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Against boundarylessness: The liminal career of the flexible employee

Abstract: In this paper, we extend the critique of the concept of the boundaryless career by focusing on how organizational members may experience boundaries as diffuse, indeterminate and ambiguous within contemporary career development. As an alternative to the concept of the boundaryless career, we introduce the concept of the liminal career. We engage with the concept of the liminal career in relation to three boundaries that remain central within career development: organizational boundaries establishing a distinction between the inside and the outside of the organization; hierarchical boundaries separating employees and managers; and functional boundaries demarcating different work domains. Using an illustrative example of how employees cope with diffuse organizational, hierarchical and functional boundaries, we argue that the concept of the liminal career has three distinct advantages compared to the concept of the boundaryless career. First, the concept of the liminal career places boundaries in its analytical focus and considers their ambiguous status. Second, it incorporates both the positive and the negative aspects of contemporary career development. Finally, the liminal career concept connects the issues of flexibility and precarity directly to boundaries.

Keywords: Ambiguity, boundaryless career, career development, flexibility, liminality, liminal career

Introduction

Since Jack Welch in the 1980s marketed 'boundaryless' as the catchword for understanding organizations as fluid networks, boundarylessness has become a code word for the celebration of flexible career trajectories enabled by the dismantling of traditional institutions and the dissolution of boundaries (Arthur, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Along with this trend, the concept of the boundaryless career has been the target of considerable critique (Loacker and Śliwa, 2016; Dany et al., 2011; Inkson et al., 2012; King et al., 2005). Contrary to the widespread assumption that boundaries have disappeared, Rodrigues and Guest argue that we are currently witnessing not a 'demise but rather a redefinition, a growing complexity, and a more subjective perspective on career boundaries' (2010: 1170). Exploring the mobility of knowledge workers, Loacker and Śliwa (2016: 658) question the dichotomy between understanding contemporary workers as either unrestrained agents of boundarylessness or as hapless victims forced by necessity into precariousness. Today, what Loacker and Śliwa call the 'mobile middle' faces a host of 'complex, dynamic and contestable' challenges (2016: 673).

In this paper, we extend the critique of the concept of the 'boundaryless career' by focusing on how organizational members may experience boundaries as diffuse, indeterminate and ambiguous within contemporary career development. To capture these experiences, we maintain that we need new concepts that allows us to understand how career boundaries are being reconfigured in contemporary work organizations, in which the crossing of boundaries is supplanted by the experience of indeterminacy and disruption. As an alternative to the concept of

the boundaryless career, we therefore introduce the concept of *the liminal career*. Liminality, we argue, can be fruitfully used to explore how some organizational members experience their career path as a 'social limbo' (Turner, 1974: 57) wherein they need to cope with career boundaries that are diffuse, indeterminate and ambiguous.

In arguing for the concept of the liminal career, we situate our analysis within a broader societal development, in which, according to Deleuze (1992), the traditional confines and boundaries of the disciplinary society are becoming blurred. Entering the 'societies of control', the boundaries between the different institutions like the school, the factory and the prison give way to 'continuous variation' within networks and circuits. In regards to career, we see the eschewing crisis of the institutions becoming mirrored in the crisis and ambivalence of their employees' careers. The concept of the liminal career offers resources to analyze career experiences where boundaries are both more important but also more elusive and difficult to define. Contrary to the normative connotations inherent in the positive discourse about flexibility, mobility and post-bureaucracy, the concept of liminality *also* implies ambiguity, anxiety and precarity. Hence, we suggest that the concept of the liminal career may be able to capture the freedom and creativity involved in contemporary career development while also drawing attention to its uncertainty, insecurity and ambiguity. With the concept of liminality, stemming from Lat. *limes*, meaning border or threshold, boundaries become the center of analytical attention.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first part briefly reviews the literature on boundaryless career by focusing on the three main weaknesses of the concept: its normativity, its lack of empirical support and its lack of clarity. In the second part, we extend the critique by looking at the conceptual inconsistency of the concept of the boundaryless career. In the third part, we introduce the concept of the liminal career in order to overcome the weaknesses identified in the concept of boundaryless career. We argue that the concept of the liminal career is promising for understanding career development trajectories because liminality captures the diffuse character of career boundaries within contemporary work-life. The concept of liminality also allows us to explore both the positive and negative consequences of this development. In the third part of the paper, we use the 'illustrative case' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 633) of a Scandinavian public administration office (called ENC) in order to provide 'empirical depth' (Costas and Fleming, 2009: 364) to the concept of the liminal career. Here we engage with the concept of the liminal career in relation to three boundaries that are central within career development in organizations: organizational boundaries establishing a distinction between the inside and the outside of the organization; hierarchical boundaries separating employees and managers; and functional boundaries demarcating different work domains. The final part provides a discussion of the concept of the liminal career in relation to flexibility and the ongoing discussion of precarity.

