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# Liminality and the practices of identity reconstruction

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to contribute a conceptualization of liminality, a state of in-between-ness and ambiguity, as it applies to identity reconstruction of people in organizations. Liminality is discussed in anthropological and organizational literatures and a composite understanding is developed here. This incorporates a dialogical perspective and defines liminal practices along with varying orientations of dialogue between the self and others. Application of this conceptualization is illustrated by analysis of two cases and a broader application of the concept to the identity work literature is discussed.

## Keywords

dialogue, identity construction, liminality, practice

## Introduction

Identity construction in organizations has been conceived as a mutually co-constructive interaction between individuals and social structures (Ybema et al., 2009). The co-construction is enacted in the interplay between an individual's 'self-identity' (their own notion of who they are) and their 'social-identity' (the notion of that person in external discourses, institutions and culture) (Watson, 2009). Research on identity construction/identity work has explored interactions such as managerial efforts to 'manufacture' subjectivities (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) and people's resistance (Collinson, 2003), people seeking to change from a 'current self' to an aspirational identity (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009), or to dis-identify from a work-imposed identity in order to be what they might regard as their 'authentic' self (Costas and Fleming, 2009). In some research the dynamics are regarded as having 'before' and 'after' identities (Fiol, 2002) (e.g. having

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been a bully's target and becoming an ex-victim [Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008]), and in others the view is that movement is relatively fluid between identities that co-exist in a person (Whittle et al., 2009) (e.g. both being an expert and a manager [Thomas and Linstead, 2002]). In either case, there is a theoretical need to be able to conceptualize how such identity changes occur. The purpose of this article is to contribute to the understanding of the interaction between an individual and their social structures at the point of identity change. It will be suggested that a fruitful way to see reconstruction practices is as part of a process of liminality.

The focus here is on the change process, and in particular when a person is in between two identity constructions: when they are neither one thing nor the other. The notion of liminality, meaning 'betwixt and between', has been developed in social anthropology (Turner, 1967) and has been adopted by some organizational researchers (Tempest and Starkey, 2004; Sturdy et al., 2006). The aim here is to extend and develop the concept of liminality into the identity construction/work literature (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

The article proceeds in the following way. First, the potential usefulness of an understanding of liminality in the identity construction/work literature is briefly outlined. Second, a conceptualization of liminality for use in organizational settings is developed. This focuses on processes of dialogue between the inner self-identity and the outer social-identity (Watson, 2009) and associated liminal practices. These practices are experimentation, reflection and recognition. Third, the application of this conceptualization of liminality will be illustrated through an analysis of two empirical examples. The article closes with a discussion of the potential of the concept to contribute to our understanding of identity reconstruction.

### *Identity construction and the self in-between*

The identity work literature focuses on identity as being constructed and reconstructed through a dynamic interaction in which a person is 'cast' in an identity by others (Karreman and Alvesson, 2001), seeks to project an identity to the outside world (Brown, 2001) and takes on (or enacts) behaviours, symbols and stories of an identity (Sims, 2003). These practices entail dialogue in which the inner self-identity is influenced by the outer social-identity (Watson, 2009). The social identity consists of projections of others towards the self, projections of the self towards others and reactions to received projections (Beech, 2008). The social-identity is a 'site' in which people draw upon and are imposed upon by external discourses, and the self-identity is the internalized view of the self in which people seek to 'keep a particular narrative [of the self] going' (Watson, 2009: 431). For Ybema et al. (2009) this is a version of the agency-structure dialectic in action, that is, the process through which the individual agent constitutes and is constituted by their social setting and the discourses available to them and those around them. Liminal practices occur at the intersection of structure and agency and so are particularly well fitted to expanding our understanding of self-identity/social-identity mutual construction.

Identity reconstructions are observed in the identity work literature, for example, Thornborrow and Brown (2009) show the change from being a 'wannabe' to being a 'para' (trouper); Alvesson and Robertson (2006) show the movement of consultants from being the 'best and brightest candidates' to being a full member of the elite; and Watson (2009) observes his research participant's re-narration of self from 'engineer' to 'manager'.

However, sometimes identity reconstruction can be partial or incomplete, for example when managers 'lose the plot' of who they are (Thomas and Linstead, 2002) or Thornborrow and Brown's (2009) example of a person who does not fully accept himself as a para, despite being a full member of the regiment, until after the experience of a particular battle. The focus of this article is on such partial and incomplete identity changes where people are 'in between' and liminal.

