Trapped in limbo

Academics' identity negotiation in conditions of perpetual liminality

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Trapped in Limbo – Academics’ Identity Negotiation in Conditions of Perpetual Liminality

Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to investigate the experiences of permanent liminality of academics and the associated multi-dimensional processes of identity negotiation.

Design/methodology/approach: The article draws upon a three-and-a-half-year at-home ethnography. The first author – as insider, participant, and researcher – investigated the consequences of an organizational redesign that pushed members of a local university department into a situation of permanent liminality.

Findings: The paper describes how academics simultaneously followed multiple trajectories in their identity negotiation as a response to ongoing experiences of ambiguity, disorientation, powerlessness, and loss of status.

Originality: The paper highlights the dual character of identity negotiation in conditions of permanent liminality as unresolved identity work through simultaneous identification and dis-identification. It further shows the multidimensionality of this identity work and argues that identity negotiation as a response to perpetual liminality is informed by notions of struggle and notions of opportunity.

Practical implications: Management decisions in higher education institutions based on administrative concerns can have adverse effects for academics, particularly when such decisions disturb, complicate, or even render impossible identification processes. University managers need to realize and to respond to the struggle of academics getting lost in an endless quest for defining who they are.
Introduction

Liminality, i.e., the experience of being betwixt and between social structures and positions (Turner, 1967), has always been one of the features of academic work. Various authors investigated the temporal liminal conditions of academic work related to, for example, the period of the Ph.D. study and career transitions (e.g., Compton and Tran, 2017; Corley, 2010; Haynes et al., 2014; Prasad, 2015). Others promote an understanding of academic work as being increasingly defined by experiences of permanent liminality. As a consequence of the “cultural corporatization of higher education” (Aronowitz, 1998, p. 217), contemporary academic work has turned into a permanent liminal enterprise, with academics perpetually being betwixt and between managerial notions of knowledge production and traditional notions of scholarship (e.g., Aronowitz, 1994; Bettis et al., 2005; Clarke et al., 2012). Being an academic in a contemporary university, hence, often means being situated in between individually measured productivity and collaborative and democratic practice (Bosetti et al., 2008; Chubb and Watermeyer, 2016; Sousa and Brennan, 2014). Responding to the experience of the permanent liminality that is inherent in contemporary academic work, academics often anchor their identity in notions of scholarship as a professional and collaborative practice (e.g., Clarke et al., 2012; Harding et al., 2010; Kuntz, 2012). However, they also do incorporate in their identities the administrative and managerial elements of contemporary academic work (e.g., Barry et al., 2001; Archer, 2008; Knights and Clarke, 2014).

The variety of experiences of permanent liminality (Thomasson, 2009) and the corresponding complex and dynamic processes of liminal identity negotiation (Beech, 2011) suggest that responding to conditions of permanent liminality does not merely result in this or that identity (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016; Ybema et al., 2011). Instead, liminal identity work develops along several trajectories (Bamber et al., 2017; Ybema et al., 2011) as individuals struggle to align, balance, incorporate, reject or otherwise relate to various social identities, each of which having different and
sometimes conflicting value and emotional significance (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ashforth and Schinoff, 2006). Feeling compelled to work on their identity (Thomasson, 2014) and/or exploring the possibilities to craft an identity (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016), individuals perpetually oscillate between different sources for identification as the experience of liminality turns into a permanent one (Ybema et al., 2011). Either way, identity negotiation is informed by continuous efforts to construe and re-construe meaningful notions of the self as identities remain fluid and incomplete (Daskalaki and Simosi, 2018).

In this article, we capture the multi-dimensional nature of identity negotiation when academics are exposed to permanent liminality conditions. We draw upon an ethnographic case study of a former university department, whose members have been thrown into a state of perpetual liminality. Investigating the dimensions along which they negotiate their identity, this article firstly contributes to the literature of liminality in academia. It demonstrates how professional and collaborative notions of organizing academic work become challenged by managerially imposed structural liminality. The manuscript highlights how academics negotiate an identity of someone dwelling on liminality. Secondly, the manuscript contributes to the understanding of social identification processes in periods of permanent liminality. It demonstrates that to be permanently in between engenders identity work that simultaneously excludes and includes multiple and often contradicting anchors of identification. Therefore, identity negotiation in conditions of permanent liminality involves unresolved identity work through simultaneous identification and dis-identification. Thirdly, we show that in their response to liminal experiences through both identification and dis-identification, people constitute a liminal identity.

