

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

by

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AND THE DYNAMICS OF CAREER CHANGE

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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 possible selves. The theory proposes three categories of mechanisms for creating and testing possible selves: *direct action* (activities), *social interaction* (relationships) and *sense making* (events). The theory also proposes a sequence of transition stages with characteristic identity tasks and dynamics. In the early stages of transition, activities, relationships and/or events alter the salience of, and behavioral commitment to, possible selves premised on old and new work identities. This exploratory stage gives rise to a liminal, or middle, period in which one or more career possibilities are selected for a more sustained trial, and conflict between old and new identities heightens. Temporal, spatial and relational boundaries foster *identity play* by buffering newer, more fragile possibilities from the rules and obligations that govern better established identities. Toward the end of the transition cycle, in the absence of an institutionalized role passage, such as a promotion or lay-off, transition narratives help people make sense of their experience and make choices among the alternatives generated.

IDENTITY TRANSITIONS:

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Our work identities situate us by providing an answer, albeit provisional, to the question “Who am I?” As researchers continue to document changes in the employment contract, the rise of boundaryless 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 work-related identity change occurs, remains largely understudied and poorly understood.

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, 1980b), 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. With some notable exceptions (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003), scant empirical 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 the mechanisms by which people develop alternatives to those identities from which they wish to disengage and the dynamics that drive the process through to completion, 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 claimed and granted in social interaction; as such they are partially defined by how a person's social entourage views him or her (Baumeister, 1998; 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 are 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 (Ebaugh, 1988).² I use the term *identity transition* to refer to the process of questioning,

¹ One 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; Sheehy, 1974). This work, however, focuses 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 work-related self-conceptions change.

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 prioritize and integrate our other roles, in such a way as to prevent role conflict and overload.

and eventually disengaging from, an identity that is central to a person's sense of self, while at the same time exploring, and eventually adopting, one or more substitutes.

This article situates itself within a small but burgeoning stream of literature that links role transitions and identity processes (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 1999, 2003). It builds on several of the key insights that have emerged from this literature, notably the notion that people make role transitions by publicly experimenting with provisional selves that serve as trials for possible, but not yet fully elaborated, professional identities (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra, 2003). Following Ebaugh (1988), I focus on permanent (rather than temporary) identity/role transitions, an area in which empirical and conceptual work has been lacking. Building on Ashforth's (2001) extensive review, this article aims to extend our thinking on work role/identity transitions by developing the range of means by which people elaborate possible selves and by explicating the process dynamics that fuel non-institutionalized or voluntary transitions from beginning to end. More generally, the article contributes to the social identity literature by focusing attention on multiplicity and dynamism in identity content and process (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000).

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 by which people explore, test and claim possible selves. The third section traces the evolution of identity transitions over time, from beginning to end, paying particular theoretical attention to the relatively ignored middle, or liminal, period, and identifying conditions that help a person close the transition cycle by making a choice among the alternatives generated. The final

section discusses general features of the process, including what differentiates between people who embark on identity transitions from those who do not, and those who ultimately make career changes from those who contemplate new options but do not take the leap, as well as contributions for future theory building and research.

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, 1980a; 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 Ashforth, 2001 and Barley, 1989 for reviews). Although the motivation for career change is beyond the scope of this article, most result from a 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 (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 in the case of job loss), the present model 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 (Becker and Carper, 1956; Hall, 1976; Strauss, 1977).³

Most existing conceptualizations implicitly assume institutionalized role transitions. Models such as Nicholson's (1984) preparation, encounter, adjustment and stabilization cycle, for example, describes 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, 1980a;

³ This fundamental modification in a person's self-conception is due to changes in the position the individual occupies in the social structure as well as changes in the expectations of, and exchanges among, those with whom the person interacts; when structures and expectations undergo dramatic shifts, the people embedded within them must change internally to maintain or regain a sense of personal identity (Becker and Carper, 1956; Strauss, 1977).

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, in contrast, there is no clear or easily identifiable next position to assume or obvious role model to emulate, and separation is neither formally mandated nor socially celebrated. Other mechanisms, therefore, are needed to explain the identity changes that unfold in non-institutionalized transitions.

Moreover, the scant literature on non-institutionalized role/identity transitions has focused primarily on role exits (Ebaugh, 1988; Ashforth, 2001), according much less attention to the process of creating the new options that eventually replace older identities. Ebaugh (1988) describes exit as a four-stage process, beginning with simmering doubts that give way to a search for alternatives, followed by a turning point that symbolizes the impossibility of return. Although her model provides great insights into career change, it also leaves open many questions about change processes motivated by new possible selves and the dynamics that propel such transitions from one stage to the next. Because additive and subtractive change processes involve inherently different dynamics, generalizing from a study of role exit to a broader array of career transitions might be misleading (Albert, 1992).

Another gap in our knowledge of non-institutionalized career change concerns the middle stages of the transition process. To date, this phase is mostly treated as the state of marginality experienced by the new recruit who has yet to make his or her place in the new role and organization (Trice and Morand, 1989; Van Maanen and

Schein, 1979), or as a role-less state between institutionally demarcated endings and beginnings (Ashforth, 2001). Descriptions of the middle period in voluntary career change (Ibarra, 2003; Osherton, 1980), however, suggest that the experience of feeling “in-between” identities is not just limited to situations when a person lacks a clear role identity, but also occurs when people develop strong commitments to two or more incompatible selves. This article extends descriptive accounts of the middle period by applying ideas about play and liminal experience (Turner, 1969) to explore conditions under which new possible selves become robust enough to compare with older, still reinforced identities.

