



# A Temporary Liminal Space Counteracting the Permanent 'in between' in Working Life<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*Ambiguous liminality used to exist 'in between', in a transition to a new social-structural order, but recently, it has gained a more permanent and normalized presence in working life, where existing boundaries are becoming blurred. However, liminality as a continuous state can be individually demanding. This paper elaborates upon a theoretical understanding of permanent and temporary liminality in working life and examines possible measures to tame excessive liminality. To illustrate the theoretical development, forms of permanent and temporary liminality in the lives of three professionals are analyzed. We found that dealing with multiple and complex work roles independently could be conducive to fracturing work routines, which we identify as habitualized, permanent liminality. Withdrawal to an alternative work environment – a rural Finnish archipelago – formed a liminal space in its original sense, a creative and reflective phase that illuminated work-related challenges. It is suggested that such spaces are designed to achieve simplicity.*

## KEYWORDS

*bodily change / creativity / liminality / reflection / space*

## Introduction

With 'anytime, anywhere' work, outsourcing, enterprising, freelancing, and project-based work gaining ground, work is increasingly surpassing organizational and work/life boundaries (Garsten 1999; Koslowski et al. 2017; Moen et al. 2013; Tempest & Starkey 2004). The notions of fluid, mobile, and resilient work suggest that it has somehow become inherently contradictory to associate work with bounded categories such as place, hours, and clearly predefined duties. As a result, it has been argued that liminality, an ambiguous state 'betwixt and between', has become a common condition and experience in contemporary work (Ibarra & Obodaru 2016; Johnsen & Sørensen 2015).

Liminality is a concept that originated from studies on the ritual behavior of traditional small-scale communities. Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1960 [1909]) discovered that rites accompanying transition to a new social status included a phase

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characterized by the physical separation of the ritual subjects from the rest of the society, the destruction of their previous social status, and a dramatic, extraordinary, and playful recombination of cultural elements, the aim of which was to transmit the society's deep knowledge about its values and cosmologies to the initiands (Turner 1974a, p. 239, 1974b). Van Gennep (1960 [1909]) defined this ambiguous, even dangerous phase as liminal, after the Latin term *limen*, denoting a threshold.

In organization and working life studies, the concept of liminality has sparked increasing interest. Liminality has been examined in relation to 'in-between' organizational spaces (Iedema et al. 2010; Shortt 2015) and events (Concannon & Nordberg 2018; Johnson et al. 2010; Sturdy et al. 2006). Certain organizational positions have also been identified as liminal, such as temporary employees and consultants (Czarniawska & Mazza 2003; Garsten 1999; Tempest & Starkey 2004; Winkler & Mahmood 2015) as well as managers of interorganizational relationships (Ellis & Ybema 2010). However, it has been found that for such individuals, the liminal 'in between' may also become a continuous state of affairs (Czarniawska & Mazza 2003; Ellis & Ybema 2010; Garsten 1999). Likewise, it has also been shown that liminality has characterized organizational strategies (Lindsay 2010), cultures (Howard-Grenville et al. 2011), and management practices (Swan et al. 2016). These findings indicate that in some cases, the liminal 'in-between' condition has reached a state of relative permanence. These studies have characterized the liminal experience in working life as ambiguous yet potentially creative, but many have paid less attention to how liminality can foster change and transition.

As the understanding of liminality has shifted from that of a ritual and extraordinary phase to an increasingly mundane and permanent phenomenon in the working life context, limitations in the original concept have begun to seem evident (Ibarra & Obodaru 2016; Johnsen & Sørensen 2015). Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) have argued that some professionals thrive in and even seek out liminal work experiences, such as knowledge workers in the new economy, high technology, and media. Simultaneously, however, responsibility for navigating liminal situations falls more heavily on the individuals themselves and may involve a risk of losing sight of how boundaries could be meaningfully restored in work and private lives (Johnsen & Sørensen 2015). According to Thomassen (2014), a prolonged liminality without transition stands in contrast to the original logic of liminality. Yet, these kinds of situations are typical to modern society (Szakolczai 2000; Thomassen 2014). It is even possible to identify multiple levels of liminality, structural and of the more personal kind, affecting the individual simultaneously (Thomassen 2015; Winkler & Mahmood 2015).

This article investigates the potential interplay of permanent and temporary liminality in contemporary working life by analyzing the experiences and reflections of three professionals during an experiment that involved a change of work environment to an unfamiliar rural Finnish archipelago for a short period of time. The article also examines whether some measures can be taken to tame and control liminality that has become burdensome. The article emphasizes spatiality and bodily experience as important dimensions of liminality, as they originally were (Thomassen 2014, p. 91), and draws theoretical insights from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Unlike some other working-life studies of liminality, this article maintains the original meaning of the concept of liminality as a transitional phase but leaves the context of the transition and its eventual outcome open, suggesting, like Ibarra and Obodaru (2016), that modern-day

transitional situations may be highly individual yet still connected to more general social conditions. In such cases, the phenomena and the transition they stimulate may be interpreted case-by-case using liminality as a heuristic device.

