think2perform® RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Towards an understanding of Subjective Liminality in Leadership Roles

Udayan Dhar, Ph.D.

Research Fellow, think2perform RESEARCH INSTITUTE

January, 2023

Contents

Executive Summary

Developing into Leadership Roles is marked by periods of transition, involving feeling betwixt, or 'in-between,' which can have significant impact on the person's well-being and leadership development. Yet, there is no validated measure of this experience, recognized as subjective liminality. The present research (1) conducts a systematic review of the literature to operationalize subjective liminality as a second-order latent construct reflected by three dimensions: the feelings of restlessness, ambiguity, and reduced group identification; (2) develops and validates a scale to measure subjective liminality using three separate samples: 150 workers on M-Turk, 151 graduate and professional students at a large Midwestern University, and 252 unemployed individuals in the United States and Canada. Implications for future research in the area of managing change are discussed.

Acknowledgements

I thank Prof. Richard Boyatzis for this helpful feedback and contribution at various stages of this study.

Introduction

Transition into leadership roles necessarily involves a role change, or sometimes even a job or career change. Such transitions can evoke a complex array of feelings in the person undergoing the transition. Such feelings, referred to as "subjective liminality" have been documented among not just individuals undergoing some form of career or organizational change (e.g. Gasson, 2006; Ibarra, 1999), but also among workers in the gig economy (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019); and among professionals in boundary-spanning roles such as research managers (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

Subjective liminality refers to the feeling of 'in-betweenness,' and experiences of doubt, uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety that it causes (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). It can be defined as the internal, subjective experience of feeling suspended or in a betwixt state, which may or may not be related to a time-period associated with a specific change. That is, subjective liminality is conceptually distinct from objective liminality, as originally defined in the anthropology literature to describe institutional rites of passage (Turner, 1969). Moreover, the phenomenon of subjective liminality is becoming prevalent in the context of modern careers that are increasingly protean and boundaryless (Arthur, & Rousseau, 2001; Hall, 2004), and are marked by both greater developmental opportunities as well as threats to one's occupational identity.

It is therefore important for executive and leadership coaches to better understand this phenomenon so that they can provide appropriate assistance to their clients. It is also important for management and leadership researchers to be able to measure this phenomenon so that they can conduct empirical studies on it. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to clarify the conceptualization of subjective liminality and develop a scale to measure it.

Literature Review

A systematic literature review of the leadership and applied psychology literature reveals that subjective liminality consists of the following three underlying aspects:

Feelings of Restlessness:

Identity reconstruction during a liminal phase involves a disruption of certain elements of the old identity, and the transition involves cognitive and emotional processing in two domains: loss orientation and restoration orientation (Beech, 2011; Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). For example, Byrnes and Taylor's (2015) study of voluntary transition of CEOs demonstrated that their subjects experienced a diminished sense of self as part of their subjective experience of the liminal phase in their lives. This can of course be more severe in career situations that are not intrinsically desired by the person. Therefore, the first aspect of subjective liminality is the felt sense of restlessness that is associated with losing a hitherto valued part of oneself while simultaneously desiring something new.

Feelings of Ambiguity:

Confusion and disorientation mark the subjective experiences of people undergoing career transitions, organizational change, as well as people in non-traditional work arrangements (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). For example, Bamber and colleagues' (2017) research on occupational limbo using teaching-only staff as their subjects showed that they felt 'locked-in' to an uncomfortable state by a set of structural and social barriers often perceived as insurmountable. Therefore, the second aspect of subjective liminality is the felt sense of not knowing where one stands at the moment with reference to different parts of oneself or different aspects of one's career.

Reduced Group Identification

During transitions, the person feels less committed to any one particular social or work group, or shares their commitment among one or more groups within the same domain, in this case the professional domain. For example, George and Chattopadhyay's (2005) study of contract workers found that they identify with both the employing and client organizations based on perceived characteristics of the organization as well as social relations within the organization. Therefore, the third aspect of subjective liminality is the felt sense of not being comfortable identifying oneself with any specific social group, such as an organization, a department, or a specific professional identity such as that of engineers or teachers.