Boundaryless career research and its discontents

In past decades, researchers have drawn attention to what they see as a radical shift in the organization of work within Western societies, a shift driven by globalization, technological

developments, increased international competition and flows of migrant labour (Castells, 2000). Taken together, these developments have transformed the conditions for employment, careers and work organization (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006; Garsten, 1999). Organizational careers within traditional corporations, premised on the assumption that employers can 'offer workers job stability and progressive careers in exchange for loyalty and commitment' (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010: 1158), are viewed by many researchers as something of the past. As an alternative to the traditional career path, many researchers propose that we are now dealing with new types of career trajectories, which they label 'post-corporate' (Peiperl and Baruch, 1997), 'kaleidoscope' (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005), 'protean' (Mirvis and Hall, 1996) or 'portfolio' (Mallon, 1999) career trajectories. In turn, concepts such as 'flexibility' (Berg, Appelbaum, Bailey and Kalleberg, 2004; Kalleberg, 2003, 2011) and 'mobility' (Loacker and Śliwa, 2016; Costa, 2013) have been introduced in order to understand how these new career paths evolve. Among the concepts that have gained momentum in career research over the past twenty years, the most widespread is that of the 'boundaryless career' (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Arthur, 1994).

Arthur (1994: 296) defines the boundaryless career in terms of six features: movement across organizational boundaries, external validation, engagement in networks beyond present employer, rejection or transgression of traditional career development and boundaryless career expectations despite current constraints. Although the concept includes a range of elements, the idea of the boundaryless career foregrounds how individuals increasingly develop 'their career capital by crossing organizational boundaries' (Valette and Culié, 2015: 1747). According to DeFillippi and Arthur, many workers today are not bounded by a single organization or occupation to which they remain committed throughout their working life. Rather, they find themselves operating in fluid networks and mobile clusters that allow them to explore 'opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of a single employment setting' (1996: 116). Boundarylessness thus contrasts with an 'organizational career' (Arthur and Rousseau, 1995: 5), with its emphasis on progressing within a linear organizational hierarchy, following criteria formulated by management.

With the boundaryless career concept having become a fashionable way of depicting the reconfiguration of employment relationships within Western societies, the concept has also become the target of critique (Loacker and Śliwa, 2016; Dany et al., 2011; Inkson et al., 2012; King et al., 2005; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010). First, the boundaryless career concept has been criticized for its normative connotations and tendency to normalize a neoliberal political regime that reinforces and privileges free-market thinking and individualism at the expense of collective responsibility and organizational communities (Arnold and Cohen, 2008; Roper et al., 2010). While the boundaryless career has been associated with increased personal freedom, self-determination and autonomy, since individuals can remain mobile and flexible by moving and navigating within intra-organizational networks (for a critique, see Hoyer and Steyaert, 2015; Loacker and Śliwa, 2016), critical observers have drawn attention to the negative aspects that

accompany such individualized work arrangements: precarity, unpredictability, uncertainty, insecurity and self-fragmentation (Kalleberg, 2011; Sennett, 2011; Standing, 2011; Mirvis and Hall, 1996).

The second critique of the concept of boundaryless career concerns the lack of empirical support for the premise that careers today now operate without boundaries (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010; King et al., 2005; Inkson, 2006). Typically, boundaryless careers have been associated with knowledge workers or high-tech professionals in Silicon Valley-like setting (Valette and Culié, 2015). In reality, such sectors are not representative for the larger Western economies as a whole. Inkson maintains that while a large part of the lower status workforce may appear to engage in a boundaryless career, since they lack commitment to one organization, they are 'bounded instead by crushing structural constraints' (2006: 556). As well, even within occupations that have been celebrated as paradigmatic examples of boundaryless careers, critics have nonetheless highlighted the existence of boundaries that significantly influence career development. For example, King et al. (2005) take issue with the idea that the career trajectories of IT professionals can be characterized as boundaryless, showing the various institutional constraints regulating job opportunities and access to alternative labour markets. In King et al.'s view, 'careers are, and always have been, "bounded"' (2005: 982). The focus on individual agency has tended to overlook the 'broader institutional context' that constitutes the conditions for agency (Piszczek and Berg, 2014: 1503).

The third critique of the concept of boundaryless career centers on its impreciseness as a concept. As Rodrigues and Guest emphasize, the concept of boundaryless career is built upon 'the core assumption of increasing mobility across organizational boundaries' (2010: 1159). Yet Rodrigues and Guest note that the nature of career boundaries has been for the most part ignored in the literature (2010: 1161). Notably, Inkson (2008) contends that the concept of the boundaryless career fails to adequately distinguish between *boundarylessness* and *boundary-crossing*. The notion of boundarylessness gives the impression that boundaries are being eradicated and dissolved within modern work-life. Rodrigues and Guest (2010) maintain, however, that boundaries are not disappearing. The notion of boundary-crossing suggests that boundaries are actually being maintained, but that individuals have become increasingly able to move between organizations by operating as 'border crossers' (Clark, 2000). Hence the emphasis on boundary-crossing over boundarylessness. Against the boundary-crossing argument, King et al. (2005) insist that boundaries continue to remain important as a constraint or channel on career development.

Extending the critique of boundarylessness

Although considerable criticism has been directed at the boundaryless career concept, these criticisms are not directed at 'the concept as originally developed but of the way it has been interpreted and proselytized' (Inkson, 2008: 7). As a result, the concept is 'all too often taken as given rather than subjected to critical scrutiny' (Arnold and Cohen, 2008: 9). In what follows, we

will extend the critique of the boundaryless career. While an understanding of boundaries is important, we will argue that drawing a distinction between the 'bounded career' and 'boundaryless career' (King et al., 2010) may be misleading. As Baruch states: 'Both descriptions tend to portray opposing archetype models, whereas life is never that simple' (2006: 128). In other words, the distinction between the organizational career and the boundaryless career has 'obscured the complexities and subtle nuances' of what happens within career development (Clarke, 2013: 695-6). Rather than juxtaposing the bounded career versus boundaryless career, we will focus on workers' ambiguous relationship to boundaries in contemporary career development. Embracing this ambiguity of career boundaries, we introduce an alternative formulation, which we call *the liminal career*.

