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Stuck in Limbo – Identity Negotiation under Conditions of Perpetual Liminality

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Abstract

This paper contributes to identity research by investigating how conditions of permanent liminality inform employees' identification processes. It grasps the identity struggle of the members of a former university department and explores the dimensions along which their identity negotiation unfolds. Drawing on material collected during a three and a half year at-home-ethnography, the paper highlights organizational members' multiple efforts to negotiate their identity as a response to perpetual liminality and the associated experiences of ambiguity, disorientation, powerlessness, and loss of status.

Introduction

What if liminality is not only related to defined periods but turns into a permanent condition of being betwixt-and-between? What does such a condition do to those who find themselves being perpetually caught in-between? What effects does an enduring state of liminality have on their identity? And how do they respond?

These are the questions that this manuscript seeks to answer. It does so by drawing upon research on liminality / permanent liminality and identity in organization and management studies and an ethnographic case study of a former university department, whose members have been thrown into a situation of perpetual liminality. Organizational conditions of being betwixt and between have attracted a fair amount of attention in recent years. Experiences of liminality and the associated consequences for organizations and their members have for example been investigated with regard to temporary employment (Garsten, 1999), consulting (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003), organizational change (Briody, 2016), boards of directors (Concannon & Nordberg, 2018), and workspaces (Vesala & Tuomivaara, 2018). More recently, scholars have devoted their efforts to investigate the antecedents and consequences of more enduring states of being betwixt and between in organizations (e.g. Bamber et al., 2017; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015; Vaira, 2014). In so doing permanent periods of liminality are either understood as prolonged times of transit or in a more general sense as any perpetual betwixt-and-between experience (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

Turning towards research on liminality and identity in organization studies, many scholars addressed the particular effects of finite or permanent states of liminality on processes of identification. For example, Beech (2011) investigated the identity work involved in liminal experiences during mergers and acquisitions, Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014) studied identity loss and recovery caused by the liminality of transitions in work memberships, relationships, and roles, Ladge et al. (2012) investigated pregnancy as a liminal period and the associated identity constructions of professionalism and motherhood, and Webb (2017) addresses both identity work

and play as processes related to inter-organizational innovation. Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) suggest that periods of perpetual liminality provide contexts where people work on their identity while also offering time and space for playing with various identity notions. In this sense, prolonged experiences of being betwixt-and-between provide environments for various modes of identity negotiation.

Drawing upon an ethnographic case study of a former university department, whose members have been thrown into a state of perpetual liminality, this article will explore how organizational members negotiate their identity when structures, positions, roles and the associated status in organizations become permanently suspended. Investigating the dimensions along they negotiate their identity, this article contributes to the literature by demonstrating that to be permanently in between results in identity work that simultaneously excludes and includes various anchors of identification as people respond to both being neither here nor there - hence neither this and that - and being both here and there – hence both this and that.

The article proceeds by reviewing the literature on perpetual liminality and identity negotiation. Afterwards I will introduce the case and the research approach of the study, before I describe how the people in the organization negotiate their identity while being pulled into different directions. The article ends with a brief discussion.

Perpetual Liminality and Identity Negotiation

The concept of liminality has been initially introduced by the French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in his study of rites of passage (1909/2004). Van Gennep suggests that ritual passages follow the three-stage processual structure of separation, transition, and incorporation. For Van Gennep, the stage of transition is the one where people leave their old life behind as they are in the process of entering a new one. He, hence, understands transition in liminal terms, as an in-between period were people are separated from the past while not yet connected to the future.

It was however not before 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 time-places of being in between became broadly acknowledged in the literature (Thomasson, 2014). For Turner 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).

As the quote suggests, Turner was particularly interested in what Van Gennep termed the transition stage and "the nature of 'interstructural' human beings" (Turner, 1967, p. 93), hence, the ones being betwixt and between. Following Van Gennep's notion of liminality, Turner argues that during the liminal state of 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). In this sense, liminality constitutes "a time-place where they are … in the midst of a journey from one social self to another" (Schechner, 2002, p. 57).

