Identity Transitions:
Possible Selves, Liminality and
the Dynamics of Career Change

by

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a theory of identity transition in voluntary career change. The proposed motor for the transition process is change in a person's set of possible selves. The theory is based on three arguments. First, it identifies three vehicles for elaborating possible selves: activities, networks and events. People construct and reconstruct their work identities by altering what they do, with whom they engage in social interaction and how they make sense of what happens to them. Second, the theory argues that the transition process features a liminal, in-between period, in which people are actively trying out new identities while detaching themselves from older or less desirable ones. Time, space and guiding figures regulate the experience and outcomes of the transition process by creating a boundary zone that encourages identity play. Third, in the absence of an institutionalized role passage, such as promotion or lay-off, the person making a career change must decide whether and when to exit the old career. The theory proposes that continuous processes of generating and testing possible selves are punctuated by turning points that allow people to craft coherent transition narratives. Turning points are not antecedents of change but rather occasions for retrospective sense making that is informed by direct experience with possible selves.

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Our work identities situate us by providing an answer, even if provisional, to the question "Who am I?" As researchers continue to document changes in the employment contract, the rise of boundary-less careers, and, consequently, the increased likelihood of career change over the life-course (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), understanding identity transitions becomes increasingly important. While calls for tackling the inherent multiplicity and dynamism of identity and identity processes have multiplied (e.g., Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000), how identity change occurs, remain largely understudied and poorly understood (Corley and Gioia, 2004).

The idea of identity as multiple, relatively fluid and frequently unstable, is especially pertinent for the study of career dynamics. Because people have multiple identities, and these can change significantly in the course of a career, any theory of career change must necessarily encompass the notion of identity transition. Yet, most existing empirical and conceptual work concerns early career socialization and institutionalized status passages such as entry (Louis, 1980), promotion (Hill, 1992; Ibarra, 1999) and transfer (Beyer and Hannah, 2002), processes in which shifts in identity are clearly linked to changes in the position the individual occupies in the social structure, and concomitant changes in the expectations of, and exchanges with, those with whom the person interacts in performing the new role. Scant organizational research has investigated the non-institutionalized transitions that tend to occur later

in a person's career.[1] As a result, several theoretical issues pertaining to identity transition as a process remain undeveloped, particularly how people disengage from old identities and identify alternatives, what occurs in the period during which a person is considering a career exit, and what dynamics trigger change in the absence of an externally imposed status passage.

This article attempts to conceptualize the processes and dynamics by which work identities evolve and change. I use the term *work identity* to refer to a person's work-related self-definition, i.e., the attributes, groups, roles and professional/occupational experiences by which people define themselves in a work role (Schein, 1978). Work identities are also defined by how a person's social entourage understands and views him or her; as such, they are claimed and granted in social interaction (Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Goffman, 1959). While people have many, frequently mutating identities, some are more central to a person's overall self-definition, and also more deeply embedded in his or her social life, while others are only relevant in specific contexts and situations (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Stryker and Serpe, 1982). Central identities, such as work identities, are characterized by a greater degree of intensity, as defined by the degree of effort expended in the role and integration between self and role

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[1] A notable exception is a stream of adult development research concerned with the mid-life transition, during which many adults typically consider making a career change (Osherton, 1980; Levinson, 1981 and Sheehy, 1974). This work, however, focused on the timing of changes relative to the adult life-cycle and the relationship between changes in work and personal spheres rather than on how and why self-conceptions change.

(Ebaugh, 1988).[2] In Stryker and Serpe's (1982) terms, central identities are those that have greater salience, i.e., identities that are invoked in many different situations and relationships. I use the term i*dentity transition* to refer to the process of questioning, and eventually disengaging from an identity that is central to a person's sense of self, while at the same time exploring potential substitutes.

The article builds on the idea that people adapt to new work roles by experimenting with provisional selves that serve as trials for possible, but not yet fully elaborated, professional identities (Ibarra, 1999). It advances this literature by conceptualizing the range of means available for creating and testing possible selves, combining ideas about the evolution of possible selves with notions about the nature of transition processes to explore conditions under which tentative identities can be claimed and granted, and explicating the role of turning points in bringing a non-institutionalized transition to a close. More generally, the article contributes to the social identity literature by focusing attention on multiplicity, ambiguity, and dynamism in identity content and process (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000; Corley and Gioia, 2004).

The article is divided into four sections. The first section briefly defines career transition and change. In the second section, I develop empirical and theoretical support for the core mechanisms – acting, interacting, and sense making – by which people shape and test possible selves. The third section builds on the notion of

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[2] Hughes (1958) argued that people have one or a few "master statuses" around which we organize our self identity and by which we are primarily known in society. Master statuses include sex, family and occupational roles. Master statuses help prioritise and integrate our other roles, in such a way as to prevent role conflict and overload.

liminality to define the transitional period, in which identity conflict and ambiguity reign, and to hypothesize about conditions – time, space and the presence of guiding figures – that might regulate the experience and outcome of the transition. Finally, the fourth section considers what pushes the person over the threshold (i.e., limen) to make a choice among the alternatives generated (e.g., accept a job offer, leave the old career). I argue that turning points help people craft transition narratives; as such, they are not antecedents of change but rather occasions for retrospective sense making (Weick, 1979). The extent to which turning points provoke change varies with characteristics of the transition period. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model developed below.

DEFINING CAREER TRANSITION AND CHANGE

Career transition and change have been conceptualized as any major change in work-role requirements or work context (Nicholson, 1984; Brett, 1984) and, alternatively, as a process that may result in a change of job, profession, or a change in one's orientation to work while continuing in the same job (Louis, 1980a; Hall, 1976; Ashforth, 2001). Frameworks focusing on the outcomes of career transition provide concepts that describe the magnitude or novelty of the change from one role to the other, such as the number and intensity of changes involved in any given career transition (Hall, 1976) or the degree to which the role permits the exercise of prior knowledge, practiced skills and established habits (Louis, 1980; Nicholson and West, 1989). Frameworks focusing on the process of making the transition identify the phases of change, with most models based on Van Gennep's (1960) separation-transition-incorporation cycle (see Barley, 1989 for a review). Although the

motivation for career change is beyond the scope of this article, most role changes are the product of some combination of push (e.g., job dissatisfaction, reduced prospects) and pull forces (e.g., appealing alternatives) (Ashforth, 2001; Lee and Mitchell, 1994).