The article proceeds by reviewing the literature on perpetual liminality, identity, and identity negotiation in academia. We will then introduce the case and the research approach of the study before describing the academics’ identity negotiation. The article ends by discussing the impact of the study on the understanding of permanent liminality and the associated processes of identity negotiation.
Permanent Liminality and Academics’ Identity Negotiation

The concept of liminality was initially introduced by French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in his study of rites of passage (1909/2004). However, it was not until Victor Turner’s (1967, 1969, 1970) adoption of Van Gennep’s ideas that the concept of liminality and the associated idea of transitions as constituting temporal and spatial periods of being in between came to be widely acknowledged in the literature (Thomasson, 2014). Turner was particularly interested in “the nature of ‘interstructural’ human beings” (Turner, 1967, p. 93), i.e., the ones who were betwixt and between. For him, liminality was associated with being “neither one thing nor another; or maybe both; or neither here nor there; or maybe nowhere … ‘betwixt and between’ recognized fixed points in the space-time of structural classification” (Turner, 1967, p. 96). Following Van Gennep’s notion of liminality as being associated with processes of transition, Turner argues that during the liminal state of the transition, people pass “through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner, 1969, p. 94). For their identity, this means that liminality constitutes a condition where people are “in the midst of a journey from one social self to another” (Schechner, 2002, p. 57).

In academia, the Ph.D. study constitutes a liminal transition from a graduate to an academic (e.g., Raineri, 2015; Prasad, 2015; Compton and Tran, 2017). Also, mid-career transitions engender liminal experiences (e.g., Corley, 2010; Haynes et al., 2014). Furthermore, practitioners who enter academia go through a liminal passage to develop an academic identity (e.g., Bosetti et al., 2008; McDermid et al., 2016). Eventually, the transition into retirement constitutes a liminal period for academics as they seek to disconnect from, yet also hold on to, the academic world (e.g., Emerald and Carpenter, 2014).

Being in transit, hence betwixt and between, implies that people slip through established systems of social classification and become structurally invisible (Turner, 1969). That invisibility has
consequences for the social reality of liminal people and their identity (Beech, 2011; Garsten, 1999; Ibarra, 2007; Ybema et al., 2011). On the one hand, liminality is associated with the experience of disorder and the loss of relevant sources of identification (Turner, 1967). Liminality results in identity work, as Beech (2011) suggests, because being in between involves searching for a new order, new anchors for identification, and new sources for establishing a position that provides status and continuity (Mayrhofer and Iellatchitch, 2005; Thomasson, 2014). On the other hand, liminality constitutes a state of contingencies where reality can develop in different directions (Garsten, 1999; Thomasson, 2009; Turnbull, 1990; Stenner, 2017). Liminality may provide time-spaces that foster reflexivity, creativity, and possibility (Ibarra and Obudaru, 2016; Sturdy et al., 2006). People experiment with provisional selves and try to determine whether those identities work for their future lives (Ibarra, 2007; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016).

However, what happens to people’s identities when being in between structures and positions takes on a more permanent quality? As identity research shows, permanent liminality has profound effects on identity negotiation (Bamber et al., 2017). For example, Garsten (1999) discusses the effects of temporary agency work turning into a permanent state of being betwixt and between regular employment positions and organizational structures. Agency workers incorporate into their identity the notion of never being here or there. They attach ambiguity, uncertainty, flexibility, and lack of agency as enduring meaning to their selves (Garsten, 1999). Referring to Deleuze’s (1992) notion of ‘dividuals’ (as opposed to ‘individuals’), Johnsen and Sørensen (2015) emphasize the impossibility of drawing clear lines between different social domains. They refer to consultants’ narratives of fragmented social identities as a response to the permanent liminality inherent in the “zone of indistinction between work and life” (p. 321) that consultancy work constitutes. Ybema et al. (2011) emphasize that perpetual liminality implies that individuals regularly switch between identifications. Their identity work entails “oscillating between ‘in’ and ‘out’, ‘same’ and ‘other’, and between an inclusive and exclusive ‘us’” (p. 21).
In contemporary academia, being betwixt and between has become an enduring feature of the temporal rhythm (Keenoy, 2005) and therefore constitutes a permanent qualifier of being an academic. Bettis et al. (2005) argue that: “As professors, we situate ourselves and our profession in a liminal state, betwixt and between knowledge as truth and incredulity towards any metanarratives, and between a traditional vision of the professoriate as a community of scholars ... and claims that faculty are merely workers in ‘knowledge factories’” (p. 50). As academics are permanently exposed to and negotiating opposing views of what it means to be an academic (Breier et al., 2020; Gordon and Whitchurch, 2010), their identification process turns into a never-ending and never-finished one since people attempt to come to terms with a variety of conflicting identity notions (Clarke and Knights, 2015; Knights and Clarke, 2014). Often, academics find themselves caught in between administrative logics driven by managerially defined notions of effectiveness and professional academic and curricular rationales (Bettis et al., 2005; Mills et al., 2005). According to Grant et al. (2014), this liminal condition turns academics into zombies; permanently being in between life, i.e., being a professional scholar, and death, i.e., being a worker in the ‘knowledge factory’ (see also Aronowitz, 2000; Clarke et al., 2012; Harding et al., 2010).