Being interstructural implicates that people slip through established systems of social classification and therefore they become structurally invisible (Turner, 1969). This invisibly has consequences for liminal persons' social reality and essentially their identity (Beech, 2011; Garsten, 1999; Ibarra, 2007). One the one hand, being betwixt and between is associated with marginality and inferiority

as people lack status, power, rank or insignia (Turner, 1967, 1969), which in turn relates liminality to feelings of deep anxiety and potential suffering (Szakolczai, 2009). In this sense, liminality is associated with the experience of disorder and the loss of relevant sources for identification (Turner, 1967). In the context of organizations, liminality results in identity work as Beech (2011) suggests because people respond to what Turner (1967) termed the 'symbolic stress' connected to the absence of a stable identity. In such situations people try to come to terms with and incorporate notions of ambiguity, uncertainty, flexibility and lack of agency into their self (Garsten, 1999). Being in between may hence include a search for new order, new anchors for identification, and new sources for establishing a position that provides status and continuity (Mayrhofer & 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; Stenner, 2017). Liminality may also provide time-spaces that foster reflexivity, creativity and possibility (Ibarra & Obudaru, 2016; Sturdy et al., 2006). In Turner's words the state of liminality "can perhaps be described as fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to and anticipating postliminal experience" (Turner, 1990, p. 12). Being in between social structures and position also means not being constrained by them but enabled to creatively and reflexively play with the otherwise taken for granted realm of clear identities (Turner, 1967). In this sense, Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) suggest that liminal conditions in organizational contexts are associated with identity play rather than identity work. People experiment with provisional selves (Ibarra, 2007) finding out whether those identities work for their future lives. Liminal conditions in this sense constitute times and places for identity growth (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

However, what if the transition between structures and positions takes on a more permanent quality with the end of the transit being undefined and the associated temporal condition of liminality turning into a perpetual one? If it becomes unpredictable to forecast what will come next (Daskalaki & Simosi, 2018), the degree of the liminal experience may increase (Thomasson, 2009) with profound effects on processes of identity negotiation (Bamber et al., 2017).

Only a couple of scholars in the field of organization studies address the effects permanent experiences of liminality have on identification processes. For example, Garsten (1999) discusses what happens when being a temporary worker does not only constitute a transitional period between more stable forms of employment but turns into a chosen lifestyle or a 'dead-end' employment status. Perpetually being betwixt and between regular employment positions and organizational structures, according to Garsten (1999), is related to continued feelings of substitutability and an enhanced sense of reflexivity. Accordingly, people incorporate into their identity the notion of being neither here nor there and they attach ambiguity, uncertainty, flexibility and lack of agency as enduring meanings to their self (Garsten, 1999).

Such under-institutionalized liminal experiences, i.e. experiences of infinite duration with the end not known at the onset, do not necessarily constitute a strain, though (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). In fact, the experience of permanent liminality may have a greater potential for identity growth as it is associated with higher degrees of freedom and less pressure to conform. Therefore, Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) suggest that "under-institutionalized experiences simply allow greater room for individual agency and latitude in identity crafting" (p. 55). People may therefore even seek to put

themselves into such a situation, e.g. as freelancer, as this would allow for greater degrees of identity play (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

Recently, Daskalaki and Simosi (2018) explore how experiences of perpetual liminality trigger attempts to explore possible future identities. Given the context of chronic and persistent unemployment, it remains unclear, to what extent the participants in this study experience the development of so-called 'liminoid identity positions' as identity play, though. Nevertheless, Daskalaki and Simosi (2018) demonstrate that people do not surrender to conditions of permanent liminality but actively seek to craft versions of possible future selves. Narrating and enacting identities that help escaping the current situation and that offer aspirations of what the long-term unemployed may become in the future, they cope with what Johnsen & Sørensen (2015), refer to as the unlimited measure of symbolic stress in spaces and times of perpetual danger.

So, conditions of liminality spark experiences of contingency, uncertain outcomes, and limited knowledge (Thomassen, 2014) and they "strip us of our 'I'" (Stenner, 2017, p. 61). Such conditions provide the time-space for heightened levels of reflexivity and identity negotiation (Turner, 1967; Beech, 2011). However, if the liminal experience is not bounded by time and space but becomes indefinite, then ongoing uncertainty, ambiguity, and possibility guide peoples perpetual search for relevant sources of identification (Garsten, 1999; Bamber et al., 2017). "(P)erpetual liminality creates a more permanent sense of being 'neither- X-nor-Y' or 'both-X-and-Y'" argue Ybema et al. (2011, p. 28). People are aware that they are locked into a state of being unattached and unallied (Bamber et al., 2017). As a result, Thomassen (2014) is bound to argue that "without return to normality and background structures that one can take for granted, individuals go crazy and societies become pathological" (p. 216). To be in limbo and therefore a perpetual state of neither here nor there without clear references and predictable guidance implicates that people may feel being unable to develop a coherent identity as they have to draw upon contradicting sources in their identity negotiation (Ybema et al., 2011). Hence, they experience unlimited symbolic stress (Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015). Permanently switching between different sources of identification and experiencing that neither of them does really fit drives people's identity negotiation. This threshold working, as Ybema et al (2011) call it, happens along several dimensions, as we will see in the case study.

