

Experimenting with work practices in a liminal space: A working period in a rural archipelago

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Abstract

Lived experiences in organisational liminal spaces ‘betwixt-and-between’ have begun to attract scholarly attention, but the full potential of liminal spaces in contemporary mobile and fluid working life has remained unexamined. This article contributes to theory by showing how a liminal experience in an alternative work environment is created via three dimensions: the aesthetic experience of a different environment, situated practices and changes to work and life rhythms. Interview material was gathered from creative professionals working temporarily in a rural archipelago environment. The results suggest that the contrast of working in a calm natural environment supported experimentation with work practices, nurtured the formation of a *communitas* and spurred imagination and reflection. The arrangement’s temporary nature heightened the intensity of participants’ experiences. However, this intensity varied depending on work community configurations and participants’ personal needs for change. This study deepens the current understanding of liminal spaces by showing how the nuances of physical and social spaces contribute to liminality and how liminality alters work rhythms. Future research should focus on how liminal workspaces can be created for individuals seeking a change in routine and increased community support.

Keywords

Creativity, liminal space, practices, rhythm, work community, work environment, workspace

Introduction

Boundaries in contemporary work are being blurred, including boundaries between work and leisure (Bloom, 2016; Lewis, 2003), between work and home (Andersson Cederholm, 2015) and between separate organisations (Tempest and Starkey, 2004). Globalisation processes and changing technologies have placed emphasis on networking, change, choice and reflexivity in lifestyle choices (Cohen et al., 2015). Workers using mobile information and communication technology (ICT) can choose practically any space that suits their work tasks and fancy, be it cafes, transitory spaces during travel or co-working spaces (Cohen et al., 2015; Felstead et al., 2005; Spinuzzi, 2012). Some withdraw to isolated environments to conduct tasks that are special or necessitate deep concentration (Newport, 2016). These developments imply that the significance of liminal spaces is increasing. Liminal spaces are described as ‘betwixt and between’ dominant spaces (Turner, 1974a) and, therefore, as devoid of any clear sets of rules and norms about their use and purpose (Shortt, 2015). A significant dimension of these undefined spaces is their association with individual and collective transition (Turner, 1974a; Van Gennep, 1960 [1909]).

The work environment and its various tools and rules have traditionally been considered self-evident elements of routine (D’Adderio, 2011). However, when work environments become fluid and changing, they gain new visibility. Changing work environments can create very concrete, practical concerns regarding how to accomplish work tasks (Brown and O’Hara, 2003). However, it has also been suggested that they can facilitate affective and aesthetic experiences important to creative work (Liegl, 2014) and new ways to experience social engagement (Daskalaki, 2014). Currently, there is not enough knowledge about the roles that different and, particularly, more alternative liminal spaces at the margins of the dominant spaces play at work.

It has been customary in organisational research to rely on the assumption of organisational actors relating to their work with mainly abstract, rational attitudes (George, 2009; see also Gagliardi, 2007; Pentland and Feldman, 2008). However, the Cartesian notion of a human being as a rationally self-sufficient unit independent from his concrete environment has become outdated in many strands of contemporary organisational research, such as within the so-called practice perspective (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Gherardi, 2006) and through the 'spatial turn' of organisation studies (e.g. Carlile et al., 2013; Taylor and Spicer, 2007). It is increasingly acknowledged that work takes place in spaces that are not merely abstract but also socially appropriated, bodily sensed and lived by their users (Lefebvre, 1991).

This article sets out to examine 1) how an alternative and rural work environment is experienced and 2) how such an environment can affect the processes of work. The research questions are examined by analysing interview data collected from 32 creative professionals (Florida, 2002) from small or micro-sized companies who spent a work period in the archipelago environment of south-western Finland and Åland. The archipelago is a rural, geographically relatively isolated region situated between the mainland and the sea.

This study discovered that the experienced contrasts of the archipelago environment, in comparison to the normal work environment, triggered imagination, reflection and experimentation characteristic of liminal spaces. However, the liminal experience was not formed only by the environment, but also by the social configurations of the work groups during the archipelago period and personal needs for transition regarding work or life in general. The nuances in the individual liminal experiences showed that a liminal working space can support creativity, balanced work rhythms and realising needs in professional development.

Literature

In this literature review, we first discuss how the workplace as it is bodily lived and experienced can be a source of emotional connectedness and control, and how the freedom of liminal spaces may enhance mindful perception. Second, we examine the interconnections of creativity, liminal workspaces and variations in work rhythms. Third, this section discusses natural environments as potentially liminal and therapeutic work environments.

From spatially embedded work to 'dropping tools' in a liminal space

Recent action-oriented organisational research and spatial research focusing on the lived experience of a space have emphasised that individuals' relationships with their immediate work environment are not merely rational as has been traditionally assumed. These relationships are instead mutually reproductive, involving a sensual, affective and corporeal dimension (Gagliardi, 2007; Gherardi, 2006; Lefebvre, 1991; Strati, 1999). The so-called communities of practice perspective (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; see also Schön, 1991) has suggested that successful conduct of work activity relies on knowledge that is developed locally and bodily by means of hands-on experience and bricolage, using all available resources. Corporeal participation in the situation, along with the sensible knowledge received from such participation, is a way of relating with oneself and the world (Gherardi et al., 2007: 322). For example, Richard Sennett (2008: 53–80) has described how the social space of pre-industrial workshop enabled the development of communal craftsmanship traditions, such as mentoring practices, in ways that still resonate in the work practices of many contemporary professionals.

However, it can be claimed that this connectedness to the work environment is not only about a sense of personal fulfilment but also about control. Proponents of the actor-network theory have argued that cognition is constrained by the surrounding network of both humans and

artefacts: tools, software, rules, codes of conduct, etc. (D'Adderio, 2011; Hutchins, 1995; Latour, 2005). These routine artefacts and the scripts they involve may hinder creative work activity (D'Adderio, 2011: 214–215).