However, experiences of permanent liminality do not necessarily have adverse effects (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016; Reed and Thomas, 2019; Söderlund and Borg, 2018). Dwelling in the interstices of social structures and positions may provide the potential for identity growth as it is associated with higher degrees of freedom and less pressure to conform (Reed and Thomas, 2019). Therefore, Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) suggest that such “under-institutionalized experiences simply allow greater room for individual agency and latitude in identity crafting” (p. 55). Daskalaki and Simosi (2018) showed how experiences of perpetual liminality simultaneously trigger processes of identity work and identity play because they “require multiple and, at times, ambiguous, fluid and incomplete identifications” (p. 1153). So-called “liminoid identity positions” (Daskalaki and Simosi, 2018, p. 1157) require developing meaningful notions of the self as identities remain fluid and incomplete. However, individuals do not only surrender to conditions of permanent liminality but actively seek to
craft versions of possible future selves. Such future selves offer aspirations of whom individuals may become, which help to cope with what Johnsen and Sørensen (2015) refer to as the unlimited measure of symbolic stress in spaces and times of perpetual identity danger.

Summarizing previous research, the literature on permanent liminality in academia has not yet fully addressed the implications for academics’ social identification. Furthermore, the impact of particular management decisions that create experiences of liminality amongst academics and the related processes of identification have only been tangentially captured. Such decisions can serve to amplify the experience of academic work as constituting an experience of permanently being in between administrative logics and academic rationales, which in turn sparks situationally informed processes of identity negotiation. Furthermore, the experience of permanent liminality is not a univariate experience as much of the existing research already suggests. Additional knowledge is necessary on how that plays into people’s identification processes as equally unfolding along several trajectories in order to better grasp the inherent efforts to variously connect different sources of identification.

The Study

Case description

The case refers to a geographically dispersed university with campuses in five cities; one main campus and four smaller campuses. Before its reorganization, the faculty in question had one department on each of the smaller campuses. The remaining departments, together with the faculty management, were located on the main campus. A couple of years ago, the faculty management decided to carry out a faculty-wide reorganization. The management argued that this was a necessary response to expected cutbacks in the higher education sector, current deficits in the budget, and the associated need for higher efficiency. Among other things, this meant reducing the number of departments and therefore the departments at two of the smaller campuses were closed down. For one of these departments – referred to as LOCDEP in this article – this decision meant that some of its members were dismissed, and the remaining staff were assigned to three other
departments situated in different campus cities between 80 and 200 kilometers away from the local campus.

However, the faculty management also decided that there should still be academic staff present at the local campus. Therefore, those who survived the closure of LOCDEP became part of the new “virtual department structure”. They continued working at the local campus, occupying the same office space, teaching in the same local study programs, and daily interacting with each other, even though they now belonged to different departments. Closing the local department as well as re-assigning employees, while demanding that they continue to collaborate and contribute to the development of the local campus pushed the former LOCDEP members into a state of permanent liminality. Since the faculty is no longer represented by one independent department at the local campus but only by a group of employees assigned to departments in other campus cities, the academics soon realized their loss of relevance for the faculty and its management. Even though they were encouraged to continue dealing with local campus matters, they did not understand how they could do that given their betwixt-and-between situation and the associated lack of status and influence. In this sense, they found themselves torn between a shared history, which still provides an anchor for identification, a present experience that is tied to both the employees’ assignment to new organizational units and the still existing community at the local campus, and a future that for many of them is unforeseeable. The former LOCDEP members are betwixt-and-between demands and structures formulated by the faculty management and their new departments, and customs, roles, and desires formulated by the local social group. For three and a half years, they have been pulled in different directions, and there is no end in sight to the condition of permanent liminality.

Fieldwork

The research approach of this study was at-home ethnography, “which is study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a ‘natural access’ and in which s/he is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants” (Alvesson, 2009, p.
The first author investigated a cultural setting where he was an active participant. Therefore, in this close-up study, the first author had the chance to participate in the process of the organizational redesign and to act as an observing participant for about three and a half years. During this time, he was an insider, participant, and researcher, familiar with both the local department and the academics who survived the closure. The first author participated in the whole process, beginning with the announcement that the local department would cease to exist, the reassignment of people to other departments, the subsequent and ongoing experiences of perpetual liminality, and the respective individual and collective responses. During the fieldwork, he was able to collect rich amounts of material ranging from official documents, email conversations, observations, participation in formal and informal meetings and gatherings, participation in various social events, numerous conversations in the corridors, at the coffee machine and in the offices, and semi-structured as well as ethnographic (Spradley, 1979) interviews. As the cultural theme of permanent liminality emerged and the participant observation became more focused (Creswell, 2007), the first author repeatedly informed participants during various occasions – especially informal talks and observations – that he planned to use the gathered material for an ethnography. He also sought informed consent from participants prior to conducting formal interviews.

Conducting an at-home ethnography turned out to be advantageous because the first author was familiar with the social group and its culture from day one of the study (Alvesson, 2009). As a result, the first author did not need to pretend to be an insider (Van Maanen, 2011), he was one. This status enabled him to employ multiple possibilities for access and generate in-depth insights (Ortner, 1997). He was able to gain information and insider knowledge that is not readily available to outsiders (Moeran, 2009). In this sense, during the fieldwork, it was possible to see what the others see, as the first author was one of them, and as he continuously engaged in building rapport to and seeking feedback from the research participants.