The Study

Case description

The department, which I refer to as GIF in the paper, was located in one of the smaller campus cities of a geographically spread university. It was the only department of the Business faculty at the local campus, in addition to two departments from other faculties of the university. With 40 staff members, GIF was not the smallest one in the faculty, but it was a truly local one, with most department members being dedicated to the place and the local community. However, some years ago the faculty management decided for a radical organizational redesign, which included the reduction of the number of departments. It did so as a response to apparent deficits in the budget and cutbacks in the higher education sector. For GIF this meant that it was dissolved, that a third of its members became dismissed, and that the remaining staff became affiliated to three other departments situated on different campus cities between 80 and 200 kilometers away from

the local campus were GIF was formerly located. However, the faculty management also decided to continue being present at the local campus. Therefore, the ones who survived the closure of GIF (I will refer to them as the 'post-GIF group') were supposed to be part of a what received the name "virtual department structure". They proceeded working at the local campus, occupying the same office space, teaching in local study programs, and interacting with each other on a daily basis even though they now belonged to different departments. Closing GIF as well as re-affiliating employees, while demanding that they continue to collaborate and to contribute to the development of the local campus put the post GIF group into a state of permanent liminality. Since the faculty was no longer represented by a department on the local campus but only by a group of employees affiliated to departments in other campus cities, the former GIF members soon realized their loss of relevance for the faculty management. Even though they were prompted to continue engaging in the development of the local campus, they did simply not understand how they could do that given their lack of status and influence after the change. In this sense they found (and continue finding themselves) torn between a common history, which still holds some truth with regard to their identity, and a presence that is tied to both the employees' affiliation to new organizational units and the community at the local campus. The former department members are betwixt-and-between demands and structures formulated by their new departments and customs, roles, and desires formulated by the local social group. For a period of three and a half years now, they are pulled into different directions and both centrifugal and centripetal forces contribute to deepening their liminal experience.

Field work

The research approach of this study could be best described as self-ethnography (Alvesson, 2003) or at-home ethnography (Alvesson, 2009) as I investigated a cultural setting where I was an active participant. In this close-up study I 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, I was insider, participant and researcher. I know the department very well and I participated in the whole process beginning with the announcement that GIF will cease to exist as independent department and people will become affiliated to other departments and the ever since ongoing process of unfolding experiences of perpetual liminality and the respective individual and collective responses. During my fieldwork I 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 on the corridor, at the coffee machine and in the offices, and semi-structured as well as ethnographic (Spradley, 1979) interviews. Conducting an at-home ethnography turned out to be advantageous because I was familiar with the social group and its culture from day one of the study (Alvesson, 2009). As a result, I did not need to pretend being an insider (Van Maanen, 2011); I was one. This allowed me to see what the others see, as I was one of them and as I continuously engaged in seeking feedback from them.

Findings

In this part of the article I want to bring you closer the experiences of perpetual liminality that I encountered during my fieldwork as well as to the responses of the people who felt to be pushed

into this state of being without having the ability to end it. Experiences of perpetual liminality for the post GIF group entailed processes of ongoing separation from past and no longer valid anchors of identification and continuous attempts to connect to a new social reality and thereby new meanings to be attached to their working selves.

I present my findings by referring to three dimensions of identity negotiation under conditions of perpetual liminality. These dimensions serve as an analytical vehicle to bring order to the complex and dynamic reality that I observed, and I need to emphasize that they intersect. Presenting the findings, I use present tense even if I refer to a period of three and a half years. I do so since I continue encountering the similar attitudes, feelings, thoughts, behaviours, and discussions since I began my fieldwork at the local place. It is therefore justified, I believe, to describe people's identity struggles as if they happen now, because they continue to happen as people continue experiencing to be in limbo.