A liminal space resides 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1974a) and is characterised by the absence of normative scripts. It exists either between two dominant spaces or between the Goffmanian front stage and back stage (Shortt, 2015), in the border between two worlds, where no one set of norms and regulations applies. The concept was originally created and developed within the field of anthropology (Turner, 1974a; Van Gennep, 1960 [1909]). There it served to identify the distinctiveness of a phase within a rite of passage, typically constituting a withdrawal to an isolated space devoid of social structure and roles to reflect deeply about the values of one's society and find a personal connection to the greater 'cosmos'. The rites followed a cyclical order, where a liminal phase was preceded by a phase of separation from the everyday life, and followed by incorporation to the social structural order. The purpose of the liminal space was to prepare individuals for a transition in social status, but due to the temporary absence of norms it could also be a threatening and unsettling space. (Turner, 1974a.) The intensity of the liminal space emerged from the shock of inverting normal cultural order into bizarre shapes, which was meant to trigger reflection among initiands (Turner, 1974b: 73). The founding characteristic of liminality was 'to replace the outside chaos with an order from the inside' (Thomassen, 2014: 118). Those sharing the liminal space would usually become a close, egalitarian and familial community, which Turner (1974a) termed 'communitas'.

In organisational research, the concept of liminality has been used in analyses of identity construction (Beech, 2011; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016), as well as temporary organisational

roles (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Garsten, 1999; Tempest and Starkey, 2004) and organisational processes or characteristics (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011; Lindsay, 2010). These studies relate liminality to a void or gap in the organisational structure. Recently, and importantly for the purposes of this study, the concept of liminality has also been applied in examining the ways workers use undefined spaces for unconstrained communication and the creation of subjective meanings. The enactment of underused or abandoned areas within working facilities is one example of such activity (Iedema et al., 2010; Shortt, 2015). Special, non-routine events spent outside organisational domains, such as strategy workshops (Johnson et al., 2010), strategy away days (Concannon and Nordberg, 2017) and business consultancy dinners (Sturdy et al., 2006), have also been found to involve liminal qualities. These studies have viewed liminality less as a structural characteristic and more as a fluid, momentary experience and a situational achievement.

Another discussion in organisational studies that relates to the significance of undefined spaces concerns 'tool dropping', an act of putting the ordinary physical or conceptual 'tools' aside to increase sensemaking (Weick, 1996). Weick has recommended tool dropping at work to reach a concept-free state of mind, or mental void (Weick, 1996, 2006). Although potentially unsettling, this void could enable the development of work practices, as when in it 'more is seen and more is seen about seeing itself' (Weick, 2006: 1727). It could be said that tool dropping is one way to approach liminality. A connection between tool dropping and liminality has been suggested in Sturdy et al.'s study of management consultancy business dinners, where participants resisted the display of physical work documents to avoid the intervention of rationalistic work logic into the liminal, unconstrained space of the dinners (Sturdy et al., 2006: 949–950). In conclusion, it seems that situationally achieved liminal

spaces can be identified at various levels in the organisation, from planned special events to one individual's momentary choice to use or 'drop' a particular tool.

Creativity, liminal workspaces and rhythmic variation

Victor Turner, one of the early developers of the liminality concept, saw creative potential in the liminal spaces of traditional community rites; however, he believed that modern society afforded opportunity for even freer individual expression in liminal situations, such as in contemporary carnivalistic events (Thomassen, 2014; Turner, 1982). It has been found that liminal workspaces of modern organisations may also foster creativity, particularly the more unnoticeable kind that is nevertheless necessary for the operation of the work community: the informal exchange of tacit knowledge and exploration and playing with emergent ideas (Concannon and Nordberg, 2017; Johnson et al., 2010; Shortt, 2015; Sturdy et al., 2006).

It has been argued that creative work activity can be paradoxical in that it does not necessarily fit with the normative idea of work being conscious, rational and goal-oriented. It has been suggested that creative activity is dependent on phases of mental passivity (Gomart and Hennion, 1999). When using existing knowledge and skills to solve a problem or derive creative ideas and solutions, it may not be useful to push conscious mental effort to its limits. Instead, leaving room for the unconscious mind to incubate ideas may be a deeper way of using one's mental resources (George, 2007, 2009). In practice, a work rhythm supporting incubation could be achieved by, for example, alternating between work tasks that involve different cognitive demands (Elsbach and Hargadon, 2006). Sennett (2008: 295–296) has described how traditional craftsmanship practices had embraced a similar kind of rhythm, slow 'craftsman time', which originated from the inner rhythms of engaged working and involved reflection and imagination.

Liminal spaces identified in contemporary work situations have been shown to be associated with a reflexive, internally emerging work rhythm. In Shortt's study (2015), the hairdressers withdrew to the marginal and liminal spaces of the workplace to rest and allow themselves time for peaceful reflection without the expectations of normative workspaces. Liminal spaces (Concannon and Nordberg, 2017; Johnson et al., 2010; Shortt, 2015; Sturdy et al., 2006) and 'resisting spaces' (which are closely linked to the idea of liminality; see Courpasson et al., 2017) have also been found to enable free, creative discussions among work colleagues. These findings suggest that liminal workspaces offer a relief from externally defined, rule-bound work rhythms.

Some workers have been found to intentionally use the change in work environment to produce rhythmic variation in their work (Henriksen and Tjora, 2016; Liegl, 2014). Liegl (2014) found creative urban nomadic workers to have developed a way of rhythmically moving between work locations, such as cafés, co-working spaces or their homes. Moving between spaces kept 'things fluid and moving' and enabled creativity to spontaneously 'arrive' (Liegl, 2014: 178–179). The practice involved momentary passivity in expecting the novel space to act as a mediator in inducing aesthetic and creative experiences. Liegl's findings suggest that reacting sensually to novelty in the environment may create a liminal moment where routinised orientation disappears and a person has to create the present with heightened intensity of both thought and activity (Thomassen, 2014). The passivity of letting a novel environment influence a sensual reaction may assist in dropping one's conscious thinking tools (Weick, 1996, 2006) and thereby intensify unconscious incubation processes conducive to creativity.

