Embracing Indeterminacy: On Being a Liminal Professional

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The rise of the corporate profession has contributed to a more varied and ambiguous professional terrain that is increasingly seen to be indeterminate and fluid. This paper advances the current debate around the development of corporate professions, exploring how practitioners respond to this environment. Drawing on research with public relations practitioners, the paper shows how the idea of being a liminar facilitates the formation of a professional identity in conditions of high indeterminacy. In taking an individual level of analysis of professions, the paper suggests that indeterminacy is a more resonant feature for corporate professionals than previously suggested in the research, but that this indeterminacy is navigated in professional identity construction through 'being a liminar', and thus greater nuance may need to be recognized in the conceptualization of both corporate professions and corporate professionalization. It also demonstrates the use of liminality as a discursive resource in identity construction and with it, challenges the common association of liminality with self-doubt and existential anxiety. In turn, the paper considers the implications of the liminal professional identity for the future of contemporary professions, and for understanding the liminal experience.

Introduction

Increasingly, the traditional professional model has been challenged (Freidson, 2001; Macdonald, 2006; Reed, 2007; Savage and Williams, 2008) and with it a more varied professional terrain has developed, particularly with the emergence of corporate professions (Ackroyd, 2016; Heusinkveld *et al.*, 2018; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2013; Kipping, Kirkpatrick and Muzio, 2006; Paton and Hodgson, 2016; Paton, Hodgson and Muzio, 2013). Corporate professions pursue professionalization differently to established professions, where the corporation is considered to be a more dominant stakeholder (Kipping, Kirkpatrick and Muzio, 2006;

Muzio *et al.*, 2011). Reflecting the institutional focus of work in this area so far, the indication from research into corporate professionalization suggests that competing 'collegial' and 'corporate' logics (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015) have to be navigated by expert occupations. There have been calls to explore further corporate professionalism across a greater range of corporate professions (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011; Muzio *et al.*, 2011) and with greater focus on the consequences of this professionalism for the practitioner (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015). This paper adds to this body of knowledge, exploring aspects of professional practice by public relations (PR) professionals.

Liminality has become a popular concept in studies on work organizations as it offers a lens through which to analyse indeterminacy, precarity and insecurity across different employment sectors in contemporary workplaces (Söderlund and Borg, 2018), serving as 'a prism through which to understand transformations in the contemporary

world' (Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra, 2015: 1). One area of liminality receiving recent attention is that of liminal occupational identities. The 'subjective state of being on the "threshold" of or betwixt and between two different existential positions' (Ybema, Beech and Ellis, 2011: 21) can be seen to present a particular challenge for the construction of a coherent and sustainable occupational identity (Bamber, Allen-Collinson and McCormack, 2017; Izak, 2015; Söderlund and Borg, 2018; Swart and Kinnie, 2014). Some have gone so far as to suggest that liminality, rather than being a temporary state, is a more continual state (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Johnsen and Sørensen, 2015; Loacker and Sullivan, 2016), resulting in individuals struggling to resolve on-going experiences of identity incoherence and fragility (Ybema, Beech and Ellis, 2011). Conceptualizing liminality as a continual state of 'becoming' also corresponds with the imperative for the modern neoliberal worker to reinvent themselves constantly (Sennett, 2006).

This paper brings the concepts of corporate professionalism and liminality together, highlighting how the identity construction of PR practitioners emphasizes a state of liminality as part of constructing a sense of self as 'professional'. The study demonstrates how, through crafting a professional identity that embraces indeterminacy, PR practitioners are able to construct a sustainable and legitimate sense of self as someone who is able to reformulate identities on a continual basis, in relation to the social situation.

The paper makes two contributions. Firstly, the research uses the concept of liminality to highlight how it serves as a discursive resource to construct an identity in a more amorphous professional environment. Discursive resources are prevailing norms of understanding, concepts and ideas that individuals draw on in the crafting and understanding of their selves (Ahuja, Heizmann and Clegg, 2018; Clarke, Brown and Hope Hailey, 2009; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Kuhn *et al.*, 2008). Discursive resources inform, therefore, an individual's 'identity work' (Watson, 2008). Previously, work on liminality indicates that identity construction can be problematic (Söderlund and Borg, 2018; Ybema, Beech and Ellis, 2011). However, this research suggests that liminality can make a positive contribution to professional identity construction. Thus, the idea of being liminal

plays the paradoxical role of sustaining rather than disrupting a sense of self.

Secondly, this study advances the debate around the development of corporate professions (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015), exploring how practitioners construct a professional identity in this context. Thus far, corporate professionalism has been explored at the macro and meso level of institutions and organizations, focusing on professionalization (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Kipping, Kirkpatrick and Muzio, 2006; Muzio *et al.*, 2011). Contrasting with this, the current research takes an inter-relational and interactional focus, highlighting how individual practitioners construct a professional identity based on the idea of being a liminar. In doing so, it responds to calls for more studies on occupations at this level (Anteby, Chan and DiBenigno, 2016), demonstrating a potential for greater indeterminacy to be experienced by some corporate professionals than so far considered, and with it, a more nuanced appreciation of corporate professions and corporate professionalization that could impact the wider appreciation of the contemporary professional landscape.

The paper is organized in four sections: the first examines the literature on contemporary professions, liminality and liminal identities; the second provides details as to how the study was conducted; the third outlines PR practitioners' talk around being a liminal professional; and the fourth considers the implications of a professional liminal identity, indicating how the research contributes to an understanding of corporate professionalism and liminal identities.