We begin our analysis with a literature review that examines permanent and temporary liminality and explores the relation between liminality, space, and body. Next, we turn to an empirical analysis, which shows how the complete change in environment of three professionals produced a liminal experience comparable to the original idea of liminality as a phase of upheaval, creativity, and reflectivity. This liminal phase also illuminated the ambiguous characteristics of the professionals' ordinary work conditions. In the discussion section, we question to what extent the 'normal' everyday work of our three informants, as it was viewed during the temporary archipelagic period, demonstrates 'permanent liminality' and how a temporary liminal phase helped counteract the tendencies of this permanent liminality. In our conclusion, we suggest that within a permanently liminal and complicated everyday reality, a transformative liminal space may paradoxically be found by embracing simplicity. This may require a physical change in one's working conditions.

## Literature

### **Liminality as the condition of modernity: From a temporary phase to a permanent state?**

Van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) main aim was to show that rites of transition possessed a universal pattern, consisting of three phases: separation from the rest of the society, transition (liminality proper), and incorporation back to the normal social order. Victor Turner (1969, 1974a, 1974b) emphasized a close association of liminality with *communitas*, a creation of equal and family-like communal bonds with fellow initiands. Yet, liminal situation was also dangerous both for the initiands and the society because such an undefined state could cause anxiety and threaten the social order (Douglas 2003 [1966]). Turner extended the concept of liminality to account also for individual liminal experiences and liminal situations experienced outside of small-scale traditional societies, such as pilgrimages (Turner 1974a) and engagement with modern art and entertainment (1974b). He recognized plenty of creative potential in liminality, describing it as 'a time of marvels' when one could reflect upon and recreate one's place in the world (Turner 1974a, pp. 238–242), this creativity being facilitated by the individualization of modern society (Turner 1974b).

As liminality has been 'set free' of the ritual framework, it appears to be no longer merely a channel to deal with changes affecting a community but a resource for profit-making and an experience sought for its entertainment value. This is particularly visible in the increased yearning for extreme experiences and immersion in virtual realities in contemporary life (Thomassen 2014). Creative play that subverts the normal rules used to belong to the liminal phase of a ritual (Szokolczai 2000, p. 213) but has become a popular organizational strategy in sectors ranging from creative and new media industries to public organizations (Pors & Andersen 2015; Sørensen & Spoelstra 2012; Walker 2011). Being an 'outsider' – a typical liminal character – used to be exceptional but is now a normalized organizational role, as in the case of consultants and temporary



workers (Czarniawska & Mazza 2003; Garsten 1999; Tempest & Starkey 2004; Winkler & Mahmood 2015).

Addressing this change, Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) have argued that, unlike its traditional counterpart, contemporary liminality is typically under-institutionalized, individualized, and open-ended – and thus fertile for ‘identity play’, the divergent exploration of possible work identities. On the other hand, studying the case of a consultant, Johnsen and Sørensen (2015) have found that the overagitated lifestyle of overworked professionals may lead to a situation where work absorbs life, and norms separating work and ‘life’ become altogether unintelligible, leading to permanent liminality. Liminality may also be addictive. Finding a way out from such a situation may be difficult if one experiences it as being constantly in a ‘fast-moving train’ (Johnsen & Sørensen 2015). A frustration caused by the simultaneous impossibility and unavoidability of finding a solution may feel like schizophrenic *aporia* (Czarniawska & Mazza 2003) or limbo (Bamber et al. 2017). Facing this situation alone increases its difficulty (Johnsen & Sørensen 2015). In sum, systemic, permanent liminality may be not only empowering but also involve difficulties with finding back to structured ways of working and living, as if one remained stuck in the third phase of the rite of transition: incorporation (Szakolczai 2000, p. 214).

### **Temporary liminal spaces in organizations: Liminality as a bodily experience**

There may yet be other, more fleeting kinds of liminality in organizations: moments that are situationally achieved, emergent, possibly orchestrated, or that simply happen as a result of individuals ‘dwelling’ in space (Bachelard 1994 [1958]; Lefebvre 1991; Shortt 2015). This kind of liminality has been identified in workshops (Johnson et al. 2010), strategy away-days (Concannon & Nordberg 2018), and work dinners (Sturdy et al. 2006), as well as in the everyday uses of leftover, abandoned space within organizational facilities (Iedema et al. 2010; Shortt 2015).

Where accounts of systemic and structural liminality highlight the contradictory and often tension-ridden and demanding nature of the in-between position for the individuals concerned (Beech 2011; Czarniawska & Mazza 2003; Garsten 1999; Winkler & Mahmood 2015), findings of situational, momentary liminality, on the other hand, emphasize characteristics more clearly on the emancipatory side of liminality: the exchange of tacit knowledge, creative discussion, retreat from the constraints of normative roles, introspection, and reflection. They also involve a separation from and return to normative spaces and roles and the use of an alternative space in between – resembling traditional liminal rites. For example, Shortt (2015) found that in the temporary liminal spaces of leftover organizational facilities, employees felt in contact with their inner feelings, which were suppressed in normative work situations. Consequently, in those spaces, they could interact with colleagues more authentically and creatively.

It must be added that individuals in a long-term liminal position may also experience their situation more intensively during particular events, but these are moments when they are suddenly reminded of the adversities of their ambiguous position (Winkler & Mahmood 2015). Our focus here, however, is on the liminal characteristics of certain momentary organizational spaces as compared to dominant organizational spaces. Yet,

Winkler and Mahmood's (2015) insight that there may be an interplay between liminal moments and long-term liminal situations is important for the purposes of this article.