Natural environments—therapeutic and liminal spaces for work?

Recently, there has been increasing interest in choosing unlikely environments, such as rural dwellings, for periodic isolated working (e.g. Newport, 2016). However, systematic research about work experiences in such spaces is scarce. Contemporary discussion of creative environments has focused on the amenities of the urban milieu, yet there is emerging evidence of a parallel counter-urban movement, motivated by the search for a ‘good life’ (Burnett and Stalker, 2016; Herslund, 2012).

Research into the psychological effects of natural environments on humans has been of growing interest for some time. Studies in environmental psychology have found pleasant natural environments to foster stress recovery, a decrease in negative emotions (Ulrich et al., 1991), recovery of the capacity to direct attention (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989), support for positive emotions, reflection on personal matters and help in forgetting worries (Korpela and Ylén, 2007; Korpela et al., 2001). Even in urban environments, people have claimed a particular attachment to the green spaces found within (Korpela and Ylén, 2007). Literature on therapeutic landscapes has found natural pleasant landscapes also to support learning, personal self-expression and community building (Conradson, 2005; Hale et al., 2011). These kinds of findings have increased interest in incorporating natural and green elements in workplaces to benefit from these positive effects (Loder, 2014; Lottrup et al., 2013).

Apart from the direct psychological and physiological effects, phenomenologically oriented scholars have emphasised that natural environments may involve richness of emotional and imaginative experiences (Bachelard, 1994 [1958]; Tuan, 1989). Bachelard, (1994 [1958]) has claimed that the power of imagination is enabled by the space in which we dwell. We do not only inhabit places; the places also inhabit us. Places can trigger imagination particularly

when contradictions accumulate, such as in an isolated environment where the human dwelling directly confronts the forces of nature (Bachelard, 1994 [1958]: 39, 42–48).

A natural place that has become almost an archetypal image of liminality is the beach, as it creates the contrast of being between land and sea. The liminality of the beach experience is considered to originate from awareness of the vastness of nature and the sea (Preston-Whyte, 2004). According to Bachelard (1994 [1958]: 185–190), for an imaginative mind an experience of vast nature can become a ‘psychological transcendent’ deepening one’s inner experience and imagination. It has been shown that for some poets, the beach has become such an experience. The shore poets (Dietrich, 2007) saw themselves as liminal characters who could offer a special perspective on the structures of society. At the same time, the liminality of the shore offered the possibility of an alternative dream-life, the imagining of possible worlds (Dietrich, 2007).

Ultimately, liminality of a geographical and physical space depends on the social relations operating in relation to that space (Andrews and Roberts, 2012). It has been suggested that there exist nuances (Shortt, 2015) or degrees (Thomassen, 2015) in a liminal experience and that the intensity of the personal liminal experience depends on the amount of different processes of liminality—at the personal, group or even societal level—overlapping in a space (Thomassen, 2015). Our approach to liminality acknowledges that spatial characteristics can signal liminality and contribute to a liminal experience. However, this study considers a liminal experience as a result of multilevel processes, including both material and social dimensions, operating simultaneously.

Data and methods

Context and preparation for the work period in the archipelago

An archipelago formation refers to an area where a collection of multiple rocks, shoals and islands lie in close proximity to each other. On one side, the archipelago of south-western Finland is contoured by the mainland, while on the other it changes gradually to open sea. Part of it belongs to UNESCO's Man and Biosphere programme. The region is characterised by remoteness from the mainland, rurality and the large presence of the sea, which has provided the region with its main means of livelihood for centuries. The isolation of the archipelago is further associated with the need to cope with the forces of nature, which gives the lifestyle a sense of particular beauty and freedom (Siivonen, 2008). The archipelago has traditionally been inhabited by Finland's Swedish speaking minority (5 % of the total population), along with the Finnish speaking majority. The Swedish speaking minority in particular has made efforts to preserve the cultural traditions of the area, and as a result has become closely identified with the region (Siivonen, 2008). Being slightly distant, both geographically and culturally, from the mainland and mainstream Finland, the archipelago region can be considered a liminal area, particularly for the tourists from mainland Finland and abroad who visit, mostly during the summer.

This paper utilises interview data that were collected during 2010–2011 for an earlier study within which an experiment on flexible telework was conducted in the rural archipelago environment. In that study, the participating workers spent one work week in the south-western Finnish archipelago. The participants had applied to participate in the experiment, typically in response to an advertisement, and they could apply in self-chosen groups or alone. As background information, it was explained that the purposes of the experiment were to examine the added value and challenges associated with working outside of a formal

workplace and to develop a new service concept. The work periods took place outside the primary Finnish holiday season.

The participants of this study represented a variety of creative professions, including journalists, graphic designers, researchers, well-being coaches, textile designers, advertising professionals, consultants and engineers. All of the participants worked in small or micro-level enterprises (less than 50 employees). They spent the weeklong working period mostly in small groups of colleagues (2–4 persons) or, in two cases, alone. There were 17 female and 15 male participants, and all working age groups were represented. Four groups of participants consisted of colleagues from the same workplace or couples sharing a household and in some cases a business, and eight groups consisted of networks of private entrepreneurs or colleagues from different offices.

The participants could use a work space with ordinary office equipment and accommodation at the work location at no cost. The spaces for work and lodging were provided by six municipalities, as well as by local associations and entrepreneurs who considered developing telework services to boost the local economy. The work spaces differed in style depending on what each municipality had to offer, ranging from modern office hotels to traditional archipelago homesteads. Some facilities were run privately. Others were municipal buildings, such as a former town hall, a historic building looking for a new purpose. Pictures 1 and 2 show examples of the spaces. The facilities had been modestly used, and they were fairly easy to adjust to function as work spaces. In general, participants could use the spaces freely, and in case of restrictions, such as opening hours, there was room for negotiation. The participants brought along the mobile ICT equipment that they considered necessary for their work, such as phones and laptops. They chose to conduct tasks that were estimated to be

particularly suitable for the archipelago work environment, an adaptation practice typical to mobile workers (Brown and O'Hara, 2003; Felstead et al., 2005).