Letting Go and Holding On

While attempting to come to terms with their situation, I observed that members of the post GIF group simultaneously let go and hold on to the local campus and the identity anchors that it offers. Their identity negotiation is informed by strong demands of commitment to their respective new departments, as these units constitute the source and focus of their current and future employment. Thereby they feel compelled to let go of both their past that was associated with the local campus and the part of their current identity that is informed by still being connected to this place. I experienced their conviction that it is a requirement to be visible to the new department and to demonstrate that they want to and can contribute to this unit. One of them even used the latter words during the introduction in front of the new department. Some of them even consider moving their official workplace and thereby all of their activities away from the local campus in order to be closer to their departments "because they do not see any future here" as someone put it during a meeting where I participated. To some extent this attitude is enforced by their current HOD, as these managers require the local department members to regularly participate in meetings in the headquarter of the department, to take over administrative and teaching tasks at other campuses, and to develop close research collaborations with their new colleagues.

One of the three HODs clearly expresses being uninterested in the small campus. This HOD sees it as burden that four academics of the department sit at a small campus some 200 km away from the department headquarter. Unlike the other two HODs, this person denies any support for the local campus but urges her department members at the local campus to devote their full attention to the new department, even considering becoming relocated. Two years after the implementation of the virtual department structure this HOD decided that the four academics at the local campus should no longer have their official workplace there but become relocated to the campus where the department is situated. During an interview that I conducted at the time of this decision, my interview partner narrated that apart from some teaching obligations, almost all of these academics' other activities are already directed at the main campus. My interview partner further 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 other places than the local campus. And their HOD is good at making it very clear to them that all research will take place in

the campus where the department has the headquarter and where almost all of the department members have their offices. They are even asked why they have not yet decided to move, to become a professor and to have a lot of PhD students instead of being stuck at the local campus.

Inn addition to attempts to let go of the local campus to construe an identity that enables the members of the post-GIF group to accommodate to and perhaps escape their liminal situation, many of them struggled to divide their attention and commitment between their new department and the local campus where they continued to have their daily affairs with their former colleagues. In so doing parts of their identity is still tight to the place, i.e. the history and conditions of the local campus and the former local department. In this sense the members of the post-GIF group continue anchor their identities in the local campus' history as being one of the smaller and, as they see it, frequently marginalized campuses of the university, the history of their former department as being formed through a merger between an independent institute and a department of the university, as having seen about ten years of rapid growth yet without overcoming the tensions resulting from the merger, and the recent development of the closure of the department and the reaffiliation of its members to four other departments from other campus cities. In so doing they defend their localness, their common past, which still, as they continue to believe, should be acknowledged by others as valid source for building their current and future identity.

Establishing and Distancing from Community

Fostering and hindering local community building constitutes a dimension of identity negotiation related to re-creating and/or retarding a local sense of togetherness, belonging and solidarity. The local community as anchor for the post-GIF group's identification is increasingly challenged by feelings of belonging (or not belonging) to two places and the resulting difficulty to show loyalty to two social environments. Responding to this, the people in my case engage in both re-creating a sense of local togetherness and disqualifying the meaning that such community has for their current situation.

One of the members of the post-GIF group, who actively promoted a sense of togetherness, belonging and solidarity amongst the local community, was Dave, who accepted to occupy the formal position to coordinate the activities of the former members of GIF at the local campus. Apparently, the faculty management regarded it as necessary to have someone at the campus, who organizes local matters even though the staff now belonged to departments being located in other campus cities. Therefore, the management announced Dave as the coordinator of the local activities. It soon turned out that to be in this position did not involve any degree of authority over the local staff. Nevertheless, in my interview with and various talks to Dave, he expressed a strong wish to preserve the local community. Amongst many other things, Dave schedules regular meetings, inviting the former GIF-members to discuss matters related to local administrative, teaching and research operations. Announcing the meetings Dave wrote in an email: "The 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. … Hopefully, you would all like to meet." The meetings referred to a form of customary practice of the former department, where there had been monthly department meetings, led by the HOD. However, the context of these meetings changed substantially, i.e.

attendance was no longer compulsory and the meetings now featured participants from various departments being more or less interested in discussing local campus matters. And this is how the meetings look like. There is no formal agenda, but participants are prompted to provide information from their departments, from their membership in boards and committees, in addition to any other information that may be relevant to the local campus. Dave's idea is that these meetings could serve as one mechanism to re-create community amongst the group, as people also use these occasions to exchange their worries, their frustration related to their liminal identity and their hopes that things may improve in the future.