Van Gennep began his classic book *Rites of Passage* with a chapter on territorial passage immediately after the initial classification of rites. He clearly meant this chapter as a framework for his subsequent examination of liminality, because space played an important role in organizing many liminal rites (Thomassen 2014, p. 91). We now examine further the significance of body and space in liminality in the context of contemporary working life by grounding our study to the bodily phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

According to Merleau-Ponty (2012 [1945]), our perceptive capabilities fundamentally begin with the body: how our body is situated in the world. In perception, we are immersed in the surrounding world and our perception is solicited by this world, we thus escape our conscious selves. This makes perception a holistic and bodily experience rather than a purely intellectual one, a stance that is advanced also by emerging strands of organization research such as spatial organization studies (e.g., Dale & Burrell 2008; Taylor & Spicer 2007) and the practice perspective (e.g., Gherardi 2006; Strati 2007). The primary role of body in perception invests it with practical, nontransparent knowledge about the world, a 'body schema' that is built upon the sedimentation of previous perceptions and comes forth situationally (Kozyreva 2018; Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]).

Merleau-Ponty stated that the 'sense' that the perception of our environment provides us has both an anthropological and a nonpersonal component. We have a 'natural', pre-personal attitude within our bodily, sensory functions that ensures there exists a certain organic unity or style in our experience beneath the ruptures of a personal and historical life (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], p. 345, see also Heinämaa 2015). However, our ability to function in the world also builds upon a personal history and familiar habitual practices that connect to another side in us, that of a cultural being. This invests every perception with an existential dimension. Says Merleau-Ponty:

For man, everything is constructed and everything is natural, in the sense that there is no single word or behavior that does not owe something to mere biological being – and, at the same time, there is no word or behavior that does not break free from animal life, that does not deflect vital behaviors from their direction [sens] through a sort of escape and a genius for ambiguity that might well serve to define man. Already the mere presence of a living being transforms the physical world, makes 'food' appear over here and a 'hiding place' over there, and gives to 'stimuli' a sense that they did not have. (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], p. 195)

Sensing is this living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life. (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], p. 53)

From this perspective, workspace, as any space in which we dwell, is not merely about functionality but also the framework of our existential belonging. Workspace solicits a certain routine behavior through its artifacts, including rules, regulations, workplace architecture, and software (D'Adderio 2011). Although these artifacts posit constraints to individual freedom and creativity, which has been a concern to recent routine literature (Howard-Grenville et al. 2016), spatial routines also contribute to developing the



practical body schema (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]), a familiar way of moving about in this world.

The significance of this affective, bodily experience of space in the formation of the individual has been an important theme in the work of many social theorists, although it has not necessarily been examined in phenomenological detail. Foucault (1977) emphasized the role of spatial design, such as that modeled after the panopticon, in producing docile and obedient bodies. Lefebvre (1991) discussed how homogeneous, rationalized, and urban spatial planning curtail expressions of social and individual life.

As we develop a habitualized way of moving around in our familiar spaces, we cease to perceive how this spatial activity as a system of exchanges comes in to being (Merleau-Ponty 1964a). According to Merleau-Ponty (1964a), this ‘becoming’ was something that modern painters like Cézanne and Matisse sought to capture by abandoning the then conventional and ideal forms of expression in an attempt to return to bodily perception, that is, to the vision as it comes into being in a bodily experience. Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 180) characterized this artistic vision as a ‘deflagration of being’. However, it was an estranged position: ‘Only one emotion is possible for this painter – the feeling of strangeness – and only one lyricism – that of the continual rebirth of existence’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, p. 18). We argue that this kind of perception is also characteristic of liminal experience, and it is by such estrangement from the ordinary norms that the existential and emotional signification tied to everyday spatial practices may be opened up and questioned. As the abovementioned studies of the liminality of work dinners, workshops, away-days, and uses of marginal spaces within work facilities indicate, a change of workspace may push normative, ordinary perception aside and enable a vision of new practices and significations.

The question we examine next is how permanent liminality and momentary liminal spaces might interplay in the lives of individual professionals. We describe the move of three such individuals to work in an unconventional work environment, a natural rural archipelago, and examine how this move evoked reflection on work practices, career, and values.

## Data and methods

The aim of this study was to further elaborate the constructs of permanent and temporary liminality in the context of contemporary working life. We illustrate this theoretical development using interviews with three Finnish individuals as case examples (Siggelkow 2007). These were professionals who detached themselves from urban environments and experimented with carrying out their work in an isolated and unfamiliar rural environment for a short period of time. This experimentation was done within a research project that examined flexible work in the rural archipelagos of the Baltic Sea region. The research project was carried out in cooperation of Finnish, Swedish, and Estonian research institutes, in partnership with local municipalities and entrepreneurs. The cases presented in this paper are from interview data collected in southwestern Finland and Åland. This archipelago area holds a special place both culturally and naturally in the Finnish context. Traditional life in the archipelago was hard, but one was elated by the forcefulness of its nature, both arid and fragile. Currently, this mainly rural area is a popular holiday destination. The beach, in between land and sea, has been found to signal liminality (Preston-Whyte 2004). The same can be considered of the archipelago.