### *Developing the concept of liminality for application in organizational settings*

Van Gennep (1960) expounded a theory of rites of passage in which a person passes from one identity state to another (e.g. boy to man, girl to bride) in three phases: separation, characterized by symbols of detachment; liminality, in which the ritual subject or 'liminar' is ambiguous and passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the 'before' and 'after' states; and aggregation, the consummation of the passage. At this stage, the liminar has reached a new identity position and they are expected to adopt certain norms. Typically the liminal process is ritualistic, starting with a 'triggering event' and is then conducted in specific places for a specific period of time. There are rules of conduct (such as abstinence from eating) and celebratory rituals as the individual re-enters society. Turner (1967) extended this conceptualization seeing the liminal person as 'interstructural' as they were 'betwixt and between' the positions that they occupy at the points of separation and aggregation. The interstructural position has certain characteristics for Turner. First, the liminar is socially if not physically invisible. Their ambiguity means that they are outside definition, for example 'a society's secular definitions do not allow for the existence of not-boy-not-man, which is what a novice in a male puberty rite is (if he can be said to be anything)' (p. 95). Second, there is a link to death as the liminar is structurally 'dead' (and may be ritually buried/lie motionless/stained black/covered in blood), and they are regarded as unclean with contact being prohibited or curtailed during liminality lest they should 'pollute' those who have not been 'inoculated' against them. Third, during liminality, the liminar has no rights and their relationship with elders is one of complete obedience. Fourth, Turner also sees liminality as a phase in which the liminar reflects about their society and their cosmos in order to return to society in a new identity with new responsibilities and powers. So, as Noble and Walker (1997) put it, liminality 'significantly disrupt[s] one's internal sense of self or place within a social system' (p. 31). Hence, liminality can be defined as a reconstruction of identity (in which the sense of self is significantly disrupted) in such a way that the new identity is meaningful for the individual and their community.

In organizational literature, liminality is commonly taken to mean a position of ambiguity and uncertainty: being betwixt and between (Chreim, 2002). Whilst this accords with part of Turner's concept, it does not typically include, for example, the processual phases. Liminality is variously used as a way of classifying people (Garsten, 1999), occupations (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003), hierarchical roles (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2002), organizations (Tempest and Starkey, 2004) and events and spaces (Sturdy et al, 2006). Ellis and Ybema (2010) analyse the liminal experience of managers of inter-organizational networks as they oscillate in between and across organizational boundaries. The concept as it is used emphasizes the changeful nature of these subjects, the multiple meanings that can co-exist and the negative psychological consequences of extended liminality.

Garsten (1999) sees temporary workers as being in an elongated state of liminality on the periphery of organizations where they experience low self-esteem ('I'm just a temp') as would be expected of a liminar (Noble and Walker, 1997). However, they do not reach the aggregation phase and Garsten emphasizes the detachment of the organization from the temps who were regarded as substitutable and dispensable. So, in these respects they would not conform to the anthropological use of the term. Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) see consultants as liminal in constantly being in the midst of organizational change. This emphasizes the liminal context of work where they are constantly in changeable circumstances. Similarly, Tempest and Starkey (2004) researched freelancers in the television industry and found that careers were becoming increasingly liminal with contractual patterns of employment and project teams creating and recreating networks within and between organizations. Thus, in application to organizations, the definition of liminality incorporates instabilities in the social context, the ongoing ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings, the lack of resolution (or aggregation) and the substitutability of the liminar.

Therefore, liminality can be understood in the anthropological sense to be a temporary transition through which identity is reconstructed, and/or it can be thought of as a more longitudinal experience of ambiguity and in-between-ness within a changeable context. In the next section I will seek to expand on the practices of liminality in organizations. In this conceptualization I will draw on both the anthropological and the organizational uses, emphasizing the dialogical aspect which is not currently in the foreground of organizational studies and introducing three practices that can combine to form liminal identity work.

### *Liminal identity work practices*

From a social construction perspective, changes in identity imply changes in the meanings associated with a person, and meanings are not simply located in the 'subjects' but in the relationship between the individual and the organization (or society) (Shotter, 2008). This can be thought of as an internalized dialogue within the self and can be seen, for example, in Watson's (2009) engineer/manager or Thornborrow and Brown's (2009) wannabe/paratrooper. Alternatively, the dialogue can be externalized between the self and others. For example, a dialogue based on the distinction between the elite and the non-elite (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Coupland, 2001), or between the self and organizational structures (Garsten, 1999). Dialogues between self and particular or generalized others have what Bakhtin (1981) termed centripetal or centrifugal orientations. Centripetal orientations are based on an internalizing perspective through which the self draws meaning in from external sources in the society (Bebbington et al., 2007). Conversely, centrifugal orientations are based on an externalizing perspective in which the self transmits towards others (Kornberger et al., 2006). Both forms are still dialogic in that the self and others respond to each other, but from the self's perspective dialogues can be principally initiated on the outside and result in internal change, principally initiated by the self and result in a change in the understanding that others have of the self, or can be a more equal flow between the self and others (Gergen et al. 2001).

