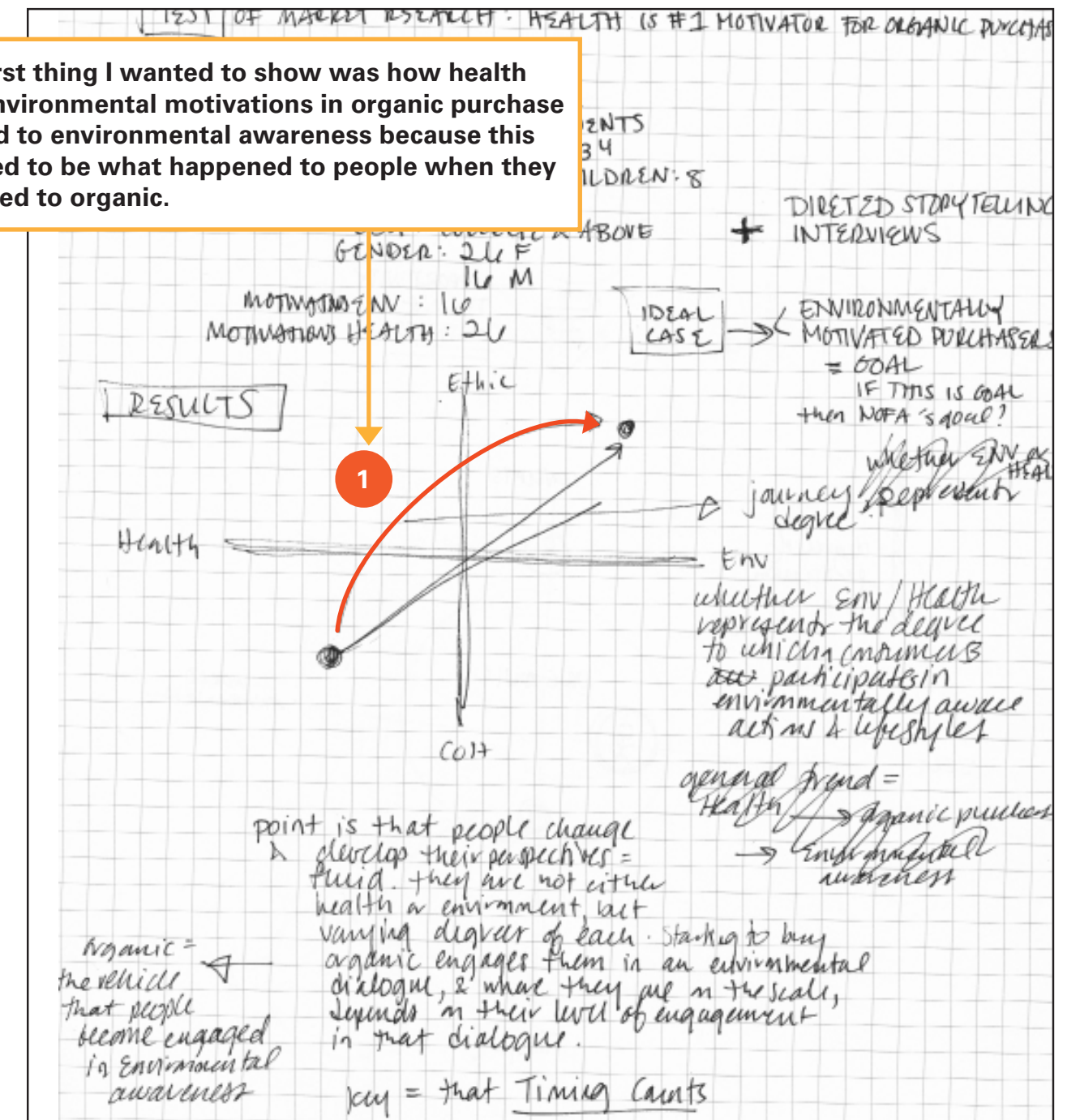
**Conclusion:** Consumers should choose organic



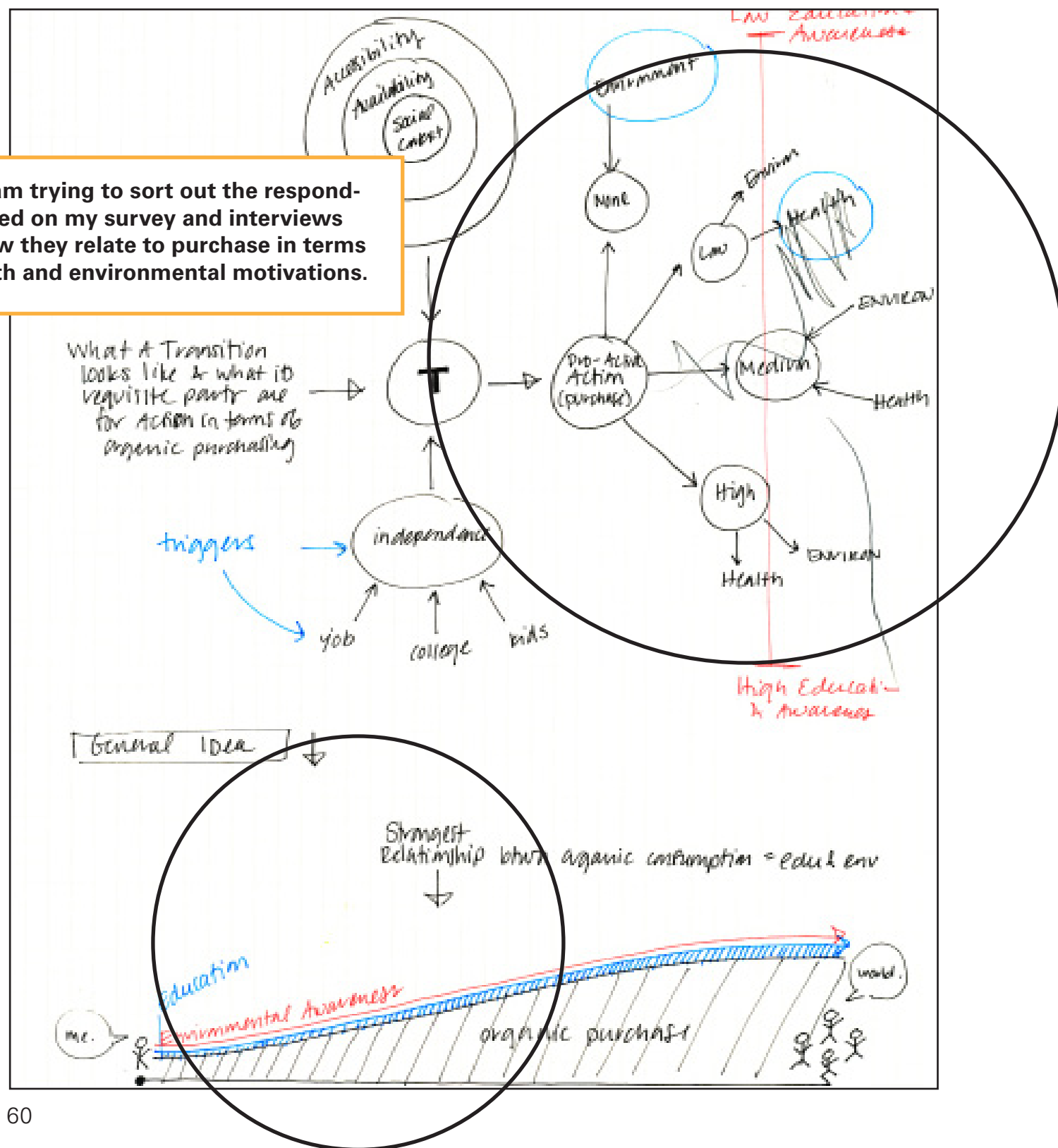
## Preliminary Sketches

The framework that I wanted to design, needed to isolate the three key needs of communication, timing and consumer types, and show how they interacted with each other and finally, give direction for future marketing strategies.

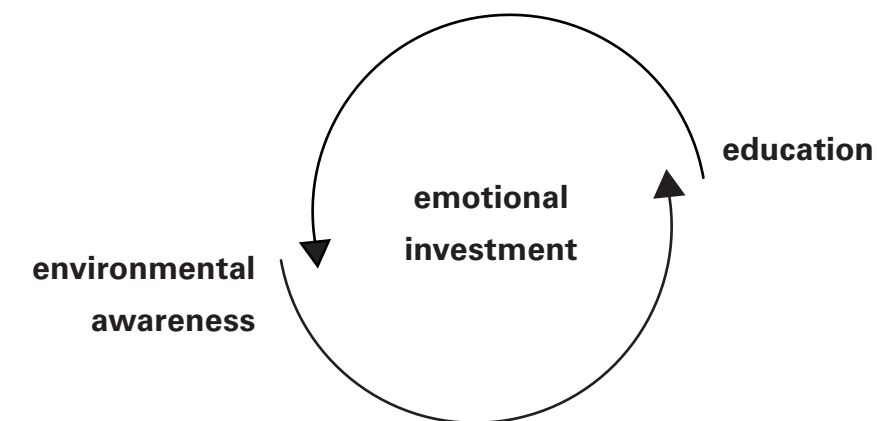
The first thing I wanted to show was how health and environmental motivations in organic purchase related to environmental awareness because this seemed to be what happened to people when they engaged to organic.