The study participants conducted their work in the archipelago over the course of a week; they were offered free lodging and office space for this purpose. The purpose of the original research project was to analyze the experience and well-being effects of working remotely in an isolated rural environment and develop telework service concepts for rural areas. Study participants were recruited through an advertisement that proposed the opportunity to try flexible work in the archipelago area in exchange for participation in the study. Before the experiment, the participants were informed in detail about the purpose and design of the experiment and study. Participation was voluntary and could be terminated at any moment if willed. The participants could decide all their own activities during the experiment. Participation was possible for small groups of colleagues and lone individuals, depending on preference.

Although this research setting could be considered atypical, flexible work arrangements are a common practice and increasingly mainstream in organizational thinking in Finland and other Nordic countries. According to a Finnish survey, every fifth employee in Finland conducts telework (Sutela & Lehto 2014). Daily working hours are less likely to be fixed among Finnish wage earners (44% of whom work fixed hours) than those in other EU countries (Eurofound 2015). Conducting work in multiple locations is most common in Finland (45%) among EU countries, with other Nordic countries reaching almost equal shares (Eurofound 2015). Given these statistics, expanding the normative idea of telework fits with general trends in Finnish working life. In addition, Finland has vast rural areas that are suffering from migration to urban areas, and the idea of rural telework as a way to re-enliven these areas reoccurs in political debate. Despite increasing migration to cities, many Finns do not want to sever their ties to the countryside entirely. In fact, Finland has one of the highest ratios of number of leisure apartments to per-capita population in the EU (Adamiak et al. 2015). There is research which indicates that these apartments are also used for teleworking (Komulainen 2007).

The study participants were interviewed thematically in groups at the end of archipelagic work periods to encourage sense-making and discussion of the nascent phenomenon (Frey & Fontana 1991). The interviews dealt with the professional backgrounds and overall work situations of the participants prior to advancing to the experiment itself, how work was carried out during the experiment, and how the period was experienced as a whole. The participants were able to themselves introduce additional themes of importance relating to what they had discovered during the experiment.

Walsh and Bartunek (2015) suggest cycles of inductive and deductive inquiry for studies of unexplored phenomena. An inductive and preliminary analysis of the data collected during the project revealed that the change of environment affected not only the practical ways in which participants carried out their work tasks but also their view on deeper topics: their professional development, dreams, pasts, and futures. As this new situation was characterized by openness and a sense of discovery, we adopted liminality as a key concept to make sense of this phenomenon.

We used theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007) to examine more closely three participants, Eeva, Mia, and Lasse (pseudonyms), whose stories are presented in this paper. These stories illustrate temporary and permanent liminality with different emphases. Together, they enable us to sketch a pattern that shows how the change of work environment affected perception and reflection, which were simultaneously directed by personal histories, situations, and concerns. Depending on personal



background, the environment could trigger intense sensations and reflection. Eeva's story is particularly rich in nuanced description of how she perceived the new environment and how it created for her an alternative world with dreamy undertones. Lasse's focus was more on his concern for his overall work situation, which was characterized by dispersion. Yet, in Lasse's interview, too, this reflection connects to his archipelago experience, where he found a contrast to his everyday routines. In Mia's story, we find complicated and fractured everyday routines, as particularly in Lasse's case, and a fascination with the current environment, as in Eeva's case but with fewer existential undertones.

We can assume that the professional backgrounds and personalities of the participants affected their orientation in the archipelago and how they expressed their experiences. Mia seemed to be more satisfied with her general work situation than Eeva and Lasse, who were each concerned in their own fashion about their work situations. The three stories shed light on the interplay between such individual background factors and the space affecting how work effort was reconstructed, experimented with, and reflected in this new space. Alvesson (2003) recommends viewing interviews as contextual accounts, a methodological perspective compatible with Merleau-Ponty's bodily and situated theory of perception, presented earlier. The liminal context of these interviews can be traced with an air of straightforwardness and in the way the existential theme of good, personally rewarding, and meaningful work was opened up, not specifically enquired into by the interviewers.

As this analysis relies on only three cases, we do not aim to make far-reaching empirical generalizations. Our main aims are to examine the interrelations between permanent and momentary liminality in professional lives and how momentary liminality can disrupt permanent liminality.

## Analysis

### Case I: Eeva

Eeva was a private entrepreneur in electrical installation, working also as a freelance journalist and writer whenever her primary job allowed. Her duties included a variety of tasks, ranging from actual installation to administrative duties, such as billing and bookkeeping. Her home was also her office. Eeva was experienced in her work, with several decades of work history as an electrician. She had also been a keen writer all her life. However, she currently struggled to find time for writing, as the breaks her main work allowed were not ideal for writing efficiently. For a year, Eeva had been planning to write a storybook with an illustrator friend, but it had been difficult to find time for this among her everyday routines. The archipelago experiment was an opportunity for the two to finally concentrate on their book project together.

The duo chose not to make detailed plans beforehand regarding the work process in the archipelago. When in place, they became fascinated by the local environment and let this sensation influence their emergent work rhythm. This is how Eeva described the process of settling in the archipelago:

Of course, we said that we would conduct our writing project here. But we couldn't define more precise goals, because we did not know anything about the conditions and

the rhythm. (...) We have carried out real working days here, it has not been like mere relaxation, although this is such a lovely place, like, can you bear to sit still and write at all ... but it just somehow, let's say it became rhythmized by itself, and it is pretty exciting to notice, like how, it just happened.

