

Sitting by the Fire.

An Ethnographic Exploration of Liminality, Self-questioning
Identity, and the Darkness that Surrounds the Fire of the
Creative.

Alan Brooke

Edinburgh Napier University
The Business School
Craiglockhart Campus
219 Colinton Road
Edinburgh
EH14 1DJ

Alan.Brooke@napier.ac.uk

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Summary

In this ethnographic study, the creative ‘underground’ will be lived in and documented, and songs will be written over the period of one year with grassroots artists within the folk/indie/rock scene. It will be argued that only by detailing the process of creation, by walking alongside the participants in their journey (Moeran, 2009), can the complexity of the experience be unravelled, and the creative ‘underground’ be truly understood (Reilly, 2017).

Considering the writing of new songs as a combination of, or perhaps conflict of, personal ‘play’ alongside extracurricular ‘work’ (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Bohm, 1996; Rogers, 1973), the data gathered from this intimate ethnographic approach is intended to capture the ‘primary drivers of behaviour’ of enjoyment and discovery over goals and objectives (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010, p.12), or the first three of Weber’s (1947) four meaningful social actions.

By exploring the participants positioning in the ‘betwixt and between’ (Beech, 2022) conflicting identities - those of ‘creative’ and/or ‘artist’, and the conventional ‘worker’ and/or ‘labourer’ of a capitalist economy (Healy, 2020) - this study seeks to explore, document, and contribute to knowledge of the longitudinal experience, and consequences of, excessive liminality.

Track: *Identity.*

Word Count: 1816

Theoretical underpinnings

A considerable body of identity literature has developed over the last fifty years, with significant breadth and depth, deeply rooted in self-reflexivity (Beech et al., 2016; Brown, 2015; Kuhn, 2006; Collison, 2003). Themes covered include the search for the resolution of tensions (Brown, 2015), stepping towards this resolution (considering root metaphor) (Alvesson, 2010), distinctiveness and coherence (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Watson, 2009), and resistance to surveillance (Collison, 2003). Recent literature regarding identity and musicians covers, though is not limited to, employability and aspirations (Burland et al. 2022; Lopez-Iniguez & Burnard, 2022; Wooley & Christie, 2021; Bennet & Hannekam, 2018), a triadic attachment between artist, persona and audience (Formilan & Stark, 2023), anxiety, mental illness and hardship (Alacovska & Karreman, 2023; Cinque et al., 2021), and agency and allyship (Jammaers & Ybema, 2023).

‘Identity work can be considered an orienting process experienced by people through which people become members of particular social groups such as professional ones’ (Gordon et al., 2020, p.1007). When transitioning from one identity construct to another, early twentieth century authors such as Arnold Van Gennep focussed on the rituals that marked these transitions (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). Contemporary examples are a wedding (fiancée to bride), bar mitzvah (boy to man) or a work-place party for a promotion. Van Gennep envisioned three stages: - separation, where an actor detaches from social structure; the liminal stage where the ‘liminar’ passes through a boundary; and the return to stability where the liminar enters, and can be recognised within, a new identity construct (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

The ‘betwixt and between’ identity constructs, where a person is transitioning from one identity construct to another (i.e. man to groom, unemployed to employed), is where liminality sits (Beech, 2011). A person in this transition may be considered socially invisible, or at best unpleasant, until the new stable identity is formed that is meaningful for the individual and society (Beech, 2011). For example, when a man is getting married, he is neither unmarried nor married, and is invisible or at best unpleasant until a meaningful identity is achieved. This fits neatly with Bohm’s (1996) and Collison’s (2003) assertion that societal actors feel uncomfortable around the unconventional, insecure and vulnerable, and are inclined to strive for the safety and convenience of routine and societal acceptability, of tried and tested, both socially and in the inner self. The historical assumption that this transition from one construct to another is finite, guided and obligatory, limits the conceptional potential of liminality (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

There exist environments where liminality is prolonged, such as within oscillating networks (Ellis & Ybema, 2010), layered career models (Reilly, 2017) or a consequence of the 21st Century dissolving of traditional structures (Brown, 2015) that may lead to dis-identification (Costas & Fleming, 2009). Extended periods of liminality are theorised to have negative consequences (Beech, 2011) such as low self-esteem (Garsten, 1999), a ‘fear of freedom’ (Collison, 2003, p.531), anxiety, confusion, and doubt (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016), the consequences of which can lead traditionalist identity theorists to again refocus discussions on the re-establishment of order in the Foucauldian sense (Collison, 2003). This assumes that all individuals try to escape from, and do not take comfort from, these ‘negative consequences’, and ignores the subtleties of the positives alongside these negatives.

When researching liminality, creatives can be a particularly fruitful field. This is due to the pressures of conformity to constructed identities (such as, for example, to fit into the expectations of a ‘demographic’ or ‘genre’), the sometimes societally unconventional ‘demographic’ or ‘genre’, and the impact this has on the self-identification of ‘creative’ and/or

‘artist’ and the meaning of creative products and artistic output (Beech et al. 2016; McKinlay & Smith, 2009; Pratt & Jeffcutt, 2009).