A custom that emerged already in the "good old days", like some of the post-GIF group refer to the time when they still were members of one local department, is to have lunch together in the coffee room. Sometimes people do just appear around 11:30, the unofficial but agreed-upon time for joint lunch. On other occasions I experienced that around lunch time people began to ask each other whether the others will join for lunch, thereby reminding themselves and others to participate in the collective event. This daily ritual has a strong integrative effect, as people share their points of view about work-related matters and their feelings regarding their situation, in addition to gossiping and exchanging information from their private life. Participating in this custom, I was literally able feel the degree of community that still exists between some of the former staff of GIF. And this translates into care for each other in addition to an honest interest in their concerns. In this sense joint lunches constitute a practice of social identification, replacing at least some of the emptiness and ambiguity that emanates from their liminal experience.

Further attempting to cope with the indeterminacy of their situation, some members continued organizing a joined social event during the Advent season, again updating an element of the tradition of their former department. Organizing this event and participating in it is another sign of local staff members' attempts to create a sense of community. Even though the former members of GIF now have such a festive season-event with their new departments, the local festivity constitutes a deliberate attempt to foster community of the group. Recounting my participation in the some of these events, people use these events to share their experiences from their departments and how their new formal unites tread them as the ones, who sit down there at the local campus. Many of their experience are alike and sharing their struggle against not being fully recognized, being less visible, and feeling inferior creates a shared understanding of belonging to an endangered species, whose fate is tight to the local campus and that cannot do much to ensure its survival. In this sense, the collective experience that comes with these activities provides the social glue to maintain and re-create a sense of community, togetherness and local belongingness.

Hindering local community building began as soon as the local staff members realized to be trapped in a permanent situation of liminality. As one result of this realization the corridors and the offices became rather empty. Particularly the academic staff began to work from home more and more often rather than being in the office. As some told me, this was but one reaction to the mental exhaustion that they felt as a result of their situation. Staying away from the place served to create a degree of physical and mental distance from the frustration, anxiety, and anger that they continue to feel as the place reminds them of their current precarious situation. Furthermore, when being in the office many of the conversations with their colleagues at the local campus center on the problematic consequences of their betwixt and between situation and their inability to escape it. In this sense the local community, may primarily be associated with feelings and thoughts that they rather would like to avoid as togetherness in this sense may only mean to

join an alliance build on the collective experience of being subpar, trapped, and threatened. Distancing in this way constitutes an identity negotiation practice that serves to separate from the local workplace community and its problematic effects on people's identity. Of course, people came to the office, yet, only during office hours or when they had to teach or to participate in a meeting. As I observed some 'disappeared' right after they finished these tasks thereby hardly spending the whole day in the office like many of them did in the past.

Distancing took also another form, namely in airing skeptical voices challenging the meaning of the various initiatives and activities to reinstall a certain degree of local community. For example, Dave's efforts to reinstall a sense of togetherness and solidarity was challenged by what he refers in the interview as the bad mood that manifested itself as a result of peoples experience of being in between. Quite a few of the local staff members express their skepticism about the idea to have a coordinating position without any formal authority. They challenged the need for such a position, referring to it as 'semi-management' without any actual effect.

On a broader plane, for some the closure of the former department formed nothing but the first step to lead the local community into a dead end. Hence, they do not see any future for the group and for the local campus. This skepticism is linked to the size and peripheral location of the local campus and the faculty's apparent unwillingness to create a vibrant and sustainable teaching and research environment here. The closure of the former department and the introduction of the virtual department structure just seem to prove that this is the case, as I learned during many of my conversations with the members of the post-GIF group. So, why should one engage in sustaining something that obviously does not have any future and being skeptical towards the various attempts to re-create something meaningful, for some was the only way of accommodating to the situation.

Challenging and Surrendering

One way of accommodating to their liminal experiences that the members of the post-GIF group use is to challenge their marginalized position and to actively fight escaping the associated lack of status, power and influence, as well as feelings of being caught in perpetual structural liminality. In so doing they worked on the resisting and defiant elements of their identity building a position of someone, who combats being caught in limbo. However, despite efforts to challenge their situation I also observed them to be inactive, actually surrendering as they felt that the various initiatives did not really lead them anywhere.