Eeva described the formation of their daily rhythm as a 'puzzle'. The duo would wake up in the morning, each according to their natural rhythm, start work, and then go for a walk together. After lunch, they again did an excursion and then worked during the afternoon. After dinner, the pair went outdoors but could again return to work until they felt it was time to go to sleep. This was the pair's rhythm during the whole week. During the period, the duo managed to lay the groundwork for the book project, crafting its basic ideas and establishing their collaboration practices.

The archipelago environment was a source of inspiration and relaxation for Eeva. She became fascinated by things both large and small, such as landscapes, overall spaciousness, and cats in the neighborhood. The excursions in the environment enabled her to transit 'from one atmosphere to another' and forget work matters, which was an unusual experience to her:

Somehow it has been wonderful here. Of course it is due to being in a new environment, that once we have been working and then gone to walk, and then when we are walking, there are so many new and wondrous things, that you forget work (...) it has been like this, you go from one ambiance to another. Somehow you can focus on where you are and not where you were a moment ago ... that is what has happened here. Of course, it would probably be different, if you would go like every year, or many times a year, to the same place. So, it is probably also the novelty which has created this.

For Eeva, the archipelago working period created an immense contrast to her daily routines. She pointed to a tendency to become completely absorbed in the work routines of her everyday life. As she worked alone, she could spend her whole days from dawn to dusk conducting work matters. However, her attention would often be dispersed to other things such as the Internet. This made Eeva's work and life merge together, leading to something she described as 'tunnel work'. Working with a colleague in the archipelago had enabled her to break this trajectory:

Knowing myself, I can sit alone and work the whole time I am awake. First, I do the assembling, then I do the billing, then bookkeeping, and then the next thing is like going to bed. I cannot interrupt it at all. Here I don't have that, I don't have a car, I can't go on the Internet. 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'.

The archipelago also affected Eeva on a deeply personal level, evoking old memories. Doing creative work in an idyllic rural environment meant for her revisiting a childhood dream:

Well, I will mostly remember pictures of the rocks and the sky, it is spacious here, and then of something like a completely new kind of life. Because this is a dream come true to me,



that I could write and live like this, it is something else. Although I cannot say I don't like my electrician work too, sometimes I like it really a lot, but this is my little girl's dream in a way, which lives here.

In the interview, Eeva anticipated that she would perhaps no longer be motivated to carry on her electrician work. A couple of weeks after the archipelagic period, we received a message from Eeva saying that it had initiated in her a reflection process about a career change. Now, she was considering quitting or significantly decreasing her electrician work to focus on something entirely different.

## Case 2: Mia

Mia was a client project manager in a small firm producing process management tools for health care services. The firm had high scientific expertise and its personnel had academic affiliations. Mia herself was a PhD student with a dissertation topic related to her work. She was allowed to work on her PhD during part of her working hours. At her job, Mia oversaw customer relations, including training, advice, and support. She also participated in product development. The employer did not have office space, so Mia usually worked from home or in an office room she rented herself. Communication with colleagues took place via e-mail, and occasionally, the firm would have get-togethers at the CEO's home or other locations.

The firm had a flexible approach to working arrangements, and consequently, Mia hardly ever followed normal office hours. Need for Mia's input fluctuated depending on the firm's productivity, and she was prepared to work extra hours when needed and take corresponding time off later. This is how she described her normal, rather complicated working days:

My normal everyday working day means that I live [in a town in the larger Helsinki metropolitan area] and mostly telework from there (...) And I have personally rented a little office room in my neighborhood. I work there part time, and part time at home. It depends a little on the schedule of the rest of the family and other affairs. But mainly I start working in the morning with my computer (...) I may go to the gym in the middle of the day or run some personal affairs. But then in the evenings I work at home, and sometimes in the weekends too. I try to calm down at weekends, but it depends on what is going on. If we have a project with a deadline, then I work harder, and when it is quieter I can balance it with extra free time. (...) My weekly working hours vary quite a lot. It would be challenging to balance the hours during a week. But it is not necessary, I think this system is really good.

Mia's colleagues were busy professionals and meetings of the firm's personnel would typically be hectic, with colleagues coming and going at different times. In Mia's view, there were not enough opportunities for the co-creation and exchange of views needed for product development. The CEO and three employees participated as a group in the archipelago experiment to find a tranquil space for collaboration. Furthermore, Mia and the other employees had made a suggestion that Mia considered to be a kind of joke: to work during office hours in the archipelago. This would be completely contrary to the

firm's normal working culture. Still, in the archipelago, the group managed to follow this plan quite successfully by means of a spatial arrangement: leaving work to the office space and not opening computers in the living space.

As in Eeva's case, the daily rhythm evolved, in Mia's words, 'naturally' in the archipelago, with the group periodically checking what they needed to accomplish together and how they should proceed. Mia found that her working days were less fractured than they normally were:

Normally my days are quite fractured because there are plenty of client calls and e-mail. I have tried to put that aside a bit and focus here more on bigger tasks that require concentration, like product development and things like that. That I have been better able to do here.