Arnold and Cohen (2008) correctly assert that career and boundaries are intimately linked. For example, the movement between two jobs implies crossing the boundary between them. This is acknowledged in the definition of career as 'the unfolding sequence of a person's work experience over time' (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996: 4). Regardless of whether it involves moving upwards, sideways or downwards, a career unfolds in a series of phases that are 'separated by boundaries' (Inkson et al., 2012: 331). These phases imply that boundaries between them exist. Essentially, '*boundaries* delimit the perimeter and scope of a given domain (e.g., a role, a country, a home, a workplace)' (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2009: 705, original italics; see also Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000). Thus, boundaries express distinctions, such as those of different occupations or hierarchical positions (Abbott, 1995). Without an understanding of boundaries, it is impossible to conceptualize any progression.

Inkson et al. (2012) opt for 'boundary-focused career scholarship' which involves the study of the crossing of career boundaries, but also a study of how boundaries come into being and how the disappearance of one type of boundary might give rise to new types of boundaries. While we are sympathetic towards this approach, we believe that research on the boundary-focused career should be supplemented by an understanding of how boundaries might become ambiguous and difficult to identify for employees pursuing their own career development (Hoyer and Steyaert 2015). While boundaries are necessary to mark the phases involved in a career, it might not always be easy for employees in organizations engaged in career development to recognize them. What were once clear career phases or steps might become uncertain or confusing, giving aspiring career employees difficulties in coping with them (Ekman, 2014; Alvesson, 2001; Costas, 2013; Garsten, 1999). Here career development becomes a 'limbo land' for organizational members (Fraher and Gabriel, 2014: 938). In such situations, the challenge for research consists in understanding how employees navigate and cope with indeterminate and diffuse career boundaries. For this purpose, we will introduce the concept of the liminal career.

The liminal career

The concept of liminality was originally created by the French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (2006) and later made famous by the British anthropologist Victor Turner (1974, 1995,

1967) in their study of rituals and rites of passage. In past decades, the concept of liminality has found its way into organization studies (Trice and Beyer, 1993; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Beech, 2010; Shortt, 2015; Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Inkson et al., 2012).[1] In its original sense, the concept of liminality signifies the middle phase of the three-step process involved in life transition rituals or *rites of passage* (Van Gennep, 2006). In the first stage of separation, the person undergoing a social transformation is deprived of his or her social identity. In the second stage of transition (the liminal phase), the person is cast into 'a social limbo in which his or her social identity is temporarily undefined' (Johnsen and Sørensen, 2015: 323). Here the person, according to Turner, is 'no longer classified and not yet classified' (1967: 96). Thus, liminality is situated at a 'threshold' (Beech, 2010) that suspends social boundaries. In the final post-liminal stage of incorporation, the individual is introduced to his or her new social identity.

Organizational scholars have shown how the process of moving between jobs inevitably involves a 'liminal state', occasioning the renegotiation of one's professional identity (Boland and Griffin, 2015; Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Inkson et al., 2012). For example, climbing the ladder of a corporate hierarchy has been described by Trice and Beyer (1993) as following the three-step pattern of a *rite of passage*, such as being promoted from employee to manager. First, the person being promoted is separated from the previous position (the pre-liminal phase). Next, the person is cast into a situation of 'between and betwixt', occupying a threshold position in which they are deprived of their former status but have not yet acquired the new position (liminality). In effect, the person, following Turner (1967: 96), is neither classified as an employee nor as a manager, but instead placed between them. Finally, the individual is incorporated into the new position within the hierarchy (post-liminal phase).

As we can see, liminality is typically depicted as a three step process. Such a sequential view of liminality, however, only makes sense against the backdrop of a 'regular work environment' (Johnson et al., 2010: 1513) or under 'normal social dynamics' (Howard-Grenville et al. 2011: 535) in which organizational boundaries have remained intact. In other words, this sequential view of liminality presupposes that it is possible to draw a clear distinction between employees and managers, as well as identifying the process in which a person can cross this hierarchical

[1] With the wide application of liminality in organization studies, Bamber, Allen-Collison and McMormack argue that this research suffers from 'conceptual confusion' (2017: 2). While Turner conflate liminality and limbo, Bamber et al. (2017) insist that these two concepts should be distinguished from each other. Liminality involves a state of transition, but they argue that limbo 'infers a fixed, "trapped state", to be changed only via profound intervention' (Bamber et al., 2017: 8). They further introduce the concept of 'occupational limbo', defined as 'always-this-and-never-that' and exemplify this concept with reference to academics who 'described their sense of being locked-in to a status deemed second-class' (Bamber et al., 2017: 20). However, as we see it, Bamber et al. (2017) fail to establish limbo as a distinct, non-creative and locked-in state that is fundamentally different from both transitional and permanent liminality. In its theological sense, limbo is a critical purgatory that might save you, but one that also harbours potential damnation. Contrary to being placed in Hell, limbo is never 'always this', precisely because there remains the possibility of divine intervention. This is why being 'locked-in' in contemporary work life is neither limbo nor liminality, but rather a 'dead end' (Booth, Francesconi and Frank, 2002). In accordance with this, Bamber et al.'s (2017: 8) interviewees did not perceive any possible 'transition out of this limbo state'. In reality, to be 'always-this' marks the very end of a liminal phase: 'a status' (Bamber et al., 2017: 20) is what one cannot establish in limbo, which remains a momentary suspension of boundaries between social identities, a passage 'through a limbo of statuslessness' (Turner, 1995: 97, italics added).

