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Between worlds of liminal spaces: A narrative of new career struggles

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Abstract

Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) work with governments around the world to tackle urgent development issues. Major IGOs in India such as UNDP, UNICEF and World Bank work with central and state governments to implement multi-stakeholder programs for poverty reduction, health care, education and women's empowerment. IGOs provide expertise, capacity building and funding. The implementation of projects supported by IGOs requires dedicated staff performing specialised tasks such as project management, analytical work, consulting and coordination. This often necessitates working closely with several agencies and stakeholders, navigating complex bureaucracy and local systems as an outsider.

This paper is based on the first author's career transition experience of moving from a corporate role in Dubai to managing an IGO supported rural community and capacity development initiative. As an appointed IGO project manager posted at an Indian district government office, key roles included community needs assessment, training of volunteers and early coordination to achieve stated objectives. However, it also required building working relationships with various stakeholders such as state, local community and political parties, as well as employees at local and regional government offices, local volunteers and party leaders and of course IGO heads. To fit into this new geography of roles and responsibilities, there were intense personal challenges of adaptation and identity re-negotiation.

There were, however, different liminal spaces emerging in relation to different actors and their organizational structures. Experiences with the local office staff showed the stark contrast between an efficient corporate culture and the bureaucratic culture of the local government, where protocols dictate this is how things are done here. Interactions with the local and regional governmental agencies also showed a liminal space in relation to idealism versus enforced pragmaticism. Experiences with volunteers showed the tension between ideals and reality. The enthusiasm of mentoring that would eventually dissipate as time went on showcased the resistances faced, and declining volunteer involvement and performance added to a sense of frustration. Liminal space also showed up in negotiations as a non-governmental employee amid complicated governmental systems, showing the tension between perceived and real power and influence. Efforts of efficiency often clashed with the struggles of bureaucracy. These liminal spaces illuminated disorientation, powerlessness, and the struggle to give up self-conception while facing the responsibilities of a new role.

Narrative analysis foregrounds subjectivity to highlight nuanced insights of major career transitions and lived liminality experiences. More specifically, the concept of liminal space reveals the complexity of navigating destabilizing transitions with empathy, integrity, and growth   highlighting the inner work needed to transcend boundaries and reinvent oneself. An analysis of liminal spaces provides specific insights into multi-dimensional conversations, identity work, emotive work and meaning making, to reorient the self across multiple cultures and roles.

Introduction

Navigating major career transitions can be a profoundly destabilizing yet transformative experience. Periods of shifting between roles and occupational identities have been characterized as liminal spaces, marking disorienting yet potentially growth-inducing turning points (Borgen & Maglio, 2007; Nicholson, 1984). The career transition was also a process involving different modes of learning, leading to the conclusion that the career transition process is essentially a learning process in which individuals acquire new perspectives and meaning in a new role (Kim, 2014). The existing literature points to several key factors that lead to career transitions. Globalization and technological advances are disrupting many traditional careers and eliminating roles (Baruch, 2004). Organizational restructuring and downsizing also often force employees to transition to new occupational roles (Amundson et al., 2010). Individual factors like seeking improved work-life balance or desiring more meaningful work can also motivate voluntary transitions (Carless & Arnup, 2011; Niendorf et al., 2022).

Past research has examined various types of employment transitions, including school-to-

between unemployment and employment (Gash, 2008; Scherer, 2004), and transitions around retirement (Bennett & Möhring, 2015). However, less attention has been paid to dramatic career shifts involving migration across vastly different organizational and national cultures. By examining liminal experiences, important insights can be gained into processes of identity work, adaptation, and meaning-making when continuity is disrupted. Drawing from anthropological concepts, liminality refers to the ambiguous phase during rites of passage when individuals undergo an "in-between" state prior to identity reintegration (Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1967).

expanding scholarly perspectives on liminal experiences. By offering an evocative, introspective lens, this study provides several benefits. It reveals nuanced emotions, vulnerabilities, difficulties, small triumphs, and evolution of thought over time. The narrative approach brings this liminal experience to life. Moreover, the subjective account aids wider understanding of how social locations shape career transitions. This exemplary case study advances insights into liminal spaces, identity tensions, and meaning making from the inside.