Conventionally, identity work is often regarded as an effort of the self to project outwards as a person seeks to claim or affirm a desired identity in order to influence how the

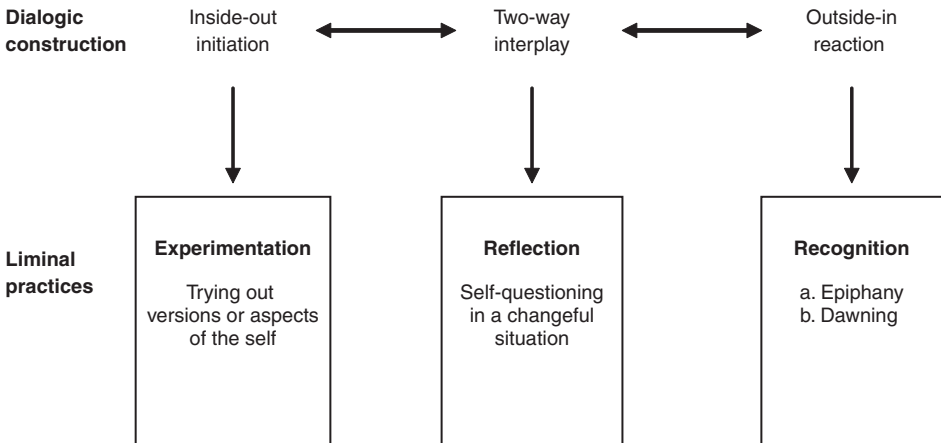
self is regarded by others (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). However, in other circumstances, the self is in a more responsive mode, reacting to external influences by, for example, accepting, complying or resisting an identity that is experienced as being imposed on the self. In Garsten's (1999) and Tempest and Starkey's (2004) research this appeared to be the case as undesired identities were projected towards (or imposed upon) people. Therefore, the first part of the conceptualization of liminality sees the self as situated in a dialogue that always incorporates both the inner-self and the outer social-identity (Shoter, 2008; Watson, 2009), but the orientation of the dialogue can vary between a greater emphasis of the external onto the internal, a more even interplay between the two or an emphasis from the internal onto the external.

The second part of the conceptualization relates to the practices that can be enacted in different dialogical circumstances. The idea of these practices was derived both from literature and from empirical examples, but for clarity of presentation they will be presented in advance of the empirical material.

The first practice is *experimentation* in which versions of the self are tried out as a new or modified identity is sought. This occurs in an inside-out dialogic orientation. For Fiol (2002) and Chreim (2002) initial dis-identification is followed by a phase of experimentation in which a person tries out different forms of temporary attachment to group, organizational or personal identities. This occurs during what Fiol sees as a paradoxical phase in which contradictions in the identity can be co-present. This practice can be undertaken in order to move towards a desired identity or to resist the imposition of an unwanted identity. For example, Alvesson and Robertson (2006) show how junior consultants enact behaviours that they believe will enable them to gain access to the elite in an experimental way, judging the relative success of their attempts before trying again.

An outside-in dialogic orientation can be enacted through the practice of *recognition*. In one version, recognition can be a gradual process of 'dawning'. Strauss (1996) refers to dawning as a 'coming to realize' that things are different typically in response to a 'confounded expectation or a turning point', which leads to a 'heightened noticing' of a new meaning. For Strauss, transformations of identity occur when there is a 'misalignment, surprise, shock, chagrin, anxiety, tension, bafflement, self-questioning' and a person is forced 'to recognize I am not the same as I was, as I used to be' (1996: 94–95). Dawning is not only a re-labelling, but the having of an experience anew. This is similar to 're-keying' an experience (Goffman, 1974) in which people change the emphasis of meaning in an act (for example, switching it between 'background' and 'primary') or by some aspect of the foreground having greater significance attributed to it such that 'now I know what was happening'. Alternatively, the recognition can come all at once as an epiphany as will be seen in one of the examples below.

A practice that incorporates emphasis on both outside-in and internalized dialogue is *reflection*. This entails self-questioning and self-change along with reacting to (or absorbing) external influences and perceptions. Self-questioning can be a mainly internal process and self-change can be a working through of how one should project the self towards society. Reflection is regarded as part of the anthropological notion of liminality. Turner said that 'liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection' (1967: 105): 'liminality is the realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence . . . there is a promiscuous intermingling and juxtaposing of the



**Figure 1** Liminal identity work

categories of event, experience and knowledge, with a pedagogic intention.’ (p. 106). Mangham (2001) explicitly follows Turner (1984) in proposing that performance genres, such as theatre, are liminal in suspending the rules of daily reality and offering an opportunity for organizational actors to be ‘reflectively confronted’ and consider how they should change in the future (p. 295). For Cunliffe (2002) such active self-questioning, of how we see ourselves and how others see us, is the essence of a dialogic construction of the self.