Despite these advantages, at-home ethnography is associated with the challenge of “making the familiar strange” (Van Maanen, 1995, p. 20). As a quasi-insider, it becomes necessary to establish
ways to avoid tunnel vision, ensure reflection, and gain a certain distance (Albu and Costas, 2018). In this sense, ethnographers who conduct at-home ethnography, must, like all ethnographers, position themselves on a continuum between “being at home” and “being abroad” (Caronia, 2018). Caronia (2018) refers to this process as “cognitive oscillation” (p. 114), constituting the methodological requirement inherent in all types of ethnographic studies (e.g., Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Such oscillation is, however, not only a cognitive exercise, but it also extends to the social identities of ethnographers during the fieldwork (Gosovic, 2018). Negotiating between insider and outsider positions involves negotiating the relationship between two facets of the ethnographer’s social identity (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2016) that unfold cognitively; yet, as we would argue, also bodily in the field and the text.

The first author followed Ybema and Horvers’ (2017) recommendation to avoid becoming too immersed in studying a phenomenon where an ethnographer is deeply involved. At the beginning of the fieldwork, the first author spent 14 months as a participating member, before he gradually withdrew. Detached from daily life at the local campus (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2016), he continued to carry out fieldwork through regular visits to the local place (i.e., once or twice a week) in addition to participating in out-of-work events and maintaining close contact via email, telephone, etc.

Although conducting the fieldwork alone, the first author engaged in intensive headwork with a colleague outside the local campus; a second strategy suggested by Ybema and Horvers (2017) to tackle one-sidedness. This collaboration eventually resulted in the co-authorship of this text. During many conversations, we discussed the potential meanings inherent in the vast amounts of material collected during the fieldwork. This analysis followed the logic of grounded theory as the way of working with the material, back and forth between theorizing and data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Hence, we did not just use coding but followed a process that combined headwork and further fieldwork (Atkinson, 2015; Van Maanen, 2011). Seeking to answer the question of “How does the change affect the LOCDEP members’ lives?”, we individually and collectively engaged in describing universal (what all do) and specific (what some do) behaviors (Crabtree et al., 2012;
Ladner, 2014). Furthermore, we described events, identified roles, and investigated critical incidents (Ladner, 2014), i.e., incidents where the LOCDEP members came to realize their “trapped-in” situation. In so doing, we constantly referred to the liminality literature, for example checking data against the numerous dimensions of liminality (Thomasson, 2009), the effects of liminality on individuals (Stenner, 2017) and societies (Thomasson, 2014), as well as the effects of permanent liminality on identity negotiation (e.g., Bamber et al., 2017). During this analysis, we identified a number of trajectories the participants follow in their identity negotiation, which we suggest are representative of the local staff’s experiences of permanent liminality after the reorganization. We suggest that they constitute trajectories of threshold identity work, i.e., being either here or there, both here and there, or perhaps nowhere (Turner, 1967).

Findings

This section articulates how emerging narratives and practices informed the unfolding identity negotiations in conditions of perpetual liminality. Findings show how the former LOCDEP members follow various trajectories of identity negotiation to cope with the ambiguities of the liminal condition. These trajectories are not mutually exclusive but represent simultaneous strategies of identity negotiation to cope with the ambiguous liminal situation. Hence, the multiple trajectories and fluid shifts between them during the liminal condition gave evidence that the identity work of the former LOCDEP members to handle their liminal situation does not follow a linear forward-going path.

We present these trajectories by adopting the role of the engaging narrator (Van Maanen, 1988). We use the present tense to give our narrative a “you-are-there” feel (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 105), even though referring to a longer period of experience. In so doing, we describe the identity struggles as if they are happening now.

Restoring local community
One trajectory of identity negotiation that the former LOCDEP members follow as they try to cope with the indeterminacy of the liminal situation aims for a restoration of the local community. That means to maintain the local place and the local community as a central identification anchor. This trajectory is nested in a narrative of the local place as a small campus populated by a unique community of former LOCDEP members who share a common struggle. The local campus has found meaning in an image of being the smallest campus of the university, always struggling for recognition during its 13-year history. Departing from this small-yet-strong-together narrative of the local place, some of the former LOCDEP members actively seek to promote a sense of togetherness, belonging and solidarity by engaging in activities that should serve to (re-)unite the remaining local staff.

They do so by firstly bolstering the visibility and relevance of the local campus, which despite being small should also be of significance for both the faculty and the former LOCDEP members. Therefore, they reach out to other departments and faculties at the local campus in order to establish cooperation, engage in developing a local campus strategy, formulate joint teaching programs, create links to local businesses, establish locally anchored research projects, and organize workshops and conferences at the local campus. In order to structure and organize these integrative efforts, former LOCDEP members initiate regular meetings for discussing topics related to local administrative, teaching, and research operations. These meetings “are meant to be informal, without agenda, and with the purpose of information exchange, i.e., what is going on at campus/at the various departments/research groups/administration etc. ...” (email announcing the meetings). The meetings fulfil the purpose of keeping each other informed and of providing a platform to coordinate campus-specific activities. With these meetings, former LOCDEP members continue a customary practice from the former local department structure, i.e., monthly departmental meetings. Even though the context of the meetings has changed substantially, they enable local staff members to coordinate their work and campus-related activities and thereby support cooperation and liaison. Furthermore, these meetings serve the purpose of integration as they create a sense of standing together in the struggle for meaning and significance, as they help to build a community of purpose.
In addition to restoring the community by strengthening the local campus, former LOCDEP members also engage in practices to rebuild and reinforce social relationships. They do so by forging community through lunching together and organizing festive social events, for example during the Christmas season. Especially lunching together constitute a ritual of social identification where LOCDEP members remember the “good old days”, share their feelings, frustrations, and hopes regarding their liminal situation, and express their genuine care for preserving the local community. With their integrative effect, practices to rebuild and reinforce social relationships replace at least some of the emptiness and ambiguity that emanate from the liminal experience. In this sense, they constitute occasions and places that provide a sense of belonging, emotional connection and a valid source on which to build current and possible future identities.

