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## Transitional Space

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### *Special Issue on Organizing Transitional Space* *Editorial paper*

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*Though I had lived by the shore all my life, I seemed never to have been near the sea till then. The smell of tar and salt was something new. I saw the most wonderful figure-heads, that had all been far over the ocean. I saw, besides, many old sailors, with rings in their ears, and whiskers curled in ringlets, and tarry pig-tails, and their swaggering, clumsy sea-walk; and if I had seen as many kings or archbishops I could not have been more delighted (Stevenson 1883/1994, p. 46)*

The above passage describes the beauty and wonder of the port city of Bristol, as encountered for the first time by the protagonist of that most famous adventure novel, *Treasure Island*. Bristol of the novel bridges the ordered space of landlocked existence and the lawless and dangerous life of the sea. It witnesses the young hero's transformation from a timid boy into an eager adventurer. But it is also a transitional space in a wider context, linking the success story of British shipbuilding industry and the darker narrative of Atlantic slave trade.

Liminality is the state betwixt and between more stable states and realities. In anthropology authors such as Arnold van Gennep (1909/1960), Erving Goffman (1959), and Victor Turner (1974) have described liminality as a transitory stage in rituals, especially in rites of passage (Turner, 1969). It is conceived of as a state of blurred boundaries, a mode where the usual constraints of normality, common sense, and cultural definitions do not apply, where norms are relaxed and there is a particular openness to experimentation and the creation of a sense of community. During the liminal phase there develops a special bond between those who go through it together, known as *communitas* – based on humanity and disregarding of structures and hierarchies of the outside culture.

Liminality need not be regarded as a purely temporal feature. Marc Augé (1995) drew attention to the areas “*which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity*” (p. 78), abundant in our contemporary societies: airport lounges, routes of commuting, shopping centres. He calls them non-places, but their defining characteristic is precisely their transitionality: non-places lack sufficient connection with wider meanings in our lives to be considered significant, yet constitute a vital link between better delineated contexts. Seemingly insignificant and thus mostly hidden in plain sight, these empty spaces (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 1997) allow for, or even force the shifting of roles and identities necessitated by moving from one setting to another.

Indeed, we see transitional space as the physical archetype of liminality: the space waiting for liminality to happen, or else, just the undefined, indefinite space that allows for many interpretations and uses. It may also be a space reclaimed by the

underdogs, or forgotten by management and reconstructed by the organization's participants as a cultural sanctuary or symbolic retreat.

This special issue of the *Tamara Journal of Critical Organization Inquiry* is dedicated to transitional space as a concept used in organization studies. It is a fairly new area of interest and so the articles presented in this issue are few, but all are interesting and innovative. The ways in which they use the concept of transitional space points, in our opinion, to several of its potentially valuable characteristics, sketching a framework for future use and development of a promising area of research.

Frederic Bill and Lena Olaison utilize the idea of transitional space to describe antiquarian bookshops as places bridging contexts of business activity and propagation of culture. Neither of these two discourses is obviously dominant, and thus the space of the bookshop must allow for constant transition and translation between contexts. The resulting liminal space forms the setting for a special instance of the gift-giving process, where commodities are transformed into gifts. The debt accruing from such exchanges is not directed towards the human participants of the process but to the book itself, allowing the sidestepping of the economic context of bookselling. Bill and Olaison use the idea of liminality and transitional space to make visible the framing of this process, which gives the interactions between the "buyer" and "seller" a meaning not obvious in the traditional interpretations utilizing the market or transaction metaphors.

Rina Arya presents the company awayday: a setting in which participants similarly struggle to distance themselves from the business context while simultaneously maintaining connections to the everyday functioning of the organization. The awayday is a potential transitional space, betwixt and between everyday and holiday, employee and management perspective. This kind of space allows for combinations of feelings and interactions with a great potential for exploration and reflection, such as a reconfiguration of identities and roles, as well as some carnivalesque features in the Bakhtinian (1941) sense, that is, consumption of the extraordinary to re-embrace order. The interplay between structure and irregularity opens up a potential for a re-thinking of identity and boundaries, embedded into social and cultural processes. The awayday can be thus seen as transitional space par excellence, offering the possibility, yet never a guarantee, of a change in context, a platform for collective innovation.

Agnieszka Postuła and Igor Postuła present a study following another change of context: a restructuring of a company set against the ongoing drive for privatization of the Polish economy. Restructuring of a Polish state-owned enterprise (SOE) is typically regarded as a legal and managerial process. The concept of transitional space, however, allows the foregrounding of collective sensemaking processes and the multipartite attempts to redefine the changing organization in the changing environment. Looking upon these processes from an anthropological point of view, and revealing their temporal and spatial context as a transitional space, sheds light on the motives of the participating stakeholders. The authors argue that it is the ambiguity and liminality of the transformation that allowed the organization to pull back from bankruptcy, and posit the crucial importance of liminal spaces for organizational renewal.

Finally, Wendelin Küpers article explores the liminal aspects of leader- and followership. Presenting work as a necessarily liminal activity, bridging disparate contexts and ambiguous relations, the author draws upon the phenomenological notion of embodiment to situate this liminality not just in the interpersonal relations, but also in the spatial settings of organizations. The latter are seen as non-places of incomplete identity, necessitating constant active involvement of all participants in the construction of ever dissipative organizational reality. Adopting the lens of liminality and regarding the structuring dynamics as taking place in a transitional space, enables the author also to bring to light the transformative power of the emotional dimensions of leader-follower interaction, without losing any of its ambivalence or ambiguity.

The articles in this special issue show an emerging, interesting area of research in organization studies. Transitional space can be understood as a spatial/ temporal context enabling embodiment of liminal ideas, roles and propositions. It is a space with considerable transformative and innovative potential, such as pointing to emotional resources, in their original, non-managed form, containing ambivalence and ambiguities. Its taking into consideration may also reveal some poorly understood aspects of interactions, such as re-presenting the buyer-antiquarian interaction as a gift giving process. It may serve as an alternative to several metaphors, such as: marketplace, social and legal structure, and other adapted to portraying dynamic organizational aspects, under transitional conditions, temporary or permanent. It may be used in the presentation, conceptualization, and dynamic analysis of phenomena ranging from existing interactions in organizations, to directions for future development. One of the most promising characteristics of the concept is that transitional space provides a source for change and renewal that is aligned with actual cultural dynamics (based on the phenomenon of liminality), springing from within the organization, and thus not being another managerialist, top-down controlled tool for forcing change upon the organization. It can, for example, be used to explore possibilities for creative change that are available to self-managing and anarchic organizations (such as those advocated by Shukaitis, 2009) . We are looking forward to a development of this exciting area of inquiry.

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