In this article, I use the term *career change* to refer to a subset of work role transitions that include a change of employers together with some degree of change in the actual work role and a subjective sense of moving into a new and different line of work (Higgins, 2001; Ibarra, 2003; Latack, 1984). The magnitude or novelty of the outcome, therefore, is not a variable but a defining feature of the phenomenon. Often, these are not just inter-firm but inter-sector transitions, for example, when a litigator leaves law to run a non-profit organization, a corporate employee starts his or her own business, a government official enters private industry or a consultant becomes a movie producer. By definition, career changes are not institutionalized as they do not form part of an established role progression, occupational ladder or organizationally planned career path, and socialization processes are disjunctive, i.e., newcomers are not following in the footsteps of immediate or recent predecessors in their current organization or occupation (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). While the initial impetus for career change may be voluntary or involuntary (as when a person loses his or her job), the model developed here focuses exclusively on voluntary transition, i.e., career changes initiated by the individual. A basic assumption is that identity changes accompany these relatively radical role transitions (e.g., Becker and Carper, 1956; Hall, 1976; Schein, 1978).

Models of the transition process propose stages by which changes in the person and situation unfold. Most models – for example, Nicholson's (1984) preparation, encounter, adjustment and stabilization cycle – assume continuous processes of anticipatory socialization, on the job interaction and gradual informal inclusion, punctuated by the actual formal passage to the new role and subsequent negotiation over how much the individual adapts to the role or adapts the role to him- or herself (Louis, 1980; Nicholson, 1984; Schein, 1978). Even in cases of variable socialization, in which cues about when to expect a boundary passage are unclear (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) and role changes typically precede the formal passage (Ibarra, 1999), the literature assumes that visible role models are present to suggest possible selves. In non-institutionalized career change, however, there is no clear or easily identifiable next position into which the person may be incorporated, separation is neither formally mandated nor socially celebrated, and the transition period is indeterminate in length.

Any theory about non-institutionalized career change, therefore, must consider how processes of disclaiming once valued and still reinforced identities (Ebaugh, 1988) interact with processes for identifying and claiming new selves, and how both of these, in turn, interact with identity granting processes, i.e., having identity claims accepted by relevant gatekeepers, thereby securing incorporation in a new domain. A theory of career change must also explain what provides propulsion, in the absence of an externally imposed role change. The sections below develop each of three major components of the Figure 1 model, and indicate how the proposed conceptualization addresses these key gaps in our understanding of identity transition in voluntary career change.

THE IDENTITY TRANSITION PROCESS

Altering Possible Selves

Markus and Nurius (1986) noted that an important aspect of a person's work identity is situated in the future, as a person's set of possible selves – images about who they might become, would like to become, or fear becoming (Markus and Nurius, 1986). This article argues that career transition and change are fueled by modifications in a person's set of possible selves. Images of desired and feared future selves act as perceptual screens, shaping a person's interpretations and, ultimately, responses to unfolding opportunities or constraints. Faced with declining opportunity as the career pyramid narrows or the organization enters a period of slow growth, downsizing or decline, for example, possible selves associated with the current career become less attractive; alternatively, increased opportunity in a growing area, as was the case during the dot.com boom, might lead a person to envisage new, more appealing possibilities. The impact of "push" and "pull" factors on career change (Lee and Mitchell, 1994), therefore, is mediated by their effects on changes in the content of an individual's set of possible selves (e.g., brand new possibilities might be added) as well as the meanings they attach to those images (e.g., the meaning of "corporate executive" may shift from positive to negative).

Although Markus and Nurius (1986) argue that possible selves are highly susceptible to changes in the environment, they do not specify how possible selves are created, retained or rejected, nor do they develop ideas about what occurs when new

possibilities compete directly with older identities. Within their theoretical conception, divergent, even contradictory, possible selves co-exist in all of us without posing any problem because they remain in cognitive realm. What the literature on possible selves does not consider, however, is what occurs when people bring potentially conflicting new identities into the realm of social interaction. Following Ibarra (1999), trying out possible selves publicly, even if only provisionally, generates both external and internal feedback; these serve as tests of the comparative feasibility and appeal of the possible selves being considered.

In the sections below, I argue that just as identities are constructed in practice (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), possible selves are added, redefined and adjusted as people start altering their work activities, modifying their social networks, and interpreting events through the lens of changing possibilities. These three distinguishable but interrelated processes – *acting*, *interacting,* and *making sense* – work together to spark the onset of an identity transition, accounting for how new possible selves are produced as well as how people select and discard among the possibilities they have considered (Yost, Strube and Bailey, 1992).

Acting: altering one's work activities. The saying "you are what you do" encapsulates the importance of our work activities to our sense of self. Likewise, "becoming" is a matter of learning by doing: apprentices learn a new craft by becoming active participants in the practices of a social community rather than by assimilating an abstract body of knowledge (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1991). What people do at work – what roles, assignments or projects they take on, for example – is therefore an important means by which they claim

membership (Bartel and Dutton, 2001) and change their work identities (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001).

As a person's regular work activities change, these may come to challenge his or her notions of who they are (i.e., a current work identity) or want to become (i.e., possible selves). The two quotes below illustrate how new assignments and changes in a person's primary work activities create disenchantment with anticipated career paths and current roles (Ibarra, 2003, 8, 142-143):

"The restructuring meant my position was going to change. When I put my ego aside and looked at what I really wanted, I realized I did not want to run any of the new groups… much of my new job entailed 'doing more with less.'"

"The mergers and acquisitions of that period led to enormous changes. People were coming and going, and I started to feel how little power I had, even as a pretty successful general manager… I was effective politically, negotiating the interests of my division, but I didn't like having to focus on the internal dynamics of the company rather than the external dynamics of the market."