The proposition here is that liminality in identity work can be constituted by one or more of these practices: experimentation, in which the liminar constructs and projects an identity; reflection, in which the liminar considers the views of others and questions the self; and recognition, in which the liminar reacts to an identity that is projected onto them. The dialogical orientations and practices are represented in Figure 1. The liminal process is constituted either by a single practice, or, perhaps more likely, by a weaving together of practices. For example, one of Thornborrow and Brown’s (2009) paratroopers who has sought an identity, has been fully trained and is formally a member of the regiment did not fully take on the identity of a ‘para’ until after reflecting on a particular experience and coming to recognize himself as a ‘para’ (‘probably after the battle of Goose Green. That’s when I must have been sat down thinking properly on stag [guard] behind a gun thinking “yes I feel I’m worthy to say now that I’m a paratrooper”’ [p. 365]).

The empirical examples below will be used to illustrate the operation of these liminal practices.

## Statement of method

The orientation of the research method was social constructionist and the interest was in identities as they are reconstructed through symbolic action and interaction within social contexts (Cunliffe, 2002). The social contexts are important because they frame the possibilities that people have for creating and recognizing meaning in their (inter)actions (Heracleous, 2004), and the challenge, as Blumer (1969) puts it, is to understand the

meanings of the actors in the situation. This presents a number of difficulties and complexities. The actors are likely to have diverse interpretations of events, and multiple meanings would be expected where actors enter and leave interactions on different narrative trajectories (Boje, 2001). People's narrative account of self provides an ongoing stream of sense-making (Brown, 2006) into which they fit their selective perceptions of new experiences (Sims, 2005) and when an interaction is contextualized by a conflation of narratives of self and other it is a complex task to make sense of so much sense-making. In addition, actors will perform during interactions in ways that project meanings towards specific audiences such as supporters, enemies, bosses and researchers. Such performances may have much to do with the actor's sense of the audience, as well as their sense of self. The way that people perform their identity-construction interactions and how those performances are incorporated, altered or ignored by others, becomes the object of study (Shotter, 2008).

In the two cases presented later there is a need to understand the social context and trace expressions around an experience of liminality. The former entails a reasonably broad engagement with the organization and the latter a relatively deep engagement with a person going through identity reconstruction. The understanding of context was gained through longitudinal engaged action research (Eden and Huxham, 2005; MacLean et al., 2002), which was focused on understanding and facilitating change in the organizations. AuthorityEast is a large council and the action research was with a service-providing department that was becoming an 'arm's length' organization, increasing its independence and seeking to explore and improve its staff engagement and innovation. Interviews were held with the eight members of the senior management team, seven focus groups were held with middle managers and 15 focus groups were held with operational staff. Workshops were facilitated with 10 project teams to establish their innovation projects. Subsequently, meetings were held with the directors and a one-day conference was run, involving all the teams and managers, to facilitate feedback and engagement on the change. This process took place over ten months and enabled the researcher to establish an understanding of the organizational context. The story of Eric's liminal experience was mainly taken from an autobiographical diary that Eric wrote, an interview about the diary, a prior interview as part of the action research and numerous conversations relating to change in AuthorityEast and his place in the social structure.

In ServiceWest broadly the same approach was applied. This research took place over two years and included two two-hour focus groups with three senior managers, regular (monthly) conversations with a senior manager over a year and two one-day workshops with middle managers. The story of Julie's liminality experience was mainly taken from three interviews and several informal conversations with Julie, and conversations with team members at two events off site.

Although the approach sought to be open in gathering empirical information, the analysis was not purely inductive as the starting point was to select particular instances that fitted with Noble and Walker's (1997) definition of liminality (a significant disruption to the sense of self). Initially five examples were chosen, but these were subsequently narrowed down to two that were chosen because they strongly informed the development of the conceptualization of liminality and provided examples of different impacts of context on the experience. Hence, the choice of empirical examples is a result of an iterative process of theorizing and analyzing.

The analysis followed a pattern set out by Silverman (2001) and Sims (2003; Beech and Sims, 2007). In each case the accounts were composite in that they developed over time, building in new actions and aspects of plot and they had more than one author as they were retold. It should be acknowledged that the researcher is also an author in this process (Cunliffe, 2002) as analysis entails re-presentation of selections from recordings (in the case of interviews) and notes (in the case of workshops and conversations). The first step is the definition of characters. Then the nature and order of events are analysed (Silverman, 2001). The significance of the story is then explored by examining implications of intentions, causes of events and attributed agency (Gabriel, 2004).

Subsequent interviews were held with Eric and Julie to discuss the analysis. They were provided with an earlier version of the account of their experience and analysis, and the interviews discussed additions and alterations to the accounts and interpretations being made. Their feelings as they went through the experiences were also discussed and this led to further refinement of the analysis.

## Two empirical illustrations

The cases of liminality presented below start by setting out the context and then tell the stories of Eric and Julie.