Finally, any theory of non-institutionalized career change must explain what provides propulsion in the absence of an externally imposed role change. This article argues that bringing voluntary transitions to a close depends on incorporating transition experiences and impending changes into a newly revised self-concept, and having the new identity granted by relevant parties (in voluntary career change, identity claims must be accepted by external parties *before* the person enters the new role, since movement depends on externalities such as a job offer or project financing). Although both Ebaugh (1988) and Ibarra (2003) demonstrate how turning points help people communicate the change, neither fully accounts for how new identities are incorporated. This article further contributes to the literature on role transitions by highlighting the role of narrative in accomplishing this critical identity task.

**ELABORATING POSSIBLE SELVES:
THE ROLE OF ACTIVITIES, RELATIONSHIPS AND EVENTS**

Identity and Possible Selves

Identity refers to the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others (Gecas, 1982). These meanings, or self-conceptions, are based on the social roles and group memberships a person holds (social identities) as well as the personal and character traits they display, and others attribute to them, based on their conduct (personal identities) (Ashforth, 2001; Gecas, 1982). Although it is widely acknowledged that people have multiple, mutable, often conflicting identities, scholars also concur that the self must have some degree of continuity across time and situation (Baumeister, 1998; Breakwell, 1986). Finally, identities may be situated in the past, present or future; an important component of identity is a person's possible selves, the images one has about who one might become, would like to become, or fears becoming in the future (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Rather than attempt to adjudicate between theories that focus alternatively on past- versus future-based self-conceptions, real and ideal selves, or actual and potential identities,⁴ this paper acknowledges these tensions as characteristic features of the transition process.

My central argument is that career transition and change are fueled by modifications in a person's set of possible selves such that discrepancies between present work identities and aspirations for the future widen over time. Images of desired and feared future selves act as perceptual screens and motivational devices, shaping one's

⁴ Markus and Wurf (1987) describe the self-concept as consisting of multiple representations that vary along a number of dimensions including their centrality or importance, whether they reflect actual or potential achievement, and their temporal orientation (i.e., their past, present, or future).

interpretations of, and responses to, unfolding opportunities or constraints. Faced with dwindling 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., possibilities might be added or subtracted) 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 become incompatible with older identities. Within their theoretical conception, divergent, even contradictory, possible selves co-exist in all of us without posing any problem, as long as they remain hypothetical or loosely articulated. The process of career change, however, necessarily raises questions about how previously inexistent or nebulous possibilities (e.g., “I’d like to have my own business one day”), over time, become central, socially grounded and potentially enduring facets of a person’s self-definition (e.g., “I am a budding entrepreneur”).

In the sections below, I argue that possible selves are added, subtracted, redefined and adjusted in practice, as people alter their work activities, modify their social networks, and interpret life events through the lens of changing possibilities. These three

mechanisms – activities, relationships and events – correspond to well-established characteristics of identity: the ability of the self to be conscious of itself (i.e., reflexivity), its interpersonal nature, and the continuity of the self over time (Baumeister, 1986, 1998; Linde, 1993). Activities are critical because self-knowledge cannot be attained directly; rather, it must be inferred or deduced as the self observes itself in the act of doing something (Baumeister, 1998). Arguments for the importance of relationships are grounded in a rich literature on the self as an interpersonal being, whose identity claims are socially constructed and negotiated (Baumeister, 1998; Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). Finally, the importance of events as occasions for sense making is based on ideas about identity as a linguistic construction, in which continuity is established as events spread out over time are united by a common meaning (Baumeister, 1986; Linde, 1993; Weick, 1995).

Altering 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 people's primary work activities change, these may come to challenge their sense of who they are (i.e., a current identity) or want to become (i.e., possible selves). Ibarra (2003), for example, describes how new assignments and organizational changes can create disenchantment with anticipated career paths. Alternatively, side activities (e.g., moonlighting, freelance or consulting work, volunteer work and courses) that engage a person in a different type of work, if only peripherally, frequently precede a more permanent shift to a different career (Ebaugh, 1988; 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).

Activities are critical means for elaborating possible selves because one can only formulate knowledge about oneself by observing oneself in action (Baumeister, 1998). The underlying mechanisms are experiential learning (Bandura, 1977) and self-perception (Bem, 1972). Side activities allow a person to learn about new options and test unfamiliar waters from the safety of their current jobs. 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 appeal (Louis, 1980a). Similarly, side activities augment the feasibility of entering a new realm by allowing a person to accumulate relevant experience in that sphere (Ibarra, 2003; Moore and Buttner, 1997). Once people begin to act a certain way, they gradually come to see themselves as being the kind of people who acts that way (Bem, 1972).

People are not always seeking to change careers when they begin to engage in alternative professional activities (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003), and many people with extra-curricular interests never change careers. But as the appeal or feasibility of alternative possible selves shifts, discretionary activity in the old sphere typically erodes, potentially diminishing the appeal and feasibility 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 allow people to try out possible selves on a limited but tangible scale; at the same time, they diminish the hold of the old self by providing alternatives.