Though much work covers external pressures, little emphasis in identity literature has been placed on internal, or intrinsic pressures that the self-identified creative place on themselves (Beech et al., 2016). As the authors’ state; ‘Identity work is then conceived as being directed towards establishing, maintaining or restoring a sense of self as a natural response to a threat’ (p.508). The authors suggest that Identity studies with creativity, therefore, focus more upon the solution, than the struggle itself. In the author’s own words, empirical studies tend to focus upon ‘struggling-to-come-up rather than struggling-to-stay-afloat’ (p.508), and thus sustained incoherence, insecurity and indistinctiveness remain neglected by scholars in the field of identity when the focus is on creativity.

Beech et al. (2016), through ‘a surprise in empirical engagement in the field’ (P.507), found that musicians invest so much of themselves in their art that they deliberately self-doubt and self-critique the process. The participants placed more emphasis on the struggle than the outcome, the puzzle as opposed to its completion, no matter the unpleasantness, furiousness, and frustration of this battle. In essence, this ‘surprise’ could form the basis for the conceptual theory of solace, the positives, that are neglected in the field of extended liminality. Identity formation, reparation and revision is reasonably unique in music, and the wider art scene, in that the self must be on display to strangers (Grey, 1998), embellished (Costas & Fleming, 2009) and utilised to form a product of meaning to both the artist and the audience. With art, identity and the self being so intertwined, internal yet on display, this forms the concept of self-questioning identity (Beech et al. 2016).

Early Indication of Research Aims and Objectives.

Due to questions emerging from the literature, this study seeks to explore, with depth, the concept of excessive longitudinal liminality (Beech, 2011) and self-questioning identity (Beech et al., 2016) with regards to those who self-identify as ‘creatives’ and/or ‘artists’. Alongside these considerations, it is also the intent to explore both the internal and external impact of the tools (or artifacts) that artists use to construct their work.

This study therefore aims to explore the longitudinal experience and consequences of prolonged liminality between identity constructs in creative practice.

From the aim of this research, and the literature reviewed, several objectives have therefore been derived;

- **To review the existing literature on identity and liminality, including in the context of creative practice.**
- **To explore how participants experience prolonged liminality during creative practice, through the lens of song writing.**
- **To examine the role of ‘working’ artefacts (e.g. instruments) in participants’ identity work.**
- **Develop recommendations to support people who experience prolonged liminal states of identity and, recognising the growth of liminal states as a result of changes**

to working practices (e.g. the gig economy), to develop recommendations on the management of prolonged and excessive liminality at work.

Research Methods.

The research proposed is reasonably complex and theoretically original (Dallow, 2003), though its complexity is purposeful and measured, to address the aim and objectives of this research, and to protect the integrity of the data in the diverse and fragile field of creation (Reilly, 2017; Bohm, 1996; Amabile, 1983; Rogers, 1954). In its essence however it is simply a multilocation (both physical and digital) ethnographic approach (Reilly, 2017), complimented by semi-structured interviews (Clark et al., 2021) and document analysis (Morgan, 2022) post fieldwork. Elements of self-reflection (Creswell, 2013) will be considered philosophical underpinnings.

The researcher will inhabit this creative world for one year. The participants in this study will be 5-6 grassroots song writers, all of whom create their own original work. They will be tasked with creating new and unique songs alongside the researcher as an observant participant (Reilly, 2017; Moeran, 2009). Due to this imposition of the researchers' historical observations and preconceptions, a reflective account of *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge in the field of song creation will be presented, and reflexive notes taken throughout. This will encourage critical peer evaluation of the researchers' viability and fallibility in undertaking this study and drawing upon this insight (Cunliffe 2003; Lynch 2000).

The journey of the researcher will begin with a reflective account of prior experience of song creation. The ethnographic fieldwork will span one year, featuring observant participation, reflexivity and the taking of field notes (Reilly, 2017). Having finished the field work, a reflection upon the whole process will be undertaken.

Alongside the researcher, the participants will be involved in the process of song creation. This exact number of songs that will be written is impossible and inappropriate to predict given the process-driven (Rouse & Pratt, 2021) and emergent (Benton & Craib, 2011) nature of the study, though this is arguably not relevant to the objectives. A semi-structured interview will then be performed, to address key themes that have arisen during the fieldwork and to gain an understanding of relevant information that may be considered not directly observable (Reilly, 2017).

Post-fieldwork document analysis will be performed on the lyrics of legacy songs of the participants and researcher, and of the songs created in this process (Morgan, 2022).

Key Dates up until the conference.

Prior to the date of the conference, it is likely that methods will have been discussed and finalised with the University, the ethics panel and supervisors. Data collection will have begun, and this conference will fall somewhere in the early stages of data gathering.

Discussion topics for the Conference.

It is firstly hoped that attendance and presentation at BAM '24 will add significant weight to the literature review, and provide confidence moving forward with this research. By sharing this research with stakeholders, it is hoped that I can get an indication of the impact when considering emerging paradigms. My attendance will undoubtedly broaden my understanding of upcoming research, shifting paradigms, and notable academics in the field.

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