Contemporary professionals

Professions in the twenty-first century are seen to be facing a fundamental decline in status, power and autonomy, brought about through institutional and structural changes (Hinings, 2005; Reed, 2007) that have served to challenge professional autonomy, including: the globalization of professional services; political and economic deregulation and marketization; the decline in 'institutional trust' (Giddens, 1991) and the rise of individualized and consumption-driven cultures; the information and communications technology revolution; and the rise in managerialism (Reed, 2007). Taken as a package of structural reforms,

these changes have served to prioritize markets and networks as forms of governance, and demystify the work jurisdictions of professions, opening them up to competitors and replacing peer-based autonomy with externally imposed performance measurement and surveillance policies (Townley, 1997). Consequently, the fundamental elements by which a profession can define itself (i.e. a credentialized body of knowledge, closure and control of the occupational jurisdiction, freedom from state and market, moral and social legitimacy) are all gradually being eroded.

The rise of new forms of expert labour, including corporate professionals (Ackroyd, 2016; Heusinkveld *et al.* 2018; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2013; Kipping, Kirkpatrick and Muzio, 2006; Paton and Hodgson, 2016; Paton, Hodgson and Muzio, 2013), have also served to challenge the core features that essentially distinguish 'the profession' from other occupational groups. These more commercially oriented (Paton, Hodgson and Muzio, 2013) corporate professions – for example, management consultants (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Kipping, 2011; McKenna, 2006; Sturdy, 2011), project managers (Muzio *et al.*, 2011), strategists (Whittington, Cailluet and Yakis-Douglas, 2011), HR practitioners (Wright, 2009), market analysts (Pollock and Williams, 2015), marketing and advertising consultants (Enright, 2006; McLeod, O'Donohoe and Townley, 2011) and PR consultants (Edwards, 2014) – tend to work in large-scale, often international, organizations subject to organizational as well as professional controls.

In this context, corporate professionalization revolves around the corporation as the key stakeholder in any attempts at social closure (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Kipping, Kirkpatrick and Muzio, 2006; Kirkpatrick and Noordegraaf, 2015; Muzio *et al.*, 2011). Explored in detail in management consulting[1] and project management, the corporation is seen to be heavily involved in the international jurisdiction of the profession, the production of the profession's knowledge claims, the governance of the professional body

and its legitimation as beneficial to the corporation's stakeholders (Muzio *et al.*, 2011). With this corporate professionalization, there is also greater use of image, rhetoric and brand to convey professional standing (Kipping, 2011). Therefore, corporate professionalism is typified by 'the interweaving of older "collegial" and newer "corporate" logics of professionalism . . . ' (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015: 746). Consequently, the structural form and institutional status of profession and professional is now more fluid and ambiguous (Carollo and Solari, 2019; Kipping, 2011; Visscher, Heusinkveld and O'Mahoney, 2018; Watson, 2002), where 'diffusion rather than exclusion remains the likely future' (Whittington, Cailluet and Yakis-Douglas, 2011: 541).

In sum, extant research suggests that the corporate profession is more ambiguous and contested in its institutional make-up and status (Collins and Butler, 2019). However, as Anteby, Chan and DiBenigno (2016) observe, the heterogeneity of occupations and individuals' relationships need to be understood from a number of different levels of analysis to appreciate fully the complexity of relations involved. Specifically, in the context of the corporate profession, little is known about how individuals navigate this ambiguous and fluid context, especially outside the narrow realm of management consulting or project management, where most of the research has currently been conducted.

Liminal identities

The concept of liminality has its roots in anthropology, with the French folklorist and ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1909/1960) originally coining the term to denote the middle phase of three making up a rite of passage: separation, margin (the liminal phase) and aggregation (the postliminal phase). Subsequent take-up of the term in anthropology, notably in the work of Victor Turner (1967), considered the liminal subject and the experiences of being in this state as a condition of paradox, ambiguity and confusion, where the person is 'at once no longer classified and not yet classified' (Turner, 1967: 95–96). Liminality thus refers to a temporary phase, with the liminal person being caught 'betwixt and between' as they move across space and time in the transition from one social status to another.

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[1]Cross and Swart (2018) highlight that historically, management consulting firms pre-date the creation of professional associations in that industry, which may also contribute to the corporate professionalization process identified by Muzio *et al.* (2011).

Within work organizations, liminality has received increased attention, 'because of its capacity to capture the interstitial and temporary elements of organizing and work' (Söderlund and Borg, 2018: 880). Söderlund and Borg (2018) categorize this emerging literature according to three areas of focus: 'process, position and place'. Studies of place consider the positive or negative role of either individual or collective liminal spaces (e.g. Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2002; Fischer, 2012; Johnson *et al.*, 2010; Rottenburg, 2000; Shortt, 2014; Sturdy, Schwarz and Spicer, 2006; Sturdy *et al.*, 2009) as 'scenes in which traditional routines, norms and activities are suspended or renegotiated' (Söderlund and Borg, 2018: 891). Meanwhile, research on process examines the transition of individual identities, or collective/organizational transition from one state (or identity) to another (e.g. Allen-Collinson, 2006; Beech, 2011; Hakak, 2015; Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016; Ibarra, 2007; Ladge, Clair and Greenberg, 2012). In this context, studies have tended to draw from the original anthropological emphasis of a temporary state involving the taking on – or sloughing off – of an identity as individuals or collectives make the transition across space and time, moving from one identity to another. Here, there is a more nuanced capturing of both the positive and negative experiences of the identity work involved in this transition to resolve potential tensions and craft a future settled identity.