Picture 1. A meeting room in an archipelago work location



Picture 2. A historical town hall functioned as an archipelago work facility

Data collection

The participants were interviewed in groups at the end of their archipelago work period, and those that participated alone were interviewed individually. As the study was explorative in nature, group interviews were chosen as a method to facilitate conversation and sensemaking (Frey and Fontana, 1991). The interviews were carried out by two different interviewers. The data consist of 12 group or pair interviews and two individual interviews, with 32 interviewees in total. The lengths of the interviews varied from 45 to 93 minutes. Portions of the interviews were conducted face to face, while other parts were carried out by phone due to the long distances in the archipelago region. The interviews were based on a thematic structure encouraging conversation. Interview questions included the following: What tasks

have you carried out during the period? Have your work practices differed somehow to how you normally conduct your work? What has been most significant to you about this period? All interviews were transcribed.

Analysis

The original research design studied the archipelago experiment from the framework of flexible telework. The interview questions applied the ordinary precondition of work as a rational pursuit, an act of carrying out a task purposively (Gagliardi, 2007; George, 2009). However, of particular interest to us as researchers was how the interviewees also brought to the discussion more personal, emotional experiences of the archipelago period, such as how enriched and encouraged they had felt in their temporary work community, how they had reflected upon their personal career choices and direction in life, and how they had enjoyed small moments and discoveries in the archipelago environment. The conversations could become deep, from memories of small moments in the archipelago to reflection on personal values concerning work and life in general. The meaning of work as a rational and purpose-oriented activity, as it is commonly understood, seemed to blur and merge with other processes. This discovery made us realise that we would have to avoid applying an overly narrow definition for work activities in our interpretation of the data. The concept of liminality (Van Gennep 1960 [1909]) enabled us to examine carefully this blurring of boundaries, to consider whether working for a week in such an environment as the rural archipelago could become a liminal experience and what kinds of processes had led to such an experience.

To make sense of both the cognitive and bodily dimensions of this process, we used an analytical method underpinned by phenomenological philosophy, combined with pragmatist understanding of the primacy of the practical situation (Jensen, 2016). This study relies on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962), which underlines how our sensual as well as cognitive approaches to making sense of the surrounding environment are mediated by our bodily position in it. Secondly, this study is also indebted to Heidegger's (1978 [1927]) existential phenomenology, particularly the idea of 'dasein', being in this world and becoming aware of one's being through practical engagement with the world. Gaston Bachelard's (1994 [1958]) analysis of the imaginary and poetic dimensions of dwelling in places and experiencing the dynamics of inside and outside places provided tools for conceptualising the imaginary and emotional dimensions of the archipelago experience.

The analytic process advanced inductively at first. We conducted open coding, marking out distinctive phrases, actions, attitudes and other things that stood out from the data as possibly significant. The initial coding revealed not only rational, but emotional and reflective modes of talking about work. To make sense of the overall experience, we considered it important to analyse the material with as few presuppositions as possible (Husserl, 1970 [1936]). We iterated between theories and data, constantly comparing different analytical lenses to find the most valid interpretation model possible (Alvesson, 2003). This process simultaneously enabled distancing from and questioning of our pre-existing presuppositions. The iteration process produced three sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954) that became heuristic devices in organising the data: aesthetic and emotional experiences, practices and rhythm. At this point we deductively analysed the interview material again by means of these three sensitising concepts. Results of this deductive coding phase can be found in Table 1. Finally, we

compared our findings with the original data to ensure the coherence of our analysis and the balance between parts and the whole.

Insert Table 1 here

Findings

The imaginary, aesthetic and liminal experience of the archipelago environment

When asked to describe work activities in the archipelago environment, the participants did not talk about work simply as an objective and purpose-oriented activity. They also offered informal personal impressions and reflections, describing how the environment had made them imagine, feel and dream. Many shared mental pictures of small moments that captured what for them was essential about working and dwelling in the archipelago. These pictures were anchored in momentary, bodily experiences. The descriptions often involved a humorous or ironic contrast between the normal work environment and the archipelago.

‘Q: What do you think you will mainly remember about this past week?’

A: Well, there is this one small detail. When you wake up in the morning to a sheep baaing under your window, it is (laughing), it is kind of a funny experience which somehow gives a good start for the day.’ (Female, marketing manager)

‘When you walk along this path 300 meters to your dwelling, I’d say it is pretty good. That is, compared to the time we usually sit in cars in traffic jams, so...’

(Female, director, researcher)

‘This environment is absolutely lovely, I mean, oh my god, at home I live on the fifth floor and see blocks, and here you could see nature and the sea from the window. So it was a tremendous change to my everyday life.’ (Female, graphic designer)

‘(...) and even though I can’t help occasionally observing those great crested grebes, there are father, mother and two babies buzzing around. Still, I think it is kind of a positive break and not like you were left staring at a stone wall like in my normal working place.’ (Male, toy designer)

Some participants described working in the archipelago environment with imaginative and even poetic language:

‘Here the normal daily rhythm is lacking, and my thoughts have been able to fly toward tomorrow (...) of course this stay by the sea is quite peaceful, it makes a whole lot of difference in your thinking.’ (Male, designer in catering services)

‘This stay here is kind of a mental adventure for me.’ (Male, manager in an advertising agency)

Our interpretation is that in experiencing the oddness and peculiarity of the contrasts between everyday work environments and the archipelago environment, the liminal experience of the

space began to take form. The prevalence of dreaming, imagination, humour and irony in the interviews suggests an experience of space that was extraordinary, even carnivalistic, as participants revelled in turning 'normal' work-related practices on their head. Resorting to metaphoric expressions also implies an experience of a space that escapes objective, definite categories.

The participants also described the archipelago environment as calm, silent, peaceful and empty, again contrasting this experience to the stress of the everyday environment. The calmness of the environment was mostly experienced as relaxing and soothing. It enabled concentration, full presence in the moment and room for personal reflection. It therefore supported the archipelago working period in its development as a liminal space.