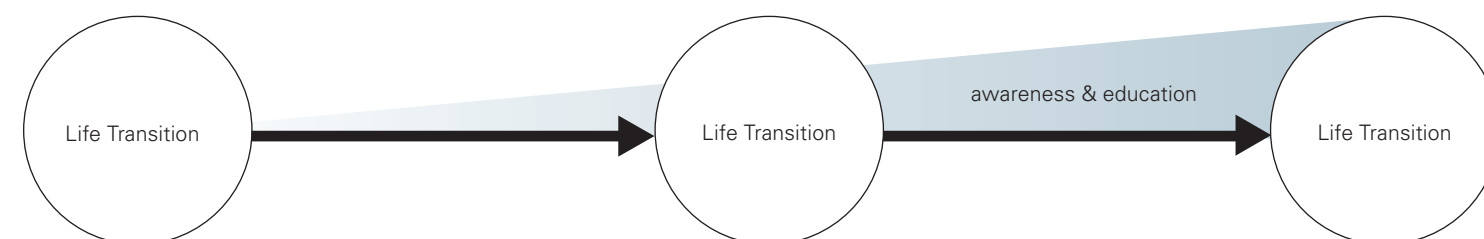
Here I am trying to sort out the responders based on my survey and interviews and how they relate to purchase in terms of health and environmental motivations.



In building out this journey, the relationship with education and environmental awareness was key. My hypothesis is that education and awareness work interdependently, leading to environmental awareness and ultimately emotional investment in making organic food choices. This means that people who purchase based on environmental values will have a sustained relationship with organic purchase over time. This conclusion is based on my subset of environmentally motivated organic purchasers. This group had a longer relationship with alternative food choice and buying organic products.



Life Transitions are key ways for people to engage in organic. This is because they bring together a variety of essential personal and social components that cause people to be open to alternative food choices. Consequently, I wanted the framework to show the composition of the moving parts within a Life Transition that led to this engagement.





Life Transition: The context of your dependence?  
what is current context of your life?  
↓ is this really the king?

1 autmonat

## Life Transition

→ Life shifts  
concepts Shift \*

turning  
point

- "Awareness Shift"
- "Experience Shift"

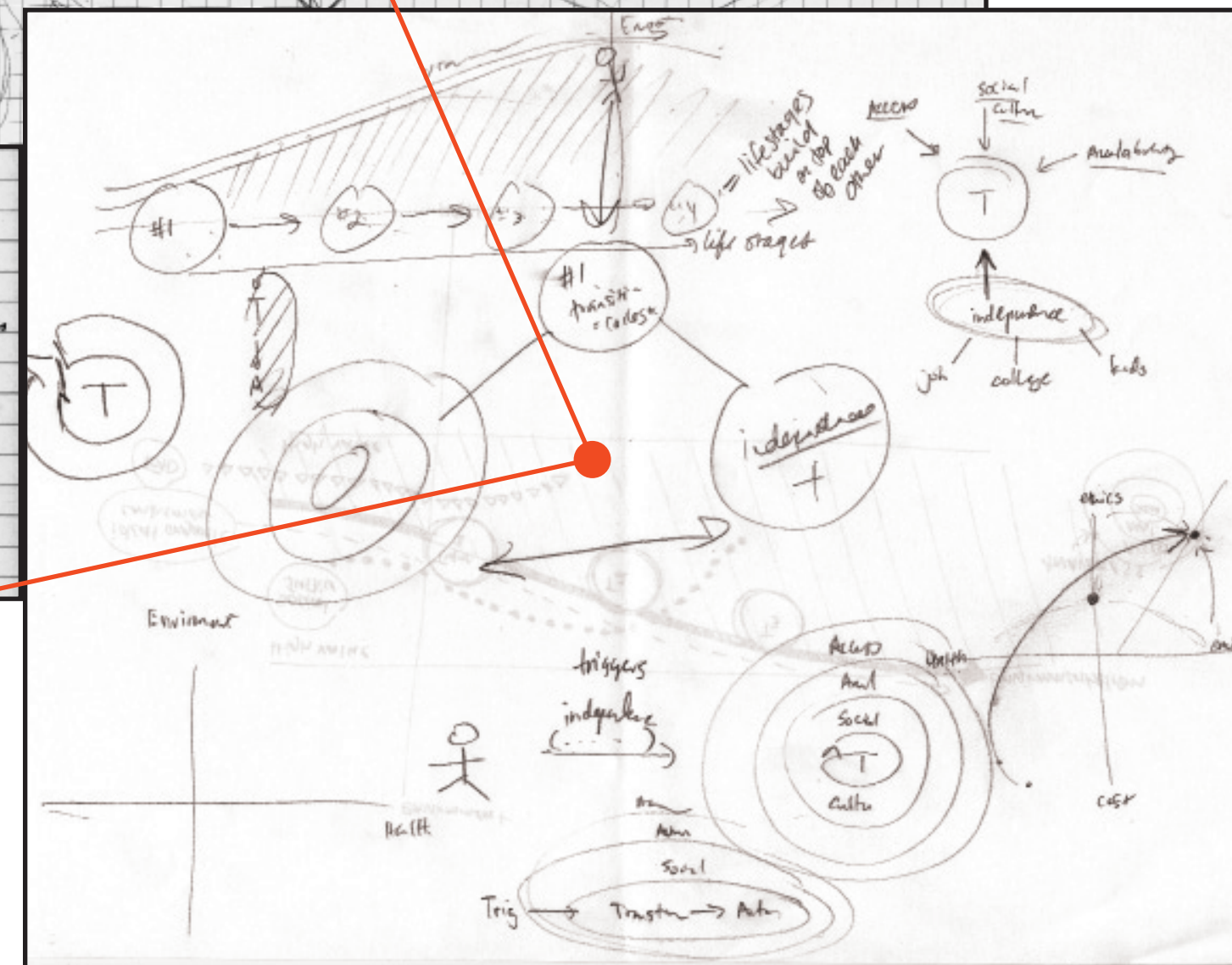
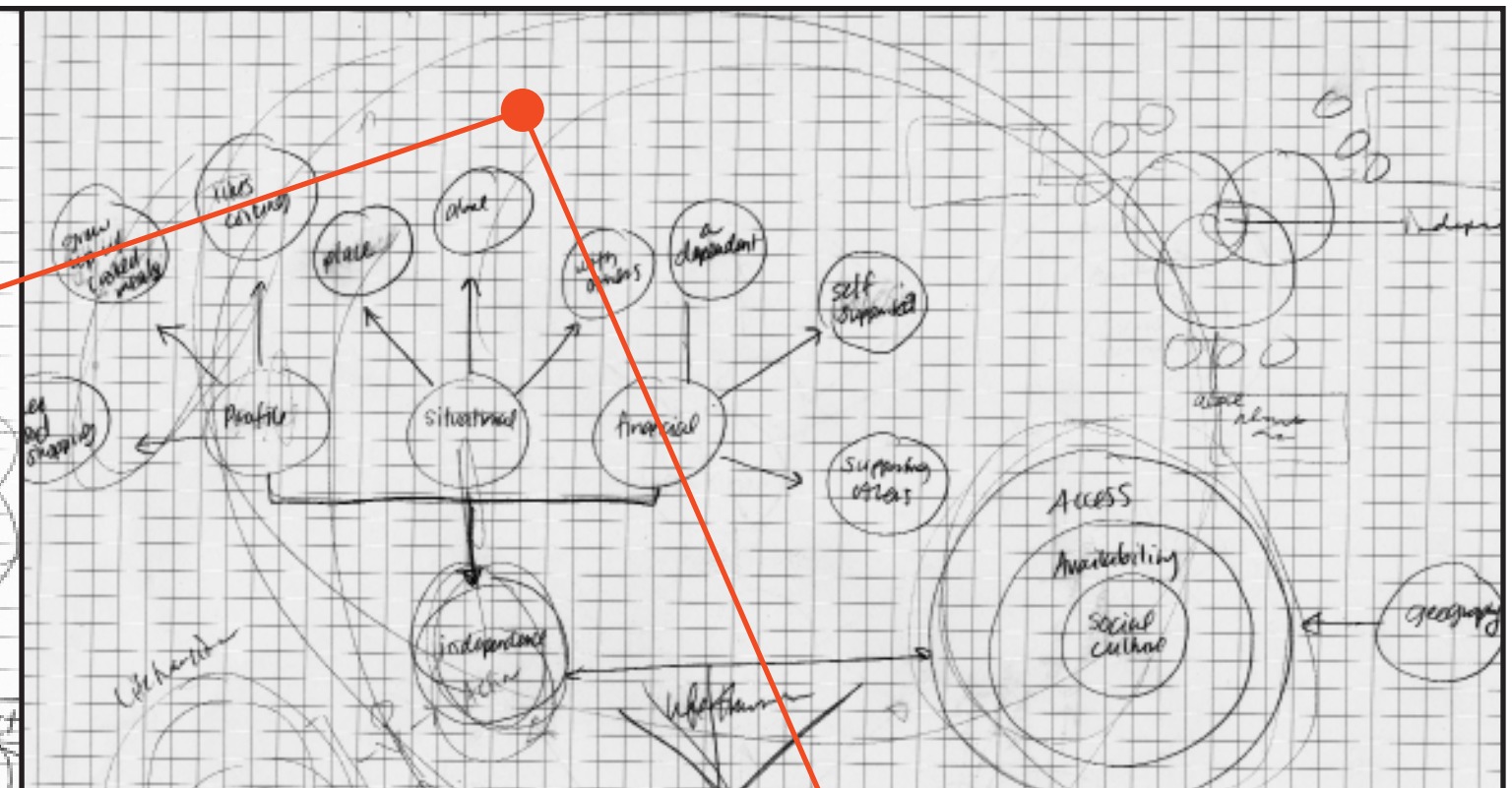
- Awareness
- Knowledge
- Information
- appreciation
- understanding
- "know" means conception