Alternatively, engaging in activities outside one's core work tasks is a powerful way of creating new possibilities. Side activities like moonlighting, freelance or consulting work, volunteer work and enrolling in courses often precede a more permanent shift to a different career as they allow people to learn about new career options and test unfamiliar waters from the safety of their current jobs (Kunda, Barley, and Evans, 2002; Ibarra, 2003; Stuart and Ding, 2003). Entrepreneurs often spend years building a

business on the side, while maintaining a "day job" until the new enterprise becomes clearly viable (Hoang and Gimeno, 2003; Moore and Buttner, 1997). In a study of women entrepreneurs (Moore and Buttner, 1997), fifty percent of the respondents reported moonlighting before starting their own business. Similarly, Ebaugh (1988) found that one fourth of those who changed careers had begun retraining while still in their current jobs, in several cases going to back school part-time or working in the new area on the side as a personal interest or hobby. A typical example was an ex-astronaut: "About ten years earlier, he had begun investing in real estate, a venture which mushroomed over the years to the point that he realized he was spending more time and effort as an investor than in his career" (1988:96).

The underlying mechanism is experiential learning (Bandura, 1977). New activities allow a person a "realistic job preview": because important differences between old and new roles are frequently unforeseeable, experience in a new role, and of oneself in that role, is necessary in order to assess its feasibility and appeal (Louis, 1980). They also augment a person's capacity to become a realistic candidate in a new realm by allowing them to accumulate relevant experience and a network of social contacts in that sphere (Ibarra, 2003; Moore and Buttner, 1997).

As the salience and intensity of activities premised on a different career increase, discretionary activity in the old sphere erodes, potentially diminishing the feasibility and appeal of possible selves based on the old career. Extra-role behaviors, such as mentoring, volunteering and socializing outside work are important ways of asserting one's work identity. The time and energy consumed by alternative activities sets off a slow and gradual process of "mutual withdrawal" in which involvement in outside

activities diminishes the person's availability, and people in the old world respond in kind by asking and expecting less over time (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003; Vaughan, 1990). New activities, therefore, allow people to try out possible selves on a limited but tangible scale; at the same time, they diminish the hold of the old by providing alternatives.

> Proposition 1: The number of, and time spent on, professional activities that are unrelated or weakly tied to a person's current work role, will be positively correlated with the likelihood of identity transition and career change.

Shifting one's social network. The fact that our work identities develop in relationships with others is well documented in early career socialization and organizational entry research (Barley, 1989; Higgins and Kram, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Strauss, 1977; Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). How relationships affect later career processes, however, has been virtually unstudied. Identifying with persons in different roles or lines of work, or comparing oneself with a different reference group, however, is a second way of creating and testing possible selves (Gersick, Bartunek and Dutton, 2000; Ibarra, 1999).

Role changes bring about new reference groups, which, in turn, generate new frames of mind, interests, attitudes and self-conceptions (Lieberman, 1956). Changing reference groups, however, can also precede role changes, catalyzing or building momentum for career transition. Ebaugh's (1988) ex-nuns began to cultivate relationships with lay men and women long before they left the order, using these contacts to evaluate how they might adjust to life outside the convent. As their

questioning of their religious commitment heightened, the nuns also intensified their contact with friends who had already left the order. Meeting people in different occupations provides information about new options as well as validation for changes one may be contemplating (Kunda, Barley, and Evans, 2002; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003; Stuart and Ding, 2003). Stuart and Ding (2003) found that having network ties to scientists, who have left academia for commercial science, increases the likelihood of making the shift oneself. These extra-university ties, they argue, facilitate the formation of a reference group that condones what the scientific community sanctions. People may consciously seek to establish ties compatible with desired future selves, using these new relationships to pull themselves into new social and professional circles (Ebaugh, 1988). Alternatively, fortuitous encounters with people who have already made transition to a different kind of work may lead a person to make a similar shift (Kunda, Barley, and Evans, 2002). A decision to enter contracting, for example, requires exposure to people who make freelance work seem more viable or attractive than taking another full-time job; employees who switched to contract work had typically worked beside contractors in their previous jobs (Kunda, Barley, and Evans, 2002).

Diluting the strength of old ties and networks appears to be at least as important for change as making new connections. If identities are negotiated in social interaction, then, over time, interaction partners form images of the focal individual that are consonant with a given work identity, and come to expect behavior consonant with that identity; with public, repeated interaction, the focal person becomes committed, even locked-in, to that identity, making it difficult to change (Baumiester, 1998; Swann, 1987; Schlenker, Dlugolecki and Doherty, 1994). One-fifth of Ebaugh's (1988) sample

reported that someone significant to them responded negatively; this negative response interrupted the exiting process or retarded the process for a significant time period. Ibarra (2003) similarly found that people considering major career changes typically face doubt, skepticism, and pigeonholing on the part of friends, family and close work associates who remain invested in the image the focal person is actively trying to shed. New acquaintances not only provide role models for new possibilities but also form a substitute community within which new identities can be negotiated without sanction.

The mechanisms underlying the role of interaction in altering possible selves, therefore, are identification, social validation and social comparison. Connecting to new networks promotes the creation of new possible selves and dilutes the strength of older ties within which established identities had been previously negotiated.

> Proposition 2: The number, emotional intensity of, and frequency of contact in, professional relationships and networks that are unrelated or weakly tied to a person's primary work role, will be positively correlated with the likelihood of identity transition and career change.

Making sense of life events. A diverse body of work has converged on the role of trigger events in stimulating change. Triggers may range from major job, organizational and personal life changes to shocks or jolts produced by more mundane episodes (Ebaugh, 1988; Hall, 1991; Lee and Mitchell, 1994; Roberts, et al., forthcoming; see Ashforth, 2001: 112-117 for classes of "precipitating events"). Indeed, accounts of career change, like stories about religious conversion, invariably

include events that sowed first doubts or provided publicly acceptable excuses for doubts already simmering (Ebaugh, 1988; Levinson, 1981).

Exogenous events, however, rarely trigger change automatically; people may ignore the information, dismiss it as irrelevant, blame the undesired outcome on fate, or deny its validity, succumbing to self-confirmatory biases (Schein, 1996; Swann, 1987). Instead, events produce change by their effects on sense-making processes (Weick, 1995), causing people to consider the meaning of the event in relation to their current situation, and sparking exploration and trial experimentation with new activities and interactions (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003; Lee and Mitchell, 1994).