'I have felt the atmosphere to be very relaxing compared to the bustle of the capital. It has been very relaxing to see the sea from the window, and the waves sloshing and boats gliding. You don't have here that background noise of the capital, like the sounds of cars and all that. Here you can feel an echo of emptiness.' (Male, manager in sports services)

'The archipelago enables me to withdraw for a week from an energetic and kind of an over-excited atmosphere. (...) Here I can be completely with my own thoughts. (...) I can calm down for a while, that is the thing. For me, calming down means that I can be quiet, I can be however I want.' (Male, manager in an advertising agency)

The experience of emptiness also triggered a creative initiative to fill the space with activities. The participants ventured independently into the environment and invented free-time activities. This enabled unique personal discoveries, which further stimulated the imagination. Some participants developed a flowing, inspired relationship with the environment, paying attention to its smallest details. The inspiration gained by these discoveries also impacted the work conducted in the archipelago. The following exchange took place between two women of the same work group:

‘Here you have culture in many meanings of the word. This is completely different, like all the hundreds and hundreds of fishermen’s cabins, and a house on a cliff just hanging on top of a couple of rocks, it’s just... (Female, illustrator)

...and the neighbour’s cats. (Female, electrician, creative writer)

The neighbour’s cats, exactly! There you really have something to wonder about. I think we are going to have so much to process regarding both work and this environment during the coming weeks. Really, I cannot even begin to think yet how much this opened doors for us.’ (Female, illustrator)

Some participants started spontaneously noticing potential work opportunities and imagining ways they could put their professional experience to use in the local community. Such talk mostly remained at the level of playing with ideas, but in some cases these plans advanced to preliminary inquiries with locals. Others saw in the archipelago environment a material resource for their creative work in terms of scenery for taking photographs or local histories

and narratives to be used in textual work. On the other hand, some participants found new creative resources within themselves:

‘The kinds of drawings that I did in the beginning of the 90s I have not done ever since, but during this week I have experienced a new renaissance. More than a dozen pieces of this kind of work and sketches have come into being during this past week.’ (Male, designer in catering services)

However, not all participants experienced the emptiness of the environment as a particularly creative starting point. Some participants described the archipelago village as rather boring, without much to do in the evenings. These participants also experienced difficulties in orienting themselves for the work week, wondering whether they should consider themselves primarily as at work or on holiday and worrying about how the local inhabitants would categorise them outside of the tourist season. These concerns did not characterise the overall experience of any participant, but were voiced only during passing moments. Yet this shows that a liminal state is also fragile and that anxiety caused by the absence of recognisable roles can sweep into even the archipelago’s outwardly peaceful and calm dwellings.

Practicing reflectively; reflecting on practices

The participants came to the archipelago differently prepared for novelty, adventure and change. The environment and the physical facilities for working and living were new for everyone. However, some participated with very familiar workmates, such as a spouse from the same family business. In these cases the patterns of collaboration did not need to change much from everyday routines. Others participated with colleagues with whom they did not normally share physical workspace. Some of these ad hoc groups had planned collaborative

work for the period, while others had not. These new configurations of workmates in the same physical location created another level of novelty, which intensified the experience of liminality by allowing the formation of a *communitas*—a close, equal and informal community (Turner, 1974a). Particularly the private entrepreneurs experienced this immediate community as immensely supportive, much needed and in contrast to their everyday environment in which they often felt lacking in social support and energy. The informal archipelago *communitas* facilitated discussions and exchange of collegial feedback, much as workshops have been found to do (Johnson et al., 2010; Concannon and Nordberg, 2017).

‘I don’t know how you actually make this atmosphere happen (...) I just had missed this so much, this kind of activity and excitement, experimenting with everything without a judgmental attitude. I think this group has had a clear positive, active attitude, and we have been building upon each other’s thoughts. I almost feel I am getting younger.’ (Male, ICT consultant)

‘It is really important to have someone to share your working days with a little bit, because normally there is not really any social environment’ (Female, coach and mental trainer)

The undefined liminal space of the archipelago work environment created a free space in terms of enabling experiments with work arrangements. The participants recounted having worked in living spaces, in the yard and other outside spaces, such as the balcony or terrace. The use of space was characterised by playfulness, spontaneity and a search for comfort. The participants’ working times could also vary. They could take breaks to walk in the

surroundings any time they felt the urge, and then continue working afterward. The arrangements of work and leisure activities were decided in an ad hoc manner, either communally or individually.

‘As I work by the nature and take a look out the window, I can always have a little break and go walking by the sea...’ (Female, well-being coach)

‘Here things have taken their natural course, we have not had any prearranged timetables, we have just agreed as the day has passed how that day is going to proceed further, what do we still have to accomplish together, and we have rhythmmed the day accordingly.’ (Female, client project manager)

Participants sometimes felt inspired to continue discussing work matters, new ideas and even dream about future business ideas until the late hours of the night. Participants themselves described this kind of activity as ‘soft planning’. Soft planning merged with free time spent together, and the participants found it problematic to define this practice as either work or leisure. Therefore, it can be interpreted as a liminal practice. Even if it was not work in the traditional sense, the participants expressed that they had profited professionally from this activity. Soft planning was also characterised by the absence of computers and agendas; these tools had by this point been left aside. By this very concrete ‘tool dropping’ (Sturdy et al., 2006; Weick, 1996), the participants created an intimate liminal space within the greater space of the archipelago period. Tool dropping supported open discussion and the attainment of a reflective state of mind.

‘And at the point when we have closed the PCs we have quite naturally moved to this sort of...I would like to call it ‘soft planning’. It is not like going through

a certain agenda or creating memos or adding things to calendars, but a bit of another kind of planning and reflection.’ (Male, toy designer)

‘Here we continue discussing sometimes quite late in the evening, and we don’t take notes or sit by the PC, but we have exchanged a lot of ideas about work, its preconditions, what supports working, and this kind of reflection.’ (Female, coach and consultant)

A recurrent theme in the interviews was that work practices in everyday life are messy and often do not comply with formal, common definitions of working time and space. For some individuals, the equal and easy-going fellowship in the isolated archipelago ‘world’ initiated deep introspection of personal life trajectories, careers and healthy values. In particular, the participants reflected on what constitutes ‘good work’. This reflection took place because many had realised that their newly invented, situated archipelago practices somehow epitomised for them what was lacking in their everyday environment, what they felt work should be like instead. They emphasised the importance of lived experience of new practices to becoming aware of the need for change.