Finally, studies of position draw attention to individuals or collectives facing liminality by being 'on the threshold' by virtue of the likes of their occupation, employment relationship or organizational structure (e.g. Garsten, 1999; Howard-Grenville *et al.*, 2011; Iedema *et al.*, 2004; Tempest and Starkey, 2004; Zabusky and Barley, 1997). Those studies that focus on individuals suggest that feelings of liminality, for some, might be a more on-going state of being (Johnsen and Sørensen, 2015; Loacker and Sullivan, 2016) or a 'condition' (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003: 269) where 'institutionalised liminality' (Ellis and Ybema, 2010: 281) has been noted. This on-going state of liminality suggests ambiguity and paradox on a more permanent basis (Ybema, Beech and Ellis, 2011: 22), highlighting the increasing need to exercise 'liminality competence' (Borg and Söderlund, 2015: 10), which, if achieved, renders the worker able to benefit from the freedoms offered from liminality.

Consequently, being a perpetual liminar emphasizes a processual subjectivity (Weedon, 1987), which also responds to the imperative for the modern neo-liberal worker to reinvent him/herself constantly (Bauman, 2000; Sennett, 2006). However, this area of research indicates that the liminal experience is largely difficult for identity construction (Bamber, Allen-Collinson and McCormack, 2017; Izak, 2015; Söderlund and Borg, 2018; Swan, Scarbrough and Ziebro, 2016; Swart and Kinnie, 2014; Ybema, Beech and Ellis, 2011).

On account of its ability to capture the increasing indeterminacy, fluidity and diffuse state of contemporary professions, some studies have begun to consider how corporate professions and liminality inter-relate. Paton and Hodgson (2016) argue that project managers are in a position of liminality by virtue of experiencing corporate professionalization. This results in project managers engaging in identity work to negotiate or integrate the opposing logics they are trapped between by virtue of being in a corporate profession. In keeping with other studies on the liminal position, the research indicates that the liminal experience is largely difficult for identity construction. Meanwhile, Cross and Swart (2018) focus on those corporate professionals who are liminal on account of their employment relationship as self-employed consultants, suggesting a potentially more positive role for liminality in their professional status and with it, a questioning of whether corporate professionalization extends to independent management consultants. Building on this emerging work, this study draws on the literature around corporate professionals and liminal identities to ask: how do corporate professionals construct an occupational identity in an indeterminate and ambiguous context?

Researching public relations

PR has rarely come to the attention of management and organization scholars (Linstead, 2016), so it is necessary to provide some context regarding the industry before outlining the findings of this study. PR's role is as a cultural intermediary (Hodges and Edwards, 2014) in producing, sustaining and regulating public opinion on behalf of organizations. PR practitioners are therefore responsible for managing organizational and/or individual reputation (CIPR, 2019). Looking after

reputation may involve a host of day-to-day activities including, but not limited to: developing communications strategies and campaigns; media relations; digital and social media liaison; influencer relations; event management; and internal communications.

Despite its increasing power (Evans, 2008), and in particular its growth compared to journalism's decline (Davis, 2000; Wedel, 2014), PR is still beholden to the elites it represents, brokering relationships on their behalf (Wedel, 2014). The UK PR industry now employs 86,000 people and is estimated to be worth £13.8bn (PRCA, 2018: 7). The composition of the industry is approximately 2:1, in-house practitioners (i.e. practitioners that are employed by and work for one organization) to consultant practitioners (i.e. practitioners that work for a consultancy and represent a number of clients) (CIPR, 2018: 14). Consultant practitioners are 'betwixt and between' their various clients. Unlike management consultants, these practitioners do not operate on one project at a time but move between their roster of clients on a daily (at times hourly) basis, navigating between different sectors, organizations and relationships. Even in-house practitioners, who are solely employed by one organization, tend to be situated 'betwixt and between' the intra- and extra-organizational audiences that matter to their organization's reputation.

With regard to professionalization in the UK, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) became a chartered body in 2005, setting out a code of conduct, a continuous professional development scheme and the qualification of Chartered Practitioner. Despite this, PR's professional development has been stifled by an ambiguous definition of what constitutes PR and an equally opaque body of knowledge (Pieczka, 2002). Consequently, PR is still considered, even by its own practitioners, as 'a practice which hasn't yet realised its own professional ambitions' (CIPR, 2014: 5) and consequently, 'PR exists in a perpetual, professional and ethical gap, a liminal space of codes and metaphors' (Brown, 2015: 162). In turn, PR struggles to differentiate itself from other disciplines, such as advertising, marketing, sales and digital services (CIPR, 2014: 18). Consequently PR, like other corporate professions, exists 'in conditions of both transience and structural ambiguity' (Paton and Hodgson, 2016: 30).

The study

Data collection

The first author and principal data collector is a former PR consultant and occupies, therefore, an 'insider–outsider' relationship with the study. The study involved 30 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with PR practitioners (23 working in PR consultancies and 7 working in-house in large organizations), representing a mix of age, gender and levels of seniority.

Interviews took place at two UK consultancies, one based in central London (Wilkin PR), belonging to a large international conglomerate of media companies, the other based in Wales (Taff PR), belonging to a network of offices offering similar PR and marketing services around the UK. The in-house practitioners were all senior members of their organizations, working in a range of sectors (see Table 1 for details of the research participants). The majority of interviews were conducted at the interviewee's place of work and ranged in length from 45 minutes to 2 hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. While being semi-structured in nature, a broad interview guide was used, covering three main areas: entering PR; daily lives, knowledge, skills and performance success; and professionalism and being a professional.