Triggers "unfreeze" – get people unstuck, ready to move – by producing surprise (Louis, 1980b; Louis and Sutton, 1991; Langer and Piper, 1987) and by making more vivid both desired and feared possible selves. People only engage in active interpretation of who they are when they are "showered with unexpected, sometimes traumatic experiences that violate their sense of routine, normality or propriety" (Van Maanen, 1998:8). While one may have ill-defined or unconscious feelings of dissatisfaction, some event will sharpen these feelings, making them more consciously accessible: A malpractice suit, for example, may heighten the simmering dissatisfaction a physician feels about the increasing bureaucratization of medical work (Ebaugh, 1988). Negative triggers, such as receiving a bad performance review, unfreeze by refuting or calling into question strongly held or cherished self-conceptions, producing "identity threats" (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996) and bringing feared possible selves more sharply into focus. Positive events, such as the birth of a

child or an unexpected job offer may have a similarly jarring impact, one that eventually alters what the person imagines for himself or herself in the future.

Events motivate exploratory behavior by setting into motion mental processes whereby the person begins to more actively consider alternatives to the current situation. Kunda, Barley and Evans, (2002) found that triggers like getting laid off were insufficient to tip the balance in favor of becoming a contractor; but they were crucial for deciding to move from permanent to contingent employment because they led informants to consider their options. Likewise, chance encounters with role models often motivated people in transition to seek out others in the same field as the role model (Ibarra, 2003). By providing a frame of reference, events also facilitate exploratory behavior (Lee and Mitchell, 1994). Because people pay attention to things that justify what they want to do, events become an organizing scheme for everything that occurs afterward.

Life's events and the meaning we make of them, therefore, motivate career change by bringing new possible selves to life or changing the meanings associated with pre-existing selves; these changing images of the self may lead a person to initiate a new activity or make some new contacts, thus launching a transition process.

> Proposition 3: Trigger events will increase the likelihood of identity transition and career change by heightening the probability that a person will explore new activities and connect to different networks.

Activities, networks and events, therefore, regulate the process of identity transition by way of experiential learning, identification and sense-making mechanisms. As

such, they alter a person's knowledge about, and capacity to assume a new career as well as their motivation to change, and provide a social context in which emerging claims to a new identity are made and granted (Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Van Maanen, 1998). Commitment to a new professional identity escalates as the salience and intensity of activities and relationships premised on the new identity increase; at the same time, an eroding commitment to the old career or its professional norms and referents unfolds with decreased interaction in that sphere.

The transition process may begin with changes in activities or relationships or with the jolt of a trigger event; the proposed theory does not prescribe a fixed sequence, nor does it specify the relative impact of push and pull factors. Either strategic choice or serendipity may propel the process. A person may have always been drawn to a particular occupation or deduce their potential aptitude or interest via career counseling. Alternatively, serendipity may play an important role, as in the case of a person who is not consciously looking to make a career change yet discovers a passion or skill they were not aware of through their amateur or extra-curricular activities.

The effects of activities, relationships and events are expected to be multiplicative, or mutually reinforcing. For example, an individual who has long harbored a novelist possible self, may begin testing that self by writing on a regular basis (activities); however, he or she may have few social interactions premised on an author identity (networks) or few reasons to feel a sense of urgency about becoming a full-time writer (events). If that person also begins to build a social network that includes other writers and actors in the literary field, and decides, with a fiftieth birthday approaching or a book proposal accepted, that the time is ripe to give writing a more serious shot, then

the salience of, and commitment to, the writer identity may be expected to increase. The effect is due to the interaction of the three identity mechanisms: the proposal acceptance may motivate the person to seek out additional "writer" activities, such as a writer's club or a course, which, in turn, stimulates the formation of additional relationships based on the writer identity, and make salient events that have potential meaning with regard to this identity.

> Proposition 4: The effects of activities, networks, and events on identity transition and career change are multiplicative; the more numerous they are, the greater the likelihood of identity transition and career change.

Being Between and Betwixt: The Liminal Period

Current notions about how the transition process unfolds are rooted in Van Gennep's (1960) three phases of a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. As discussed in the sections above, in the absence of an institutionally imposed separation, new activities and relationships, as well as events interpreted as a reason for disenchantment or anticipation, allow a person to start disengaging from the old career while beginning to explore new options. Van Gennep argued that during the middle, liminal (which means threshold in Latin) or transition phase, people experience a period of ambiguity or "social limbo" in which identity is multiple, ambiguous or provisional (Bridges, 1980; Turner, 1969).

Studies of a broad range of roles exist:, from leaving a religious order or undergoing sex-change surgery to exiting an occupation or getting divorced indicate that people in

transition invariably feel "in-between" identities, describing their state in terms of being "in a vacuum," "in midair," "neither here nor there," and "at loose ends" (Bridges, 1980; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003; Osherton, 1980). Recent work on organizational identity change suggests a similar phenomenon in the form of identity ambiguity (Corley and Gioia, 2004:200), defined as a situation in which multiple, plausible interpretations of identity exist, leading to a sense of "unformulated or nebulous identity."[3] The quote below, from a mid-career literature professor, trying to switch into a finance career, illustrates the disparate possible selves and sense of "nebulous identity" that characterize liminal periods:

> "It is Sunday and I don't know where to begin working… For now, it's up for grabs: Shall I clean the house; buy food for the family; read "El Burlador de Sevilla", which I assigned to my students for class tomorrow; go to the business school to search the alumni database for names of people at the firms I've applied to; learn more Excel; or look for information about alternatives to an MBA program. My husband thinks I should start talking to people about staying here in some capacity or another. I, of course, want a new career, a new life, independence, new knowledge, excitement, passion, and challenges. In the meantime, I continue to learn and I continue to make mistakes. It is like living inside a hurricane." (Ibarra, 2003: 53).

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[3] Corley and Gioia (2004:201) distinguish between identity ambiguity and identity conflict. The former refers to multiple identities vying for pre-eminence or privilege; the latter implies that the meaning underlying identity claims are in doubt or subject to multiple, plausible interpretations.

The liminal period is not a literal space between one job and the next but a psychological zone in which individuals remain intensely involved in the old work role (although they know it is no longer possible, viable or appealing), yet they are still unsure about what the future holds. Although the potential for conflict among divergent possible selves is always present, rival identities that exist only in people's minds (Markus and Nurius, 1986) or as provisional constructions that fluctuate from one interaction to the next (Ibarra, 1999), rarely produce feelings of being "in-between." Alternatively, possible selves attached to different spheres of life may be buffered from potential conflicts by micro role transitions (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000). During a career transition, however, such harmonious co-existence is broken once identity claiming and granting processes cumulate to bring competing identities to life.