Methodology

Following Hinkin's (1998) guidance on developing and validating psychometric scales, the development and validation process consisted of the following steps:

1. Item Development and Refinement:

An initial pool of items was developed based on the literature review following a deductive approach. A panel of experts consisting of prominent scholars and practitioners in the field of career transitions and change management provided detailed feedback on each of the items from the initial pool. For content validity assessment, 150 respondents on Amazon's M-Turk platform were divided into three groups and given the construct definitions. To analyze the responses, a Q-correlation matrix and Principal Components Analysis was used. Items with acceptable factor loadings and no major cross loadings were retained.

2. Testing Psychometric Properties of the Scale:

The objective was to further refine the instrument by checking inter-item correlations and conducting preliminary factor analysis. 151 graduate and professional student participants took the Subjective Liminality survey. Inter-item correlations were checked for item uniqueness, Cronbach's alpha was measured for reliability assessment, and a Factor Analysis was performed to confirm the three-factor structure. Based on this step, some items were dropped, and others were edited.

3. Construct Validity of the Scale

Using a sample of 251 unemployed people in the United States and Canada, a group that is expected to demonstrate high levels of subjective liminality as they are presently between two jobs, the scale's convergent validity and discriminant validity with conceptually related and unrelated scales was tested.

Findings

A confirmatory factor analysis was using the varimax rotation method with three factors, which showed three clear factors in the data corresponding to the three factors identified in the literature. As shown in the Table below, sufficient convergent and discriminant validity was established. More specifically, Subjective Liminality was found to be positively correlated with Ideal-Real Self Discrepancy (Higgins, 1987) which refers to the perceived difference between the actual/own self-state and ideal self-states. Subjective Liminality was found to be negatively correlated to both career satisfaction and work engagement. It was found to have no relationship with a person's cognitive ability.

Construct Validity Testing (Pearson's Correlations, N=252)

	Age	Gender	SL	SD	CSAT	ENG
Gender	0.055	--				
Subjective Liminality (SL)	-.137*	0.095	--			
Self-Discrepancy (SD)	-.146*	0.043	.400**	--		
Career Satisfaction (CSAT)	.245**	0.063	-.302**	-.367**	--	
Work Engagement (ENG)	.216**	0.046	-.452**	-.469**	.582**	--
Cognitive Ability (G)	-0.106	-0.022	0.024	0.064	-0.071	-0.037

Note: Correlations with Subjective Liminality in Bold; ** p-value> 0.001, *p-value>0.05

Social Significance of Findings

Executive and career coaches, counsellors, and educators often struggle to help their clients who are experiencing intense feelings during a major role, job, or career transition. By understanding that the feelings involve the three aspects of restlessness, ambiguity, and reduced social identification, they can develop interventions to specifically target those issues. On this front, positive psychology based coaching can provide some guidance.

Positive Psychology based coaching involves taking a compassionate approach to grounding the person in an aspirational, strengths-based identity (Dhar et al., 2021). It is a relational process that involves focusing on the other person's well-being and supporting others to achieve their most deeply valued aspirations. The cornerstones of an effective coaching relationship a belief that: individual change is a procedural, not event-bound; an opportunity "to mine for gold, not dig for dirt"; and hinges upon an agenda that is directed by the coachee themselves (Boyatzis et al., 2019: p. 142–143). Thus, coaching with compassion is essentially coaching for development because it may or may not have an immediate instrumental organizational outcome. The coach approaches the relationship without holding the organizational benefit as more important than the benefit to the individual (Dhar et al., 2021).