Life-stage represents a change in the learning context of a person, where the person is taken from a familiar ~~text~~ context and placed into unfamiliar context which makes them reconsider how they perceived, question & reconsider & affirm the former context.

This usually means

- Geographic location → <sup>diff</sup> social context
- Individual
  - spiritual
  - financial
  - social

**These sketches are thoughts on the composition of a transition, and then how these transitions can engage a person in organic.**



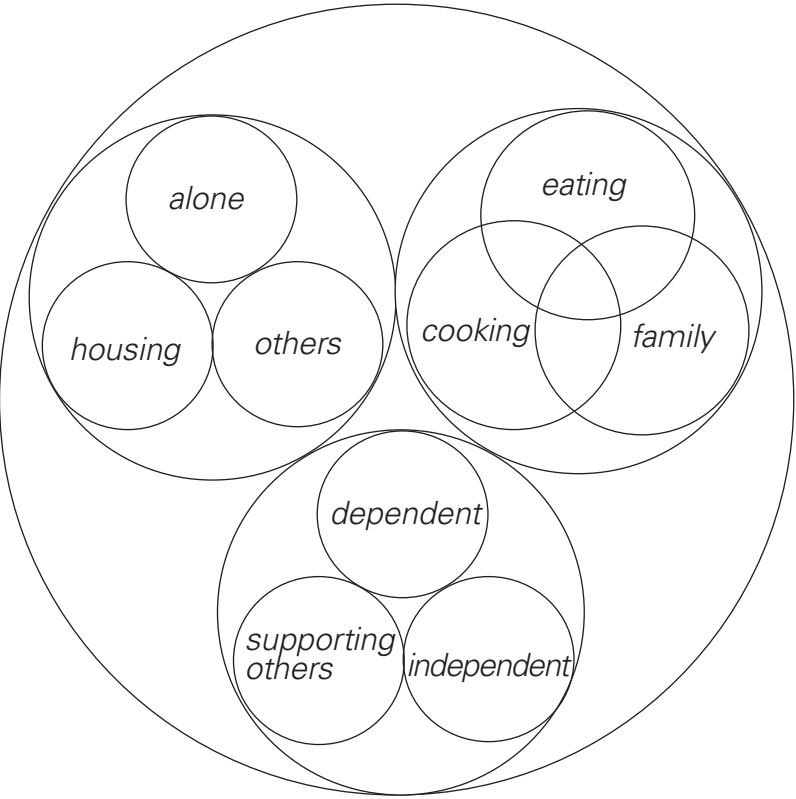
# personal context

## HISTORICAL

How you grew up eating often influences how much you already know about what to buy or food culture in general. This also establishes your initial eating preferences and habits, and whether you're more/less experienced at cooking. All influence how you make food choices.

## SITUATIONAL

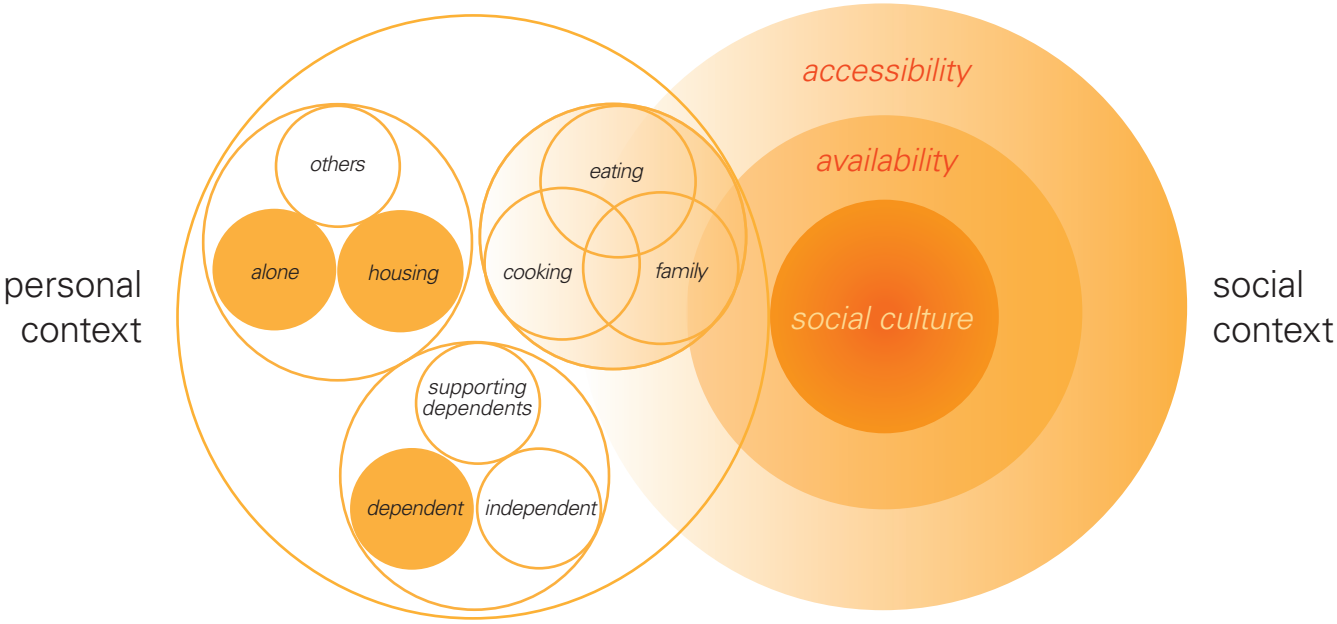
These are the situational contexts that will often determine how you make food choices. For example, if you live in a dorm, it's unlikely you will be cooking for yourself.