The liminal period can extend over weeks, months or even years (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003; Levinson, 1981). Although market forces (e.g., the availability of certain types of jobs, and the time required to obtain appropriate credentials) have a significant impact on its duration, voluntary role exit is often a lengthy process (Ebaugh, 1988). Even when dissatisfied or disenchanted, people continue to revisit the possibility of making their career work because their work role is tied to formerly valued possible selves, consisting of images of who one once wanted to become or felt one ought to be (Bridges, 1980; Ibarra, 2003). Consequently, the psychology of the transition period has been described as ambivalence: people oscillate between "holding on" and "letting go", between a desire to rigidly clutch or grieve for the past and the impulse to rush exuberantly into the future (Osherton, 1980; Shepherd, 2003). Moving back and forth between old and new facilitates the transition process by

staving off premature closure until a person has fully explored all the alternatives (Osherton, 1980; Ibarra, 2003; Shepherd, 2003).

Existing theories of career change suggest that the experience and outcomes of the transition process depends on how much difference there is between old and new careers (i.e., it is generally harder, and takes longer, to move into an entirely different role or situation; Louis, 1980). Since this article concerns itself exclusively with transitions that are radical by definition, the theory proposed here must suggest other sources of variance. In the sections below, I draw from two disparate, theoretical traditions, on rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969) and transitional objects in psychoanalysis (Winnicott, 1971) to argue that once a central identity is *in play* (i.e., open to question and change), a playful (rather than "rational" or "efficient") posture facilitates transition. Building on these two traditions, I frame the process of trying out and seeking social validation for new possible selves as *identity play* and identify factors – space, time and guiding figures – that affect the claiming and granting of new identities, therefore shaping the course of career transitions.

Identity play/Identities in play. While Van Genep's notion of liminality pertained exclusively to primitive rites, Turner (1969) extended the concept to a broader range of experiences in which the normal rules of everyday life are suspended for a concentrated period when "anything goes," and curiosity, exploration, frivolity and *joie de vivre* govern behavior. Turner noted that these "liminoid" experiences often share dedicated time, space and guiding figures such that the person in transition can "violate the rules" or experiment with new identities without fear of danger or sanction.

This idea of a protected time and space is also present in developmental psychology. Winnicott (1989) identified transitional periods in which children imagine various possibilities for themselves in the future, and play out these possibilities via imagination and make-believe. Transitional objects, such as toys and blankets, serve as bridges between the external world of reality and constraint and the internal world of fantasy and future possibility. Transitional figures, initially the mother, provide a safety zone in which the child can give rein to his or her imagination. The time and space demarcated by the mother and the play objects is a boundary region in which the child can gradually define and test out a newly emerging self, protected from any danger. The "good-enough mother" neither stifles nor ignores the child, neither intrudes nor abandons, but rather gives the child enough rope for discovery, all the while conveying that she is nearby if needed.

The operating principle shared by the notions of liminal experience and transitional phenomena is play or playfulness. Play serves to challenge existing belief systems and to restructure cognitions, facilitating experiments with identity (Brown and Starkey, 2000; March, 1979). Extending these notions to professional life, a person contemplating a career change must be able to try out unformed, even risky, identities in a relatively safe and secure environment in which the rules governing the old career and its associated identity are suspended, and fledgling selves can be tested without incurring the risks of fully exposing them to the real world. Below, I argue that time, space, and help from guiding figures encourage identity play by providing safety, suspension of the rules, and separation from "real life".

Transitional time and space. Entering a time and space legitimately dedicated to exploration makes it easier for people to claim provisional identities, and therefore, create the experience base needed to make more lasting changes. Because transitional time and space impose a separation from one's daily work routine, they may also serve to diminish the strength of competing possibilities.

Sabbaticals, educational programs, vacations and leisure activity are temporal means of gaining freedom from institutional obligations and, therefore, grant license to play with new ways of being (Turner, 1969). Ebaugh (1988), for example, reported a high incidence of returning to school prior to a role exit. Because the suspension of rules is temporary, people can toy safely with possibilities, knowing that they will have to come back to reality again. The literature professor/would-be money manager, quoted earlier, for example, used the year in which she audited MBA classes to play with a broad palette of possible selves: "She looked at management consulting, knowing it was not for her; she considered whether or not to apply to other literature jobs; she took on a one-year volunteer project, coaching high-school instructors to teach literature; she revisited the idea of moving into university administration; and she investigated a range of finance possibilities." (Ibarra, 2003:57).

In organizations, neutral spaces or privileged areas like laboratories and skunk works, are also liminoid in that they are set aside from the mainstream in order to encourage departures from existing norms and operating procedures (Turner, 1969). Experimentation in protected spaces, such as those defined by scenarios, simulations, role-plays and parallel organizations, allow people to suspend "real world" requirements for consistency and rationality, play with possibilities, and develop new

skills and self-images that can be transferred back to the mainstream (Brown and Starkey, 2000; Schrage, 1999; Schein, 1996). Many of the side-activities that people use to test alternative careers, unfold in a protected space: an evening course, a weekend project, or an inventor's garage, allow people to test risky or conflicting identities in a secure environment, until it is safe to claim the emerging identity – publicly and privately – as truly reflecting one's self (Ibarra, 2003; Korotov, 2004).

Finally, protected time and space allow for innovative leaps by interfering with habitual behavior (Amabile, 1996; Koestler, 1989; Staudenmeyer, Tyre and Perlow, 2002) and allowing a stepping back to obtain a new way of seeing what is (Koestler, 1989). Changes in the normal rhythm of work or halts in normal productive activity can act as triggers, waking people up from their daily routine and refocusing their attention on the future (Staudenmeyer, Tyre and Perlow, 2002).

> Proposition 5: Dedicating a defined time and space to exploring new possibilities accelerates and eases identity transition.

Transitional figures. Established members initiate newcomers into a profession or organization; newcomers are taught not only the required skills and rules but also how to acquire the right look and feel, and what social norms govern how they should conduct themselves if they are to become true members. Reinventing oneself as a member of a new occupational world is also a process of becoming an insider to that world, learning its subjective viewpoint, language, demeanor, and outlook. However, since apprenticeships and internships typically exist in institutional form only for the

young, at mid-career, people are often left to their own devices when it comes to acquiring the requisite tacit knowledge and finding role models from whom to learn.