### *AuthorityEast and Eric*

Eric is now a senior manager in a large local authority. The extracts of his story presented later tell of certain episodes in his career. Fourteen years ago local authorities in Eric's area were reorganized and a new organization was formed through a merger. Eric moved to a division that incorporated catering and banqueting, which was his background prior to joining a local authority. Following the merger there was a period of adjustment in which new departments were formed, people were allocated to roles, procedures, terms and conditions were reviewed and a 'rationalization' or downsizing was conducted. Eric's career had been progressing well in his previous organization and he was surprised to be selected for redundancy at this time. However, before he actually left, another change meant that he was not made redundant. The experience had a considerable effect on him. Eight years after the merger there was another change in which certain parts of the AuthorityEast were recreated as 'arms length' organizations, which were intended to be more commercial, work in a supplier relationship with the 'centre' of the authority, and seek to develop new clients and revenues. Eric's section was one of the early movers into this more commercial, market-based structure, and this heralded new roles. Eric now applied for a job that appeared to be a very good fit for his skills and qualifications, but he was not selected. This led to reflection and enquiries about the reasons. Subsequently, Eric was promoted to a different role, but he still feels different to the other top managers and not fully a 'member of the inner sanctum' because of this difference.

### *Eric's story*

Following the merger, the Chief Executive required all directors to reduce costs by making one redundancy per department at senior management level. This tactic was employed

so that any subsequent staff redundancies could not be regarded as having left the management ranks unaffected. There were 10 main departments, and therefore 10 management redundancies. In nine of these departments, the redundancies were secured on a voluntary basis as the candidates were over 50 years of age and could access their pension schemes. However, Eric was 35 years old and was surprised to be served with a 90 days compulsory redundancy notice. 'Although my division was trading well, and the budget cuts were targeted towards other service areas [in the division], I was selected for redundancy.'

Eric: Well, I'm quite an expressive individual. When I came into restaurants and banqueting what I liked about it was that it's very expressive. So when you put together a banquet for 350, or run a restaurant, this is why I was always attracted to the performance stuff, right. You're fundamentally constructing a piece of theatre for people. That's what you're actually doing. And I've always enjoyed that. So what happened was I got a tremendous sense of satisfaction out of that. So over the years, running from my late teens up through my twenties and into my early thirties, the way I expressed myself at my work, it was very, very important to me. Beyond my immediate family, it was the, well . . . it was very important. Anyway, I was selected for redundancy in 1998 because of a number of different factors. What happened was that that process of redundancy kind of made explicit the kind of economic relationship between . . . that I had with my employer. . . . When people are immersed in what they do, I think they kind of lose sight of, while they're getting the pat on the back, and while they're getting the applause, the plaudits and all the rest of it, they're just eventually, you're just, you're . . . you're just a number to them. Right?

Interviewer: Yes.

Eric: And it takes something like that, I, I kinda call it an organizational epiphany. It's like a moment of, it, it inspires critical reflection. Right, right?

Interviewer: Yes.

Eric: So I suddenly realized that I had to remodel how I thought about my work and identified with it. From that process.

Eric was resigned to the prospect of redundancy and planned to go fishing for a few weeks to contemplate his future. However:

. . . as fate would have it, I was plucked from the edge of redundancy as I 'worked from home' serving my 90 days redundancy notice. My Director made contact and advised me that another member of the senior team had secured alternative employment and had applied for voluntary redundancy. Now, as the council policy was to trawl for voluntary redundancy in the first instance the Director was obliged to accept the application of a member of his team for voluntary redundancy and subsequently 'invite' me to rejoin the senior management team. I had no hesitation in accepting this offer and returned to work. I thought I appeared on the surface to be unaffected regarding the affair, however, internally I was now in a neutral identification position towards both my occupational identity and my employer.

All of the management team in this division, with the exception of Eric, had come from the same predecessor organization and Eric subsequently found out that apparently his

post had been promised to someone else from that predecessor organization. Reflecting on this analysis, Eric said 'I became cold towards work, cold on the inside, before I was warm on the outside and the inside.'

Subsequently, Eric decided to try to change his position and he gained support to do an MBA. This did lead to some changes and he was 'recognized as the in-house change management expert'. When EastAuthority planned a further major change towards a market-style of operation, the CEO was the change project leader and each department had a change leader on the team. Eric was selected as the change leader for his department. Eric felt at home in this situation and the processes, language and analyses of change management were familiar to him. Through this process he was appointed to lead a major two-year organizational development programme that incorporated over 200 people working in project teams to produce innovations in service and develop their skills. Reflecting later on this phase of his career, Eric said:

The educational journey was important because it involved an aspirational process whereby I 'imagined' myself as a Director one day running an organization. . . . I relate this to an athlete who imagines winning the gold at the Olympics so they train and train. . . . This ambition was fuelled by my 'training', i.e. the MBA. . . . This enabled me to cope with the betwixt and between . . . pushing for the top job but was never quite allowed full access.