Liminal Spaces and Liminality

This study is grounded in the theoretical tradition of liminality and its relevance to occupational transitions and identity work. The concept of liminality originates from anthropologist Arnold van Gennep's (1960) research on rites of passage in ceremonial contexts. He proposed that rituals involve three stages: separation, transition, and reincorporation. The

from one societal position to another (Turner, 1967). Turner (1967) expanded on liminality, positioning it as a period when continuity breaks down, norms are suspended, and fluidity manifests, prior to identities being reintegrated with new meanings. Beech (2011) conceived liminality as an identity workspace

temporary employees (Garsten, 1999). Common features include disorientation, self-doubt, perceived powerlessness, critical reflection, resilience, and new perspectives (Blustein, 2011).

Ashforth, (2000) notes transitions often generate identity limbo. Bamber et al., (2017) distinguish occupational limbo as an always-this-never-that tension, less desirable than a hoped-for identity. Nicholson, (1984) argues liminal career spaces involve identity play and evaluation until sensemaking resolves confusion. Ibarra's (2004) research reveals how possible identities are

relational and temporal interconnections. Overall, liminal experiences represent pivotal identity workspaces.

This study applies and builds upon these theoretical foundations, providing an empirical

residents had minimal education and were accustomed to hierarchical societal norms. The region had deep ties to the political party in power. This unique scenario thrust the author into profound liminality, as he undertook intense identity work and adaptation.

Intergovernmental Organizations in India

IGOs have long played an important role in supporting social welfare and human development programs in India. As formal interstate entities with dedicated bureaucracies, IGOs like the UNDP, UNICEF, World Bank, and WHO derive legitimacy from their mandates and technical expertise (Abbott & Snidal, 2010). Through exercising authority in their domain and establishing priorities, IGOs seek to influence member state policies and facilitate collaboration on transnational issues like health, education, and poverty reduction (Nilsson, 2017).

Since independence, India has partnered extensively with major IGOs to expand access to primary education, public health services, and gender equity programs across the country. Evaluations indicate IGO collaborations have helped increase school enrollment, reduce child mortality, and enhance women's socioeconomic opportunities, though progress remains uneven (Jalan & Ravallion, 2003). For example, UNICEF and the World Bank pioneered interventions that boosted primary education access in India (Nambisan, 2008). WHO, UNICEF and others have worked to address infectious diseases, malnutrition and maternal-child health through large-scale programs endorsed by the Indian government (Jalan & Ravallion, 2003). The United Nations Development Programme and World Bank have funded major rural poverty reduction and women's empowerment schemes since the 1990s, with some success in alleviating income poverty and vulnerability (Niti Aayog, 2023).

In the health sector, WHO assisted India's National Rural Health Mission launched in 2005 to expand healthcare access in underserved communities (Singh, 2018). The World Bank focused more on disease control programs for HIV/AIDS, and tuberculosis, though India's disease burden remains high in these areas (World Bank, 2019). Regarding education, UNICEF helped boost enrollment in primary education since 1949, while the World Bank supported the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan campaign starting in 2001 that helped achieve near universal primary education by 2011(UNICEF, 2022; World Bank, 2014). For gender equality, partnerships with UN Women and UNICEF have aimed to increase women's economic and political participation (UN Women, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). Thus, engagement with IGOs remains vital for India to

meet its Sustainable Development Goals through capacity building and designing context-specific programs.

Indian Government Offices

The government of India has an elaborate administrative structure consisting of various ministries and departments at the union, state, and local levels. The central government is organized into specialized ministries like finance, home affairs, and defense that formulate major policies, allocate budgets, implement schemes, and monitor programs within their sectors. The state governments contain departments focused on areas like revenue, education, and health that are headed by ministers and secretaries. At the grassroots level, district government offices interact directly with citizens to deliver services and welfare schemes (National Portal of India, 2023; Wolpert et al., 2023).