Strauss (1977) and Levinson (1981) noted the key role of guiding figures in helping the person in transition to endure the ambiguity of the transition period by conferring blessings, giving advice, embodying new possibilities, and, as a teacher, helping to shape those possibilities. The strong bond that develops between the person in transition and the guiding figure forms a transitional space within which a possible self starts becoming a reality (Strauss, 1977). Guiding figures are prominent in stories of career change, as professors, mentors and role models (Ibarra, 2003); their role is to validate feelings the focal person is experiencing, share personal experiences with similar career dilemmas and transitions, and teach the would-be entrant the tacit knowledge needed to enter a new field. These relationships foster safety and provide a secure base from which to explore new territory (Bowlby, 1988; Kahn, 1996).

Guiding figures may present themselves serendipitously, or a person may explicitly seek one out (Ibarra, 2003:127). In many cases, however, they may be unavailable, and people learn, instead, by participating peripherally in the life of the group they would like to join. Like guiding figures, new peer groups (e.g., fellow students in an educational program, participants in an outplacement class) or professional communities (e.g., members of a professional society or occupational association), consisting of people who are experiencing similar doubts or difficulties with regard to old paths, or who are already full participants in a possible new realm, can also provide inclusion, role modeling, guidance and a safe place to try out new possibilities (Ibarra, 2003; Korotov, 2004).

Transitional figures and groups also provide separation from, and suspension of, the rules defined by the web of routine professional interactions in which the person has been embedded (Ibarra, 2003). While close ties generally create an environment of psychological safety (Kahn, 1996), they also bind the person to previously negotiated identities. In transitional relationships, people can negotiate new possibilities without violating old expectations.

> Proposition 6: The presence of transitional figures and groups accelerates and eases identity transition.

All change processes involve "moving from an existing clarity of understanding to doubt, uncertainty, and/or ambiguity, and ultimately to a state of renewed clarity that resolves into an altered form" (Corley and Gioia, 2004: 174). Transitional time, space and guiding figures provide the safety, suspension of the rules, and separation from "real life" needed to prevent a premature closure to identity explorations, and allow multiple and alternative selves to develop.

Enacting a Turning Point

Transitions, by definition, cannot last forever. At some point, the individual makes a firm and definitive decision to make a career change. When there is no prescribed start or end-point to a transition, this tends to occur in connection with some abrupt and dramatic turning point in the person's life, "an event that mobilizes and focuses awareness that old lines of action are complete, have failed, have been disrupted, or are

no longer personally satisfying, and provides individuals with the opportunity to do something different with their lives" (Ebaugh, 1988:123). But, if people are free to try out any identity they like, it is also true that they must rely on others to complete the picture of which they can only paint certain parts. The desired identity remains incomplete and tentative without the stamp of approval of relevant gatekeepers and one's social entourage (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934).

This final section discusses how these new identity claims are made and what makes them compelling. If identity is the way a person views himself, and is often viewed by others, then identity changes require a new understanding of who one is, a new frame of understanding, and a reinterpretation of the past based on that frame (Holland, et al., 1998:68). Stories are an important means of reframing experience (Gergen, 1997; McAdams, 1997; Nicholson and West, 1989; Van Maanen, 1998). Just as people construct work identities by telling stories, they also reinvent themselves by telling new stories about what is happening to them, reinterpreting past events in the light of these new experiences, and weaving past and present into a coherent story about who they are becoming (Holland, et al., 1998).

Transition narratives. Identity narratives may be grouped into two basic story forms: continuity and discontinuity narratives (Gergen, 1997; Bateson, 2004). The former tells of continuous progress (or failure) along a given path, for example, the career of the good student who becomes a star professional; the latter tells about a discontinuity that marks a change of direction. Ashforth (2001) argues that identity narratives are easier to articulate when they represent a clear and sequential role progression; they

become more difficult to articulate when the sequencing of roles deviates from familiar or socially acceptable career trajectories.[4]

Because transition narratives are necessarily discontinuity stories, they rely on turning points or epiphanies to explain the need for change while highlighting a continuity that the change restores (e.g., Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003; Kunda, Barley and Evans, 2002; Linde, 1993). A turning point or climax represents a point of no return, after which the protagonist can no longer see or do things the same way; insight crystallizes and the story moves inexorably to climax and resolution. Turning points play a critical role in helping bring the liminal period to a close by lending an appropriate narrative form to a person's transition story. A good story makes identity claiming easier, and increases the likelihood that a new identity will be granted.

One of the reasons people experience the transition to a new working life as a time of confusion, loss, insecurity, and uncertainty is that they have lost the narrative thread of their professional life (Ibarra, 2003). Even as they engage in compelling new activities and relationships, without a coherent story line, a person will feel lost and rudderless. Turning points, no matter how "trivial", help people reframe their disorientation, confusion, doubt, or frustration as meaningful, as part of the personal odyssey required to find their true purpose or calling. Equally importantly, they help explain the discontinuity to friends and family, as well as gatekeepers, such as recruiters, headhunters and financiers. Kunda, Barley and Evans (2002), for example,

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[4] In Scott and Lyman's (1968:51) theory of "accounts", discontinuity stories are akin to "justifications": socially approved vocabularies that assert the positive value of an act in the face of a claim to the contrary.

found that technical workers who made the transition from salaried employment to contract work, told stories with a common script:

> "The narrative begins with the lament of an expert for whom the tension between the ideal of technical rationality and the political reality of organizational life has become a source of simmering discontent. Then, an employer's action or an unanticipated event that undermines job security, leads the expert to act on his or her discontent. Aided by serendipitous encounters with the world of contracting, the expert finally chooses to escape the world of full-time employment into the world of contingent work, which promises a way of life more consistent with the expert's world-view." (2002:240-41).

Transition narratives are intended for oneself as much as for an external audience (Gergen, 1997; Lave and Wenger, 1991; McAdams, 1997). People making career transitions are often disturbed to find many different options appealing, or worry that the same person who once chose what they no longer want to do, might give up a secure job in favor of a poor choice; without a story to help give them a sense of why they must change, they feel unsettled and uncertain of their own identity (Ibarra, 2003). Without a compelling narrative, the external audience for one's reinvention also remains dubious and skeptical. A good story establishes credibility by explaining why a seemingly nonsensical action, such as quitting a prestigious job for a lower status role, not only makes sense but is also consistent with a fundamental aspect of who one is and always has been (Linde, 1993).