boundary. Here we want to draw attention to another situation: that the regular or normal career path for employees within the organization is experienced as a prolonged liminal phase. We find support for a more elastic view of liminality in Turner's work, wherein a social limbo may be rendered the normal condition. Contrary to Van Gennep, Turner believed that liminality could also become an 'institutionalized state', using the example of the pilgrim, for whom transition 'becomes a permanent condition' (1969: 107). In such instances, liminality is no more a temporal interval between separation and incorporation, but rather becomes permanent through an 'institutionalization of liminality' (Szakolczai 2000: 211). It is this kind of institutionalization that has been observed within contemporary work life (Boland and Griffin, 2015; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Ellis and Ybema, 2010; Johnsen and Sørensen, 2015; Bamber, Allen-Collinson and McCormack, 2017). Garsten (1999; 2008) shows how 'temporary employment' constitutes a liminal zone, since those who are engaged in such employment are neither fully employed (which is their goal) nor fully unemployed. Rather, they dwell in a zone of being 'in-between' employed/unemployed. Since their status is rendered unclear, the temporary worker is left to their own devices to establish their status, putting a heavy burden into narrating one's occupational identity in a coherent manner.

The emergence of these permanent liminal experiences can be understood against the backdrop of what Deleuze (1992) characterizes as a transition from the disciplinary society towards societies of control. While disciplinary society is structured into different 'environments of enclosure', such as the schools, hospitals and factories, Deleuze suggests that societies of control operate according to the logic of 'continuous variation' of different networks. Looking at how previous institutions have entered into a crisis, Deleuze explains that we are currently witnessing the emergence of new forms of control that operate on the basis of creating modulations. The difference between the factory and the corporation, according to Deleuze, amounts to two different modulations. The factory correspond to a modulation that operate on the basis of confined spaces in which production processes was aimed at being calibrated to the highest level of efficiency possible: the goal is the productive and assertive subject, that has left its liminal phase of education and adolescence, and become a stable member of society. Contrary to this, in the societies of control, 'one is never finished with anything' - 'the corporation, the educational system … [are] metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation' (Deleuze, 1992: 5). This implies, instead of the post-liminal ritual of reintegration (Van Gennep, 2006), rather '*limitless postponements*' (Deleuze, 1992: 5, italics in original): here the subject is reduced to its smallest unit, the 'dividual' in Deleuze's parlance, for whom only the process of lifelong learning and testing will produce enough data to potentially add it all up to 'a person'.

While the old subject dealt with the preexisting boundaries of the factory, the corporation is a modulation that operates according to a different logic. The corporation understood as a mode blurs boundaries between the organization and its environment; between work time and leisure time; between what is internal and external (Fleming and Spicer, 2004). This also makes it difficult to locate the corporation in geographical space and chronological time, since 'the

corporation is a spirit, a gas' (Deleuze, 1992: 4). Deleuze further explains that these two forms of society can be illustrated by enacting the concepts of the mole and the serpent. The mole thrives in the disciplinary society: each occupation requires concentration on a specific task. In contrast, the snake is a dynamic creature that can constantly adjust to new situations and move within different settings. Thus, Deleuze notes: 'The disciplinary man was a discontinuous producer of energy, but the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network' (1992: 5-6).

This has profound consequences for how the 'employee of control' is left handling boundaries. Here, Inkson et al. (2012) are helpful in explicating how boundaries traditionally have served three distinct roles: as *constraints* (restricting career possibilities), *enablers* (facilitating career development) and *punctuators* (structuring career development). With reference to Van Gennep (2006), Inkson et al. note that boundaries as punctuators provide 'the markers that help people structure their working lives as they move through the many rites of passage that they encounter' (2012: 333). Such rites of passage presuppose that social structures are momentarily suspended (liminality). The initiand is coached by a 'master of ceremonies' (Turner, 1995: 13), who is able to guide the person undergoing the transition from the initial social position (pre-liminal) and into the new role (post-liminal). In the process of being promoted within a hierarchy, the master of ceremonies would be the mentor who serves a 'career-enhancing function' (Stephens, 1994: 491) that consists of providing support and assuming responsibility for their proteges' career development. While such mentors might be fairly easy to locate in traditional bureaucracies, Weick notes that we increasingly observe the 'disappearance of external guides for sequences of work experience, such as advancement in a hierarchy' (1996: 41). In these instances, organizational members will not have at disposal a mentor who can structure their careers, insofar as the master of ceremonies will be absent (Beech, 2010). Such disappearances bears witness to Deleuze's societal diagnoses, requiring organizational members to enact tactics for navigating in career development without having neither a mentor nor clearly defined boundaries to rely upon.