The organizational changes then led to some restructuring and the CEO created five new senior change management posts. They were advertised nationally and attracted over 100 applicants of which eight were selected for interview, all internal. Eric was interviewed but was not successful and was very disappointed at this rejection. His director (who was on the interview panel) offered him a 'debrief'. Eric was told 'that [he] unquestionably had the strongest interview, that [he] had the most impressive qualifications, and clearly demonstrated that [he] could do the job.' Eric asked why he was rejected in that case and 'the director said that whilst the Chief Executive recognized all of my attributes, he could not get out of his head his image of me in a dinner suit managing the civic functions. So he couldn't see me as a suitable candidate for the post.' In Eric's view this represented a distinction between 'white collar professionals' (such as the accountants and HR director who got the jobs), and what was perceived as his 'blue collar' background in catering and functions.

About a year later Eric was promoted, not to the same level as the change management post, but without interview into a senior post that was an expansion of his responsibilities. Although Eric had now been a member of the senior management team for a long time, had gained qualifications and won awards for the services his department provided, he still did not feel completely 'one of the team'. Critically, although his pay had been increased, his grade was still one level below that of 'natural' candidates for directorial posts.

In the subsequent interview Eric summed up his current position:

Betwixt and between is a bit scary in terms of identity. One experiences a form of 'identity loss' . . . I thought it looked a sad story initially, but I'm not sure. I think there's a lot of people in this situation . . . looking in through the window, nearly there but not quite. I still feel a bit of an outsider, although to my colleagues I have done really well . . . I will only resolve this when I

compete for a bigger job one day and win. I think when this day comes, and I still believe it will, I will no longer be betwixt and between.

### *ServiceWest and Julie*

ServiceWest is a commercial supplier of utilities. Historically it was a publicly owned organization, which was the nature of that industry in the UK. The whole industry was largely privatized in the 1980s and what had been a national conglomerate was split into a number of smaller companies that could compete with each other. This change led to a commercial intensification and the introduction of a managerial approach in the industry (Mueller and Carter, 2007). ServiceWest was no exception to this. Before privatization there had been a strong focus on rules, safety, quality of supply and engineering standards. The organization was heavily unionized and no major organizational changes occurred without negotiation.

In the years since privatization, union membership has declined, external market pressures have become much more competitive and cost reductions have been made throughout the company. Safety and quality of supply were still treated as very high priorities ('Safety First') but the new Chief Executive displayed a disregard for other traditions in Head Quarters, for example, telling an administration section that they 'didn't do real work, not like the guys out there'.

The industry entered a phase of merger and acquisition and international companies became interested in buying UK utility companies. ServiceWest fought off a bid and launched its own bid for a similar organization in a different part of the UK. The bid was successful and Julie's story takes place in the post-acquisition context in which there was a no compulsory redundancy policy and yet a perceived view from the top that duplication should be reduced and savings made.

In the pre-acquisition organization, Julie was a professional who had returned to work part-time after a career break. She had not worked for ServiceWest prior to her career break and was taken on as a part-timer from the outset. This raised some initial comment from the colleagues in the team: Peter: 'It's alright for some!' Sally: 'I could do with two days off a week'. When away from the others Julie responded: 'I'm better qualified than them – and I've got more experience'. However, over time, friendships developed and people were aware of the contributions that each made and Julie did not feel part-time-ness was an issue. The rest of the team stopped mentioning it. The team had a strong identity: 'We're the real professionals' (Sally), and members would regularly work together on projects and travel to remote sites together. Julie was always supported by Colin (the senior manager with responsibility for the team) who never made an issue of her part-time-ness. In the subsequent interview Julie said: 'I was accepted as a professional and they gave me my place. They used to ask me things about [name of technical area]. But in a way I always felt as if I'd just started the job and there was an unspoken issue with me being part time, which flared up at times of stress.'

Following the acquisition of the distant organization, flexibility and the willingness to work away from home for periods of up to a week became espoused virtues. Post-acquisition, Julie felt she was 'tested' to establish how flexible she was. Colin often delayed Julie from leaving the office at the end of the day for what she saw as unimportant

reasons: 'When I'm getting ready to leave for home he waves over that he needs a word. Then he carries on his phone call. When he's free it's 5.30 and there's gridlock outside.' Queues could increase journey time by 20 minutes and for Julie this was a problem because of domestic responsibilities. Other team members had meanwhile 'made a quick getaway'. Julie came into work earlier than her start time in order to compensate for having to leave on time, but felt she could not say anything: 'I don't want him saying my childcare arrangements are affecting my work.' In the subsequent interview, Julie said that at this point she:

. . . felt vulnerable. I felt as if he was drawing attention to the fact I knew that he knew that I wanted to get away early, and the fact he was doing this made me feel worried that he thought it might be a problem and he was testing me. I felt as if I wasn't allowed to be a full member of the team, and the otherness of me being a mother was continually implied.