Despite their liminal situation and the associated low status, unavailability of resources and possibilities to enact influence, I have been able to learn about numerous attempts by the local staff members to challenge their liminal situation. There have been and still are continuous activities to develop a local strategy that could serve to unite the remaining local staff, to align local study programs under a common theme, to make the local study programs more attractive, to develop new lines of study, to establish cooperation with departments from other faculties at the local campus, particularly the engineers, and to create links to local business. Yet, their ability to accomplish something is confined by their liminal situation. For example, who is supposed to initiate joint courses with the engineers? Should it be the local professors, who cannot make decision on behalf of their department or the HODs, who often lack time (and sometimes interest, as some staff members told me) to focus on the problems of the local campus? Furthermore, how

to motivate the members of the post-GIF group to promote existing and develop new study program when this is not supported by their new departments? Finally, who should establish links between the local academic environment and the local business on the university's behalf when there is no one able to represent all of the local staff and therefore no one being in the position to negotiate binding agreements?

I learned through my interviews and through the numerous talks to the local staff that they become increasingly tired of being active as their initiatives and propositions often get disapproved as soon as they required some sort of financial investment. As one of my interview partners expressed it: "It becomes very tiring to wait for a no" so why should they show any additional effort as all they get is a higher workload, no support and finally a rebuff. Some of them never engaged in fighting for the place but to only focus on their own academic activities. During the course of my fieldwork I had the impression that more and more decided this to be the only appropriated response to their situation.

However, despite such reactions, challenging to be in limbo continues to inform the post-GIF group's identity negotiation, which particularly apparent during the official visits of the faculty management at the local campus. The faculty management usually begins such visits with presenting the faculty's current situation and future challenges, expressing its awareness of the difficult situation of the staff at the local campus, defending the decision to implement a virtual department structure as being the only viable option to ensure a prosperous future of the faculty, and emphasizing the believe that with hard work the local problems can be resolved. After the management's presentation, the staff becomes invited to ask and comment, what usually resulted in a more or less open critique of the management's initial decision to close the department at the local campus and the poor way of handling the perpetual liminal situation that this decision created for the post-GIF group. Remembering some of the staff's responses, some of them pointed to shrinking numbers of students and staff, as the place becomes less attractive. Students recognize that staff members leave the local campus, without any replacement, though. They further notice that staff members turn their attention to the locations where their new department is situated and likewise students turn away from the local study programs. Furthermore, staff members underscore the struggle to get their local study programs promoted as they do not have control over the resources necessary to do so but often are dependent on the goodwill of actors outside the local campus (e.g. their HOD). One of the main reason for their situation, some staff member argue, is the low level of commitment of the faculty management to the local campus as apparently the faculty "is committed to have a minimum, just enough to survive but not enough to create a thriving critical mass vibrant community of scholars and students". Others joined this argumentation, which is a pattern I could observe in various meetings. They demanded more investment in the local campus enabling them to have the necessary resources to actively address their current situation, for example having someone being in a position to competently make decisions on their behalf and in their local interests and not people sitting in other campus cities either ignoring them or imposing their thoughts upon them. "Who is locally responsible?" is the recurrent question they pose during such meetings as their HODs, who sit outside the local campus, neither have the capacity nor the interest to devote much of their time to develop the whole post-GIF group but do often focus on the few local staff members who belong to their departments. Summarizing such and similar comments during campus visits of the faculty management, the local staff attempted to prove the management being wrong pinpointing the numerous problems that emerged after the closure.

Articulating concerns about their situation and detailing the numerous challenges that they have to respond to in their daily work, local staff members also ask for more support for the local campus as without such support they fear to be forever caught in between and eventually the campus to die off. In so doing they position themselves as being unable to escape the conditions of perpetual liminality themselves and the above-described rejection that many of their initiatives experience only seem to prove this. However, the usual response from the faculty management to such claims is that although the management is aware of the staff's difficult situation, it expected the staff to develop own solutions for their problems, if possible, together with their HODs.