## FINANCIAL

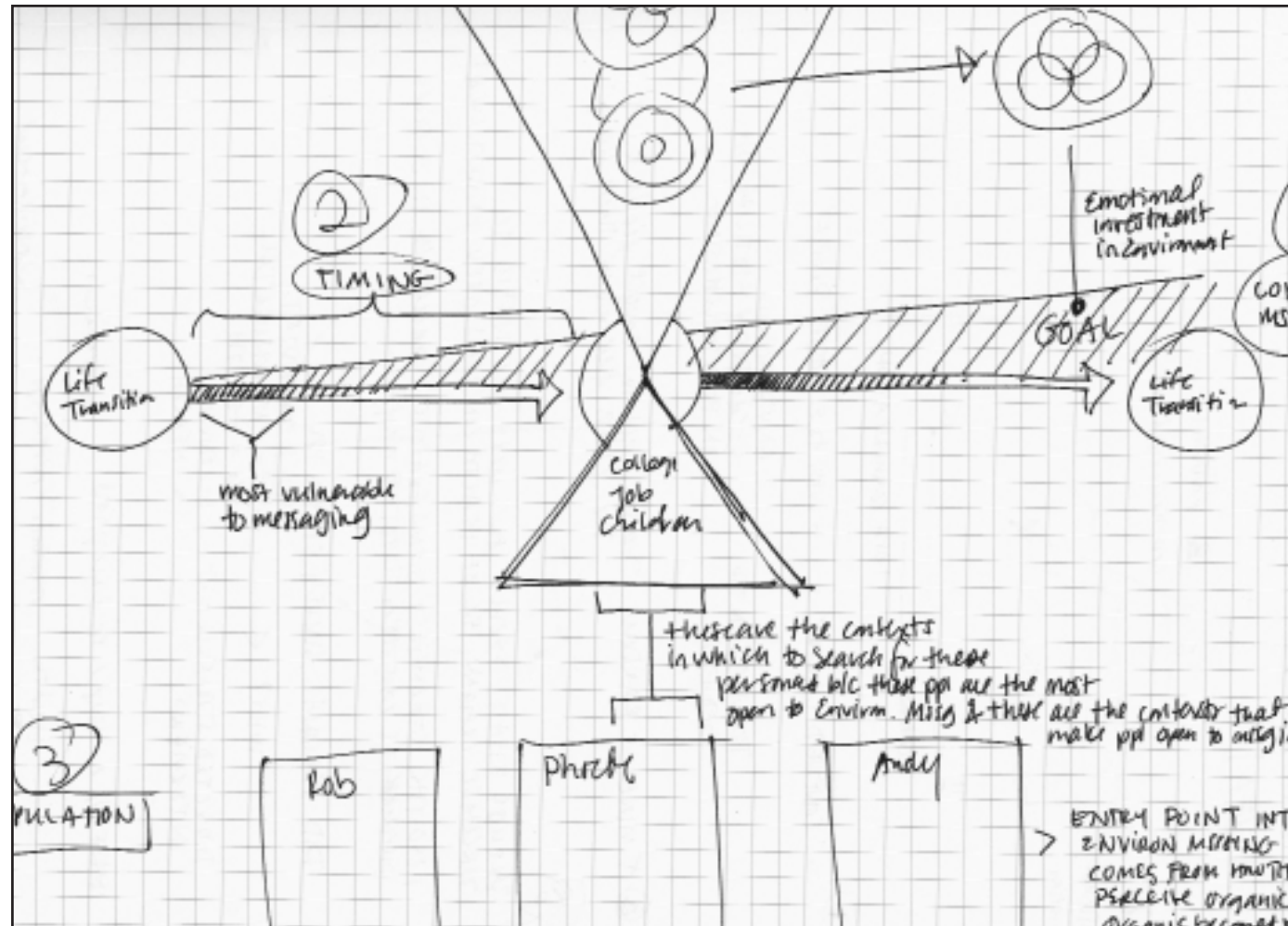
These factors will determine your budget and create contexts in which people decide how much to spend and why. For example, people with children often are willing to pay for more if they believe it's better for their children. This is also particularly important in determining your level of independence. For example, whether you're a student or a profession determines how much disposable income you have.

# example: college

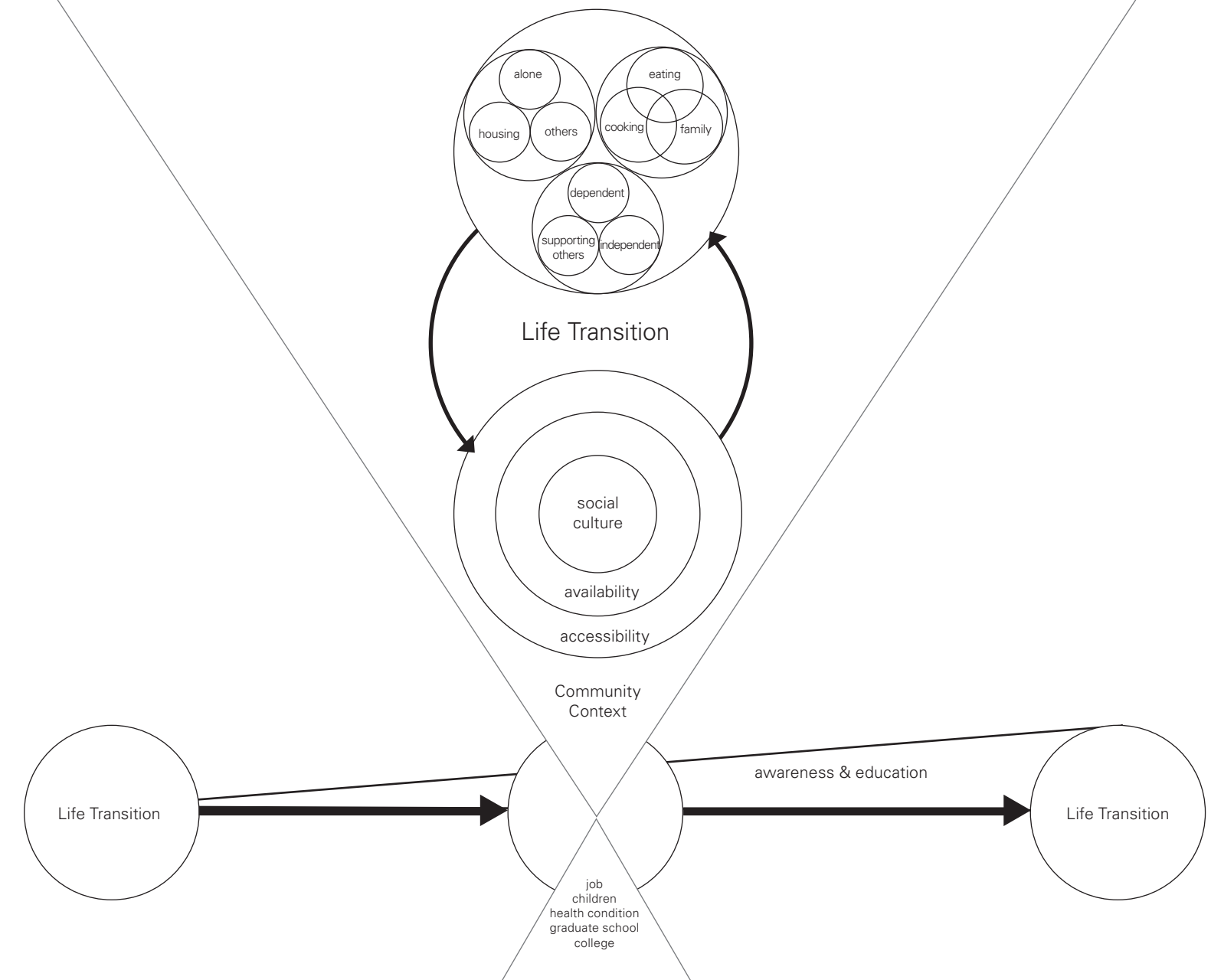


Establishing the composition of a life transition is helpful because depending on what transition you focus on (college, job, kids, graduate school, health condition), knowing what the component parts are is helpful in contextualizing a target group and their needs. In the example above, many of my survey respondents and interviewees began their entry into organic during college/graduate school. For example Berkeley's social culture led to availability and access which made it easy for someone who was interested in organic and alternative food choices to participate. In the personal context, respondents became engaged when they had to feed themselves being independent for the first time, and this made them open to what was being offered by the social context. Also, if NOFA-VT were going to lecture at a college campus again, it would be better to focus on juniors and seniors which is when students usually live in a housing situation that allows for food preparation (e.g. dormitories vs apartments).