We consider a liminal career as occurring when the normal career path within the organization becomes a state of 'betwixt and between'. In a liminal career actors experience a lack of clear boundaries in relation to which they may navigate and orient themselves. According to Boland and Griffin (2015), we can find a host of liminal experiences within contemporary career development in organizations. The concept of the liminal career thus helps us explore how a number of boundaries that regulate career development within organizations, such as those delimiting employment categories, hierarchical structure or professional competences, today tend to become diffuse, ambiguous and precarious. This is the case, since career development for the individual within the organization increasingly consists of constantly negotiating boundaries and maneuvering through a variety of grey zones (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010). Without doubt, career development within organizations is regulated by boundaries. But although boundaries clearly may continue to exist in organizations, managers and employees may *experience* them as unclear and ambiguous. In effect, actors in liminal careers are individually required to navigate between

unclear boundaries. Hence, they must cope with insecurity but perhaps also deal with creative flows. Under such conditions, the concept of liminality allows us to understand how the positions that the employees occupy in the organization become ambiguous, indeterminate and insecure (Swan et al., 2015).

The illustrative case of the ENC

In order to illustrate a possible application of the concept of liminal career, we will use the case of career development within a Scandinavian public institution, here referred to as ENC. The ENC is an office that is part of the national public sector in Denmark and consists of approximately 100 employees, of which 20 are middle or senior managers. Established in the 1960s, ENC is responsible for developing policies and administering parts of governmental policy areas. We introduce this example in order to illustrate how the concept of the liminal career might be used in order to understand situations in which the career path turns into a social limbo. Our case study of ENC is not meant to be exhaustive. The example is meant to be illustrative, suggesting how the liminal career concept might be used to develop future research within the field. Furthermore, we wish to emphasize that we do not argue that the liminal career has now become the predominant career type within Western societies. Following Arnold and Cohen (2008: 11), we will explore how the employees and managers negotiate and cope with organizational, hierarchical, functional boundaries. This will allow us to illustrate how the concept of liminal career can be used in order to analyze situations in which the boundaries involved in career development become ambiguous.

The primary data for our study is comprised of three focus group interviews. Two focus groups were carried out with groups of employees (professional staff and technical staff) and a third focus group interview took place with a group of managers at ENC. Each of the three focus group sessions lasted three hours. During the focus group interviews, participants were asked to discuss their career-related experiences while at ENC, including career expectations, what they considered to be a good career and what they believed were the key challenges in relation to career development. As such, we used the focus group interviews as a subjective index, to gain an understanding of how ENC employees viewed their careers (Bloor, 2001). The first focus group consisted of three women (Linda, Mia and Alice) and two men (Ethan and James). The second group consisted of four women (Chloe, Audrey, Christine, Natalie) and one man (Mark, who is also a middle manager). All of the employees were between 30 and 50 years old, being situated in the middle of their professional life course, and had worked for ENC between 2 and 8 years, except for Christine, who had been at ENC for 20 years. The third focus group consisted of two managers (Charlotte and Katelyn). Charlotte worked with developing strategies related to career development, and Katelyn was part of the management team responsible for managing resources at ENC.

In our treatment of the focus group interviews, we have not used an inductive approach that looks for certain general patterns in the material. Instead, we have followed Beech (2011: 291) in

looking for instances in our data that could be used in order to illustrate the concept of liminal career. To do so, we have related the interview data to the three themes of organizational, hierarchical and functional boundaries in relation to career development. Although our approach does not offer an overview of all the topics that were discussed at the focus group interviews, the concept of liminal career allows us to concentrate on how the members relate to the organizational, hierarchical and functional boundaries. It is therefore important to stress here that the purpose of our illustrative example is not to provide a comprehensive account of career development at ENC.

Organizational, functional and hierarchical boundaries

In what follows, we will use the illustrative example of ENC to discuss the concept of the liminal career in relation to three boundaries that are central within career development: organizational, hierarchical and functional boundaries.

Organizational boundaries

One particular career boundary that has become blurred in many organizations is the boundary between work and leisure (Kreiner et al., 2009). Normally, work is considered 'paid employment while "life" includes activities outside work' (Guest, 2002: 236). However, we gradually experience instances in which employees are 'putting their "lives" to "work" in the creation of value for the company' (Land and Taylor, 2010: 395). As a result, the boundary between work and life is blurred, insofar as many employees are expected to invest their private lives in their careers (Fleming and Sturdy, 2010). Accordingly, career research has adopted elastic concepts such as the 'protean' career in order to acknowledge how 'work and nonwork roles overlap' (Mirvis and Hall, 1996). With the concept of liminality, we point out that the boundary between work and life has not disappeared as such. Rather, our focus is on the fact that for many employees, the distinction between work and life has become a pressing concern within their career development, something that they must navigate as work task cross over into personal life. For those in a liminal career, the work-personal life boundary must be continually negotiated. Here we find the concept of liminality relevant for understanding certain aspects of career development that involve the 'blurring of boundaries between social life-spheres in modern work–life' (Johnsen and Sørensen, 2015: 322).

In order to demarcate an professional career within an organization, it is necessary to establish a boundary between the sphere of professional work and the sphere of private life. However, instead of suggesting that the distinction between work and life is either present or absent within career development in organizations, we can use the concept of the liminal career in order to understand how this boundary becomes ambiguous, placing organizational members in a 'social limbo' (Turner, 1974: 57). In this section, we will here focus on how employees try to cope with a blurred distinction between the domains of work and private life. Here we can use the concept of the liminal career as a tool for understanding how employees orient their career in relation to

the ambiguous distinction between professional work within the organizational setting and their personal lives.