However, numerous studies reveal several issues constraining efficiency in Indian government offices across levels. These include bureaucratic red tape, corruption, opacity, outdated procedures, staff shortages, poor infrastructure, and low citizen satisfaction. The limited adoption of information technology also hinders service delivery and grievance redressal (Afridi, 2017; Dasgupta & Kapur, 2020; Jagannath, 2016; P et al., 2021; Saxena, 2007).

Method

This study employs a narrative approach to provide an evocative, subjective account of

experiences to gain wider cultural understandings and insights (Ellis, 2004). As participant-observer, the researcher himself is the data source. Data was collected through retrospective journaling, and critical reflection on memories, emotions, and discoveries during the liminal transition period. The author compiled detailed observational and reflective accounts over the course of his three-

author to develop the story into a narrative paper to share these rarely captured, subjective

that I learned that the journey to securing a position in an IGO could span anywhere from three to six months. The gravity of the process became even more evident as I navigated these forums, with applicants sharing their experiences and the twists and turns they encountered along the way.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, an email notification illuminated my screen. The message contained the auspicious news that I had been waiting for -

of the Public Managers entrusted with this crucial mission. This role would go on to shape my journey significantly, allowing me to directly and meaningfully contribute to the development of youth in my assigned district.

In my capacity as a Public Manager, I operated under the direct supervision of the National Project Director, carrying a diverse set of responsibilities. What made my role as a Public Manager particularly distinctive was the aspect of dual reporting. This entailed the obligation to report to both the IGO and the regional office of the Ministry. Additionally, state and local government authorities were kept informed through informal reporting structures, ensuring transparency and communication at multiple levels of governance. I collaborated closely with the District Administration, developmental departments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), playing a pivotal role in fostering self-reliant Youth Clubs. These clubs became platforms for young individuals to come together, exchange ideas, and collectively work towards community development. A crucial aspect of my role involved identifying the specific training needs of club members, which in turn facilitated the organization of targeted programs tailored to their requirements. By addressing the unique challenges faced by different segments of the youth population in the district, we were able to design initiatives that could truly make a tangible impact. This comprehensive needs assessment formed the bedrock for the Annual Action Plan, a comprehensive blueprint encompassing diverse programs designed to engage and empower youth. Furthermore, a substantial portion of my responsibilities revolved around assisting Youth Clubs and NGOs in formulating project proposals under the Ministry's Financial Assistance Schemes. This support played a pivotal role in facilitating impactful projects that directly addressed pressing issues and contributed to the overall development of the community.

The project I was engaged in featured a distinctive employment landscape characterized by two distinct contracts. The first contract pertained to the agreement between the IGO and the Ministry. In this arrangement, the Ministry played a pivotal role by providing essential financial assistance to support the project's implementation. The project's seamless operation and continuation were heavily reliant on this financial support. Consequently, the presence of the IGO in the district was contingent upon the Ministry's decision to continue providing this crucial financial assistance. The second contract revolved around the employment relationship between the IGO and its employees, including myself in my role as a Public Manager (PM). The duration

of our employment was directly tied to the lifespan of the project. If the project encountered any

they had a level of job security and stability compared to the contractual staff members. Additionally, there was an office attendant hired on a contractual basis by a national private recruiting agency. Their role involved providing general support and assistance in maintaining the office premises and performing various administrative tasks. As a contractual employee, their employment was subject to the terms and conditions specified in their contract, which may have limited their job security and benefits. Furthermore, a sweeper was hired on a contractual basis through a local private recruiting agency. This individual was responsible for maintaining cleanliness and hygiene in the office premises. Like the office attendant, their employment was governed by a specific contract, and they may have faced similar limitations regarding job security and benefits. Lastly, there were 15 contractual volunteers who were hired by the Ministry through an open recruitment process. These volunteers were selected based on predetermined criteria and were between the ages of 18 and 29, with basic educational backgrounds. Their primary role was to support the implementation of the project, working closely with the PM and other staff members.