In the tranquil atmosphere, Mia enjoyed being able to share more than just the most acute work matters with her colleagues. The combination of working, doing simple leisure activities, and enjoying the environment together with colleagues enforced the sense of community within the firm:

The matters that needed negotiation and reflection together, we have taken plenty of time for that here. It has been really useful regarding how we are going to proceed next. Absolutely, this being together with the firm has been a really good thing, to spend time together. It has also been nice to go to the sauna and cook together, to go out a little and things like that.

From Mia's perspective, the rare opportunity for a communal time and space enhanced the collective product development process. Often the colleagues would have to conduct such processes through e-mail where there was no flow of immediate communication and, consequently, the process was fractured and slowed down. In contrast, in the archipelago, Mia was able to see such development processes in a holistic manner. The natural environment supported the creation of a positive atmosphere:

Regarding work matters, I will mostly remember that this kind of time together and solving and planning certain things together is absolutely important and positive. (...) In this kind of get-together, we are able to do one thing properly (...) with all the experts at once, so that we can move on to the next stage, we can give feedback to each other and find perspectives together. Another thing I will remember is this nature, the scenery and the archipelago as an environment, these little villages (...) All this is really very nice, to be able to enjoy such wonderful nature alongside working.

### Case 3: Lasse

Lasse was a consultant who combined private entrepreneurship with network-based work activity. Besides running his own company, he was a partner in two other companies that were operated by partners who, like Lasse, similarly ran their own enterprises. He also had affiliations to other networks. None of his companies had an office, so Lasse worked from home.



Lasse's job involved consulting to companies on network-based business practices. He also provided facilitation services and training for networks. However, he felt that his own network of colleagues needed to boost their business concept, and this was why he and his three partners had decided to participate in the archipelago experiment.

In the interview, Lasse was preoccupied with reflecting on his everyday work conditions. Many times, he expressed concern about the fractured nature of his work activities. He divided his work into 'real work', which was about client orders, and other not-so-real work that he associated with tasks such as marketing and stakeholder communication. He also took care of the financial administration of the three companies he was involved in. In addition to this functional dispersion of his work, Lasse traveled extensively for work meetings, spending time in his home office only occasionally. All this work effort and mobility required relatively long working hours compared to the Finnish average. Lasse felt he was involved in too many things at the expense of his family life, which prompted a question as to whether he did anything 'reasonable':

My working hours are really a question of definition. There is too little of such work that is based on client orders, real work, that is. (...) It is terribly scattered. (...) I really ask, just like my wife has done many times, do I do anything reasonable. It is quite difficult to answer that question as I spend my evenings managing the e-mail. When you act in networks, it involves so many of these little strange things. Like first thing this morning, there was this one offer which I passed on to my network. I hope something comes out of it but it is all terribly scattered (...) For a long time I had missed this kind of a long period [such as the archipelago] when you feel that you even get to proceed somewhere.

The fluctuating profitability of the firms had driven Lasse to widen his entrepreneurial activities to their current extent. Lasse reminisced warmly about an earlier stage in his career when he was in stable employment with a smaller but regular salary. Now, Lasse was approaching pension phase, which he envisioned providing more opportunities for family time. However, Lasse felt that he still needed to earn more before he could at least partially quit work.

Lasse's relationship to his work was somewhat contradictory. He described himself as work-oriented and work as his 'hobby', but his mind often turned to home chores while he was working. These contrasting attractions added to the experienced fracturedness of his work. Lasse's work orientation had become reactionary, in that he would simply adapt to situations as they emerged. This he described as characteristic of his whole lifestyle. Lasse approached family holidays with a similar 'hurry' as he did his work. He would not spend time planning trips beforehand but just obtain a map and try to find his way around. Sarcastically, Lasse hoped this would not show too much on the outside. This was also how he had come to the archipelago:

I have a lifestyle that I have been following also in my private life (...) I didn't have time to make any preparations, I come and see where I can put my bag and where to get electricity and what is around here, and then I kind of force myself to adapt to the situation. It is part of this overall fracturedness and moving around a lot that when you wake up in some hotel, you basically ask what is this country, what is the currency, and even what are we doing here.

What Lasse commended most about the archipelagic period was the feeling of accomplishment and moving ahead with work tasks. The group worked from morning until evening and managed to accomplish, in Lasse's words, twice the usual amount of work during the week, although they also found time for recreational activities. As Lasse saw himself as a work-oriented person, this was enjoyable to him:

I am pretty work-oriented, so it was clear to me that we would work like from morning till evening and from evening till morning, and take a walk every once in a while. (...) This is pretty staid activity if you look at it from outside, but extremely nice here inside when you get to be doing it.

For Lasse, the archipelagic period represented a 'clear' working period as opposed to his everyday work. He felt that taking time off from the hectic everyday routines was beneficial for his efficiency. Lasse had realized that one needs clear working periods, such as the archipelagic period, and then clear holiday periods, a statement echoing the themes that he was pondering in relation to his everyday working life:

The biggest thing here is replacing the fractured days with this kind of one long-term effort, and the fracturedness is connected to having a family and a dog and you have to do all kinds of stuff, just like [a colleague in the archipelago] said that when working at home he is tempted to go to the yard and chop wood. One really ought to have this kind of clear working periods, and then clear holiday periods.