Proposition 1: The proportional number of, and time spent on, professional activities that are unrelated to, or weakly associated with, a person's current work role, relative to those implied by the current role, will be positively related to identity transition and career change.

Changing Social Interactions

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). Yet, how relationships affect later career processes has been virtually unstudied. Successful self-changes, however, are often instigated, motivated or supported by others. Interpersonal relationships are powerful determinants of the success or failure of efforts to change because self-concept change depends on enlisting other people to lend social reality to the desired changes (Baumeister, 1998). The mechanisms underlying the role of social interaction in altering possible selves are information and support, identification, and social validation and comparison.

Meeting people in different occupations provides information about new, perhaps previously unknown, options. 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 alongside contractors in their previous jobs (Kunda, *et al.*, 2002). Established members also initiate newcomers into a new occupational world by teaching them the required skills and rules as well as the social norms that govern how they should conduct themselves if they are to become true members (Strauss, 1977).

Identifying with persons in different roles or lines of work is another important means of creating and testing possible selves (Gersick, Bartunek and Dutton, 2000; Ibarra,

1999). Modeling is a powerful determinant of behavioral change (Bandura, 1977) because identification with role models infuses behavior with meaning, goals and purposes (Foote, 1951; Strauss, 1977). When people identify with role models, they are more likely to assimilate role requirements as part of their professional identity (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979:234). Role models are prominent in anecdotes of career change, as people who embody new possibilities, and as mentors and teachers, support and help shape those possibilities (Ibarra, 2003).

Role changes are often preceded by changing reference groups that catalyze or build momentum for the role transition. New reference groups generate new self-conceptions (Lieberman, 1956), providing both a point of reference and reflected appraisals that shape the focal person's self-understanding (Baumeister, 1998; Cooley, 1902). Social validation and comparison processes are particularly important in career change because a person who is uncertain about his or her beliefs is more likely to seek support for them from others (Festinger, 1954). Ebaugh's (1988) ex-nuns, for example, 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 intensified their contact with friends who had left the order.

Once a new reference group is established as an appropriate point of comparison, social contact with that group provides validation for changes one may be contemplating (Kunda, *et al.*, 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.

In much the same way that people often stumble into new activities, these relational processes need not be intentional at the start. Fortuitous encounters with those who have made work role transitions may lead a person to entertain the idea of a similar shift (Ibarra, 2003; Kunda, *et al.*, 2002). Alternatively, 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).

Diluting the strength of old ties and networks appears to be at least as important for identity transition as making new connections, since intimates can buffer the self-concept from the external feedback needed for change (Baumeister, 1998). Interaction partners can lock people into outdated identities by maintaining images of them that are consonant with those identities, and expecting fitting behavior (Baumeister, 1998; Swann, 1987; Schlenker, Dlugolecki and Doherty, 1994). One-fifth of Ebaugh's (1988) sample reported that someone of significance 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 career changes faced doubt, skepticism, and pigeonholing on the part of friends, family and close work associates, who remained invested in the identity the focal person was actively trying to shed. New ties not only provide role models, reference groups and social support for new possibilities but also form a substitute community within which new identities can be negotiated without sanction. Forging new relationships and connecting to new networks, therefore, promotes the creation of new possible selves

and dilutes the strength of older ties within which established identities were previously negotiated.

Proposition 2: The proportional number, emotional intensity, and frequency of contact in professional relationships and networks that are unrelated or weakly tied to a person's primary work role, relative to those implied by the old role, will be positively related to identity transition and career change.

Making Sense of Life Events

A diverse body of work has converged on the role of events as triggers for change. Precipitating events may range from major job, organizational and personal life changes to shocks or jolts produced by more mundane episodes (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Hall, 1991; Lee and Mitchell, 1994; Roberts, *et al.*, forthcoming). Accounts of career change invariably include events that sowed first doubts, provided publicly acceptable excuses for doubts already simmering, or served as turning points that legitimized and spurred a final decision (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003).

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), and an event of great significance to one person may be trivial to another. What transforms any given event into a trigger is the meaning a person derives from it (Ebaugh, 1988). Events provide occasions for sense making, causing people to consider the significance of the event in relation to their current situation, and

motivating the exploratory behavior that may lead to later identity alterations (Ebaugh, 1988; Hall, 1976; Ibarra, 2003; Lee and Mitchell, 1994).

Events “unfreeze” by producing surprise (Louis, 1980b; Louis and Sutton, 1991; Langer and Piper, 1987). 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 the medical profession (Ebaugh, 1988). Negative events, such as receiving a bad performance review, refute or call into question strongly held or cherished self-conceptions and bring feared possible selves more sharply into focus (Ibarra, 2003). 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 (Lee and Mitchell, 1994). Kunda, *et al.*, (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 people to consider their options. Because people pay attention to things that justify what they want to do, events become an organizing scheme for everything that occurs afterward.