Such reactions fueled the local staff's negotiation of an identity position where they surrender to being stuck. The former GIF-people frequently complain about the lack of clear statements about the future of the local campus and hence their positions. They recurrently tell me that they fail to see the big picture provided by the faculty management regarding the direction, in which the group could develop itself in order to secure its existence. What they did experience is that the faculty management on the one hand prompts them to develop ideas and initiatives for the future of the group at the local campus, however, without providing any support. On the other hand, many of the ideas and initiatives that the post-GIF members brought forward, such as the establishment of new study programs or new research centers, became rejected because they were labeled as being economically unfeasible. Furthermore, "I hear what you say" is the only response they usually receive each time they ask for help from the faculty management. The lack of interest and support that they experience, however, contributes to a permanent sense of being ignored and further promotes a stance of surrendering and expecating that in the end the group will "disappear from the map", as one interview partner put it.

Preliminary Discussion

Drawing on long-term fieldwork this article contributes to literature that investigates how conditions of perpetual liminality and processes of identity negotiation are interrelated (Daskalaki et al., 2016; Ybema et al., 2011). As Ybema et al. (2011) suggest, experiences of permanent liminality contribute to the creation of an enduring sense of being 'neither-this-nor-that' or 'both-this-and-that'. This is associated with experiences of permanently being neither here nor there or both here and there (Bamber et al., 2017) implicated by the state of perpetual liminality. From what I have been able to learn from my case is that the group members' identity negation is informed by both of Ybema et al's (2011) notions of being betwixt and between. They are members of a local community and tight to the local campus but are simultaneously affiliated to their new departments outside this community, thereby, both-this-and-that, as their identification is informed by both social contexts. Simultaneously they are neither fully integrated into their departments outside the local campus nor completely dedicated to the community at the local campus, hence, neither-this-nor-that, as none of these contexts provide stable anchors for identification.

The dimensions along which they negotiate their identity represent, as I would suggest, their liminal identity work in this double sense. Much of what I 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 targets of work commitment and sources of identification. Although they may be in favor of the local campus and even though

they believe in the importance of contributing to the local community, they sometimes cannot accommodate the disrupted nature of their current working life. As a result, they shift their attention between different organizational units and social domains.

Referring to the term identity work, this case exemplifies that contexts where people are permanently exposed to the experience of liminality create greater negativity compared to liminal states associated with a transition (Bamber et al., 2017). Writing of identity play in the present case would do injustice to the recurrent notions of being locked in, confined, trapped, and finally stuck that I observed during my fieldwork. Surely, being-in-between for the local staff members created possibilities to experiment with new identities, and in fact the above-described dimensions along which their identity negotiation developed hint to such experiments. However, I cannot suggest speaking of a playful combination of social and cultural resources as what I experienced resembled more of a desperate search to establish a meaningful identity and an attempt to finally escape being in limbo.

Although the dimensions that I highlight in this article are context-specific, they have implications for our broader understanding of processes of identity negotiation under perpetual liminality. People's identity work (and play) is essentially informed by persistent notions of being betwixt-and-between and studies of how they negotiate their identity under such conditions have to necessarily reflect this in-betweenness. Therefore, what I like to show above is how they juggle different meanings of what it means (or rather, could mean) to be in limbo along various dimensions that connect to competing sources employed to formulate their identity. I suggest that the post-GIF group members negotiate their liminal identity along the three dimensions 'letting go and holding on', 'establishing and distancing from community', and 'challenging and surrendering'. These dimensions, I hope, demonstrate that identity negotiation under conditions of perpetual liminality does not mean shifting between being this and / or that, hence, two alternative identity positions. It rather implies to combine and re-combine multiple and potentially contradicting anchors of identification and identity positions, thus, "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). In so doing, people merge sources of identification into a narrative that provides sense as it highlights uncertainty, ambiguity, insecurity and flexibility as elements of their identity as permanent liminals. Yet, it also provides sense to the extent that to be in limbo implies being a juggler, a searcher, and on an endless quest for stability and rest from the symbolic stress that liminal situations cause.

Finally, what we can also learn from the case is that shifting between identity positions or more specifically targets of identification is clearly visible among the post-GIF group. However, what I suggest is that such shifting does not mean switching between relatively clear positions that are tight to either this or that social sphere. Rather, shifting often takes the form of employing rather blurred notions of what one could or should be in order to appropriately respond to a given situation. I purposefully avoided to specify the identity positions that the local staff members developed as I do not want to lock them into being either this or that. Instead with this article I have tried to foreground their identity negotiation as something that they do in order to create, revise and change self-notions that correspond to their experience of being in limbo.

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