‘Earlier I have worked both at home and in the office, and in comparison this is completely different. The work is pretty much the same here, but the change of environment and place, here you can orientate to things in a more relaxed manner, and that gives you a new kind of vision about work also regarding the future. Here you kind of face it, how nice it is to work when you have a good time. And you can, you are able to apply that also in the future...’ (Female, illustrator)

'Maybe this has helped me to see what this kind of work enables, like, is this good work compared to the everyday toil I carry out. Probably that is the most important thing (...) and also, I don't know if one should reflect about the environment more (...) here it seems that people have slightly different values, maybe the salary is not the most important thing here, there are other things that go before salary and one's own interest.' (Male, manager in food services)

Another participant took a more concrete approach and captured her experience of the period with a metaphor she had invented, 'Korppoo mentality', based on the name of the island on which she was staying. With this conceptualisation, she aimed to create a mental tool that would enable the re-creation of preferred archipelago practices in her normal environment. Developing this unique metaphor also highlights the difficulty of defining the liminal archipelago experience and practices with any previously known concepts.

'It is a bit like as you step out of the train in Helsinki [the capital of Finland], everyone is walking at the same pace. And [after the archipelago period] we could consider having occasionally a sort of 'Korppoo [name of an island] mentality day', already to begin that day differently and construct it...I mean we only have the sky as our limit, you just have to realise it. You have to sort of reflect about it and become aware of how we can make use of it in a different way.' (Female, coach and consultant)

The experienced rhythms and sense of time

An awareness of the temporariness of the situated working and living community was a constant undertone in the interviews. The fragility of this temporary settlement created an urge to experience fully the time available, together with others.

‘That we have the whole days’ time from morning till evening and nobody is going to run away (...) that has been really good here. I had thought already before this period that here we have a chance for...we really need time together for discussing and idea creation.’ (Female, client project manager)

‘We have worked long days here, on Friday you get to go home to rest [laughing]. This is a crazy input of time for this purpose, and it worked really well like that. We had a goal, and it looks like we will reach it just fine, and afterwards we will return to the normal order. This is how I experience it.’
(Male, ICT consultant)

This peculiar intensity of experiencing time affected work rhythms. Participants felt that when they were working in the archipelago, their focus was intensely engaged with the task at hand. Many described the calm, peacefulness and silence as facilitating concentration on one task at a time. Others explained this effectiveness by referring to the ‘fullness’ of the archipelago experience as a whole. The ability to share a community with colleagues and to anticipate inspiring adventures in the environment once work was done introduced a different rhythm of life, one arising from social engagement and emotional experience.

‘May it sound good or bad, but I’ll say that when you leave home or your normal office environment the efficiency of working increases significantly.

And as you make up nice activities here for the evening, you can say that the soul is resting, and that way you become more efficient. These kinds of group meetings, they don't necessarily have to take place in the normal office. And I claim that this is much more efficient than if we gathered in the office back home to do the same things there.' (Male, engineer)

Many participants discussed the imperceptible narrowing and loss of rhythmic variation in normal daily routines. They described phases of work and leisure having become a formless, chaotic mass, without a sense of beginning or fully completing anything. Others described a tendency to bounce restlessly between tasks without the ability to give full attention to any one of them. The archipelago period created the ability to enact clear transitions between different activities, and the period acted itself as a transition within the larger trajectory of participants' lives. Therefore it can be said that the period facilitated the creation of meaningful, rhythmic cycles that reflected those found in the cyclic structure of liminal ritual (Turner, 1974a).

'Knowing myself, I can sit alone and work the whole time I am awake (...)
Here some things are lacking which could be mind-distracting, and then there is another person with whom you can have a break every now and then, so it doesn't become that kind of "tunnel work".' (Female, electrician, creative writer)

'The biggest thing here is replacing the fractured days with this kind of one long-term effort (...) One really ought to have this kind of clear working periods, and then clear holiday periods.' (Male, business consultant)

In the archipelago, participants experimented with minor situated rhythmic variations between elements of work, change in environment, leisure and socialising together. For example, some participants applied personal, sensitive ways of rhythmically enacting the natural and built environments. An example of this can be found in the following description from one participant. By changing the environment the participant was able to relieve herself from conscious thinking processes got stuck and achieve an empty, liminal moment. Her thinking and idea incubation were stimulated by such rhythmic change (e.g. George, 2007, 2009).

‘For example, as I was sitting in the office yesterday and I was supposed to develop a new product, it just wouldn’t work. Then I went to the balcony, where you could see the sea and the sun was shining. I sat there for a while. Then immediately I started having new ideas (...) and this morning I had already decided as I went to the office that I would take the PC and instead go out to work. But then it happened, that as I sat there [in the office], I probably had already processed over the night that stream of thoughts I had yesterday, so I ended up working in the office anyway.’ (Female, career and life coach)

Another rhythmic discovery that enabled creating fruitful mental contrasts was that of switching between working alone and working together. These issues could first be processed individually and then deliberated further through collegial discussion:

‘In principle one designer has already created these plans. But once they are further reviewed by three pair of eyes, or in this case four, who are all experts,

then suddenly you start finding little things that you can still improve. Everybody learns something, everybody has a good time, and the result is certainly going to be better. (...) We discovered this practice accidentally here, but we are certainly going to use it in the future.’ (Male, leading engineer)

Some of the participants gravitated towards a ‘puzzle-like rhythm’, where switching between working alone and working together was complemented with spontaneous excursions in the surrounding nature, even in the middle of the day. The ‘puzzle-like rhythm’ was a way of creating a rhythmic cycle that answered to personal needs of both meaningful order of things and mental stimulation.