Experience with Office Staff Members

The experience was undoubtedly new for all parties involved at the office. For me, it marked my introduction to the intricacies of the government working system, while for the rest of the staff, it was their first time collaborating with someone from outsi

incurred by the youth clubs in carrying out these initiatives. This approach aligns with the overarching goal of fostering youth engagement and development within the community.

In the initial months of my role, it became apparent that many of the programs were primarily for photo opportunities and budget expenditure, rather than genuine efforts to empower and strengthen the youth. Additionally, I became aware that the youth clubs responsible for executing these programs often had affiliations or familial ties to the office staff. Whenever I attempted to bring new youth clubs into the fold, I encountered repeated obstacles. These roadblocks were often created by the office staff, as government offices typically entail a multitude of procedures for empanelling a youth club.

On one particular day, clerical staff members approached me and offered me a packet, referring to it as the "cut." I refused to accept it. He explained that this was a common practice in the office, suggesting that it was customary for procedures to be expedited through such means. He further implied that my predecessors had accepted such offers, and he insinuated that anyone who followed in my position would likely do the same. Despite facing similar situations on multiple occasions, I remained resolute in my decision to abstain from participating in such practices. These actions went against my principles and values, causing me deep discomfort, and I was determined to maintain my ethical stance.

The chaotic state of affairs within the office left me disconcerted, and I felt compelled to report these issues to the IGO. However, I often received a passive response from them, with suggestions to resolve the matters internally and build trust with the office staff. This response, though well-intentioned, left me grappling with the challenges of navigating an environment where deeply ingrained practices contradicted the organization's mission and values.

The majority of the Ministry's district offices were housed within the complexes of the state administration buildings. However, during our h EMC /Span ЀMCIring our h EMC /Span ЀMCIring our h I

conversations and the rapport I had developed with the District Commissioner, I had a strong conviction that if I took decisive action, we could secure an office room within the administration building. I broached this idea with my staff, anticipating their excitement. However, to my surprise, I encountered resistance from them. They seemed to be of the opinion that we should refrain from moving there, citing reasons like "people there don't have much work and they put their nose into our work".

Upon closer examination, I discerned that these statements masked their unwillingness to work in a more structured and monitored environment. It became evident to me that each member of my staff had their own objectives and motivations, which might not always align with the organizational goals or the kind of accountability I envisioned for the team. This realization was an eye-opener, shedding light on the complexity of managing a team with diverse aspirations and work philosophies. The regular clerical staff, enjoying permanent employment and pension benefits, often displayed a sense of complacency and lack of motivation. With the assurance of job security, they may have felt less driven to go above and beyond their duties, resulting in a decline in productivity and efficiency. In contrast, the contractual office staff, with temporary employment contracts, were more inclined to focus on asserting their rights and seeking better working conditions. Their contractual nature of employment may have created a sense of urgency and a need to advocate for their interests. This could have affected their motivation to contribute fully to the project's goals, as their attention was divided between their own concerns and the overall objectives of the project. The contractual volunteers, driven by their aspirations for permanent roles and political ties, may have exhibited a different set of motivations. Their focus on securing long-term positions through political connections could have detracted from their commitment to the project's objectives. The desire for personal gain and the pursuit of individual interests might have hindered the cohesive functioning of the team and created a sense of imbalance in goal alignment.

Despite anticipating some challenges, I made the decision to proceed with the process of relocating our office to the district administration premises. Little did I know that I would soon find myself in the midst of a storm. During the subsequent monthly meeting, I encountered resistance from the volunteers. This resistance coincided with the recent introduction of a new performance management portal, which may have contributed to their apprehension and reluctance. The level of resistance I encountered far exceeded my expectations, and to my

dismay, I observed that my office staff did not intervene. Due to my limited fluency in the local language, I faced constraints in effectively conveying my arguments to them. I glanced around the room, hoping to find some support among the staff, but no one came forward.

A few days later, I received a letter addressed to the volunteers at my office. I opened it, and although the letter was written in the local language, the subject line was in English:

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and repetitive tasks. I suspected that this might be due to the perception that, as a non-regular employee within the government system, I wasn't entitled to more significant responsibilities.