The sample was derived from a mixture of the first author's personal networks and snowball sampling and as such reflects the first author's background as a PR consultant. The in-house cohort, whilst a smaller proportion of the sample, was included in order to compare and contrast their responses with those practitioners based in an alternate organizational structure and setup. Therefore, this group of practitioners was a useful indicator of whether the professional identities being constructed were only as a consequence of the consultancy organizational setup or whether there were suggestions that the professional identity construction spanned more of the occupation as a whole.

We view the interview as both a setting for stimulating professional identity reflections in its own right – as questions about the participants' lives and work generate reflexive ordering of ways of being and knowing (Alvesson, 2003) – as well as a mechanism for gathering material about the respondents' working lives. In this sense, the interview can be regarded as a social text, co-constructed by the researcher and researched

Table 1. Details of the research participants

Profile of consultant practitioners

Name	Company	Participant's role and position	Time in PR (years)
May	Taff PR	Junior PR consultant (Account Executive)	2
Alexander	Taff PR	Very senior consultant (MD of PR network)	18
Helen	Taff PR	Senior-level consultant (Account Director)	8
Rose	Taff PR	Junior PR consultant (Account Executive)	1
Chloe	Taff PR	Mid-level consultant (Account Manager)	3
Ruby	Taff PR	Senior-level consultant (Account Director)	19
Spencer	Taff PR	Very senior consultant (MD of Taff PR)	15
Harriet	Taff PR	Mid-level consultant (Account Manager)	5
Louise	Taff PR	Mid-level consultant (Account Manager)	5
Kim	Taff PR	Senior-level consultant (Account Director)	13
Lily	Wilkin PR	Mid-level consultant (Senior Account Manager). Works in corporate section	6
Joanne	Wilkin PR	Junior consultant (Account Executive). Works in consumer section	2
James	Wilkin PR	Very senior consultant (Associate Director). Works in corporate section	10
Emily	Wilkin PR	Very junior consultant (Account Co-ordinator). Works in corporate section	1.5
Anita	Wilkin PR	Senior consultant (Account Director). Works in corporate section	5.5
Adeline	Wilkin PR	Senior consultant (Account Director). Works in consumer section	7
Richard	Wilkin PR	Junior consultant (Senior Account Executive). Works in corporate section	7
Natalie	Wilkin PR	Mid-level consultant (Senior Account Manager). Works in corporate section	4
Adam	Wilkin PR	Senior consultant (Account Director). Works in corporate section	8
Elizabeth	Wilkin PR	Senior consultant (Account Director). Works in consumer section	6
Sam	Wilkin PR	Very senior consultant (Practice Group Director). Works in consumer section	10
Melanie	Wilkin PR	Very junior consultant (Account Co-ordinator). Works in consumer section	1
Isabel	Wilkin PR	Mid-level consultant (Account Manager). Works in corporate section	4

Profile of in-house practitioners

Name		Participant's role and position	Time in PR (years)
Bruce		Works in Pharmaceutical sector	14
Ben		Works in Local Government sector	28
Moira		Works in Public sector body	23
Melissa		Works in Environmental sector	20
Minny		Works in Higher Education sector	23
Russell		Works in Health sector	23
Janet		Works in Construction/Engineering sector	30

(Thomas and Linstead, 2002), where both parties engage in identity work (Cassell, 2005). As the interviewer was previously a PR consultant, the interviews tended to involve a considerable amount of assumed complicit and shared knowledge. Accordingly, the first author's experiences and professional identity are interwoven in the construction and execution of the research project. In presenting an analysis of these practitioners' reflections on their work, we are aware that our own discursive practices are implicated in these constructions (Ybema *et al.*, 2009), as well as those of academic writing convention (Rhodes and Brown, 2005).

Data analysis

Analysis of the interview texts involved thematic coding by attaching keywords and/or themes to different segments in order to structure the empirical material, focusing on instances of talk that seemed particularly resonant in the interview texts. This was determined by the emphasis placed on the issue, the time taken discussing it and the extent to which the issue seemed to cause concern or elicit strong emotion. What was apparent at this point was the frequency of talk around the indeterminate nature of what they do. This initial 'data reduction' (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) was followed by a process of 'data complication', where similarities, paradoxes, patterns and themes were related to theoretical concepts so as to generalize from the data. Subsequent analysis of the theme of indeterminacy drew attention to the extent to which it could be seen as a leitmotiv in the PR texts: in terms of PR practice and 'product' (i.e. what they produced, measures of performance and professional know-how). It was this continuous indeterminate state that alerted us to the concept of

liminal identities. What came through very strongly in the interviews was that these PR professionals were aware of constantly having to reformulate their self, contingent on the prevailing context, and this ability was viewed to be essential to their profession. Consequently, the next stage of analysis was to code for instances of talk that related to the need to embrace a liminal identity, drawing on understandings of the archetypal, or 'ideal', PR professional (Meriläinen *et al.*, 2004: 548).

Likewise, the frequency with which relationships and being attuned to others appeared in practitioners' talk emphasized the PR professionals' 'betwixt and between' state, emblematic of liminality. Therefore, further analysis was conducted on the relationships involved in being a successful PR practitioner, coding for incidents where practitioners discussed relationships with others and how this contributed to the constitution of professional identities. The findings presented in the next section encapsulate this analytical process in order to construct an overarching narrative around how these individuals construct their professional identities in the context of an indeterminate corporate profession.

Public relations: Being who you need to be...

This section presents an analysis of how PR practitioners respond to the corporate professional environment. The first subsection illustrates how practitioners identify indeterminacy as a core feature of the profession. The second subsection shows how, despite this indeterminacy, some definitional focus is attained regarding PR as centring on relationship management. The third subsection highlights how this focus on relationships brings with it an awareness of being liminal in two key ways: being continually situated in the middle of others; and constantly reformulating the self, in order to build relationships with others. The section ends with practitioners' talk that foregrounds liminality as a discursive resource in their professional identity construction, where being who you need to be is construed as the ideal PR type.