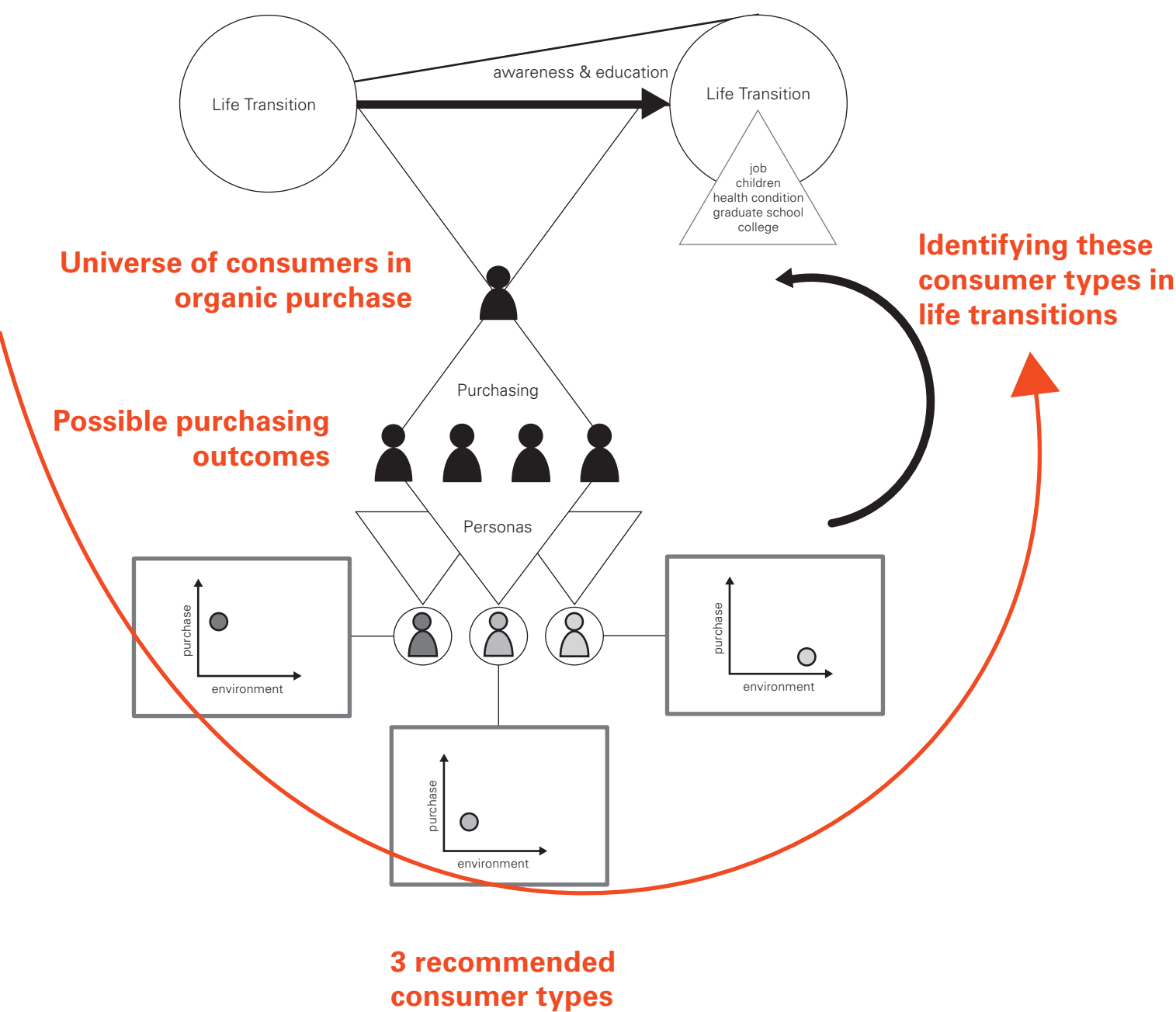


I wanted the framework to give an idea of the components that all interacted together and so I decided to show the composition of a life transition as part of the visual diagram. This way, the framework can be used like a map. If NOFA-VT wanted to target a particular life transition, they could go back and see the component parts and begin describing the context and also what the moving parts are that are important to a target group within the context. This creates a way to focus and target the environment as well as the audience needs.

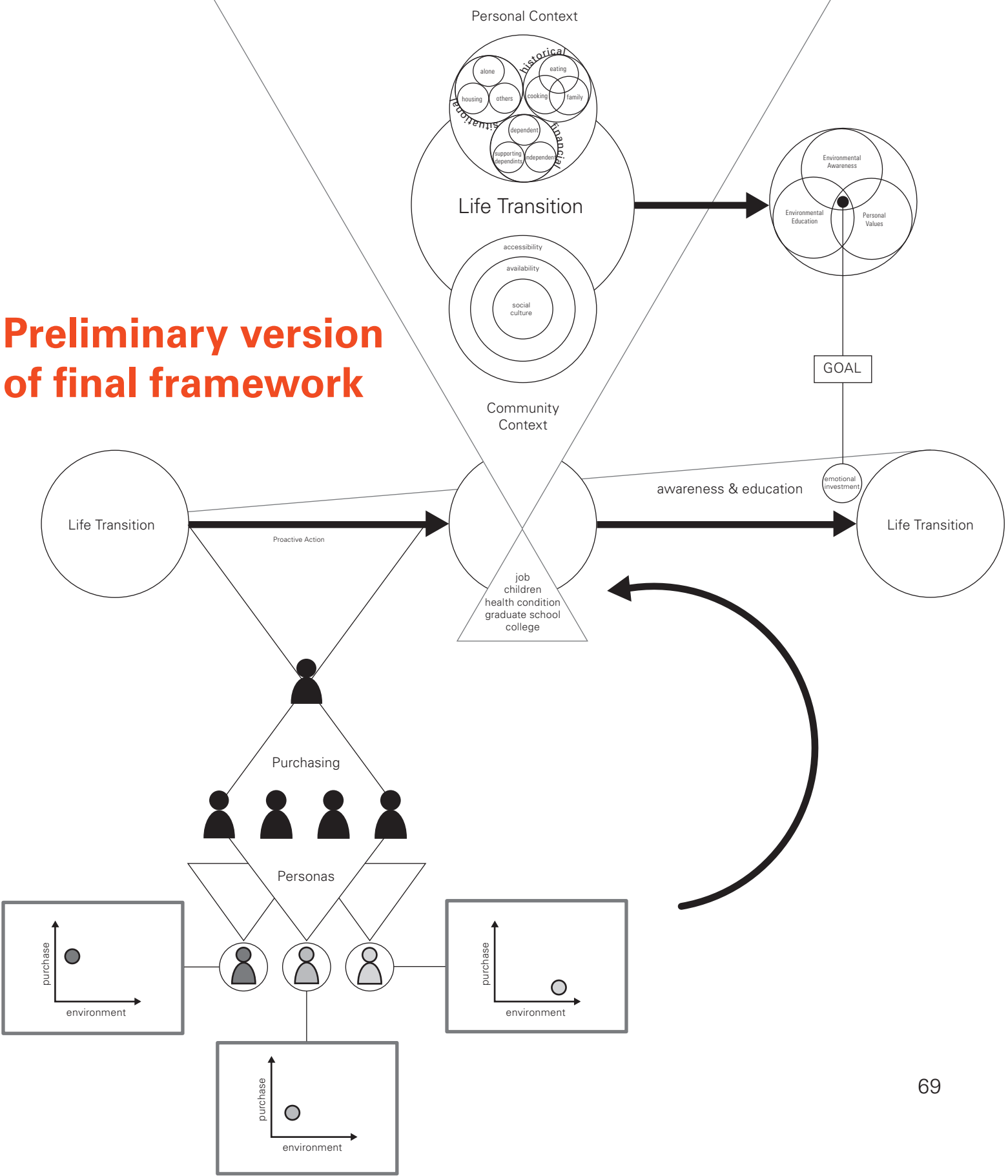


They could also consider where they can access people in this particular life transition, e.g. hospitals. Hospitals often provide childbirth and care educational programs, and this might be a good opportunity for NOFA to insert a food education program. Depending on how many life transitions a person has had, and where among them she has engaged in organic, may help indicate his/her level of knowledge. This will help contextualize NOFA's communication in terms of talking points in terms of how deep or high level they need to keep their communication.