In all three cases, normal order was inverted into unusual shapes (Turner 1974b, p. 73), as is typical of liminality, but this has to be seen in relation to the individual professional situations. Eeva found a creative collective in contrast to her everyday lonesome 'tunnel work'. For Mia, experimenting with conventional working hours was initially so strange as to be a joke. Shared space and time with colleagues was also extraordinary to Mia. Lasse experienced a 'clear' working period as a contrast to his fractured everyday life.

Liminality is also about creating meaning in a world gone chaotic (Thomassen 2014, p. 118). Eeva found a way to reinvigorate her true calling. The unanticipated opportunity to spend a working period in the archipelago let Eeva play with another kind of work and identity (Ibarra & Obodaru 2016), and this led to a reflection process about a career change. In Lasse's case, the archipelagic experience prompted serious, critical reflection on the sense of his ways of working. For Mia, spending time with her colleagues increased her sense of community and involvement in 'bigger tasks', such as collective product development. Typical to liminal space, the archipelagic work period was characterized by informal and creative social relations as well as existential reflection (Turner 1969, 1974a, 1974b).

The physical change of place played an important role in creating this liminal space. The spatial change brought along a bodily sensation of a different rhythm, both in the environment and in the work carried out there, which conditioned the emerging work practices (see Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]). Eeva particularly allowed herself be immersed in the sensations of the new environment and created an alternative, situated work practice. Although Mia's group had planned to deliberately change their everyday routines, in practice, they also situatedly developed a rhythm within these frames



according to what felt collectively meaningful at the time. The tranquil rhythm of the environment also enabled in-depth discussions and getting better acquainted personally with colleagues. For Lasse, a clear time frame for working toward a clear goal was a change of rhythm that created an experience where work again made sense to him.

### **Discussion: Taming permanent liminality by a withdrawal to a temporary liminal space?**

This study found that a change in working place can become a liminal experience in the original sense of the concept (Thomassen 2014; van Gennepe 1960 [1909]): a temporary, communal, and playful phase detached from many of the everyday toils and sources of frustration. Yet, liminality may also be threatening, just as ‘matter out of place’ can call into question the existential meaning of order and disorder; structure and chaos (Douglas 2003 [1966]). The unconventional work experiment made some of the everyday work arrangements of our informants seem fragmented and lacking meaning. We thus found forms of permanent liminality, as identified by Johnsen and Sørensen (2015), in the stories of the three informants we examined.

In Lasse’s case, the parallels to Johnsen and Sørensen’s (2015) case were most evident. Lasse’s network-based consultant work was functionally dispersed and fractured. He was involved in several companies and there were plenty of administrative tasks and work travel. As a consequence, Lasse was working long hours and struggled to find time for family life. Although Lasse generally characterized himself as work-oriented, when working in his home office he was often attracted by home chores. Like Johnsen and Sørensen’s (2015) consultant living and working in ‘a fast-moving train’, Lasse felt he was being pulled in too many directions and had begun to question the reasonability of it all.

Somewhat resembling Lasse’s case, Mia’s daily routines were also highly irregular – she had two work stations from where she teleworked, home and a rented office; two lines of work, as she was conducting her PhD thesis alongside main work; a lot of personal choice as to when to work, but the need to yield to the fluctuating needs of her family and employer, who could request her input in the evenings and on weekends. Being the contact point for customers added to the fractured nature of Mia’s routines. Although Mia appreciated the flexible working culture of her employer, during the archipelago period, she deliberately wished to work according to conventional office hours.

Eeva’s everyday routines presented similar but unique challenges. Having worked for decades mainly as an entrepreneur in electrical installation, she had waited for an opportunity to express more her creative side through writing. Similar to Lasse, when Eeva worked alone in her home office, she tended to become distracted by other chores as well as by the Internet. Eeva remained at least partially connected to work-related matters during all waking hours but struggled to find an opportunity to concentrate on her passion, writing. Eeva’s work and private life had started to blur into one and the same thing which she experienced as ‘tunnel work’, with the ‘tunnel’ perhaps referring to a space where vision is narrow and limited. This blurring of work and life resembles Lasse’s case, but as Lasse’s concerns mainly related to the amount of work and his multiple work roles, Eeva was also missing new vision for her career.

These three cases show a form of permanent liminality that has emerged, as work routines have become fractured and blurred with other areas of life. Lasse and Eeva suffered from this situation, while Mia, although viewing the archipelago period as an opportunity for a respite from the fragmentation, still seemed to be in control of and handling her situation. Like the consultant in Johnsen and Sørensen's (2015) case, Lasse's liminal situation was due to extensive amount of work but also to functional fragmentation. In Mia's case, we find both functional and temporal fragmentation. Eeva too was trying to combine two jobs, but she was also lacking work community that could provide support and framework for her activities. In the archipelago, Mia also realized her need for such a supportive work community.