Resisting liminality

In addition to restoring the local community and promoting the local campus, LOCDEP members actively challenge and resist their inferior and liminal position. This trajectory is informed by a narrative that criticizes the very decision of the virtual department structure and the drawbacks of this structure. It constitutes the LOCDEP members as victims of a management decision and draws a clear boundary between the faculty management and the threatened local community.

Challenging the liminal condition becomes particularly apparent during the faculty management’s official visits to the local campus. At these meetings, the faculty management usually presents the faculty’s current situation and future challenges. While expressing their awareness of the problematic position of the staff at the local campus, the management at the same time defends the virtual department structure as being the only viable option to ensure a prosperous future for the faculty. The management emphasizes the belief that with hard work, the local problems can be resolved. After the presentation, the staff can ask and comment, which usually results in quite open criticisms of the management’s initial decision to close the department at the local campus. The former LOCDEP members address the poor way in which the management handles the various
problems that the decision created for the local staff. Some of them point to shrinking numbers of students and staff, as the place becomes less attractive. Further, local staff members stress their struggle to promote the local study programs as they only have limited control over necessary resources but are dependent on the goodwill of actors outside the local campus. As one of them puts it during a visit by the faculty management; “the faculty is committed to having a minimum, just enough to survive but not enough to create a thriving critical mass vibrant community of scholars and students”.

On top of articulating criticism, the former LOCDEP members demand more investment in the local campus. That would enable them to have the necessary authority and resources to address their current situation actively. For example, they emphasize the need to have the local responsibility to competently make decisions on the local group’s behalf and in their interests. They are tired of decisions being taken (or avoided) by people situated at other campuses either ignoring the local situation or imposing unrealistic demands on the local campus. Being located at the headquarters, their HODs (heads of department) often only focus on “their” local staff members. Despite the local staffs’ objections to their lack of authority, the faculty management continues to stress its expectations that the local staff will develop solutions to local problems, if possible, together with their HODs.

*Surrendering to liminality*

Repeatedly experiencing a lack of resources, support, and authority, the former LOCDEP members come to recognize that they constitute an endangered species. The resulting trajectory builds on the acceptance of being subpar, threatened and eventually trapped. The former LOCDEP members feel that they are unable to do much to ensure their survival as their fate lies in the hands of others.

Many of the experiences expressed during the formal and informal events and gatherings do witness a struggle against not being recognized, against being invisible and feeling inferior in the new departments. In this way, the uniting narratives of being small-yet-strong and resisting are challenged
by a common feeling of being the underdog and left without muscles. The former LOCDEP members are encouraged by the faculty management to develop ideas and initiatives for the future of the group at the local campus. However, each time they show initiative, they also learn that their liminal situation confines their ability to accomplish something as they experience the lack of local authority and managerial support leaving them without real performative powers to decide or act independently locally. Accordingly, many of their initiatives fail because the authority structure and the availability of resources are unclear. For instance, who has the authority to initiate joint courses with departments from other faculties at the local campus? Should it be the local professors, who cannot make decisions on behalf of their department? Or should it be the HODs, who sometimes lack the time (and in some cases the interest) to focus on the problems of the local campus? How can former LOCDEP members be motivated to promote existing and develop new study programs when neither their new departments nor the faculty management supports this?

In several interviews and conversations, the former LOCDEP members expressed increasing exhaustion from showing initiative as their propositions and actions are often met with disapproval. As one of the members puts it: “It becomes very tiring to wait for a ‘No’”. Furthermore, many of the ideas and initiatives that they propose, such as the establishment of additional study programs, become rejected as they allegedly are economically unfeasible. “I hear what you say” seems to be the recurring response that they receive each time they ask for help from the faculty management. They begin to wonder if they should refrain from making extraordinary local efforts when all they get is no support, and finally often a rebuff.

All in all, given the lack of substantial management support and no real authority granted for the local campus, the former LOCDEP members experience being ignored and fear being forever caught in liminality. Despite their efforts to change the situation, they are also apathetic and do surrender to their fate because they feel that their various initiatives and actions do not lead them out of their
situation. They develop an identity that is built upon the acceptance of being stuck in inferiority as the only option available.