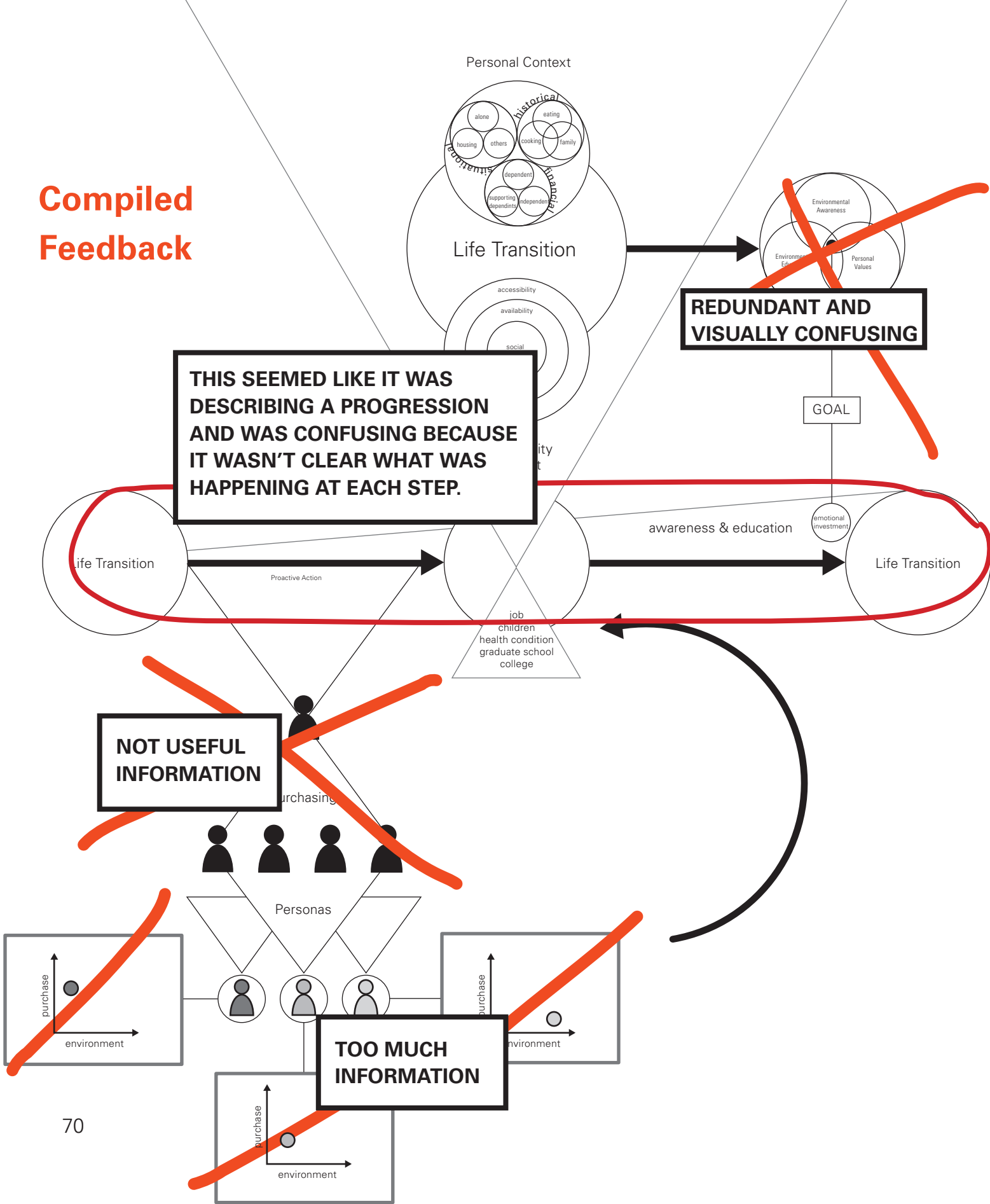
# Incorporating consumer types



## Preliminary version of final framework



Compiled Feedback

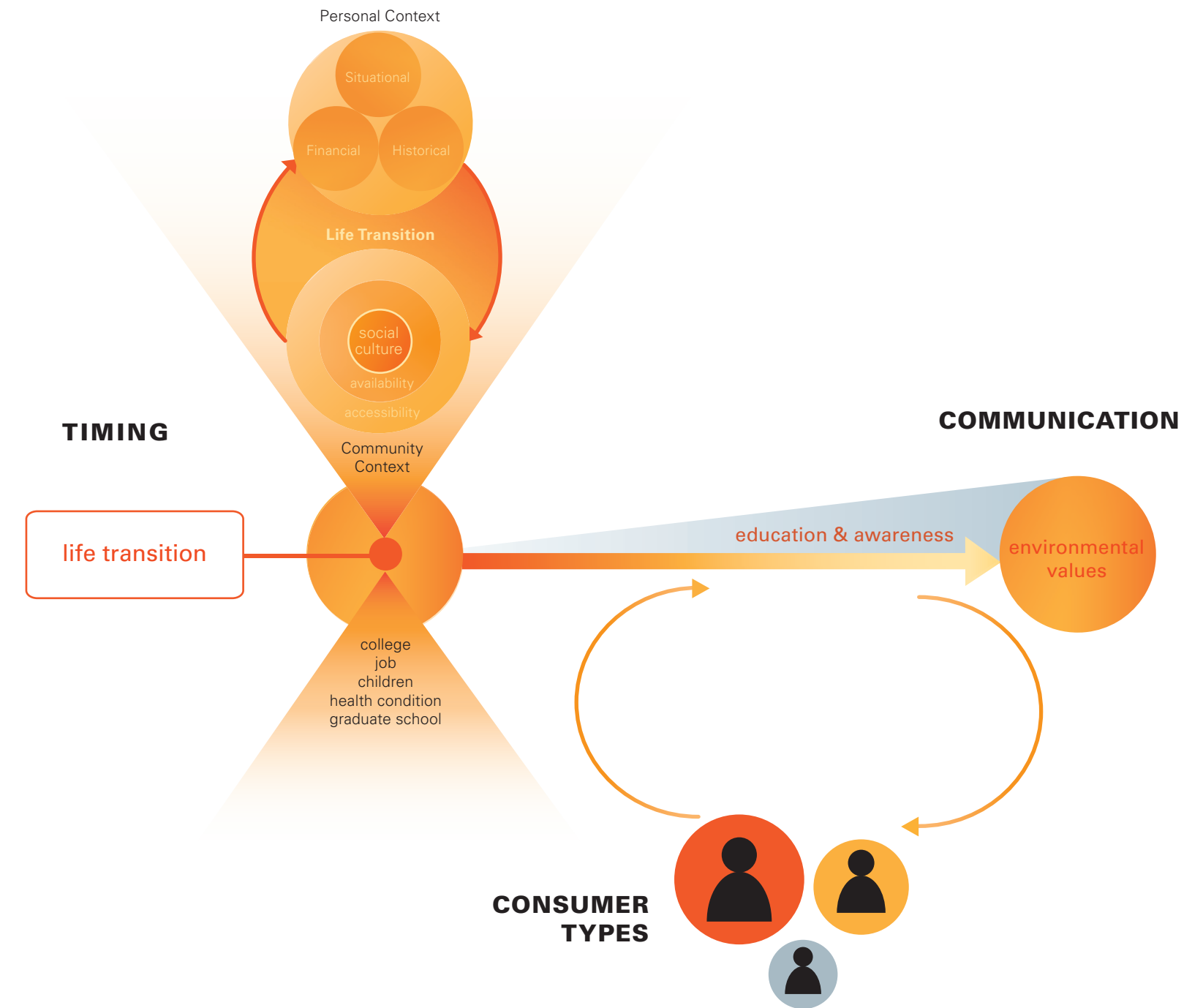


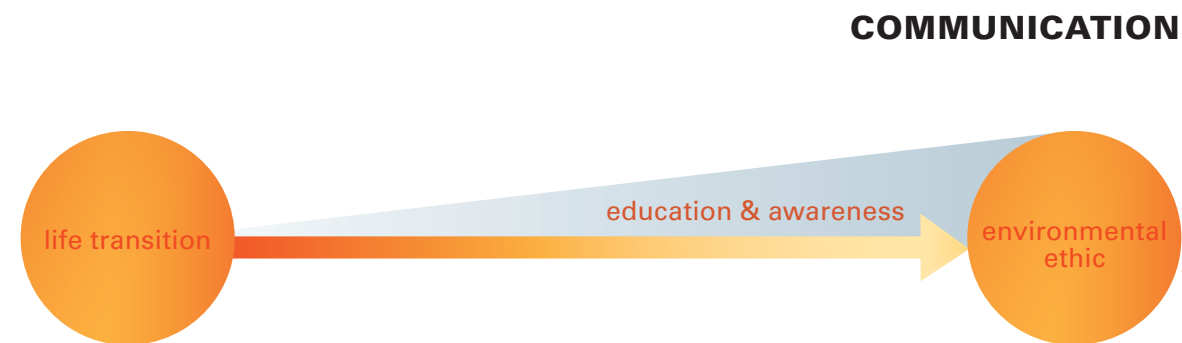
The feedback I received suggested that I make this as simple as possible so that what the basic structure of this framework is suppose to achieve is, is easily communicated.

- The visualization of the consumer break-out was unnecessary. I didn't need to show the process, just the result.
- Fo each target consumer type, I had written out lengthy descriptions. I received feed-back that there was too much information in the visualization. Also, showing each group's size could be useful to NOFA in terms of focus.
- The way I showed the life transitions created some confusion because it looked like there was a progression and the purpose was unclear at each step. This is not how I wanted them to be read. The fact is that people can have many or just one life transition depending on where they are in life. Not every life transition may propel someone into organic, because it needs to be composed of a particular set of interdependent personal and social conditions. I needed to show more simply the way a life transition might work.
- I also had a visualization that showed how a life transition would lead to environmental education and awareness, but this was redundant and confusing because I was showing that already.
- I was also given some feedback about whether it was necessary to show the composition of a life transition, since it was visually complex. I felt that yes, this composition was necessary in order for this framework to provide direction. NOFA needed to be able to see the necessary components that make up a life transition that would lead a person to engage in organic.