Finally, events can also provoke insight or crystallization of what a person had hitherto known tacitly (Louis and Sutton, 1991; Langer and Piper, 1987). While many transition anecdotes tell of defining moments that clarified doubts and impelled the person to decisive action (e.g., Ebaugh, 1988), insight is a function of prior preparation and experience. Consequently, I argue that the role of events and the nature of the sense-making processes they provoke differ at different stages of the transition process: earlier events trigger and justify preliminary exploration while later events frame the more elaborate and publicly legitimate accounts needed to make a decisive break with the past.

Life's events and the meaning people make of them, therefore, bring new possible selves to life or change the meanings associated with pre-existing selves; their effects on identity transition and change, however, are mediated by behavior.

Proposition 3: The relationship between precipitating events and identity transition and career change is mediated by behavior to explore, claim or disclaim the identity suggested by the precipitating event.

The effects of activities, relationships and events are expected to be additive, 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 (relationships) 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 the writer identity may be expected to increase. The effect is due to the sum of the three mechanisms: the proposal acceptance may motivate the person to seek out additional “writer” activities, such as a writer’s club, which, in turn, stimulates the formation of relationships based on the writer identity, and makes more salient events that are meaningful with regard to this identity. It is the constellation of convergences among these processes, rather than any single mechanism, that promotes identity transition and career change.

Proposition 4: The effects of activities, networks, and events on identity transition and career change are additive.

Transition processes may begin with changes in activities or relationships or with the jolt of a trigger event; the theory proposed here does not prescribe a fixed sequence, nor does it specify the relative impact of push and pull factors. Either strategic intent 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. In terms of intentionality, however, the earlier stages of the transition are expected to be more subject to random events and serendipity than later stages, when a person’s involvement in activities and relationships associated with a new career becomes more conscious, systematic or goal-directed. Whatever the initial intent, movement in

identity transitions depends on the extent to which the intensity of activities, relationships and sense making premised on an alternative career increases over time.

IDENTITY TASKS BY TRANSITION STAGES

Van Gennep's (1960) three phases of a rite of passage – separation, transition, and incorporation – provide a foundation for most models of role transition. Most existing work, however, has focused on either the separation (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988) or incorporation phases, according little attention to the middle, transition stage, or to the dynamics that drive movement from one stage to the next.

Identity transitions begin, as discussed above, as people start to act on possibilities that did not previously exist or that existed only in their minds; over time, as their involvement in new activities and relationships intensifies, new identities become more salient and the appeal of older ones starts to diminish. A salient identity is one that is activated or invoked across many different situations and relationships; salience implies both centrality to a person's self-concept and commitment to the identity, defined as the number of persons to whom one is connected to through that identity, as well as the affective strength of those ties (Stryker and Serpe, 1982). Empirical evidence suggests a strong link between salience, commitment, and behavior consistent with salient identities (Stets and Burke, 2003). Early transition, therefore, is marked by an increasing intensity of exploratory behavior and the concomitant increase in the salience of new possibilities, relative to older ones.

Voluntary career change, however, rarely unfolds as a smooth, continuous process by which new possible selves gradually displace older identities. Schouten (1991) argues that people respond to their possible selves in one of three ways: with inaction, as when possible selves remain fantasies; with active rejection; or with incorporation of the possible self into a revised self-concept. When incorporating a new possible self necessarily implies rejecting another, as is the case in career change, the transition process tends to be fraught with identity conflict, ambivalence and fragmentation. People deal with the conflict by selecting one or a small number of possibilities for closer inspection, while erecting clear boundaries between their various identities so as to avoid or delay direct comparison.

Ending the fragmentation that ensues is the core task of the final stages of transition, when integrating previously segmented aspects of the self into a more-or-less re-unified work identity becomes imperative. Establishing continuity is a narrative task. To make a final choice and persuade external parties that this choice makes sense, people must craft a compelling story that explains, and transcends, the obvious discontinuity. Table 1 summarizes the arguments developed in more detail below.

In the Middle: Identity Buffering and Identity Play

Much research and theorizing suggests that identity transitions feature a middle, or liminal, period characterized by identity confusion and conflict (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969). This state has been variously described by role exiters as being “in a vacuum,” “in midair,” “neither here nor there,” and “at loose ends” (Bridges, 1980; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003; Osherton, 1980). The quote below, from a literature

professor trying to switch into a finance career, illustrates the disparate possible selves and sense of being “between and betwixt” that characterize liminality:

“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).

The state of liminality illustrated by this quote does not refer to a literal time period in between physical separation from one job role and incorporation into the next, but rather to a psychological state that occurs when a person loses or rejects an important aspect of the self without replacement in the same social domain (Ashforth, 2001; Schouten, 1991). Although the most commonly discussed forms of liminality in professional life concern cases of retirement and job loss (Ashforth, 2001), research on voluntary work role transitions suggests that people with multiple, incompatible commitments experience liminality as a period of acute identity conflict (Ibarra, 2003;

Osherton, 1980). Following Baumeister (1986: 199), I use the term *identity conflict* to refer to a “multiply-defined self, whose multiple definitions are incompatible.”⁵

Identity conflict may stem from various different sources.⁶ First, “side bets”, the things of value that people accrue in the course of a career, which they would have to forgo should they give up the career, (these include “golden handcuffs” such as stock options or retirement benefits, and intangibles including security, status and prestige) often bind people to careers that no longer appeal to them intrinsically (Ebaugh, 1988). Second, as leaving a career starts to become a real and appealing option, people often revisit the possibility of remaining as a way of coping with the loss of a future they once wanted or felt they should attain (Bridges, 1980; Ibarra, 2003). Finally, identity conflicts are difficult to resolve when competing identities are not comparable: still tentative or untested possible selves may not fare well in comparison to tangible identities that are well-grounded in the activities, relationships and events that defined them historically. A central question for transition scholars, therefore, is what conditions increase the likelihood that people will be able to explore alternatives sufficiently to come to an informed resolution of the inevitable conflict.