During the focus group interviews at ENC, the work-life balance became a central topic of discussion in relation to career development. Many of the participants emphasized that a successful career would involve the merger between their work and their private life, with the aim of reaching a 'whole' and hence successful life. However, Mia emphasizes that:

> If you have a crisis in your private life, then it is really difficult to ensure that it does not affect your work. If you have a crisis at work and bring it home, the family can sense it. But in the family you have after all a close network that can help you deal with the crisis. Here we have experienced that people suddenly get divorced or something like that, and then you can sense that the person has a hard time.

Although there might be a boundary between work and life, these two spheres influences each other, since work related issues might impact private life and visa versa. For this reason, it can be challenging to maintain the distinction between these two spheres. Responding to Mia, James explains that:

> It can really difficult keeping things separate. There is a tendency that work and leisure become more and more intermingled, such as in situations where you are checking your emails at home or when you get a call from your boss in your leisure time. I don't know if this is an advantage or not. I prefer that when you are home, that you are off work.

The point here is not that the boundary between working life and private life is absent at ENC. But as James stresses, it is difficult to make sure that the boundary between work and private life is upheld. While preferring to maintain a clear distinction, James still admits that checking emails at home or receiving a call from his boss makes it difficult to separate work from private life. In turn, the boundary between work and private life becomes an ongoing concern. With the help of the concept of liminal career, we see here that the boundary between work and private life is neither clear-cut nor totally absent. Instead, Mia and James constantly must cope with the difficulty of separating work from home life. In order to avoid that their careers eradicate the distinction, the employees at ENC must evoke different 'tactics' (Kreiner et al., 2009) in order to retain the distinction between work and life. Mia, for example, has made the following promise to herself:

> I have made an agreement with myself: I never open my computer at home. It is easy because I have only one computer, and I don't bring it home unless I am working from home that day. So I have granted myself this. Using my computer at home was something I did a lot in the beginning, especially on Sundays, completing written work that I did not manage to do during the week… And I think this is something that you have to manage yourself in this organization.

While Mia maintains the boundary between work and life by 'making an agreement with herself', the employee Ethan admits: 'I think a lot about work when I'm not at work'. As the interviews reveal, many of ENC's employees frequently continue working after they arrive home. The predominate way to conceptualize such situations in career scholarship has been to

claim that objectively, the boundary between work and private life might have dissolved but must be subjectively enacted by members of the organization (see Tams and Arthur, 2010; Hirschhorn and Gilmore, 1992). On this account, boundaries are 'constructed in the head of those people experiencing it' (Gunz et al., 2007: 478). In turn, advocates of boundaryless career claim that objective boundaries have been replaced by subjective boundaries. Yet, these subjective boundaries remain clearly defined for the actors who engage with them. At first glance, one might assume that the boundary between work and private life is subjectively constructed by the members of ENC. However, the concept of the liminal career allows us to frame this differently. Instead of claiming that the boundary between work and private life is objectively absent and subjectively present, we see that the members of the organization has to cope with what they experience as a diffuse, ambiguous and unclear boundary between their work-life and private-life. For this reason, the members of the organization find themselves 'somewhere in-between' (Daskalaki et al., 2016) the sphere of work and private life. In this liminal sphere, they have to constantly negotiate the distinction between work and life. The distinction between work and life is here not momentarily suspended, but rather constantly open for negotiation. This is what Deleuze terms 'limitless postponement' (1992) of actually clarifying the precise nature of the boundary between work and private life. As a result, the employees find themselves in a liminal career.

Hierarchical boundaries

In the organizational career, crossing the boundary between employee and manager is assumed to be guided by merits that govern possible progressions 'through a stable, structured hierarchy' (Clarke, 2013: 690). According to Weber, the bureaucratic official 'is set for a "*career*" within the hierarchical order' and 'naturally desires a mechanical fixing of the conditions of promotion' (1958: 203, italics in original). As previously mentioned, Trice and Beyer (1993) show that such processes of career promotion typically follows the three-step liminal ritual pattern. However, the proponents of the concept of the boundaryless career insists that increasingly 'traditional organizational career boundaries, notably hierarchical reporting and advancement principles, are broken' (Arthur, 1994: 296). The abandonment of bureaucratic principles are often assumed to facilitate flexibility and mobility, but it equally creates situations in which it is unclear for the employee how to advance from one level to the other, such as being promoted from being an employee to becoming a manager. While this is true and perhaps most challenging for the employee, this lack of clarity is also present at the managerial level. Management will sometimes be unsure about how to guide the employees on their career path. While liminal careers might characterize middle-level employees, the mid-level managers might also experience similar conditions.

At ENC, we can detect a reluctance in management's motivation to guide employees' careers. Although the formal hierarchy of ENC do contain rather clear boundaries between employees and managers, the criteria for crossing this boundary remain unclear and diffuse. The middle

manager Katelyn states that she is not able to clearly outline career trajectories for her employees at ENC:

> We cannot and will not draw career paths for people and say, 'You just need to do this and that, and then such and such will happen'. Some employees embrace this and prefer not to have a concrete career plan, while others would actually prefer to have [such a guideline]… This whole matter is a big mess in everyone's heads.