While objectively indistinguishable from the trigger events discussed earlier, turning points differ in when they occur and how they are enacted. Most turning points occur when the person is on the threshold of making a decision, creating the occasion to take a firm stand and announce an exit (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003). A second reason why they tend to occur later in a transition is that events only have relevance in relationship to a valued end-point – the story's end. They can only be constructed as turning points, therefore, when a specific end goal is in sight (Gergen, 1997), and that usually occurs only after a period of harboring doubts and actively experimenting with concrete options. Once people know where they want to go, hindsight reconstructs clear-cut sequences that lead inevitably to the desired outcome (Weick, 1995: 128).

In sum, turning points are occasions for reworking and reassembling a life story, reframing the past and creating momentum for the future. By punctuating continuous experience, they force people to select and discard possible selves among the alternatives they have considered, and thus, take the final steps needed to complete the transition. By providing narrative form, they help the person communicate publicly the changes that have been unfolding privately, increasing a person's motivation to exit the old career and their ability to gain public or external support for the change. As such, turning points are not antecedents, but rather consequences, of change, and their impact on identity transition is moderated by the extent to which they are incorporated into a compelling transition narrative. A good story allows the person to claim, and be granted, the new identity in a greater variety of situations and relationships, increasing its centrality to the person's sense of self.

Proposition 7: The likelihood of a turning point leading to a career change increases with its incorporation into a compelling transition narrative.

DISCUSSION

This article's central argument is that voluntary career change, and its concomitant identity transition, is the result of changes in a person's set of possible selves. Possible selves begin to shift and fluctuate as a result of variation in a person's activities, their social networks, and the meanings they make of the events of their lives. Over time, new possibilities start to compete with well-established roles and self-conceptions, and people enter a liminal period in which they feel they are "neither here nor there", or "in-between." This period of ambiguous identity, which varies in time, space and degree of social support for change, serves as a holding environment in which the rules that govern old identities are suspended, allowing people to play with new possibilities, claiming them tentatively at a safe distance from older selves. This transition period is punctuated by turning points that create momentum, serve as occasions for retrospective sense-making, and lend narrative form to the transition, thereby increasing the likelihood that the new identity will be accepted as legitimate by a larger and larger proportion of the person's social network. As the new identity is invoked in a greater variety of situations and relationships, it becomes more central to a person's sense of self. These ideas suggest the rudiments of a conceptual model, outlined in Figure 1. In the sections below, I discuss three major contributions of the model and promising directions for future research.

The notion that people construct identities by situated action in relationship with significant others is not new, and neither is the notion that desired future images, rather than existing identities, provide the basis for interpreting events (Gioia and Thomas, 1996). What *is* new, and potentially generative, is a model of identity transition that advances basic ideas about how possible selves are created, selected and discarded. The model proposed here is consistent with a view self-development as an evolutionary process that involves the generation of variation in the self and the selection and retention of selves that are proposed (Ibarra, 1999; Weick, 1979; Yost, Strube and Bailey, 1992). To date, however, few organizational scholars have examined the underlying processes associated with identity's dynamism. The proposed model clarifies these dynamics by specifying how activities, relationships and events can increase the variety of one's set of identity possibilities, and by indicating what characteristics of liminal periods might explain the selective retention of some identities over others.

A second contribution of this article lies in conceptualizing identity processes during the liminal period. Current thinking on identity change has ignored the critical role of these periods, partly because scholars have focused on roles and identities that are either synergistic or easily buffered from one another (Ashforth, 2001; Rothbard, 2001; Settles, Sellers, and Damas, 2002; Ruderman, et al., 2002). While the idea of being "between identities", proposed here, builds on a diverse literature on role (Bridges, 1980; Ebaugh, 1988) and business (Corley and Gioia, 2004) exit, as well as on identity processes in non-traditional work arrangements (Bartel and Dutton, 2001), few scholars have examined how identity ambiguity is produced, and what effect it has on identity change. The perspective proposed builds on Corley and Gioia's (2004)

claim that the emergence of a state of identity ambiguity, as compared to an earlier state of identity clarity, is key to the process of identity change. This article contributes to this line of reasoning by identifying a mechanism – identity play – that both increases ambiguity and motivates sense making to resolve it.

Recent work on the nature of liminal experience in organizational life (e.g., Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Dubouloy, 2004; Korotov, 2004) raises interesting questions about how variations in time and space – for example, a time period that is fixed or open-ended, or the degree of physical and social encapsulation of the individual (Greil and Rudy, 1984) – might affect identity play and, thus, identity development. The current popularity and variety of adult education programs, which include evening, weekend and multi-session courses, provides an excellent laboratory in which to explore diverse forms of transitional time and space. Research that investigates diverse forms of liminal experience, or how different people make use of the same sort of transitional time and space (Korotov, 2004), might shed light on variation in transition outcomes, such as generating viable alternatives and satisfaction with one's ultimate choices.

Explaining whether and when people actually make a career change, once a fuller set of alternatives emerges, necessarily raises fundamental questions about change dynamics, in particular how we punctuate continuous experience in the absence of a formalized rite of passage. The ideas about transition narratives proposed here are consistent with a broad literature on the importance of accounts, narratives and other rhetorical devices in creating meaning and negotiating identities (e.g., Scott and Lyman, 1968; Van Maanen, 1998; Weick, 1995). This paper extends these ideas by

arguing that narrative (as opposed to other identity claiming or rhetorical forms) plays a particularly important role in restoring identity clarity after a period of fragmentation and ambiguity. It stands to reason, then, that if a transition narrative lacks appropriate form, is not coherent, or conflicts with other identity claims, then the person remains in the liminal state. Although a good deal has been written about what elements make for a good story (e.g., Gergen, 1997; Linde, 1993; Weick, 1995), research is needed to link features of narrative form (e.g., a beginning, a middle and end) and narrative properties (e.g., coherence) to transition processes and outcomes.