Two divergent streams of thought suggest that conditions that increase playfulness also promote identity exploration. In anthropology, Turner (1969) extended Van

⁵ This definition parallels traditional notions of inter-role conflict, defined as different roles having incompatible expectations (Katz and Kahn, 1978), as well as conceptions of identity conflict as defined by multiple identities vying for pre-eminence or privilege (Corley and Gioia, 2004:201).

⁶ Although the potential for conflict among divergent possible selves is always present, when rival identities exist only in people’s minds (Markus and Nurius, 1986), as provisional constructions that fluctuate from one interaction to the next (Ibarra, 1999), or as roles attached to different spheres of social life that are buffered from potential conflicts by micro role transitions (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000), people do not experience liminality.

Gennep's notion of liminality to a range of experiences that share a bounded time and space in which the normal rules of everyday life are suspended. Curiosity, exploration, and even frivolity govern behavior during these periods, such that the person in transition can "violate the rules" or experiment with new identities safely, without danger of sanction. Similarly, 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 form a boundary region in which the child can gradually define and test out a newly emerging self, protected from any danger. A playful attitude facilitates experiments with identity by challenging existing belief systems and restructuring cognitions (Brown and Starkey, 2000; March, 1979).

Building on these two traditions, this article proposes that a person contemplating a career change will benefit from being able to try out unformed, even risky, identities in a relatively safe and secure environment in which the rules governing old career identities are suspended. The operating principles, therefore, are buffering and play: the time and space set aside from the mainstream for side activities or special relationships, erect boundaries between potentially conflicting selves, allowing people to concentrate on one identity at a time rather than attempting to resolve the conflicts among them (Ashforth, 2001; Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Breakwell, 1986). I use the term *identity play* to refer to the process of provisionally taking roles and

modeling behaviors associated with desired future selves, and argue that temporal, spatial and relational boundaries encourage identity play by providing safety, suspension of the rules, and separation from established identities.

Temporal boundaries, such as those defined by sabbaticals, educational programs, vacations and leisure activities buffer people from institutional obligations, and thus grant license to play with new ways of being (Turner, 1969). Role exits, for example, are frequently preceded by returning to school (Ebaugh, 1988). When 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 a year of 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 for 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).

Spatial boundaries, such as those around laboratories, scenarios, simulations, role-plays and parallel organizations, similarly encourage departures from existing norms and operating procedures, by allowing people to suspend normal requirements for consistency and rationality, play with possibilities, and develop new skills or 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 within a bounded time and 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).

The boundaries created by significant relationships also protect and buffer. Guiding figures, defined as people from whom adults in transition gain the support and encouragement needed to consider new ways of structuring their lives and work (Levinson, 1981:109), are prominent in stories of career change (Ibarra, 2003). Guiding figures confer blessings, give advice, embody new possibilities, and, as teachers, help to shape those possibilities (Strauss, 1977). They also serve as sounding boards for early sense-making efforts, allowing a person who does not yet have clarity about next steps to try out explanations that will improve with practice and experience (Ibarra, 2003). The strong bond that develops between the guiding figure and the person in transition fosters psychological safety, providing a secure base for exploring new territory (Bowlby, 1988; Kahn, 1996).

Because temporal, spatial and relational boundaries impose a separation from one’s ongoing work routine, they also serve to further diminish the salience of, or commitment to, well-established work identities. The psychology of the middle period, however, 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). Micro role transitions (Ashforth, 2001) between buffered identity domains facilitate change by staving off premature closure until a person has fully explored alternatives (Osherton, 1980; Ibarra, 2003; Shepherd, 2003).

Proposition 5: Buffering new possible selves from the temporal, physical and social domains associated with older identities, will be positively related to identity transition and career change.

Ending the Transition: Identity as Narrative

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). Once people begin to act on newly emerging possibilities, any pre-existing clarity about who they want to become inevitably gives way to the doubt, uncertainty and ambivalence of the middle period. A common strategy for dealing with this conflict is compartmentalizing, or erecting boundaries among competing identities so as to avoid direct contact and comparison (Breakwell, 1986). However, boundaries can also segregate identities such that they remain static for years (Breakwell, 1986). What, then, explains movement from the buffered identity play of the liminal period to a “renewed clarity” that allows a person to resolve the conflict and make a firm decision to stay or leave?

Ebaugh (1988:123) noted that non-institutionalized role transitions tend to come to a close 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.” Turning points, she argued, serve three essential functions: they create an occasion to take a firm stand and announce the exit, help resolve final doubts and conflicts so that the

person can make the decision, and galvanize the action needed to complete the transition. In this section, I extend Ebaugh's arguments by suggesting that turning points also play a narrative role, helping the person in transition to integrate new self-conceptions into a more coherent and enduring sense of identity, and to claim that identity publicly and successfully across his or her various social circles.