**Distancing from local community**

It is out of the recognition of their ambiguous situation that some of the former LOCDEP members follow a different trajectory in their identity work. To cope with the liminality, they distance themselves from and thereby dis-identify with the local community. This trajectory is informed by narratives of the local place as a land without opportunities and power. It constitutes a place which is bleeding to death, drags people down and is easily overlooked due to its remote location.

For some, the closure of LOCDEP was nothing more than the first step in leading the activities of the faculty at the local campus into a dead end. Thus, they do not see any future for either the group or for the local campus. This skepticism is particularly linked to the small size and peripheral geographical location of the local campus and the faculty’s apparent unwillingness to have a vibrant and sustainable teaching and research environment there. The closure of LOCDEP and the implementation of the virtual department structure just seem to prove that this is the case. Hence, they start questioning what sense it makes to identify with a place that has a precarious present and most likely no future at all?

Despite the active engagement in restoring the local community and resisting to accept their situation as a viable trajectory to cope with the liminal condition, withdrawing from the re-establishment of the local community began as soon as the former LOCDEP members realized being trapped in conditions of permanent liminality. As one result of this realization, the corridors and the offices are often empty. The academic staff, including those who see themselves as being at the forefront of re-creating a local community, began to work from home more often than in the office. Staying away from the place serves as a defense mechanism to create a degree of mental distance from the frustration, anxiety, and anger that they continue to feel as the local campus reminds them of their current precarious situation. Belonging to a local community – despite constituting a source
of solidarity and mutual support – is also associated with feelings and thoughts that the former LOCDEP members would prefer to avoid. For them, community and thus togetherness and belongingness also mean being part of a community built on the collective experience of being stuck in between.

Distancing from the local community and disidentifying from the local campus also take other forms, such as staying away from any initiatives created to strengthen the local campus and not engaging in restoring the local community. Some of the local academics’ efforts to reintroduce a sense of togetherness and solidarity are challenged by what one of them refers to as the “bad feeling” that manifested itself as a result of people’s experience of being stuck. For example, not all decide to join for lunch, even when being in the office. Instead, they have their lunch in the cafeteria or their office. Furthermore, not all LOCDEP members participate in the social events created to reconstitute the local community. Talking to some of them, it appears that both the local community and the activities at the local campus constitute less relevant sources for identification. The weakness of the local campus and the uncertainty regarding the future of the former LOCDEP populating the place make it challenging to see the importance of investing in the local place. They instead turn towards their new department and seek to make this identification source more salient.

**Connecting to the new place**

A final trajectory taken by the former LOCDEP members to accommodate their liminal experience is that of seeking integration into the new department. This trajectory is informed by a narrative of opportunities and enforcement as well as an orientation towards the future.

Over time, many, if not most, of the former LOCDEP members came to realize that the new departments constitute the source and focus of their future careers. They, therefore, feel compelled to connect to the new places and the sources of identification they provide. During numerous conversations, they expressed the need to demonstrate that they want to and can contribute to their new department. During a meeting where former LOCDEP members introduced themselves to their new department, one of them expressed to the new colleagues to be able and willing to contribute
to the unit. Some of the former LOCDEP members even consider relocating their official workplace to get closer to their new department, and a few of them did. “They do not see any future here”, one of them aptly put it during one of the many gatherings where the future of the local campus was discussed. To some extent, this attitude is enforced by their new HOD. The former LOCDEP members are expected to regularly participate in meetings at the department’s headquarter, to take over administrative and teaching tasks at other campuses, and to develop close research collaborations with the new colleagues. Some of them make it very clear that all research will take place at the campus where the department has its headquarters. Likewise, other department colleagues prompt the former LOCDEP members to move their office. That would increase their chance to become a full professor and have many Ph.D. students instead of career-wise being stuck at the local campus. They, therefore, should let go of the local place.

One of the HODs clearly expresses being uninterested in the small campus. This HOD challenges the fact that a few of the department’s academic staff are situated at a small campus some 200 km away from the department’s headquarters. Hence, this person gives no support to the local campus but urges the local department members to devote their full attention to their new department. Two years into the implementation of the virtual department structure, this HOD decided that the department’s four academic staff members at the local campus should no longer have their official workplace there but be relocated to the main campus where the department is situated. During an interview, one of the four academics who were to be relocated said that apart from some teaching obligations at the local campus, almost all of the other activities are already directed at the new department. The interview partner also expressed the conviction that particularly the younger ones of the four may be inclined to move, as they may see their career opportunities being related to places other than the local campus.

The narrative of opportunities and the pressure from management compel the former LOCDEP members to let go of both the part of their past that is associated with the local campus and the identity informed by still being connected to this place. It promotes anchoring their identity in their
membership in the new organizational unit and the associated social environment; hence, social identities that promise continuity and recognizability.

Discussion

This article contributes to the literature that investigates how experiences of permanent liminality and processes of identity negotiation are interrelated. The aim is to understand identity work in conditions of permanent liminality as performed by academics who have been pushed into a state of perpetual liminality after the implementation of a virtual department structure. The rationale of the change was to produce administrative savings. However, the observable result was the establishment of long-term uncertainty and insecurity; experiences from which the former LOCDEP members feel unable to escape, yet experiences that feed into their identity work.