PR as an indeterminate corporate profession

It's like we're magicians – smoke and mirrors – I always think that's what we are because you don't see the direct result of what we do. I always feel that we're the puppet makers pulling the strings 'cos you can't actually put your finger on who or what we are... (Lily, Wilkin PR)

An endemic feature of all practitioners' interviews was the indeterminacy of PR where the core tenets of what it constitutes, what it produces, what it achieves and what skills it requires are all ambiguous. Practitioners regularly highlight that defining PR is 'really difficult!' (Lily, Wilkin PR), where PR is 'just anything really, isn't it?' (Alexander, Taff PR). The difficulty in defining PR is compounded by an inability to determine a tangible and measurable product of PR work, meaning that PR practitioners find it very difficult to evaluate what they have contributed. For some, this is because the work is 'invisible' or 'behind-the-scenes' (Melissa, in-house) and as a result seems to involve 'throwing things into the ether' (Adeline, Wilkin PR). For others, the fact that their performance is also dependent on other parties – such as journalists – renders it particularly vulnerable to changes beyond their control.

Indeterminacy is also a dominant feature of talk around proving what PR achieves, where it is considered as one of the 'biggest challenges within the industry' (Richard, Wilkin PR), where the '"so what?" factor presides, and questions such as "who read that?" and "what's the impact of that?"' (Lily, Wilkin PR) still remain unanswered. The need to establish a standardized and widely recognized performance measure, which so far continues to elude PR, is keenly felt by practitioners where they observe: 'PR is not value creating, or if they don't see a number, they don't consider it value creating' (Natalie, Wilkin PR).

Coupled with these inherent ambiguities of PR, the practitioners identify further uncertainties regarding the skill required to operate in the profession. Part of the problem relates to the lack of boundary distinctions between PR work and allied professions such as marketing, advertising and journalism. In addition, recent developments in the rise of new media channels also serve to undermine claims to distinct and bounded expertise. Moreover, when a skills base can be identified, rather than drawing on a formal abstract body of knowledge, it comprises innate skills combined with tacit knowledge centred on experience of '...rites of passage and ways of working which then give you certain personal skills and

qualities which you can then apply to other things later on . . .' (Moira, in-house). This means that the only requirement is ' . . . the right sort of temperament and ability to pick stuff up [and] then I think anyone can do it' (Elizabeth, Wilkin PR).

What is clear is that ambiguity and fluidity around the professional practice and skill set is a dominant theme in the interviews. Corresponding with other research in this area (Visscher, Heusinkveld and O'Mahoney, 2018), these findings suggest that a potentially diffuse professional identity lies at the heart of the profession.

It's all about relationships

> . . . a lot of what PR is, is building those relationships. (Emily, Wilkin PR)

Despite the overwhelming talk of indeterminacy, one recurring theme is the importance of crafting, nurturing and retaining relationships where ' . . . what we're about is relationships in PR' (Alexander, Taff PR). Relationship management serves as an anchor point for the construction of the profession and professional. At its most basic, this constitutes 'managing the relationship between a large number of individuals and a corporate entity . . .' (Russell, in-house). As a result, relationship management involves 'identifying who matters to what you're trying to do, and building a relationship, getting a common understanding . . .' (Melissa, in-house). The reason for this emphasis on the relationship with others is because PR is ' . . . about someone else giving you the credentials to say that you're a great product or a great service, so it's about influencing people whose opinions matter . . .' (Lily, Wilkin PR).

Therefore, despite the indeterminate nature of PR dominating practitioners' talk, the focus on relationships brings with it a sense of some definitional parameters where ' . . . if you can work out where people are coming from, then PR's really straightforward . . .' (Minny, in-house). The emphasis on relationships is in line with other research on professions, corporate professions and knowledge work (e.g. Alvesson, 2004; Cohen *et al.*, 2005; Harris, 2002; Kipping, 2011; Kitay and Wright, 2007; Spence and Carter, 2014) that identifies relationships as an important element of the work. However, in this context, relationships are the sole definitional feature, emphasized by all practitioners interviewed regardless of level of se-

niority. Nevertheless, relationships are still relatively indeterminate and fluid, with a potential for continual change. Consequently, relationships are constructed as the only means by which to attempt to define this corporate profession and the professionals that operate within it; without that, there is only indeterminacy. The irony here is that relationships are also about dealing with indeterminacy.

The relational professional: Being liminal

What is apparent in the practitioners' talk is that this indeterminacy of the profession and practice is addressed through being in a constant state of unsettlement. In practice, this means reformulating who they are and what they do in interaction with others. Ironically, it is this on-going liminal state that seems to provide a fixed point of self-understanding for the practitioners in two ways: relationally, as continually situated between others; and subjectively, 'on the threshold' of different identities.

Betwixt and between

> [you know] having to sort of be the inbetweener! (Chloe, Taff PR)

The practitioners' emphasis on relationships brings with it consideration of being continually situated between others. Russell situates himself between his organization and its audiences, meaning 'I need an audience to share my organisation's thoughts, and the other way round, when in consultation, so I have to stand in everyone's shoes to understand the organisation and our audience . . .' (Russell, in-house). Similarly, Emily observes ' . . . I think being professional is understanding the different people you're between, understanding how you need to talk to these different people, and getting them to understand what you're doing, and how it affects other people . . .' (Emily, Wilkin PR). Consequently, practitioners develop an understanding of themselves as continually betwixt and between others because of the importance placed on relationship management as a core of the profession and therefore the professional. Spencer neatly sums this up: 'PR people are always in the middle whether that's between clients and the media, between clients and stakeholders, or between different clients' (Spencer, Taff PR).