This behaviour wasn't limited to officials alone; it extended to youth clubs, political party leaders, NGOs, local government institutions, and affiliated organizations. They seemed to view me as a temporary presence, believing that any assistance extended to me would not result in long-term benefits. This perception of my role as transient had a pervasive impact on how I was perceived and the opportunities I was given to contribute effectively.

As part of the volunteer recruitment process, It was necessary to invite the district commissioner to participate. However, due to his busy schedule, he often delegated this responsibility to his office staff. On this particular occasion, he nominated a Grade A level officer to represent him. We had scheduled the program to commence at 10:30 am, and the candidates had arrived promptly by 9:30 am. However, the nominated officer did not arrive even by 11:30 am, and it was only after I called him that I learned he was in another meeting. Considering the presence of other dignitaries on the panel and the delayed start, I made the decision to commence the

development indicators. In our regular monthly meetings, all volunteers agreed to this approach and seemed satisfied.

Implementing this process was an initiative aimed at streamlining our office's operations and responding to the persistent pressure from the headquarters to efficiently utilize the sanctioned funds. I had assumed that the volunteers would be self-motivated to track their performance against the set targets and that this approach would foster healthy competition among them. To further incentivize their efforts, I introduced a "Best Volunteer of the Month" award, using my own funds as there were no provisions for additional expenses in the office budget.

In the first month following the implementation of the performance-based honorarium system portal, there was a notable improvement in the overall performance of the volunteers as a group. Despite a few underperformers, the majority of volunteers demonstrated satisfactory results during this initial period. However, things took a turn for the worse in subsequent months. The volunteers' performance gradually declined, and many of them consistently underperformed. When confronted about their lack of progress, they offered trivial excuses and seemed unmoved by the importance of accomplishing the assigned tasks and the positive impact it could have on the neighbourhoods and their own development as volunteers.

To address this issue, I decided to investigate the underperformance informally, seeking information from various sources. Surprisingly, I learned 9 out of 15 volunteers held leadership roles in the ruling party's youth wing. The rest were supporters of the same party. This revelation raised concerns about the potential influence of political affiliations on their dedication and commitment to their volunteer roles. Furthermore, it also came to my attention that 12 out of the 15 volunteers were juggling part-time jobs along with their volunteer responsibilities. This was in contrast to the vacancy advertisement that clearly stated the volunteer position required full-time engagement, with an honorarium provided to support their commitment. The combination of political involvement and part-time jobs may likely have contributed to the decline in their performance. With competing interests and responsibilities, the volunteers may have been unable to devote sufficient time and energy to their volunteer duties, leading to subpar results.

It was essential to communicate the importance of separating their political affiliations from their volunteer work and to reiterate that their contributions should be solely focused on benefiting the local community without any biases. After having discussions with the

underperforming volunteers about their lack of adherence to office procedures, I presented them with two options: either vacate their positions or improve their commitment and performance. Since terminating their roles was not possible, as the volunteers were hired through government agencies, I decided not to pay their honorarium until their performance improved. However, this decision resulted in an unexpected and alarming response. I started receiving threatening phone calls from my own volunteers and local political party leaders. They argued this is how it had always been done in other districts, questioning why this place should be different. They noted past volunteers also held party positions and campaigned for the same actively. They demanded that I reinstate the honorarium and relinquish the portal. Despite their demands, I stood firm in my decision to deny both requests.

Reinstating the honorarium without any improvement in their performance would have sent the wrong message and undermined the purpose of the performance-based reward system. It would have discouraged other volunteers who were diligently working towards achieving their targets and fulfilling their responsibilities. Relinquishing the portal would have significantly conceded to unreasonable threats and demands. Doing so under duress would have compromised the project's integrity and set a dangerous precedent. Instead, I chose to prioritize the project's goals, the well-being of the local community, and the principles of fair and transparent volunteer management. I firmly communicated my stance to the volunteers, emphasizing that their performance needed to improve if they wished to be eligible for the honorarium. Furthermore, I made it clear that the portal was an essential tool for the project's success and should not be used as a bargaining chip.