Unfinished change – Unresolved identity work

By investigating identity negotiations after the structural redesign in an academic institution, we respond to claims to study specific contexts in order to learn how liminality influences identities in organizations (Coupland and Brown, 2012; Daskalaki and Simosi, 2018). We particularly studied conditions where the liminal experience becomes intensified (Thomassen, 2009) and the associated identity struggles are amplified. Even though the virtual department structure has been put into place, the former LOCDEP members do not feel that the change process is finished as they have not been able to define their place in the new structure and to find out how the new reality could work for them. The academics arrive at the conclusion that the focus is only on achieving organizational objectives – particularly administrative efficiency – yet not improvements pertaining to the logics of academic work and essentially the quality of working life. Their experience of being pushed into a situation of permanent liminality is informed by the fact that those who are responsible for the change prove to be inconsiderate of the unintended consequences of it and unwilling to account for these consequences.
Hence, on the one hand, the story that we tell in this article is a story of failing to make change stick (Kotter, 1995), as employees are unable to see how the new structure helps them to improve their work. Even though formally implemented, the structure does not make much sense as it does not facilitate the work of the former LOCDEP members at the local campus. Furthermore, it created additional problems as not only operations at the local campus are disturbed but cross-department collaboration is also made complicated rather than being supported.

On the other hand, one could argue that actually change has been made stick; however, not in the sense of the intended managerial changes but as the permanent liminality felt by the former LOCDEP members. The implementation of the new structure for the former LOCDEP members cultivated ambivalent and ongoing experiences of belonging and not-belonging. For them, this is the new reality after the structural change; a reality that is informed by experiences of losing control over their situation and the agency to shape their future. For the former LOCDEP members, liminality constitutes an unwanted yet permanent state of existence and a state that causes unresolved identity work (Beech et al., 2016), i.e., a continuous process of self-questioning and self-doubt that contributes to a disrupted sense of self. Their intensified and ambivalent identity work along the five trajectories illustrated in our findings is fueled by simultaneous identifications and dis-identifications.

**Identifications and dis-identifications**

Our findings gave evidence of the dynamic and complex nature of the identity negotiations that the former LOCDEP members engage in to handle their perpetual state of being betwixt and between in a restructured organization. They have been dismantled of their long-lived identification anchors connected to the old organization structure and offered new anchors associated with their place in the new structure. Our case witnessed how their strategy to handle the liminal experience was highly informed by an ambivalent identity work, as they engaged in simultaneous identification and
dis-identification acts (Ashforth, 2001; Elsbach, 2001; Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004) with the old place as well as with the new place.

Their identification with attributes connected to the old place pertained to a narrative of a common past and a local uniqueness as the uniting substance, which incited performative acts of restoration of the local community. In parallel, the narrative of the new place as the site for prosperous research collaborations and promotion opportunities equally evoked a sense of identification, as it nurtured a rational logic about what is prudent and expedient in terms of doing career as a researcher. In addition to these identifications, the former LOCDEP members showed signs of dis-identification with attributes connected to the old place and the new place. Dis-identifications are more actively displayed as it implies cognitive and emotional agency to disassociate actively from organizational attributes (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). Consecutively, the former LOCDEP members dis-identified with the old place by physically working from home or not participating in the new informal meetings. In terms of the new place, they showed separation and distancing, e.g., in their criticism and utterances of discontent with the management’s lack of dedication and commitment. For them dis-identification in this sense constitutes a means to counterbalance and resist managerial regulation, such as implemented by the virtual department structure (e.g., Fleming, 2005; Mumby, 2005).

The partiality of the ambivalent acts

The simultaneous identifications and dis-identifications with attributes connected to the old and the new place appear counteracting and competing offhand. However, existing research suggests that ambivalent identifications – which are typical for liminal experiences (Bamber et al., 2017; Ybema et al., 2011) – do not necessarily have opposing effects. Instead, simultaneous organizational identifications and dis-identifications can be concurrent, complementary, and competing (Kuhn and Nelson 2002; Larson and Pepper 2002).
This is especially dependent on the partiality of the ambivalent acts of identification and dis-identification (Ashforth, 2001; Elsbach, 2001). Our findings give evidence of such partiality as the identity negotiations were informed by multiple anchors (e.g., place, community, policies, values, teaching program, opportunities) pertaining to the old and the new place. We show how acts of identification and dis-identification relate to different attributes associated with varied anchors (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004), which leads us to suggest that the ambivalent identifications are not only competing but also complementary as each identification or dis-identification act nurtures specific needs in the coping process.

Liminal experiences involve to “to keep conflicting agendas in play across a range of settings and in front of a spectrum of players” (Iedema et al., 2004). In our case, in some situations the need for re-integration into the old community is stronger than in others, and in some situations, the rationale of identifying with the new place seems to be the most apparent. Accordingly, we contend that the five trajectories that we described as our findings are not competing but serve different needs of both connectivity (identifications) to and separation (dis-identifications) from attributes connected to the old and the new place with different degrees of intensity at various situations. Therefore, as we have shown, the LOCDEP members did not simply follow one of the trajectories. Rather, they pursued multiple and sometimes contradicting trajectories in their identity negotiation, rendering particular social identities more or less salient at different times.