Here, to be a corporate professional, servicing the needs of others without other core facets of the job readily defined, involves recognizing that you permanently occupy a space between others, formulating, reformulating and maintaining relationships.

Self as continually on the threshold

I'm always presenting a different version of me, I mean that's sort of what PR is... (Adeline, Wilkin PR)

Coupled with this sense of being betwixt and between others, practitioners also construct themselves as continually on the threshold when it comes to their identities, where 'being a PR professional is about remembering that with every person you liaise with or every event you attend, you are representing not only your business and yourself but the client as well...' (May, Taff PR). The emphasis on relationship management means that PR practitioners identify themselves as bound to others, and with this is an awareness of needing to alter the self on a continual basis in order to form and maintain relationships with others. This means that Emily goes into relationships '...mindful of "ok this person is not thinking the way that I think", and you have to tailor yourself, if you want them to listen and understand you' (Emily, Wilkin PR). Meanwhile Alexander considers:

...what are the notes which I'm going to have to hit to build a relationship with this person. [...] it's like when you walk into someone's office and see a picture on the wall, 'is that your family – I've got two kids as well' kind of thing. It's that mirroring thing... (Alexander, Taff PR)

With this, comes the notion that the corporate professional is '...almost like being an actress' (Kim, Taff PR). This requires:

...the ability to be chameleonic... it's the ability to walk into [client company name] and talk the language they talk, very visual, pictures, ambitious, passion and then also be able to walk into... a financial organisation, dress up in a suit, be very serious, talk in technical language, work with introverts to tease out the thing they're doing. And I think that ability to go into a million different companies and probably be a slightly different person in each one; get them,

get their business and get the culture and work with it accordingly; I think that's really important. (Adam, Wilkin PR)

Consequently, practitioners present themselves as needing to keep their identities on the threshold, never quite 'fixing' themselves but instead remaining indeterminate by always altering who they are for the different relationships that need to be forged and developed in order to be a successful corporate professional in this context.

Corporate professional as 'a liminar'

You're always shifting so that people will respect you, or help you get the results that you need. (Anita, Wilkin PR)

In attempting to construct some definitional focus for this corporate profession where indeterminacy reigns, practitioners ironically find themselves embracing indeterminacy and constant discontinuity. The ideal-type corporate professional is therefore constructed as someone who copes with indeterminacy, recognizing that 'it's quite a fluid way of life' (Janet, in-house) and therefore 'to be a good practitioner I have to be comfortable with ambiguity in general' (James, Wilkin PR). In particular, the positioning of the corporate professional as between others renders 'PR [as] being comfortable that when you're with a different audience for a different purpose, you're different...' (Russell, in-house).

As a result, the practitioners construct themselves as a 'liminar' – someone who embraces indeterminacy to remain on the threshold of different identities in order to form and sustain a range of relations. Being a liminar is seen as a positive confirmation and indication of a job well done, as these practitioners observe:

From the feedback and reviews I've had about my job performance, what makes me successful is that I'm quite good at adapting who I am in different environments and with different people... (Isabel, Wilkin PR)

I think what makes me a good PR practitioner is that I'm quite adaptable, I'm a bit of a chameleon... (Helen, Taff PR)

In turn, these corporate professionals construct themselves as someone who remains ambiguous, never quite transitioning from one threshold

identity to another but regularly occupying liminality in order to switch between identities: 'It's hard to think of a moment in the day where I'm not switching between different "me's" for someone else – it's what being a PR person is all about!' (Alexander, Taff PR). This is because 'you need to be the everyman or everywoman to everybody to be a good PR' (Spencer, Taff PR). Therefore, the ultimate definition of the corporate professional is to be liminal, where 'I can be whoever you want me to be baby! I'm in PR, that's what we do!' (Minny, in-house). In sum, despite the indeterminacy of the job in general and the indeterminacy that comes with the sole focus on relationships, there is little sense of angst or existential crisis from practitioners in this context. Instead, we see the embracing of indeterminacy. For these practitioners, liminality operates as a discursive resource – a construct to draw on in crafting a legitimate and sustainable professional identity.

Discussion: Corporate professionals embracing indeterminacy

Our study sought to understand how corporate professionals construct a professional identity in increasingly indeterminate, fluid and diffuse contemporary work environments. Responding to a need for more research that explores the consequences of such indeterminacy for practitioners (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015), our research goes further than existing studies that concentrate on the institutional and symbolic parameters of the corporate profession by highlighting the individual practitioner experience. Our findings suggest that a greater level of indeterminacy is experienced in terms of professional practice, with a strong inter-relational and interactional focus to practitioners' professional identity construction. Consequently, individuals navigate this indeterminacy by drawing on liminality as a discursive resource in their construction of their professional identity to become 'a liminar'. Our paper offers two main contributions to the literature on liminal identities and contemporary professions. These are set out below.