A narrative is a story that posits a history for an outcome (Weick, 1995). Self-narratives, defined as "account(s) of the relationship among self-relevant events over time" (Gergen, 1997:187), are an important means of sense making and constructing identities (Ashforth, 2001; Gergen, 1997; McAdams, 1997; Van Maanen, 1998). People use stories to identify themselves to others and to themselves, and to give their life a sense of meaning and direction (Gergen, 1997); they also reinvent themselves by reinterpreting past events in the light of new experiences, and weaving past and present into a coherent story about who they are becoming (Holland, *et al.*, 1998).

Narrative is especially important in the final stages of transition because it sustains or restores the three key features of identity described above – its reflexivity, interpersonal nature, and the continuity of the self over time (Baumeister, 1998). First, narrative allows self-reflection by creating a distance between the narrator and the protagonist of the narrative: "consequently, the narrator can observe, reflect, adjust the amount of distance, and correct the self that is being created. The very act of narrating creates the occasion for self-regard and editing." (Linde, 1993:105). Second, telling one's story is an interpersonal act. Since desired selves remain incomplete and tentative without the stamp of approval of one's social entourage (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), without a compelling narrative,

however, the external audience (e.g., friends, family, recruiters, etc.) for one's transformation remains dubious and skeptical (Ashforth, 2001; Gergen, 1997). Finally, narrative establishes or restores identity continuity, a difficult task when anticipated career changes are discontinuous, or otherwise deviate from socially acceptable trajectories (Ashforth, 2001).⁷ A good story allows a person to show either that the change is really not discontinuous or that discontinuity is not as problematic as it might seem (Linde, 1993:140).

Not all narratives are equally compelling. A good story rests on a coherent, goal-directed sequence of events in which the past is related to the present, and from that connection, one can extrapolate to the future (Gergen, 1997; Weick, 1995). It explains, for example, why quitting a prestigious job for a seemingly lower status work role, not only makes sense but is also consistent with a fundamental aspect of who one is and always has been. Coherence, in turn, results from continuity (i.e., although the situation has changed, the person remains the same) and causality (i.e., there is a good explanation for the change) (Linde, 1993:127).

Because transition narratives are necessarily discontinuity stories, they rely on turning points to establish causality (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003). A turning point represents a point of no return, after which the protagonist can no longer see or do things the same way, and the story moves inexorably to climax and resolution. Kunda, *et al.*, (2002) found that technical workers who made the transition from salaried employment to contract work, told stories that illustrate the principles of continuity and causation:

⁷ 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.

“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).

In this narrative, unspecified events, in combination with serendipitous encounters, motivate a search for alternatives; as a viable alternative materializes, a later event is framed as a turning point and impels the expert to take final steps to complete the transition. This turning point need not be objectively different from earlier events that only heightened discontent; what makes it a turning point is that the person is now on the threshold of making a decision and a desired outcome is in sight. Once people know what they want, they can search retrospectively for a causal chain that explains that outcome (Weick, 1995).

Compelling narratives are the product of hindsight and substantial editing (Weick, 1995). Another advantage of buffering in the middle period is that rigid boundaries allow people to try out widely divergent claims about their career identities and aspirations with different audiences, and rehearse different draft versions of their emerging stories. With practice, and exposure to others who tell their own transition

stories, people develop a more compelling narrative, one that helps resolve the conflict and fragmentation of the liminal period by making it easier to claim the new identity in a greater variety of situations. Since identities invoked across a range of social interactions become more salient (Stryker and Serpe, 1982), the act of constructing, telling and retelling a convincing transition narrative – and not simply experiencing a turning point passively – helps the person incorporate the new identity elements into a revised self-concept, and thus bring the transition cycle to a close.

Proposition 6: Telling a coherent transition narrative will be positively related to identity transition and career change.

DISCUSSION

This article has argued that identity transition and career change are the result of shifts and fluctuations in a person's activities, relationships, and the meaning they make of the events of their lives. In the early stages of the transition, new possible selves become more salient to the extent that the time, energy and conscious intent devoted to exploring them intensifies. The hallmark of the middle transition stage is the experience of liminality, in which people feel caught "in-between" conflicting, incompatible identities. Middle periods differ in the extent to which they provide a holding environment in which the rules that govern old identities are suspended, allowing people to play safely with more tentative possibilities. Buffered from direct contact and comparison with well-established roles and self-conceptions, immature possible selves develop more fully, providing a better basis for making choices among alternatives. Events construed as turning points herald the end of the transition cycle

by serving as occasions for retrospective sense making and lending narrative form to the transition. Narratives restore identity continuity, increasing the likelihood that the new identity will be incorporated and accepted as legitimate by a wider social circle. The sections below discuss the major features of identity transition processes as well as the contributions and implications of these ideas for future research.

Process Motors and Characteristics

Since the number of people who contemplate career changes can be expected to be higher than the number who actually accomplish them, any theory of identity transition must explain conditions that differentiate those who embark on the process from those who do not, as well as factors that might derail or set back the transition, and why, after considering alternatives, some people change careers while others do not. The present conceptualization provides at least a partial answer by identifying key identity tasks associated with early, middle and late transition stages; if these are not accomplished, the transition fails to begin, is interrupted or must loop back to a preceding task. The theory developed here does not seek to predict who will attempt a transition; nor does it delve into specific change outcomes or prescribe a necessary sequence of events that unfold according to clearly demarcated stages. Instead, it suggests conditions for attaining career change, once the transition has begun.