Facing the escalating situation, the volunteers' actions took a turn for the worse, and their demands intensified. Despite my initial denial of their claims and refusal to comply with their demands, their persistence and resistance began to take a toll on the project and my ability to manage it effectively. The volunteers went to great lengths to express their displeasure. They

and delicate position. The volunteers' actions left me with limited options to resolve the issue peacefully and maintain the project's integrity.

As the pressure and resistance mounted, I faced the difficult reality that the volunteers were unwilling to cooperate and that their actions were making the continuation of the project unsustainable. The untenable situation forced me to re-evaluate my approach and make a difficult decision. In the end, the overwhelming pressure and the volunteers' unwillingness to cooperate left me with no other viable option. I made the difficult decision to abandon the portal and reinstate the honorariums to quell the resistance and avoid further disruptions to the project. This decision, while not ideal, was made in the interest of ensuring the safety of all involved and preventing any further negative repercussions. It was a difficult compromise, and I recognized that it might not have fully addressed the underlying issues with the volunteers' performance and behavior.

The level of resistance I encountered in response to a small change aimed at greater efficiency came as a surprise. After all, these were volunteers - selfless individuals supposedly motivated by altruism to join the cause. Yet faced with this opposition, I'm left questioning if that was truly the case. Perhaps there were underlying motivations I had not uncovered.

The influence of political interference extended well beyond the realm of honorarium disbursement and began to permeate various other facets of the project, most notably the allocation of program funds to youth clubs. This interference became increasingly apparent as it became clear that certain youth clubs affiliated with the ruling political party were being granted preferential treatment in terms of budget allocation. This practice ran counter to the fundamental principles of fairness and equal opportunity that the project aimed to uphold. There were instances when leaders of the political party in power would make direct calls to our office, requesting the involvement of their affiliated youth clubs in the implementation of specific initiatives. Given ou

difficult position, struggling to strike a balance between my commitment to the project's core values and the complex reality of political pressures and expectations.

Discussion

The public manager's journey from the corporate sphere to an IGO development role encapsulates the identity and cultural transitions underlying career shifts into the multilateral space. Entering IGO roles requires reconciling national, and local realities with institutional mandates and adapting to new cross-cultural norms (Biermann & Siebenhüner, 2009; Ege & Bauer, 2013). IGO careers necessitate balancing political accumen with technocratic expertise (Bauer, 2006). Officials engage in consensus-building among member state representatives while implementing public management practices (European Court of Auditors., 2012; Hooghe & Marks, 2015). This blending of diplomacy and administration shapes a distinct occupational identity.

As evidenced in the manager's narrative, this passage obliges identity renegotiation and navigating unfamiliar bureaucratic networks. The disorientation and ambiguity of this transition process resonates with the liminality concept. As elaborated in the ensuing discussion, the manager's passage between old and new spheres meant enduring an unstructured in-betweenness. It reveals the different liminal spaces encountered, necessitating continual identity reconstruction to navigate each ambiguous in-between phase. This also illuminates how conflicting liminal spaces trap one in limbo, compelling simultaneous responses amidst persistent tumult. It highlights fleeting moments of emancipation that provide temporary relief yet prove insufficient to fully overcome lingering liminality. Moreover, it unveils the profound emotional toll of persisting through liminal uncertainty devoid of structure.

Entering Liminal Spaces

The concept of liminal spaces refers to thresholds where an individual transition between

different human worlds meet and to a greater or lesser extent overlap; and in this meeting they create new opportunities for difference. Humans in liminal spaces tend to meet other humans

These in-between zones are characterized by uncertainty, discontinuity, and the questioning of

inhabiting liminal spaces requires navigating profound fluidity.

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The public manager's journey from the corporate to the public sector provides insights into experiencing multiple, overlapping liminal spaces during such a transition. He had to negotiate and make sense of the blurred boundaries and hybrid demands at each threshold. The career shift itself induced the first major liminal space, as the manager detached from the comfort of his corporate role and entered the unfamiliar domain of the social sector. Adopting new norms, values, and practices aligned with the development field proved challenging against his ingrained corporate mindsets. For instance, he vividly recalls the culture shock of stepping into the bare, cramped government office radically different from his polished corporate towers. Devoid of the familiar trappings and professional etiquette, he felt suspended in an alien environment operating on unfamiliar terms.