Liminality as a discursive resource

The first contribution of this research is in offering the notion of liminality as a discursive resource

in identity construction. Wider discursive regimes 'serve to discipline individuals' understandings of professional identity, and constitute the space within which individuals position themselves' (Ahuja, Heizmann and Clegg, 2018: 989). Within those discursive regimes, discursive resources are '…"tools" that guide interpretations of experience and shape the construction of preferred conceptions of persons' (Kuhn et al., 2008: 163). Currently, the wider discursive regime around the contemporary worker calls for an 'adaptive individual' (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008: 352) better able to cope as boundaries between states, organizations and people become more blurred (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Ellis and Ybema, 2010; Loacker and Sullivan, 2016). Likewise, the wider neo-liberal discursive regime of the modern worker is of someone required to 'continually reengineer, reinvent themselves' (Sennett, 2006: 44), appealing to the virtues of creative autonomy and individual expression (Wright, 2009). Consequently, within this discursive regime liminality can operate as a discursive resource where to be 'in-between' (Turner, 1967), 'on the threshold' (Söderlund and Borg, 2018), 'indefinable' (Zabusky and Barley, 1997) and/or 'paradoxical' (Beech, 2011) is used to construct oneself as a professional. Therefore, this research suggests liminality is not just an experience, but a tool to make sense of the liminal position, value the work conducted and construct a professional identity.

In recognizing liminality as a discursive resource, a different identity construction process can be appreciated. So far, what is usually presented in research on liminal identities (particularly liminality experienced on an on-going basis) is that in reaction to coping with a liminal position, individuals engage in identity work switching between different defined identities (Ellis and Ybema, 2010; Garsten, 1999; Zabusky and Barley, 1997) or adopting a hybrid identity between various tensions or logics contained in the liminal position (e.g. Iedema et al., 2004; Paton and Hogson, 2016). Instead, this research indicates that in navigating a liminal position, liminality is rendered a discursive resource by individuals and so liminality is subsumed into the professional identity where the ideal-type professional constitutes the quintessential liminar. This professional identity is one that is capable of demonstrating 'heterogeneous multiplicity' (Weiskopf and Loacker, 2006: 407), that is someone who

does not, like a mole, make arrangements for long-term habitation and residence. Rather, like a snake, s/he is adaptable, willing and able to modify its appearance, stripping off and building a new skin according to changing conditions. (Weiskopf and Loacker, 2006: 407)

The professional liminar embraces indeterminacy and discontinuity; being liminal means self-styling as an identity worker in the literal sense. It involves self-fashioning according to client and context; in effect, putting identities to work and securing a sense of self through an appreciation of the self as malleable and therefore flexible to others' demands.

Using liminality as a discursive resource in the construction of professional identity may help to explain why this is also a more positive identity work process than suggested in studies on liminal identities so far (e.g. Bamber, Allen-Collinson and McCormack, 2017; Izak, 2015; Söderlund and Borg, 2018; Swan, Scarbrough and Ziebro, 2016; Swart and Kinnie, 2014; Ybema, Beech and Ellis, 2011). For the PR practitioners involved in this study, there was no indication of the self-doubt and existential angst one might expect. Paradoxically, foregrounding themselves as liminal allowed them to construct legitimate and sustainable professional identities. This is because liminality as a discursive resource has the potential to circumvent tensions or contradictions, as it requires you to see yourself as 'being anything you're needed to be'. Therefore, there is nothing to struggle/negotiate with, as being indefinable has been brought to the fore in the identity construct. It is the encapsulation of the freedom of the liminal position Turner (1982) refers to, where there is 'freedom to' be whatever you need to be for others, and 'freedom from' the potential constraints/tensions/paradoxes of a distinct professional identity.

The lack of existential angst as a result of the construction of a liminal professional identity was both a surprise and a catalyst for the development of this paper. However, in situating your professional identity around being a liminar, you are unlikely to demonstrate existential angst, as it would suggest you are not a true professional or successful at your job. Consequently, this serves as a reminder that interviews are sites of identity work (Thomas and Linstead, 2002) inasmuch as they are settings for gathering information from beyond the interview. Nevertheless, it is important to note that

this identity process also potentially perpetuates the conditions it is responding to, as it does not question the liminal position in any way. Liminality as a discursive resource therefore allows the individual to construct a sense of a coherent self but because identity work and identity regulation operate together, it still reproduces the wider discursive regime (Ahuja, Heizmann and Clegg, 2018), thus indicating the 'importance of individual reflexivity' (Kuhn *et al.*, 2008: 168) in this context.

The indeterminacy of contemporary professionals

By focusing on the experiences of individuals, the other contribution of this research has been to throw light on a relational understanding (Anteby, Chan and DiBenigno, 2016) of corporate professionals demonstrating how, who these professionals are and what they do are defined by their relations with others. The relational understanding of professional identity that emerges from this research demonstrates that there is merit in considering professions and professionalization from the 'bottom up', focusing on individuals' experiences, as much as from the 'top down', focusing on key structures, institutions and organizations, in order to understand how they develop and evolve. At this more individual level of analysis this would involve not just analysing discourses imposed 'from above' (Evetts, 2011, 2013) from institutions such as professional associations, or from organizations such as the firm and how they play out at the individual level, but instead examining what discursive resources are used by individuals 'from within' (Evetts, 2011, 2013) the occupation to make sense of the self as professional and then consider the implications of this for organizations and institutions that are part of the professionalization project. This is particularly pertinent for corporate professions where institutions have not been able to play such an influential (or at least traditional) role in their development.

As a result of the focus of this study, the research highlights how life for some corporate professionals is much more fluid, inter-relational and interactional than is currently suggested in the literature, resulting in a professional identity as a liminar. This indeterminacy is much more pronounced and complex than simply a case of competing but distinct logics (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015) or identity dualities (Wright, 2009). Therefore, in this context some corporate professionals are

not merely interweaving, or choosing between various delineated logics (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015). Rather, they are doing neither, since the notion of professionalism at work is a considerably more fluid, relational and dynamic process. Living with indeterminacy constitutes a determining feature of the job, and positively embracing and exploiting this confirms a professional identity as legitimate and successful. Accordingly, in responding to the indeterminate and ambiguous professional terrain, individuals draw on a context-specific relational identity of 'a liminar', and liminality becomes incorporated into the definition of the profession and being professional.