In the early stages, a person may explore possible selves via new activities and relationships, but fail to intensify their involvement (e.g., as when a person pursues a hobby for a long period of time without trying to make it an alternative career), or experience what might be seen as a precipitating event, but emerge unaffected. In

order for the identity transition to begin, images of possible futures need to be transformed into action. As these actions create or amplify discrepancies between the current role identity and a person's desires for the future, the liminal period begins.

In the middle period, a person might test a favorite possibility only to discard it on the basis of experience. First-hand knowledge is needed as much to rule out possible selves as to retain more appealing or viable options. In Ibarra's (2003) study, for example, a consultant used a sabbatical to explore becoming a scuba diving shop owner, only to conclude that a career based on his hobby would lose appeal over time and refocus his search on more conventional career options; other participants failed to find employment in their domain of choice and, as such, were forced to modify their search. Failed experiments and the feedback they generate can stimulate further, more refined loops or double-interacts (Weick, 1979) in the transition process, leading to more sophisticated trials. The present model is not linear, therefore, but, rather, characterized by loops and iterations among the proposed transition tasks.

Voluntary identity transitions unfold initially by way of additive processes (Albert, 1992), as new selves develop before old possibilities are discarded. But, the resulting multitude of selves is uncomfortable (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003), and as such creates the context for its own resolution in the later stages, when a more difficult operation, change by subtraction, is required (Albert, 1992). As identity conflict becomes more obvious and pronounced, urgency for taking definitive action to restore a sense of coherent identity builds, and so does the motivation to come up with a compelling story that bolsters the person's resolve to take action.

While one person may exit a transition having made fundamental professional changes, another may conclude a similar period of turmoil and self-questioning by re-affirming past choices (Ibarra, 2003; Levinson, 1981). The failure to make a career change does not preclude identity transition, as people also modify work identities by changing their relationship or internal orientation to the role already held (Louis, 1980a). Alternatively, making a career change does not necessarily imply an objective improvement. Although little empirical research exists to shed light on variation in transition outcomes such as satisfaction with one's decision, the ideas proposed here suggest that better subjective outcomes – regardless of whether the person ultimately stays or leaves – result from transition processes in which decisions are informed by direct experience with a range of possibilities.⁸

Many individual and contextual variables that I do not treat explicitly – the transferability of skills, interests and experience between the old and potential, new career, barriers to entry into a new occupation, the availability of jobs in the desired domain, and the reversibility of the exit, to name a few⁹ – may moderate transition processes and outcomes (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988). Rather than viewing career change as an outcome that can be predicted as a function of facilitating and constraining factors, this paper offers a process model made up of changing responses

⁸ Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) distinction between the external career (based on socially defined indicators of status, wealth and prestige) and the internal career (based on individual preferences, priorities and values) is relevant to any normative treatment of career transition outcomes.

⁹ Ebaugh's (1988) own findings provided many counter-examples to her moderating conditions. For example, while some of her occupational exiters considered jobs tangentially related to what they were doing before (e.g., business teachers found jobs as accountants in business, police officers went into private security work); others, notably the physicians, moved into completely different lines of work (e.g., law, real estate). Likewise, although she found that fields with relatively low barriers to entry, such as real estate, tended to be attractive second careers, she also reported a high incidence of returning to graduate schools (e.g., law, engineering) among her examples.

to unfolding opportunities. The identity tasks and mechanisms outlined in Table 1 provide a basis for future research into identity's evolution.

Contributions to Theory and Research

To date, few organizational scholars have examined the underlying processes associated with dynamism in work identities. While the notion that people construct identities by situated, social action is not new, nor is the notion that desired future images, rather than existing identities, provide the basis for interpreting events and motivating action (Baumeister, 1986; Gioia and Thomas, 1996), what *is* new, and potentially generative, is a model of identity transition that identifies the conditions and processes that increase the likelihood of making a career change, in the absence of an institutionalized rite of passage. The model proposed here is consistent with a view of self-development as an evolutionary process that involves the generation of variation in the self and selection and retention among proposed selves (Ibarra, 1999; Yost, Strube and Bailey, 1992), as well as the more descriptive stages of role transition and career change proposed by Ebaugh (1988) and Ibarra (2003). It extends these ideas by uniting transition mechanisms and stages into an integrated framework that specifies how activities, relationships and events alter a person's set of possible selves, indicating how liminal periods allow fuller elaboration of selves selected for closer inspection, and illuminating the role of narrative in retaining and incorporating the resulting identity changes.

A second contribution of this article is a set of ideas about the identity dynamics of the liminal period. Current thinking on identity change has largely ignored 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” builds on a diverse literature on role boundaries, temporary role transitions, and role exits (Ashforth, 2001; Ashforth *et al.* 2000; Ebaugh, 1988), scant research has examined how people resolve identity conflicts in situations where they must make choices among incompatible futures. This article extends a growing literature that classifies strategies for coping with multiple and conflicting identities (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Breakwell, 1986; Pratt and Foreman, 2000) by suggesting a sequence of coping strategies over the course of a transition (e.g., proposing that compartmentalization strategies tend to precede deletion or integration strategies). It also contributes to this literature by introducing the notion of identity play, an idea suggested in existing treatments of change (e.g., Brown and Starkey, 2000) but rarely fully articulated or systematically linked to the transition processes that unfold in organizational life.