These findings raise questions about the extent to which the increasingly common independent, multirole, and virtual ways of working can imperceptibly cause permanent liminality. Merleau-Ponty (2012 [1945]) states that even our most minor, everyday, practical activities have existential repercussions. On the basis of our findings, particularly in the cases of Lasse and Eeva, it seems that blurred everyday routines may lead to blurring of one's general life goals. Both Lasse and Eeva had drifted to a way of life that was habitual and familiar but contradictory to some of their wishes for life. On the other hand, while Mia's routines were also fluid and difficult to keep track of, they were still meaningful to her. Then again, Mia was studying, which implies that she was living a phase of life that would eventually change, while Eeva and Lasse already had long careers behind them. However, Mia's working habits were also supported by the flexible working culture of her employer. How Mia's habits continued to evolve and whether she would remain adaptive to their fragmentation is beyond the scope of this study. These findings suggest that the intensity of permanently liminal work situations depends not only on objective work conditions but also on how these conditions interweave with personal histories, career situations, and habits formed through time (see Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]).

Our findings add to the literature of organizational and working life liminality in the following ways. First, applying Merleau-Ponty's (2012 [1945]) thinking, this study expands our understanding of the formation of temporary liminal workspaces: they may be formed when a change of environment and rhythm disrupts our body schema, our habitual way of reaching toward the world. The system of exchanges that has been formed between ourselves, work, and the environment ceases to follow the familiar course. This estrangement may create an alternative way of seeing and perceiving, one that is freer from norms and rules and thus allows bodily experience to come to the fore (Merleau-Ponty 1964a). The liminality of the archipelagic work experiment emerges as a phase of enlivened becoming of new working and living practices as they were solicited by awakened bodily sensations.

Merleau-Ponty (2012 [1945], p. 309) states that if we hold back every cultural affirmation, 'stand in wonder before the world and cease to be complicit with it', we are able to reveal the motivations that carry us there, awaken our life and 'make it entirely explicit'. Existential reflection was stimulated in the archipelago by allowing activities spontaneously organize themselves as they were perceived (Merleau-Ponty 1964b). Particularly, Eeva and Lasse saw their work histories and futures as a continuum. Adapting practically to a novel environment may trigger surprising dimensions in personal memory, as we can see particularly in Eeva's case. The liminal experience of changing the work environment allows us to reflect on how we perceive our 'normal' work and lifestyle and illuminates their ambiguous characteristics.



Second, our findings show that dealing with complex and multiple work roles independently may be conducive to the development of fractured and liminal work habits, which in turn may blur the sense of one's work. As a consequence, permanent liminality can become a state of mind characterized by mental dispersion, visible particularly in Lasse's and Eeva's accounts. Yet, such a development is also conditioned by the long-term personal career trajectory and career prospects, not merely the objective work conditions. Third, work activity and sense-making in the temporary liminal space are influenced by the tensions of the individual professional and life situations. In Merleau-Ponty's thinking (2012 [1945]), we carry previous experiences sedimented in the body schema, as in a latent disposition, and these sedimentations condition our coming perceptions. In the three cases, fragmented ways of working formed this sedimented background, to which the calm and simple work arrangements of the archipelago produced a strange and revealing contrast. There is an interplay between liminal events and one's long-term liminal condition, as Winkler and Mahmood (2015) have suggested, and we have elaborated on this insight by showing how it can go two ways.

This paper considers useful the initiatives to extend the traditional concept of liminality to encompass permanent liminality (Johnsen & Sørensen 2015) and under-institutionalized liminality (Ibarra & Obodaru 2016). However, we simultaneously consider it important not to dismiss some of the concept's original characteristics, which were essential in defining liminality. In our understanding, the traditional idea of liminality was essentially about meaning-making. The purpose of liminal rites was to dig into the (collective) unconscious through ritual performance to reinvigorate fundamental values, which could be swept aside by everyday toil, worries, and conflicts (Szokolczai 2000; Turner 1974b). The liminal space was a spiritual space designed to foster a sense of community and individual belonging. This kind of liminal space may still be important for inducing creativity in contemporary work, not only in the instrumental sense of improving work results but also in a deeper, perhaps ethical sense (Bigo 2018), in that it may enable more transparent relations with others and with oneself.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the notion of permanent liminality (Johnsen & Sørensen 2015) along with the more traditional idea of transitional, temporary liminality (van Gennep 1960 [1909]) in contemporary working life. We have discussed how certain contemporary ways of working, such as independent, multirole, and virtual work, may be conducive to the development of fractured work routines, leading to permanent liminality as a habitualized mindset. This may eventually blur the experienced sense of one's work activities. However, an alternative work environment may produce a temporary liminal space that can illuminate ambiguous aspects of everyday work practices and one's career.

We suggest that (transitional) liminal space could acquire a novel meaning in contemporary working life as a space of simplicity, in much the same vein as Bigo (2018, p. 127) suggested that silence could be viewed as a resource and creative power 'in a contemporary world of quasi-incessant noise'. Simplicity could be achieved by substituting mediated communication practices with direct social contact and collaboration

in a shared concrete environment (see also Schutz 1967, pp. 163–172). In tandem with van Genep (1960 [1909]), who realized the significance of the physical separation of liminal initiands, we want to highlight the bodily change in work conditions as a way to support the formation of this liminal space. Merleau-Ponty saw the sensing and moving bodily system, which typically remains marginal and silent within our overall existence, as the basis for all perception (Heinämaa 2015). By means of replacing everyday surroundings with a simplified and natural work environment in both social and physical sense, new perceptive registers may be activated and a transitional liminal experience triggered.

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