Corporate professions constitute a large but also diverse and fragmented cohort of occupations (Ackroyd, 2016) that is increasingly being researched as a key facet of the professional landscape because of the increasing power and influence of these occupations and because their professionalization strategies differ from those traditionally outlined in the sociology of professions (e.g. Collins and Butler, 2019; Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2013; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Muzio *et al.*, 2011). Current work in this area that has so far focused on management consulting and project management suggests a degree of indeterminacy (Collins and Butler, 2019; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Visscher, Heusinkveld and O'Mahoney, 2018) and liminality between different defined tensions (Paton and Hodgson, 2016) of the 'collegial' and 'corporate'. Responding to calls for more studies of corporate professions and their nuances (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio, 2015; Muzio and Kirpatrick, 2011; Paton and Hodgson, 2016), this research suggests that other corporate professions similar to PR – such as marketing, advertising or 'new management occupations' (Heusinkveld *et al.*, 2018) like talent and corporate social responsibility managers – may be on the more liminal end of the scale. This may be because features of corporate professionalization (Muzio *et al.*, 2011) have not yet been realized. For example, in this study neither the professional association nor the employing organization were significant in defining professional identity for either consultants or in-house practitioners. Alternatively, this may be because corporate professionalization manifests in different ways (e.g. Reed, 2018). As Cross and Swart (2018) highlight, the corporate professionalization project of management consulting is not recog-

nized by independently employed management consultants.

In either case, this study indicates that the indeterminacy more liminal corporate professions will inevitably encounter can be embraced by individuals using liminality as a discursive resource in their identity construction. However, this has implications for how the profession and professional are defined by other stakeholders in the corporate professionalization process and the role of corporate professionalization as it is currently defined. For instance, this research suggests that liminality has the potential to be a useful discursive resource for these stakeholders because it allows for the embracing and exploitation of indeterminacy as they attempt to navigate a way through the complex conditions under which they operate to enhance their positional status in an organizational world characterized by shifting priorities and expectations. However, in adopting liminality as a discursive resource, the role these stakeholders then play in defining the profession and having power over the profession's jurisdictions also potentially becomes more indeterminate for them too.

This is not to suggest that the current conceptualization of corporate professionalization is therefore unfounded or incorrect, but as Collins and Butler (2019: 5) note in highlighting the arguments of Hodgson, Paton and Muzio (2015):

> …'corporate professionalization' cannot be viewed as an end-point with clearly understood boundaries and parameters. Nor, given its vagueness, can it be considered truly generalizable. Instead, the authors argue that the concept of 'corporate professionalization' should be regarded as a 'heuristic' …

Consequently, whilst there is a cohort of occupations termed 'corporate professions', there may be suggestions that different forms of corporate professionalization will be found amongst this disparate group, particularly as they engage with different levels of indeterminacy and liminality in their respective occupations.

Conclusion

This paper draws on literature regarding the corporate profession and liminality in order to understand how individuals navigate indeterminacy in the construction of their professional identities. It finds that in the world of PR, indeterminacy is

a pronounced feature and yet a professional identity embracing that indeterminacy is constructed to produce a sustaining sense of self. In turn, the paper demonstrates the appeal of a liminal professional identity in the context of corporate professionalism.

Current assertions are that the lines between different professions, and between professions and organizations, are continuing to blur as the contemporary professional landscape becomes more diverse, fragmented and therefore ambiguous (Carollo and Solari, 2019; Heusinkveld *et al.*, 2018). This suggests that more liminal experiences are on the horizon for contemporary professionals, and so there is a need for continued research into corporate professions and their inter-relations with other professions in order to capture their plurality and their responses to indeterminacy. Moreover, there is a need for more study of these phenomena at the micro/individual level, as well as the meso and macro level, in order to capture the construction of professionalism 'from within' (Evetts, 2011, 2013) and with it consider the relative liminal experiences and responses in different professions and from different stakeholders within them (i.e. institutions/organizations/individuals).

In this context, a relational lens (Anteby, Chan and DiBenigno, 2016) would encourage taking a triadic approach to consider the profession–organization–client relationship in more detail and the role of the client and the organization in constructing the liminal professional, considering 'the study of multiple identities and the complex ways in which these constellations of identities—be they occupational, organizational, or other—interact and intersect' (Anteby, Chan and DiBenigno, 2016: 225). This would also fit with Söderlund and Borg's (2018) call for more comparative research around liminality, for instance considering position and process together to assess 'how process differ, depending on specific liminal positions – for example [. . .] among different occupational groups and cultures' (Söderlund and Borg, 2018: 897). In turn, this micro-level focus would consider how professionalization responds to liminality, with indications from this study that this will uncover more diverse and nuanced strategies of response in different professions. Research of this nature would consider how corporate professionals exploit indeterminacy to further their professionalization projects. Equally, what are the wider implications of professions' responses to indeterminacy, both individual and collective, for contemporary professions and professionalism?

Focusing on liminality, this research indicates that more attention needs to be paid to the nuance around reactions to the liminal experience within the contemporary work environment and how liminal identities emerge in work practices (Söderlund and Borg, 2018). Despite the more positive appreciation of liminality in professional identity construction found in this study, the sustainability of this kind of identity construction and any potential downsides to this kind of identity need to be examined further. Longitudinal research could aid with the former, whereas for the latter interviews with those that have left the profession could be revealing to explore the potential struggles with maintaining a liminal professional identity.

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