Finally, the present and future merged in participants’ experiences in their anticipation that the archipelago experience would yield significant yet undetermined future outcomes. As one participant expressed, the period had ‘opened doors’, a metaphoric expression Van Gennep (1960 [1909]: 192) used in describing liminality.

Discussion

With interest in alternative workspaces increasing (Liegl, 2014; Newport, 2016), there is a need to understand the lived experiences of work carried out in non-dominant spaces. The participants in this study reacted powerfully to the aesthetic beauty and calm of the archipelago environment. However, they were surprised by the contrast of carrying out their work in this unique environment. The sudden shift to working in a rural environment with natural and animal-filled landscapes (Conradson, 2005; Hale et al., 2011) became at times humorous. Bodily living this contrast between the everyday and the archipelago work environment introduced a feeling of play. A liminal space was formed, which was reflected in

the participants' accounts of emptiness, reflection, perception of altered rhythm and experimentation with work and leisure arrangements.

The calm rhythm of the archipelago environment fostered mindful concentration at work, though participants experienced differing degrees of intensity in their liminal experiences. The liminal experiences were characterised for some as work blurring with holiday, while for others liminality facilitated co-creative community and deep reflection. For those in the former category, the period could be characterised as an odd and exceptional, yet fun and thought-provoking working experience. Work activities could be coupled with enjoyable free-time activities, while many obligations associated with normal social roles were absent. For those in the latter category, liminality went further, assuming a dimension of intense collective sharing and reflection. Their experience could resemble the intense liminality of initiation rites characterised by close and equal communal bonds of *communitas*, as described by Turner (1974a). This community-formation process was most evident in the case of those who participated with colleague(s) who were not generally present in the physical working space. It seems that this was another novelty factor that contributed to the liminality of the experience. Those participating with a familiar partner could rely on existing communication and collaboration patterns; while the physical environment, facilities and rhythms of the archipelago community were new, at least the social configuration remained familiar and safe. The period was thus more adventurous for participants with novel partners.

The interviews showed that many participants—particularly those forming a situated *communitas* (Turner, 1974a)—reflected intensively upon their working habits, career, life values and well-being. Both alone and in groups, they reflected critically on their existing routines and experimented with new ones. The archipelago environment offered an

experimentation field which fuelled reflection processes that participants felt needed to take place. This study adds to our understanding of nuanced experiences of liminal spaces by showing that the ways in which the opportunities of this open space are utilised, and the resulting intensity of personal liminal experiences, depend on 1) the levels of novelty and contrast of the environment as compared to the everyday environment, either in physical or social terms, and 2) individual needs for personal transition.

In contemporary working life, where boundaries between different domains have become blurred, it might be fruitful to concentrate on the enabling qualities of liminal phases instead of the threatening ones. Liminal, undefined phases are becoming familiar to nearly everyone, but Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) claim that many are unable to reap the benefits of these phases. Liminal phases allow one to play with different possibilities for work and possible futures. But rather than utilizing this opportunity for experimentation, there is a common tendency to cut these reflection processes short and rush too quickly to reach solid ground. The frustration with everyday environments that was revealed in the interviews shows that there existed a genuine need for such a liminal period, a playground for experimenting with new possibilities, to re-evaluate work practices.

Sennett (2008: 53–80)) has described how communities and whole cultures of craftsmanship were formed by craftsmen working in the presence of colleagues in workshops, with concentrated working occasionally interspersed with mentoring and social rituals. Over time, craftsmanship evolved from communal endeavours to individual artistry. As a consequence, the workshop transformed from the working home of a community into an individual creator's sole refuge from the world. It could be said that the rural archipelago period bore traces of both kinds of workshops. While the support of the community was emphasised, the

period also triggered individual creative processes and re-establishing the sense of professional 'I'. However, the archipelago period was also liminal play for a temporary contingent of workers used to the contemporary multitude of virtual and physical spaces (Felstead et al., 2005; Liegl, 2014). Yet for these workers this settlement in the calm, natural archipelago environment provided welcome respite and breathing space, an occasion to listen to one's body, feelings and thoughts. The participants seized the opportunity for a work period in the archipelago after seeing an advertisement, without prior knowledge and experience of the conditions. This could be called 'accidental liminality', an effect produced when separate processes happened to converge. Yet mobile and fluid work may feed such processes where different individual movements occasionally come together and produce spaces that can become liminal experiences (Daskalaki, 2014).

Most workplaces encourage searching for work-life balance, but the underlying norm of maintaining a productive image may override this ideal, and finding balance may paradoxically become yet another 'task', one that is practically impossible to accomplish (Bloom, 2016). During the archipelago period, many participants, surprising even themselves, found ways to re-create this balance after realising through environmental contrast the problematic nature of practices that had been building, slowly and unnoticed, in their everyday environments. When both work and leisure time were satisfactory and offered mental stimulation (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989), balanced and meaningful rhythmic daily structures could be created without effort (Gomart and Hennion, 1999; Liegl, 2014). Moreover, when work is deeply meaningful, as it is for many creative professionals, it can itself feel like leisure (Lewis, 2003). Work and leisure could at times playfully blur, as in the case of 'soft planning', but the participants also found they could use the stimulation of the novel environment to detach from work when needed. Rhythmic variations facilitated fluid

transitions between purposive and more liminal, passive and reflective orientations characterised by openness to experience (Gomart and Hennion, 1999; Liegl, 2014). Perhaps this rhythm was a contemporary version of slow ‘craftsman-time’ (Sennett, 2008), with room for incubation, the unconscious mental processing necessary for personal development and the ability to work in a creative and reflective manner. The interplay of the dimensions of liminality during the archipelago work period is depicted in figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 here

Conclusions

In organisational research on liminality, the focus has been expanding from liminal aspects inherent to the structure of the organisation to personal experiences of liminal spaces (Concannon and Nordberg, 2017; Iedema et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2010; Shortt, 2015; Sturdy et al., 2006). This study adds to the literature by showing the nuanced liminality of a work period in an unconventional and contrasting work environment. It shows how such environments can initiate not only small moments of creativity and relief from normative constraints, but also critical reflection on work processes and personal values of work and life. We also connect liminality concept with discussions on work rhythm (George 2007, 2009; Gomart and Hennion, 1999; Liegl, 2014) and suggest that liminal spaces entail a different kind of rhythm to that of normative spaces, a rhythm originating from inner personal needs. Liminal spaces can bring rhythmic changes to work processes and this way enable dropping thinking patterns no longer effective – and discovering fresh ones.