Julie felt that she had passed the 'tests' by reorganizing her childcare arrangements and making herself available to travel when asked. However, voluntary redundancies were announced and things changed. Interactions became difficult and she said that Colin had said: 'In a small team there is no place for part timers'. Other team members also identified Julie in a different way: 'You're a mother first and a career girl second' (Sally), and 'you could afford to go, you don't even need to work full time' (Peter). Julie felt anxious and unsettled and ultimately decided to leave. After she had left, Sally and Peter (and others) made sure that they invited Julie to lunches with the 'old team' and social relationships were maintained.

Reflecting on the experience, Julie said:

I was OK, but I was new to the company when this upheaval took place and the weakness of my newness was extended because it was happening at a time of change when everyone felt uncomfortable. I couldn't really join a solid culture – because of the changes in the company structure nobody knew what the culture was supposed to be like. The business was in a state of massive cultural change.

The old guard weathered the change better, and people who joined after the change did better. It felt as if you were in between two companies, it was a very uncertain, uneasy place. I think we felt we joined one company and it turned into another company . . . I felt I had weathered it, but when they started talking about cutting numbers, the tension about me being part-time flared up again, you have nothing behind you to give you confidence in that company. After starting, things had settled down into a normal routine, but when it flared up we hadn't had enough time acting into our settled roles . . . in order to fulfil some sort of belonging, I went.

## Discussion

The empirical examples will now be analysed using the composite conceptualization of liminality from the literature review and framework of the liminal practices proposed: experimentation, reflection and recognition.

Liminality was defined earlier as a reconstruction of identity (in which the sense of self is significantly disrupted) in such a way that the new identity is meaningful for the

individual and their community. Both Eric and Julie move through a series of experiences that result in them occupying a different identity in relation to their organizations at the point at which we suspend their stories, and it is fair to say that they associate meaning (albeit somewhat unwelcome) with this identity reconstruction. There are various facets of their experiences that correlate with the conceptualization of liminality developed earlier.

First, the changes have 'triggering events' that were recognizable and known both to the liminars and to others. In these cases, the triggering events related to structural and cultural changes in the organizations were that both went through mergers, downsizing and increased commercialization. Second, the liminar becomes 'structurally invisible' (Turner, 1967) by moving into a position 'betwixt and between' in which they can occupy a paradoxical identity (such as not-boy-not-man). In Eric's case he appeared to be one of the team and yet not one of the team when he was selected for redundancy and, although he sought to transform his identity through seeking qualifications and notable achievements, he remained as a semi-outsider within the senior management team. Julie's initiation into the team was met with some opposition from extant team members, but after a while she became both a member of the team and friends with the others. However, following the triggering event of the post-merger downsizing her identity became less clear and her identity as part-time became re-keyed (Goffman, 1974) into a new meaning of not-permanent or not-in-need-of-a-job. Third there was social separation in which the liminar is regarded as (perhaps a milder version of) 'unclean' or 'prohibited'. For example, Eric was not allowed into the change management job in his view because he was still regarded by the CEO as a blue-collar manager. In Julie's case there was a notable phase when prior to her leaving friendships diminished severely and she was not included in social activities until the situation became 'resolved'. Fourth, during the liminal period, the liminar has few rights and has to obey the elders. In Eric's case this might be seen in his non-questioning of the redundancy decision and although he got feedback on the later non-selection decision he did not feel in a position to challenge it. Similarly, Julie was not able to prevent Colin 'testing her' even though this caused problems for her. Lastly, the liminar contemplates their relationship to the society and arrives at a new identity reconstruction that shows a notable disruption of their old identity (Noble and Walker, 1997). Both Eric and Julie had thought through their experiences, decided what to do and ended in different identity positions, Eric as insider-outsider and Julie as outsider. Thus, it is not unreasonable to claim that there are significant areas of contiguity between Eric's and Julie's experiences and the initial conceptualization of liminality. In the subsequent interviews both Eric and Julie saw themselves as having been liminal during the episodes described.

Similarly, when compared with the concept of liminality in the organizational literature, the cases can be regarded as showing a reasonable match. They both existed in changeful organizations in which structures become temporary and subject to sudden alteration (Chreim, 2002). As liminars Eric and Julie occupied ambiguous and uncertain positions (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003), and multiple meanings were attached to them (Sturdy et al., 2006). The situations also displayed an 'irresolution' (Tempest and Starkey, 2004) that contributed to a feeling of being substitutable and unwanted by the organization (Garsten, 1999). Both Eric and Julie felt that the amount of change in their organizations was significant, as Julie said 'before we could settle, it all shifted again'.