Clearly, identity transition needs to be better understood in a world in which individuals enjoy considerable choice regarding occupation, employer, and career paths (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000). But, is the model of career change proposed here a universal one, or does it particularly apply to certain groups? An argument could be made that the present model explains best the career changes of professionals, managers or people in other high status occupations, who can "afford" liminality, and who are relatively buffered from hard economic knocks. Many of the examples provided from the literature support that conclusion, as they document the career changes of doctors, lawyers, academics, information technologists, and the like. But, there were a range of exceptions, including, for example, Ebaugh's (1988) schoolteachers and Moore and Buttner's (1997) entrepreneurs, for whom financial constraints led to liminal periods that consisted of working two jobs, rather than taking a time-out to return to school or engage in volunteer or creative activities. Clearly, future work will be required to define the boundaries of the model.

Another important boundary condition pertains to the current focus on voluntary career change. Processes associated with involuntary changes due to business failure or layoffs (Latack and Dozier, 1986; Shepherd, 2003) obviously have parallels with self-initiated change. In job loss, the identity transition also entails discarding a no longer viable possible self, people find alternatives via their activities and networks, and the unemployment period may be viewed as a form of liminality (Ashforth, 2001). Nevertheless, further research is needed to explore similarities and differences, as well as to discern conditions under which job loss generates rigidity or career growth, and to assess how grieving dynamics associated with job loss affect the transition process.

The concept of identity transition developed here contributes to a growing literature concerned with both stability and change in identities, extending recent thinking on conflicting (Foreman and Whetten, 2002) or ambiguous (Bartel and Dutton, 2001) identities, identity threat (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996) and disidentification (Elsback and Bhattacharya, 2001). While the model proposed here concerns individual change, the underlying ideas have links to a broader range of situations in which continuity and change exist in dynamic tension, in particular the burgeoning literature on organizational identity change. Organizational research provides ample evidence that organizational identities are also expressed and transformed through changes in a firm's activities, networks and reference groups. Firms adopt innovations (Strang and Meyer, 1993; Kraatz, 1998), create experiments (Brown and Eisenhart, 1997) and use scenarios and simulations (Schrage, 1999) as means of trying out alternative ways of being. Participation in networks – industry groups, strategic alliances and other institutional relationships – is a primary means of signaling and changing identities

(Rao, Davis and Ward, 2000). Sense-making processes such as storytelling play a similar role as a critical tool for effecting organizational change (Gioia and Thomas, 1996). Finally, although disparate studies have examined experiential learning, identification and sense making as sources of identity and reputation, few organization scholars have explored the existence and identity dynamics of liminal periods (Corley and Gioia, 2004 is a recent exception) or what transitional phenomena might explain variation in the process and outcomes of organizational change.

Until recently, research on careers has assumed that people develop and advance largely within the confines of a single organization and occupation, and that the transitions that pace their career are institutionalized in form and timing. Today's self-designing professional trajectories, which often involve moving from one firm, sector or career to another, both liberate and place important identity demands on individuals, requiring us to create, alter and dissolve identities as we move from one career phase to another. These continuous and shifting patterns of identity evolution and dissolution are a necessary part of human adaptation and change.

Figure 1: Identity Transition Process
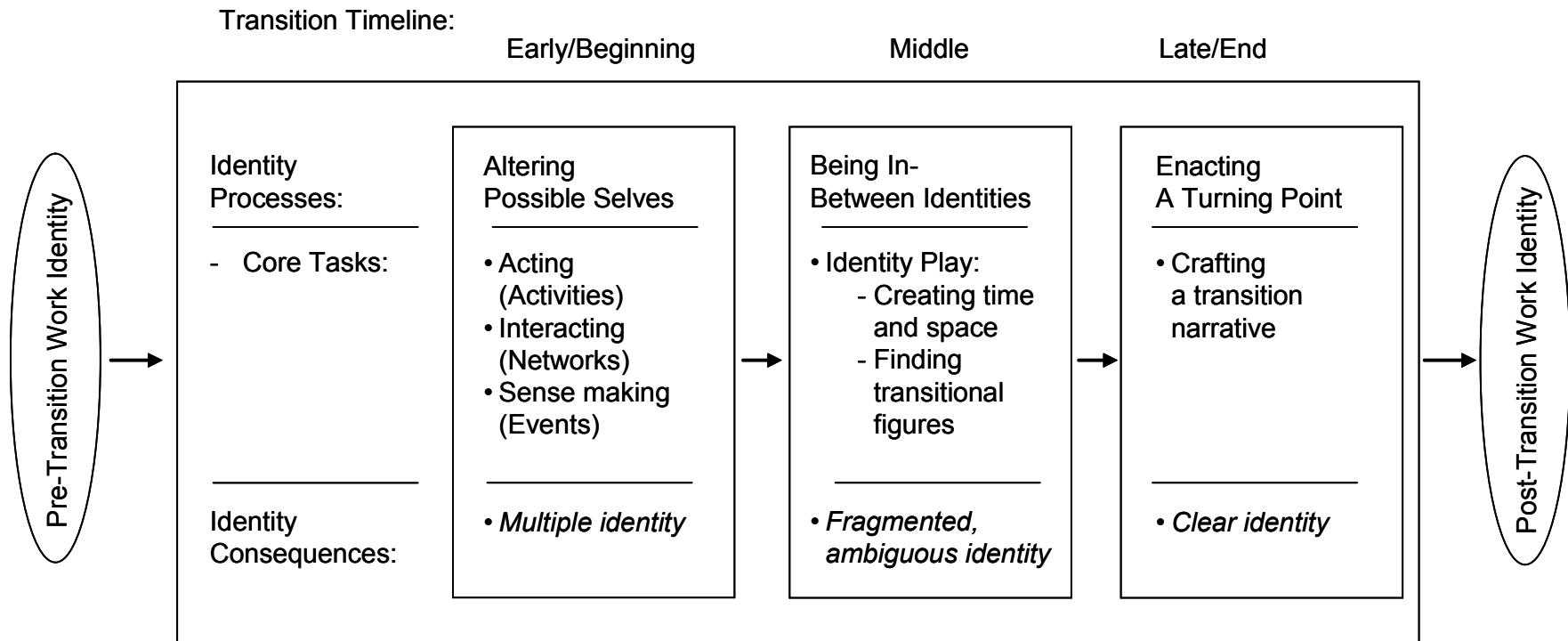
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