For example, the coach can help invoke the client's "Ideal Self" which is the best possible version of oneself in the future, based on one's personal values, aspirations, and core identity (Boyatzis & Dhar, 2022). Invoking the Ideal Self involves utilizing the skill of asking the right questions. Examples of questions to ask to help a person experiencing subjective liminality in their Ideal Self are (Taylor et al., 2019):

- Imagine it is the year [insert today +10 years] and I am doing a documentary on your ideal life. What are you doing? By whom are you surrounded?
- What do you wish your legacy to be? What is your passion? Who would you like to be as a leader?
- What impact would you like to have on others? What have been your enduring strengths? What are your unique capabilities?
- Which aspects of your core identity do you wish to maintain and are central to who you would like to be in the future?

Conclusion

In this study, a systematic review of the literature was conducted to operationalize subjective liminality as a second-order latent construct reflected by three dimensions: the feelings of restlessness, ambiguity, and reduced group identification. Items were developed for a scale to measure Subjective Liminality and the scale was validated using multiple samples. The next step of the ongoing research involves testing the cross-sample validity of the scale. For example, people undergoing some form of leadership or career transition should be expected to have higher scores on the Subjective Liminality scale compared to a similar population that is not undergoing any significant transition. The validated scale is available from the author for free use for research and educational purposes.

Bibliography

Arthur, M. B., & Rousseau, D. M. (Eds.). (2001). *The boundaryless career: A new employment principle for a new organizational era.* Oxford University Press on Demand.

Boyatzis, R., & Dhar, U. (2022). Dynamics of the ideal self. *Journal of Management Development*, 41(9), 1-9.

Chen, Q., Wang, J. A., Ou, R., Sun, J., & Chang, L. C. (2019). Disruptive technologies and career transition strategies of middle-skilled workers. *Career Development International.*

Clarke, M. (2007). Where to from here? Evaluating employability during career transition. *Journal of Management and Organization*, 13(3), 196.

Dhar, U., Schaffner, J. J., & Smith, W. A. (2021). Coaching with Compassion. *Positive Psychology Coaching in the Workplace*, 483-496.

Dhar, U. (2021). Managerial identity development across the age-spectrum from an ideal self and values perspective. *Journal of Management Development*, 40(6), 574-583.

Fleming, L., & Waguespack, D. M. (2007). Brokerage, boundary spanning, and leadership in open innovation communities. *Organization science*, *18*(2), 165-180.

Garsten, C. (1999). Betwixt and between: Temporary employees as liminal subjects in flexible organizations. *Organization studies*, *20*(4), 601-617.

Hall, D. T. (2004). The protean career: A quarter-century journey. *Journal of vocational behavior*, 65(1), 1-13.

Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: a theory relating self and affect. *Psychological review*, 94(3), 319.

Hinkin, T. R. (1998). A brief tutorial on the development of measures for use in survey questionnaires. *Organizational research methods,* 1(1), 104-121.

Ibarra, H., & Obodaru, O. (2016). Betwixt and between identities: Liminal experience in contemporary careers. *Research in Organizational Behavior,* 36, 47-64.

Maxwell, N., Connolly, L., & Ní Laoire, C. (2019). Informality, emotion and gendered career paths: The hidden toll of maternity leave on female academics and researchers. *Gender, Work & Organization,* 26(2), 140-157.

Taylor, S. N., Passarelli, A. M., & Van Oosten, E. B. (2019). Leadership coach effectiveness as fostering self-determined, sustained change. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30(6), 101313.

Tempest, S., & Starkey, K. (2004). The effects of liminality on individual and organizational learning. *Organization Studies*, *25*(4), 507-527.

Terkel, S. (Ed.). (1974). *Working: People talk about what they do all day and how they feel about what they do.* The New Press.

Thomson, K. S., & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2016). Investigating an alternate form of the cognitive reflection test. *Judgment and Decision making,* 11(1), 99.

Turner, V. (1969). Liminality and communitas. *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*, 94(113), 125-30.

Weerts, D. J., & Sandmann, L. R. (2010). Community engagement and boundary-spanning roles at research universities. *The Journal of higher education*, *81*(6), 632-657.

Appendix

Our Mission

think2perform Research Institute advances moral, purposeful, and emotionally intelligent leadership to inspire and engage current and emerging leaders.

This is a publication of