## Final Framework



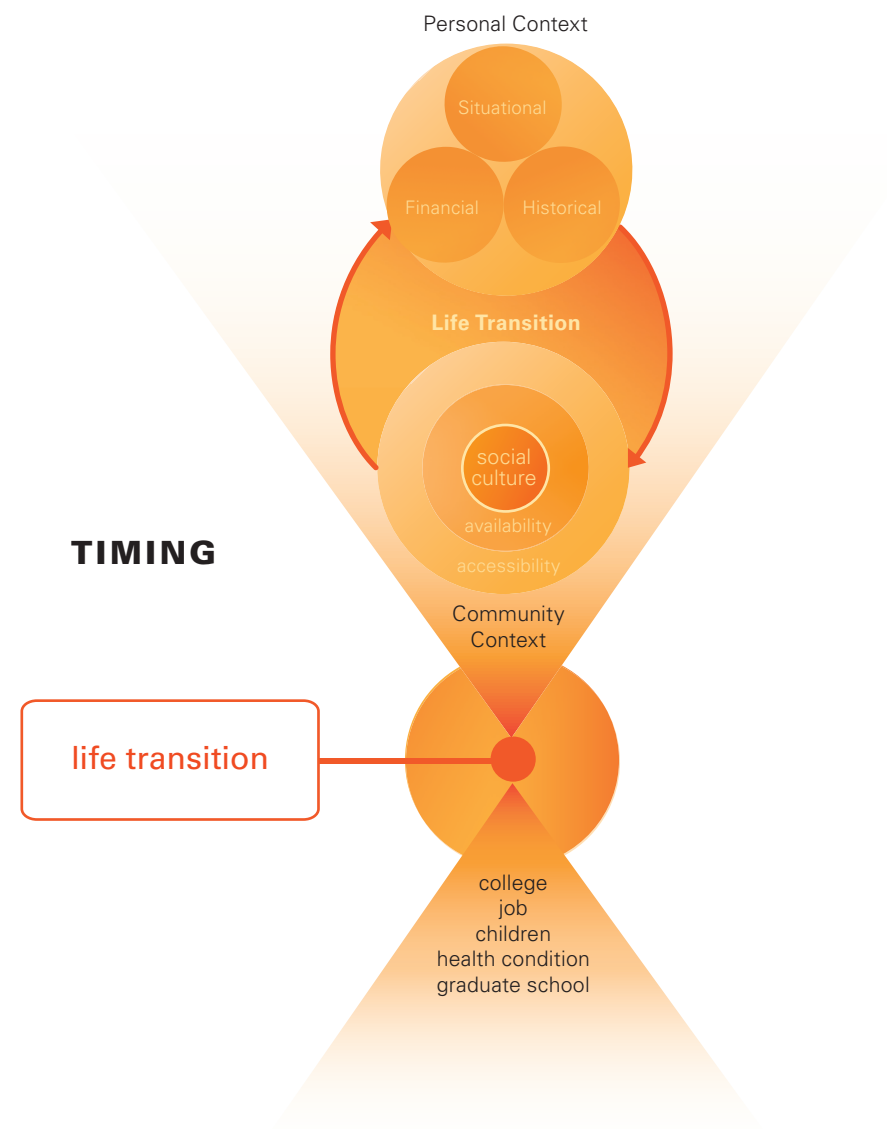


This part of the framework describes the goals of NOFA-VT's communication. Developing the communication is the most important of NOFA VT's three needs. I have a personal interest in arguing that environmental values and ethic are the goals of their communication because I think that people should proactively care about the environment. Organic is a way to engage people in these ethics and goals.

A communication founded on the values and belief of NOFA-VT as an organization establishes trust because it describes the emotional impetus for why they care so much about organic. NOFA-VT has to clearly articulate its own emotional investment in organic and be able to encapsulate that as the basis of their communication.

NOFA-VT can then form this message to the different perspectives and needs of their various consumers. Importantly, it's not about having a different message for every consumer need and motivation that exists, but having a consistent one that can be formed distinctively to speak to the particular interests of the various consumer types. In other words, two very different types of consumers should be able to accurately articulate why NOFA-VT values organic, while also describing clearly the reasons why NOFA-VT thinks they, the consumer, should as well.

NOFA has an opportunity in inserting their communication during life transitions when people are more likely to be open to organic.



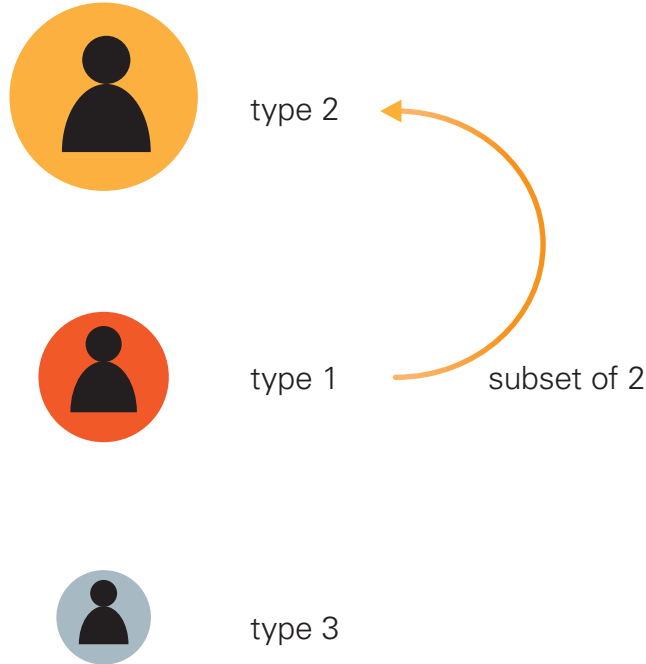
Timing is very important in promoting organic because it can target contexts where people are more open to marketing and therefore make the communication more effective. Sensitive timing for organic occur during life transitions. These life transitions meet particular conditions in personal and social contexts that engage a person in organic. The personal and social contexts work interdependently to produce a life transition. For example, college is an entry point life transition for many consumers who engage in organic. A large part of this has to do with the fact that this is the first time a person has to decide what to eat and what food to buy. If there is a social culture that supports alternative food provision and creates the context for organic to be readily available, this will then determine access. There is a marriage between personal context and social context producing ideal conditions for a person to engage in organic choice.

On the other hand, if the personal context and social context do not align, the framework can help describe where the weakness might be. For example, if the social culture around organic is not as strong, there may be issues in terms of availability which means issues in terms of access and affordability. This might translate into a strategy that focuses on helping to create availability and access.

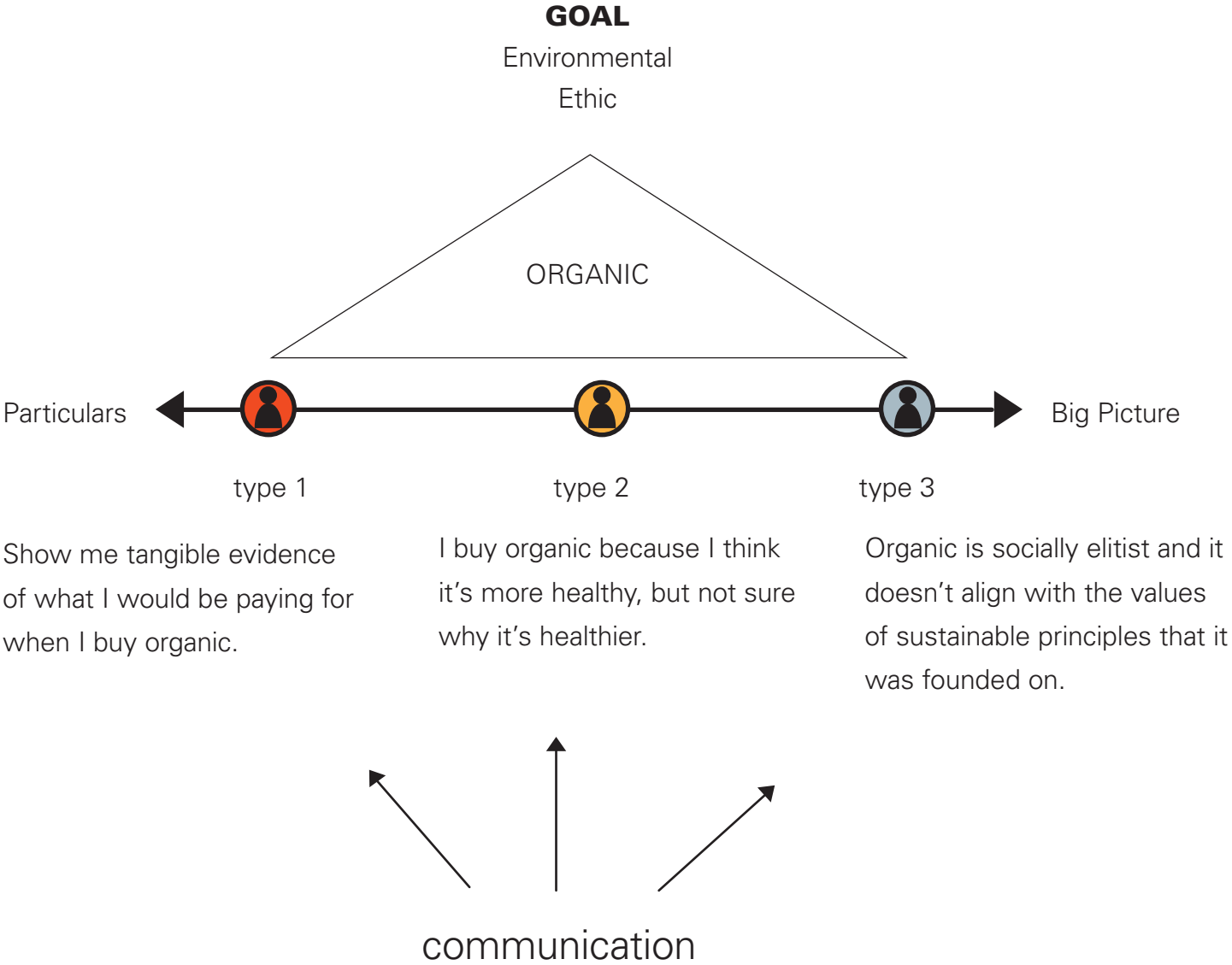
There might also be situations where there is not alignment between personal and social contexts but due to characteristics of the potential consumer group. That is, a particular aspect of the personal/social context might provide challenges. For example, a potential consumer group might be the elderly. But due to age related issues, physical access might be difficult. Thus this would create an opportunity to create a strategy focusing on physical access.