Moreover, while career development normally involves articulations of future scenarios and prospects, the manager Charlotte at ENC states that on a daily basis 'one can't discuss such matters [i.e., matters of career]'. Another middle manager, Mark, explicitly does not go to work 'with the goal of being a boss', as he rather sees his work as one of 'nursing a lot of people'. Here, the difference between being a 'manager' and being a 'nurse' must be stressed: while the the former stems from the Italian *maneggiare*, a term directly connected to handling and directing things (Wensley 1996), the latter primary implies providing care and comfort for the process of healing to happen, rather than providing direction for that same process.

Under such conditions, middle managers are less motivated or enabled to act as 'masters of ceremonies' (Turner, 1969: 89) who outline criteria for career advancement, what Stephens (1994: 491) sees as the task of 'mentors'. As many have noted, such situations might cause frustration, uncertainty and ambiguity. In this regard, the employee [Lise Lotte] explicitly would like her career opportunities more clearly outlined, if not directly 'served' for her by management, then to appear as 'structures or models'. This may result in the 'aimlessness' discussed in Arnold and Cohen, when they, quoting Sennett, assert that 'without clear paths, individuals are left vulnerable to "the sense of aimlessness which constitutes the deepest sense of anxiety"' (2008: 12). With the deferral of managerial decisions and the blurring of criteria for career advancement, contemporary career development places 'much of the burden, hence, stress, on individuals' (Baruch, 2006: 134). Using the concept of the liminal career, we can view this as 'symbolic stress' (Turner, 1967: 108) that stems from the lack of clarity, precariousness and ambiguity involved in career development. Management's inability to outline career trajectories for their employees leaves employees in a liminal career, lacking the necessary master of ceremonies who can ensure that the 'integrative phase' (Turner, 1967) of liminality is accomplished.

Granting that this may generate symbolic stress or what Katelyn calls a 'big mess in everyone's heads', the employee Natalie on the other hand sees a creative vista in this openness: 'It would be fine if one did not see the different trajectories as completely locked in. A nice culture would be one where one was enabled to swap in and out'. Viewed in the optic of the liminal career, we can see that in the absence of clear criteria for career advancement and managerial guidance, employees who experience the liminal career must become their own 'self-proclaimed ceremony masters' (Thomassen, 2012: 53) who take responsibility for ensuring their own career development. Employees engaged in a liminal career become compelled to become their own 'career architects' (Segers et al., 2008). The employee Alice at ENC observes that although

management has launched various initiatives to improve career development, these efforts 'still haven't translated into practice'. Along similar lines, the employee Chloe wishes that possible career trajectories could be 'made more clear' at ENC. The employee Mia's reaction is a feeling of frustration, but also a feeling of a necessity to act:

> It's a bit frustrating sometimes [to work at ENC], because you feel that there should be some kind of plan for where you're going… [Yet, it's] hard to really figure out what it is you want.

While the employees seem to call for clearer managerial policies, the 'lack of clarity' (Cooper and Baird, 2015: 580) in management decisions in this regard only widens the gap between the policies employees want and the actual practices within the organization. Management, in turn, explicitly recognizes this ambiguity as being a burden for the employees. As the manager Katelyn says: 'To be able to endure such conditions, one needs to be extraordinarily self-contained. It's really a contradiction'. The contradiction here stems from the fact that employees must orient themselves towards the organization in order to succeed in their careers, but they also have to be independent from the organization in order to be self-contained (Pedersen, 2011). This ambiguity may be conceived as a form of managerial control that infuses uncertainty into the process of career development (Fleming, 2015). As well, Inkson (2008: 556) criticizes the current managerial discourse for being unable to address the challenges of facilitating career development. While these critiques may be directed towards the managerial discourse, it is important to note that middle managers, as we observe in the example of ENC, might feel themselves unable to serve as mentors for those situated beneath them in the hierarchy. As such, their middle management careers might also become a permanent state of liminality. With this in mind, we suggest that the concept of the liminal career is a more fruitful lens through which to understand situations in which we can observe the ambiguous nature of hierarchical boundaries within career development.

Functional boundaries

Functional boundaries are often associated with 'competences' (Bagdadli et al., 2003), understood here as the professional skills required in order to carry out a occupation. Professional specialization that might be either enabling or constraining for career development depending upon the specific context. Becoming a lawyer, medical doctor or IT engineer, for example, might formally grant you access to certain occupations, but also exclude you from others due to overqualification. The question of cultivating the proper set of competences remains central for career development in organizations. An organizational career is often portrayed as a progression within a 'hierarchy of occupational titles' that are 'simple, clear, and relatively stable' (Hirschhorn and Gilmore, 1992: 5). Each occupational title is associated with a specific set of competences. However, contrary to an organizational career that adheres to a set of competences supporting a fixed professional identity, a boundaryless career is believed to involve a constant, almost life-long reinvention and acquisition of new professional skills (see discussion of Rousseau and Arthur, 1996 in Gunz et al., 2007). The employee engaging in an

boundaryless career should be flexible and adopt the ability to ‘play a bewildering variety of roles’ (Hirschhorn and Gilmore, 1992: 5) within the organization.

The dissolvement of clear occupational identities might not only enable flexibility and mobility, but also spark ambiguity and uncertainty, because determining the specific package of competences that delineates a work role becomes exceedingly difficult. Hence, each employees within a given work setting might experience that each formal position recourse into an ‘ambiguous role’ (Swan et al., 2016). Under such circumstances, we can use the concept of liminal career to understand how functional boundaries are rendered unclear, placing the employees on a ‘threshold’ (Beech, 2010) between different work roles. As the career of the employee becomes liminal, his or her professional identity becomes ‘open to definition’ (Garsten, 1999: 603), since there are no firm, symbolic structures or guidelines that fix how the employee should understood their work roles (Swan et al., 2015). In effect, each individual is required to cope with ambiguous expectations, demands and requirements on their own individual terms.