Previous literature emphasizes that experiences of permanent liminality contribute to an enduring sense of being ‘neither-this-nor-that’ or ‘both-this-and-that’ (e.g., Ybema et al., 2011). The experiences of permanent liminality that we studied implicate that identity negotiation in conditions of perpetual liminality is informed by both of these notions of being betwixt and between. Therefore, the former LOCDEP members liminal identity implies to be ‘neither-this-nor-that’ (pertaining to acts of dis-identification) AND ‘both-this-and-that’ (pertaining to acts of identification). They are neither-this-nor-that as neither the local community nor the new department provide stable anchors for identification. However, they are as well both-this-and-that
as their identification continues to be informed by both organizational and social contexts. The trajectories along which they negotiate their identity represent their liminal identity work in this dual sense. Much of what we learned from them reflects their “impossibility of drawing clear distinctions between different social spheres” (Johnsen and Sørensen, 2015, p. 321). They continuously have to juggle various work commitment targets and sources of identification. As a result, they permanently shift their attention between different organizational units, social domains, value systems and the associated social identities.

_Establishing a liminal identity_

The ambiguous identity work performed by the former LOCDEP members seems to have an oxymoronic effect appearing as a double-edged sword that contains both the poison and the remedy. Their coping strategy is via the five trajectories informed by the repeated movement in and out of social groups and categories connected to temporal and ambivalent feelings of belonging and (at least) provisional certainty but also alienation and uncertainty (Daskalaki et al., 2016). The narratives associated with the old and the new place respectively either deter or nurture the liminal experience by pushing in new identification anchors or by pulling in the direction of existing identification anchors. Hence, concurrently with the identity work pertaining to eliminate the ambiguity of the liminality through the dynamic and complex identity work, the ambivalent identifications intensify the liminal experience and uphold its perseverance. As long as the members engage in these intense identity negotiations, their liminal condition is maintained. Paradoxically, the ambivalent identifications thus retain the individual in the liminal condition while at the same time being the remedy to cope with it.

In this way, this article contributes to research on how people constitute a liminal identity. Previous research on permanent liminality shows that for example contract workers (Garsten, 1999), consultants (Johnsen and Sørensen, 2015), the unemployed (Daskalaki and Simosi, 2018), but also academics (Clarke et al., 2012; Harding et al., 2010) respond to this experience by forming an
understanding of belonging to a community of being perpetually in between. With our study we have demonstrated that the social identity of the liminal is constituted through repeated and ambivalent performances of social identification and dis-identification. Liminal experiences involve “to keep conflicting agendas in play across a range of settings and in front of a spectrum of players” (Iedema et al., 2004, p. 29) and this – as we have shown – includes to perpetually oscillate between multiple, potentially contradicting and sometimes blurred targets of identification. In this sense, liminal experiences do not only shape the identity of people as Turner (1982) emphasizes. People rather actively contribute to shaping their identity as they respond to liminal conditions, in our case establishing an identity being on an endless quest for rest from the symbolic stress that prolonged liminal situations cause.

**Practical Implications**

We believe that our case demonstrates that university management at times can be inconsiderate of the problematic social effects of its decisions and that it may be unwilling to address these effects once they appear. Giving priority to administrative considerations and notions of efficiency ignores the social aspect of management. As long as savings were realized and output was ensured, all other matters seemed to be of less concern. Such prioritization risks marginalizing academic and pedagogical concerns, which are equally crucial for organizing academic work and for achieving the purpose of the university. Management decisions in higher education institutions based on administrative concerns can have adverse effects for employees, particularly concerning the academics’ possibility to use the university as a target for identification. The results might be that this source for identification is lost or – as in our case – identification processes are seriously disturbed, complicated, or even rendered impossible. Identity research has long shown the problematic individual and organizational consequences when members fail to identify with the organization. As we have shown, it is equally problematic when members of an organization become lost in an endless quest for defining who they are. However, not all university managers realize the importance of such insights.
Conclusions

Thomassen (2014) argues that “without return to normality and background structures that one can take for granted, individuals go crazy and societies become pathological” (p. 216). The academics in this study have, as we argue, been trapped in a liminal condition for more than three years, without any prospect that this situation will come to an end. Their work environment and their social relations might in fact have developed a pathological quality, as much of what they experience is abnormal and symptomatic for organizational malfunction. They have not yet become insane, though, notwithstanding their continuous struggle to establish a sense of self that enables them to see some meaning in what they experience.

Identity work in conditions of perpetual liminality – we conclude – takes the form of efforts of identification and dis-identification to establish a position betwixt-and-between and, hence, largely unspecified and thereby potentially boundaryless surroundings. For further studies of such conditions, we suggest research to specifically address both the specificity and the multiplicity inherent in liminal identification processes. We particularly propose focusing on how identity negotiations in the perpetual liminality condition are constituted by multiple and competing identifications and dis-identifications, which have simultaneous effects of counteracting and upholding the liminal experience.
References


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