The ideas proposed in this article can also inform future research on diverse forms of liminality. At least two forms have been suggested here: liminality stemming from the simultaneous pursuit of two different career paths, as when a would-be entrepreneur works on a new business idea on the side while continuing a day job; and liminality created by diverse forms of “time-out” as when a person is laid off, follows an outplacement program, takes a sabbatical, or follows some form of adult education (Ashforth, 2001; Korotov, 2004). Ebaugh (1988) noted that liminality can be experienced over weeks, months or even years. Future studies might explore the extent to which exogenous variables, such as occupational status, financial resources,

and family situation, make different varieties of liminal experiences more or less possible,¹⁰ and how these variations, in turn, affect identity play. The current variety of adult education programs, which include evening, weekend and multi-session courses, provide an excellent laboratory in which to explore diverse forms of liminality, such as time periods that are fixed or open-ended, or differing degrees of physical and social encapsulation (Greil and Rudy, 1984).

Finally, the notion of transition narratives developed here is consistent with a broad literature on the importance of accounts, narratives and other rhetorical devices in creating meaning and negotiating identities (e.g., Ashforth, 2001; 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 integration after a period of fragmentation and conflict. It stands to reason, then, that if a transition narrative lacks appropriate form, is not coherent, or conflicts with other identity claims, movement along the transition cycle is impeded. Although much has been written about what makes for a good story (Gergen, 1997; Linde, 1993; Weick, 1995), further research is needed to link narrative properties to variation in transition processes and outcomes.

¹⁰ 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 this 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 transitions that entailed working two jobs, rather than taking a time-out to return to school or engage in volunteer or creative activities.

Another promising area for future research concerns sources of variation in self-narratives. Some transition narratives may be more readily available as institutionalized scripts (Ashforth, 2001); the engineer who becomes a manager, for example, follows a well-trod narrative path while the person who makes a less common or valued change faces the added challenge of inventing a unique story. Still another conceptual issue concerns the multiplicity of self-narratives. While a consistent narrative told across diverse social circles consolidates identity, it also constrains the person to live up to the self they have claimed to be. Bateson (2004:69) argues that there are advantages to having multiple versions of one's life story, as different interpretations help people construct different futures. Future research on the evolution of identity might distinguish periods during which identity aims are best accomplished by telling stories that are variations on the same basic plot from periods in which switching to a different plot is required.

An important boundary condition for the present model is its focus on voluntary change. In job loss, like in voluntary exits, identity transition 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; Latack and Dozier, 1986; Shepherd, 2003). But, involuntary transitions begin as change by subtraction rather than addition, and as such, are likely characterized by different dynamics (Albert, 1992). When identities based on the old career are no longer possible futures, the identity conflict and buffering strategies of voluntary transitions may be replaced by different dynamics, for example, dynamics associated with identity ambiguity (e.g., Corley and Gioia, 2004). The experience of liminality may also differ: one might reasonably expect that the identity threat associated with

layoff might interfere with the process of identity play; alternatively, an imposed separation might facilitate transition by providing a clearly dedicated time to explore alternatives. Further research is needed to discern conditions under which job loss is more or less likely to lead to identity transition and career change.

Clearly, identity transition needs to be better understood in a world in which individuals enjoy considerable choice regarding occupation, employer, and career paths (Albert *et al.*, 2000). Although this paper has focused on individual experiences and outcomes, the transition processes described here have many implications for scholars who study new forms of work (e.g., temporary employment, freelance work, and “portfolio careers”, in which people simultaneously pursue different occupations, each on a part-time basis), settings and situations that are typically populated by people who have experienced or are in the midst of identity transitions.

Although much caution is warranted in making links across levels of analysis, the present conception of identity transition may also shed light on the dynamics of organizational identity change. Ample evidence suggests that organizational identities are expressed and transformed through changes in a firm’s activities and relationships. 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, are also important tools for effecting organizational change (Gioia and Thomas, 1996). Further, dynamics associated with possible selves,

such growing discrepancies between current identities and desired futures, also appear to fuel organizational identity change (Corley and Gioia, 2004). The ideas about core identity tasks and transition stages developed here might inspire further theoretical development on the dynamics of organizational identity change. More broadly, they may help consolidate recent thinking on problematic facets of organizational identity, including identity conflict (Foreman and Whetten, 2002), ambiguity (Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Corley and Gioia, 2004) threat (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996), and disidentification (Elsback and Bhattacharya, 2001).

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.

Table 1. Identity Tasks by Transition Stages

	Stages of the Transition Process Over Time		
	Early	Middle	Late
Core Identity Tasks	Exploring alternatives	Trying out one or more selected options by way of a more sustained test	Resolution & integration: Discarding and retaining possibilities among those considered
Mechanisms that propel movement across stages	Changing salience of new and old possible selves	Buffering and identity play	Crafting a coherent transition narrative

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