This insider-outsider liminality was reinforced by his unique position of being an IGO-hired manager within the broader government structure. Despite his managerial role, he lacked regular government employees' decision-making power and social capital. The need for bureaucratic approvals continually emphasized his outsider status. This fuelled a recurrent liminal space as he shifted between approaches to meet conflicting stakeholder demands. The complicated dual reporting system required flipping mindsets to balance his IGO role with norms within the local office.

Navigating local political interests also induced liminal spaces, as he was torn between pragmatism and integrity. He continuously negotiated whether to comply with or resist

tied groups. This suspension between acquiescence and resistance catalysed introspection around his principles and integrity.

This identity questioning compelled the manager to engage in reflective identity work (Ibarra, 2004). By suspending his stable corporate identity, he was pressed to actively experiment with provisional professional selves, exploring possible new leader identities through immersive activities and continuous meaning-making. Hence, inhabiting these in-between liminal spaces provided fertile ground for identity growth, liberating him from an entrenched corporate mindset and facilitating the development of a leadership approach more aligned with public service. Each liminal threshold marked an identity crisis, yet also activated critical self-reflection and learning. For instance, the disorienting initiation into a hierarchical bureaucratic system represented an unstructuring of his identity, rupturing his self-concept (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003).

Navigating Occupational Limbo

A profound challenge for the public manager was navigating the inherent ambiguities and tensions of occupying a liminal in-between position, appearing trapped in occupational limbo (Bamber et al., 2017). This liminality resulted from the manager navigating multiple, often

dysfunctional, preventing meaningful change and growth. For him, unresolved liminal spaces hindered his ability to define a coherent identity and role, fuelling disorientation and frustration.

Moments of Emancipation Within Limbo

Paradoxically, moments of progress and empowerment emerged for the manager even amidst the chaos and discomfort of liminality. Despite the predominant turbulence, small wins arose that provided glimpses of hope, keeping him anchored through the storm. Securing the

grappled with decoding unfamiliar cultural norms and feeling rules as an outsider. Extensive emotion regulation was required to manage uncertainty, frustration, and fear while outwardly displaying confidence to influence resistant subordinates. Drawing on Hochschild' (1983) concepts, the manager appears to have engaged in surface acting by faking unfelt emotions, and deep acting by aligning internal feelings with external displays. The emotional labour involved in regulating one's own emotions and influencing others proved draining. Yet the promise of emancipation following successful transition compelled persistence through turbulence. Moments of progress enabled emotional stamina in the face of persistent uncertainty and exhaustion (Hochschild, 1983). Spor

facilitated resilience-building identity work, despite adversity.

Conclusion

This study makes key contributions to liminality scholarship by providing an in-depth subjective perspective from within the transitional space. The narrative approach brings to life the identity tensions and messy human experiences that exemplify career shifts. Practically, it provides guidance for approaching liminal experiences with greater resilience, empathy, integrity and personal growth. For individuals facing destabilizing shifts to unfamiliar career settings, this study underscores the importance of maintaining self-care and patience with oneself throughout profound periods of disorientation and identity undoing. Practicing self-compassion can enable emerging from liminal spaces with renewed purpose.

Further, by elucidating the learning curve and emotional labour entailed, this account demonstrates the need for reflexivity, willingness to listen, and openness to feedback when inhabiting new occupational roles. This narrative also offers lessons regarding upholding integrity and core values amid complex realities. When ideals confront ingrained practices that contradict principles, persevering with empathy while also tactfully initiating changes can slowly transform environments. Additionally, tempering idealism with realism without becoming discouraged enables sustaining commitment despite challenges. By emphasizing reflexivity and meaning making, this study provides guidance for individuals to emerge from liminal career shifts with an expanded sense of purpose.

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