The timing aspect of the framework is to help describe the contextual composition in which people are the most open to engaging in organic choice. It also helps surface where particular pain points are in non-ideal contexts.

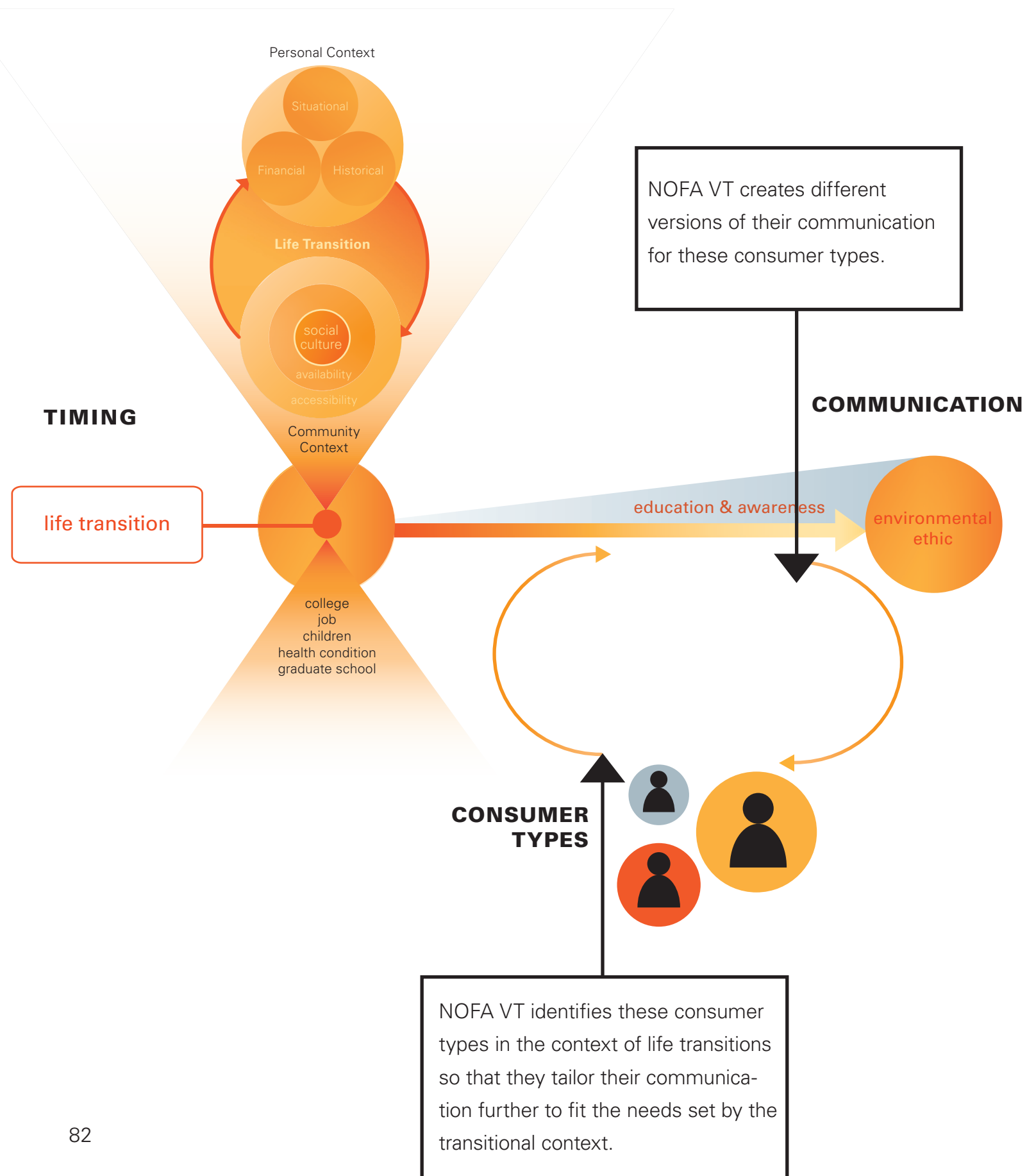
size of of consumer types based on interviews



If NOFA were to focus on one type over another, the size of the consumer group would help give an idea where to focus. However, the sizes provide are based on an interview of 43 people from a very homogenous social profile, so I'm not sure how accurately it would describe the consumer market in Vermont. They would have to do their own survey and interviews to define the size of these types.



These consumer types have two functions. One is to be able to isolate three major issues around organic into talking points. As such, they act as a communication map for NOFA to see that they need to be able navigate communication easily from the general to particular. If they can talk to these types, they can pretty much talk to most consumers.



The framework I put together for NOFA-VT acts as a compass. It distinguishes the three needs that I found that they needed as an organization in order to consider building out a marketing strategy. These were communication, timing and population. Each of these needs had to be considered in depth in terms of organic consumption and purchase through research and testing.

I took these three needs, specified and tailored them to NOFA's needs based on the research I did. The framework shows the relationship between them that can help NOFA focus more strategically and proceed towards more targeted marketing.



Reflection

## Thoughts on the framework

I think that my framework does what I intended it to do. It isolates three needs of NOFA-VT and put them together into a system describing how they work together to direct more strategically focused marketing strategies. However, the framework cannot exist in it of itself and needs an explanatory booklet (perhaps a shortened version of this thesis document) to explain the details and the depth of each need based on market research as well as my own. This is where the richness of the research behind the framework is explained and cannot be fully described by the framework.

While I push for a message that targets environmental values, the framework can work for any end goal and provides a map of how and what to research. If the goal was to get people to buy more shoes, this framework would be useful in terms of research that considered targeted timing, transitional contexts and what kind of messaging is most effective and what consumer types represent major issues around the goal. The framework can be used as a way to focus research for an organization inexperienced in marketing, which was what NOFA-VT needed.

However, I do believe that the values driving NOFA-VT as an organization in promoting sustainable practices and principles, is a valuable argument and one that will reach consumers. From my personal experience, I was someone who didn't care about the environment, but now I do and I have been changing my living habits according to these values. Much of this development is based on the food choices that I made during life transitions. Others I interviewed had similar experiences. I feel that whatever tangible evidence might not be available in market research to support my hypothesis, the collective experiences that I discovered are significant indicators of this process.

The next step is to create a marketing strategy based on the framework to see whether it can really be effective in directing a targeted marketing strategy. This could begin with carefully crafting the NOFA-VT communication and applying it to the consumer types in the transitional contexts to see how well this is received. Also, it could mean diving deep into the journey of consumers in their engagement with organic and figuring out more specifically where and what types of consumers fit along that journey.

## Thoughts on other aspects of the thesis process

In retrospect, I would choose not to work with an organization that was so far away. This made collaboration difficult. I was not there on a daily basis to engage with the members, and this led to misaligned expectations on both sides.

One thing that I found difficult with NOFA-VT was that they expected me to come up with a magic bullet that would answer their problem of growing organic purchase. Design can sound like a panacea to all ills, and the process was somewhat confusing and messy for them. Even though we wrote out a business agreement and communicated expectations initially, these sort of fell to the wayside and there was difficulty engaging them in discussion about changing things for better design. This probably had a lot to do with the fact that I wasn't there to develop relationships with them. At some point I had to decide whether I was going to spend my time trying to engage, motivate and convince them about the value of design or just do it on my own. Given the context of distance and resources, I chose the latter. Much of what I ended up doing was independent of NOFA-VT. For any future design student entering a thesis project, I wouldn't suggest working with an organization that isn't easily accessible, or who has no knowledge of design. This is probably something they will deal with in the real world, but for the sake of thesis, they want to make it easier on themselves.

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