We acknowledge that the archipelago experiment analysed here had some unique characteristics, but using alternative environments is increasing both in convenience, due to

the development of ICT, and social acceptance. Rural areas are found to be welcoming of creative knowledge professionals (Burnett and Stalker, 2016; Herslund, 2012), and the archipelago municipalities were eager to develop telework services that would answer to the needs of the visiting professionals. Perhaps it is a question of finding service models and practices that would be both relevant for workers and possible for locals to offer. However, if a complete change of environment seems inconvenient, even little moments of ‘tool dropping’ can provide a new perspective (Weick, 1996, 2006). Our findings also lend support to the occasional use of pleasant outdoor spaces while working to provide opportunities for rhythmic variation.

A liminal workshop such as the archipelago period might particularly benefit those working independently, such as freelancers and entrepreneurs, as these spaces could provide the warmth of community and collegial feedback and mentoring. As entrepreneurial, nomadic and other non-standard ways of working become more common (Cohen et al., 2015; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016), the number of workers in need of such experiences may in fact be growing. More research is needed about how a place can support community-building and restore a healthy work rhythm, as well as about the interrelations between place, rhythm and personally meaningful and productive work practices.

This study analysed creative professionals working in small companies. It is possible that their professional backgrounds facilitated the experimental and flexible work orientation found in this study. It is further possible that workers other than creative professionals would orientate themselves differently in such an environment. Therefore, more research is needed on the experiences of alternative spaces among different kinds of professionals. Collegial work periods in a novel, pleasant and comforting environment could particularly serve

individuals who work independently, those in a transition period in their working lives and those who feel deprived of personal resources needed at work.

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Table 1. Sensitising concepts with associated codes

Aesthetic and emotional experiences	Practices	Rhythm
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Momentary mental pictures of the environment •Contrasts to the everyday environment •Poetic and metaphoric expressions •Calm and emptiness, reflection •Professional imagination inspired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Formation of a community •Ad hoc work arrangements •Trying different working spaces, times and co-working arrangements •Work merging with leisure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The period as a rhythmic change •Inner rhythm of work •Minor rhythmic variations of work and life •Incubation

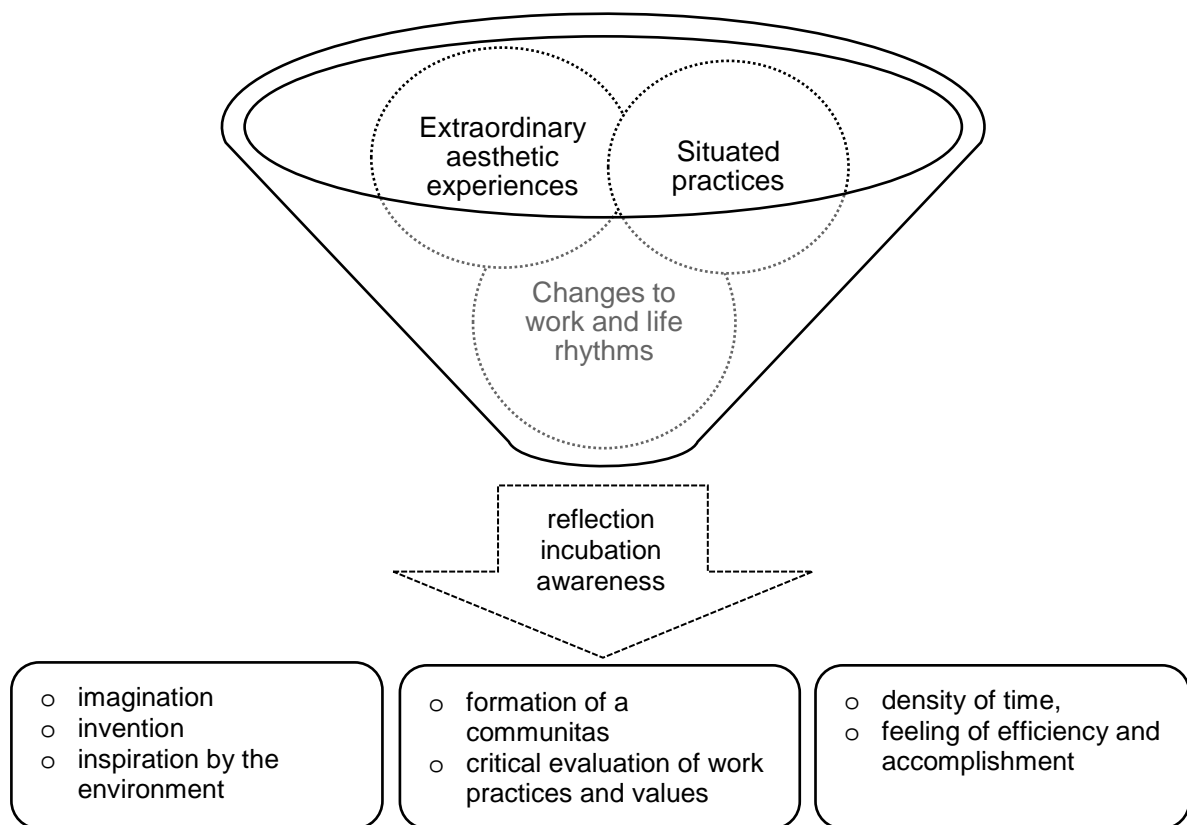


Figure 1. The interplay of dimensions of liminality during the archipelago work period.

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