However, although there are areas of similarity to the literature-based concept of liminality, there are also differences. There was a lack of overt ritual. Although Eric's interview could be seen as somewhat ritualistic, the aspects of ritual that were missing were both the liminar and their society knowing the meaning, duration and broad process of the ritual. Hence, the natural stress of a liminal situation was heightened when the process itself was ambiguous and uncertain. In traditional liminality the ritual serves to constrain uncertainty in time and space, and hence lower the associated stress. Related to this, the three phases of separation, liminality and aggregation were not all in evidence. There was separation and liminality but there was a lack of aggregation. In Eric's case there was a feeling of continued ambiguity although a place was made for him in the senior management team. As Eric put it: 'you get powerful affirmation moments and you start to accept yourself', but an insufficiency of these moments, for example, because of a lack of ritualistic closure, means that 'you have the appearance of the identity but don't feel you are the "real deal"'. For Julie it was as if there was a social identity that was established early on which was 'floating below the surface' even though it did not match with her self-identity and eventually there was a permanent separation from the work identity and an aggregation into the friendship structure. Hence, in both cases, there was only partial aggregation and this served to prolong the stress experienced by the liminars. In traditional liminality there is support for the liminar by a mentor or peers. In both Eric and Julie's cases this support appeared to be missing. Finally, although there was a shift in meaning between the start and end point, at the end there was still unresolved ambiguity and difference of interpretation. Therefore, in broad terms, these examples highlight the aspects of liminality to do with disconnection, ambiguity and loss of social place. The compensatory rituals and supports that enable a liminar to come through the process and rejoin society appear to be largely missing.

It is possible to use the model of liminal identity work developed earlier (see Figure 1) to understand the differences between Eric and Julie's experiences and what might constitute a full and successful liminality in Turner's (1967) terms. In a Turnerian ideal, the dialogic construction incorporates moments of two-way interaction; outsider-in and insider-out activities. As the ritual proceeds through its phases, all parts of the model are accessed at some point.

Eric and Julie's experiences contrast with this. The dialogic constructions start with an external trigger, both being considered for redundancy when that was not their preference. In addition, others in their organizations appear to have started the process some time before Eric and Julie became aware and hence both were subject to an outsider-in form of dialogic construction. Both did undergo reflection and self-questioning, but this was stimulated by trying to cope with a stressful situation and there appeared to be strong pressures towards acquiescing. In as much as they tried to do experimental identity work, it had limited effect in producing their desired social identities. Eric's new qualifications were not recognized as overriding his 'blue collar manager' identity and Julie's efforts to pass Colin's tests ultimately failed to convince others that she was really, equally, one of the team. However, the practice of recognition plays an important role in both narratives. Eric experienced what he called an epiphany in which there was an overnight realization that his social identity did not match his self-identity. In Julie's case the recognition of disjuncture was more gradual and was like a dawning

realization of the way things were. When the context changed in ServiceWest, a re-keying (Goffman, 1974) occurred in which part-time-ness became re-read as temporary and/or not-in-need-of-the-job. This re-keying legitimated the behaviour that Julie experienced as testing by management and a withdrawal of friendship by team members. Julie felt increasingly isolated and unhappy and although at the start she had no intention of taking voluntary redundancy, three months later it seemed the 'right thing'. Strauss (1996) emphasizes surprise and bafflement as qualities of experience that go along with misalignment, and both are present in these examples of recognition, although an epiphany is likely to entail more initial surprise; a dawning realization is no less impactful on the self-identity of the individual. Thus the defining practices in Eric and Julie's experiences can be seen as recognition and reflection with little success in experimental identity work.

## Conclusion

The growing literature concerned with identity work and reconstruction (Alvesson et al., 2008; Ybema et al., 2009) has greatly broadened our understanding of the processes of social construction of identity in the workplace. The purpose of this article is to contribute to this literature a conceptualization of liminality as it applies to identity reconstruction of people in organizations. Liminality has been defined by drawing upon both the anthropological and organizational literatures and, although there are key differences in that the organizational usage lacks the rituals and complete phases of Turner's (1967) concept, it is hoped that the conceptualization provides a useful way of focusing on the phase of in-between-ness in identity reconstruction. The model that has been proposed (Figure 1) incorporates different practices (experimentation, reflection and recognition) that relate to the orientation of dialogic construction between the organization and individual, and hence present an integration of key concepts for identity theory.

In the Turnerian 'ideal' of liminality, all the practices in the model appear to be available to the liminar, and the experience of liminality entails a weaving together of these practices. The integration is further aided by the ritualistic structure that provides a boundary to the experience of uncertainty and support from appointed members of the society. In the examples given earlier, and perhaps more generally in organizational life, there were a number of points of deviation from the Turnerian ideal. There appeared to be a preponderance of practices of recognition through epiphany or dawning that set the frame for the experience. In addition, the organization being changeful itself, the lack of boundaries provided by ritual and the lack of support meant that the liminal experience of ambiguity became extensive and was not easily resolved. Clearly this experience could contribute to the psychological dysfunctions of liminality identified elsewhere (Garsten, 1999). While the ideas of experimental practices already exist in the identity work literature, the proposed model highlights additional practices of recognition and reflection and provides a way of framing the process that constitutes the relationship between the organization and individual during the in-between phase of identity change. It also provides a way of interpreting and highlighting the problems for people who become embroiled in liminality without having the structure and support to reach aggregation.

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