In the first group interview at ENC, the participants were asked to select a word that could describe their careers development. The employee Ethan responded in the following way:

> I have chosen ‘competence’ [to describe my career]. I believe it also involves professional development, and I have chosen that word, too. But I think that competence has a quite broad coverage, since it also involves some personal development. I don’t think it is *that* important in your career, but there is an element of both [professional development and personal development]. Developing your competences is the most important part of your career.

As we can see here, Ethan associates his career with the development of competences. Competences do not simply mean expert knowledge. They also concern the development of your ‘whole person’ (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011), since personal development remains central. While Ethan believes that professional development is more important than personal development, the employee Alice stresses that this depends on the situation. For example, Alice says that if you want to ‘advance to become a manager, then you have to develop some personal skills’ and acquire some ‘broader competences’. Used in this manner, competence is a more flexible and adaptable notion, but it is also more vague compared to more specific concepts of skills or qualifications. As opposed to qualifications, competences do not simply express the current state. They also involve the ‘potential’ of the employees (Håland and Tjorna, 2006). Competence is not given in advance. Rather, it must be developed through the career. While Ethan and Alice disagree about how to balance the relationship between ‘professional development and personal development’, they agree with James, who states that it depends on ‘where you have your personal focus’. Says Alice: ‘It all depends on where you have the focus. I actually think this is a really good explanation’.

Here we can see how career development becomes a question of developing the right competencies, such that the concept of competences remains ‘somewhere in-between’

(Daskalaki et al., 2016) personal and professional development. Competencies are, to use the words of Turner, 'neither this nor that, and yet is both' (1967: 99). They are not tied to either personal or professional development alone but remain a concern in both perspectives, and may expand both's potentiality. We see in ENC that each member of the organization must engage in both personal and professional development in order to thrive. Yet it remains unclear how the relationship between the personal and the professional should be conceived. This suggests that managing the relationship between personal development and professional advancement is not determined by the organization, nor by the managers, but by each individual employee themselves. Each employe must now find a way to balance the personal and the professional through what Kreiner et al. succinctly term 'boundary work tactics' (2009).

The result is an individualization of career responsibility (Dowd and Kaplan, 2005; Inkson, 2008; Garsten, 2008; Costas, 2013), since 'personal focus' becomes the organizing principle for career development. Within the discourse of the boundaryless career, this individualization process tends to be associated with increased flexibility and mobility, since employees can now choose how to 'tweak' or refine their career development, as fixed functional boundaries as defined by the organization have presumably disappeared. However, Inkson highlights how this trend places a tremendous 'responsibility on individual career actor's shoulders' (2008: 550), since 'individuals, not organizations, are responsible for managing their own careers' (Dowd and Kaplan, 2005: 702). This has been marked as a shift from an 'organization-centered' career path towards an 'individual-centered' career path (see Peiperl et al., 2000). Here we should not simply assume that 'objective boundaries' have been replaced by 'subjective boundaries'; that is, in the absence of clear functional boundaries defined by the organizations, that individuals must subjectively construct them. Instead, our example points towards an emphasis on 'personal focus' among the members of ENC as a response to uncertain work conditions and the prospect of change. For example, Linda says:

> In many of the tasks that we work on, there is an obvious focus on professionalism. But let's imagine that we merged with [another department] and we should be integrated with each other, then other things would be at stake. Here we should not let our personality lead us into isolation - we should welcome our new colleagues. So after such a process, we might answer [the question of what is important for career development] differently.

As Linda explains, many of the tasks that they are assigned require certain specific professional qualifications, implying the existence of firm, functional boundaries within the organization. However, these functional boundaries might suddenly change due to new conditions, such as a merger with another department. For each member of the organization, it is therefore vital to stay flexible, adaptable and mobile in order to adapt to the unpredictability and ambiguity inherent in the changing organizational conditions (Clarke, 2013). Here it is important to note that the description above is a fictitious scenario presented by Linda. Yet, it is precisely this prospect—that each individual should expect the unexpected or prepare for the unpreparable—that marks career development at ENC. It is flexibility with precarity. We can use the concept of the liminal

career here to understand how career development proceeds on the basis of uncertainty. As employees are put ‘permanently on guard’ (Fleming, 2015: 86), they experience that the criteria for succeeding in the organization are unclear. With the concept of the liminal career, we can see here how precarious the functional boundaries at ENC have become and it is this precarity that turns what once were organizational careers into liminal careers.

Discussion

Compared to the concept of the boundaryless career, we suggest that the concept of the liminal career has two distinct advantages. At the conceptual level, the liminal career obviates the need to insist on either the presence versus absence of boundaries. Rather, liminality allows us to understand how boundaries might exist and yet be difficult to identify for organizational members in the concrete life situation. Those who are experiencing a liminal career might be placed in a social context regulated by boundaries, but the nature of these boundaries - and how to traverse them - may be unclear, diffuse and ambiguous. For example, an employee within an organization might have a specific job title without there being any specific tasks and responsibilities associated with it. Such a position may be considered a liminal zone in which boundaries are rendered indeterminate. An example could be nurses in contemporary hospital care, who are confronting pressures from health assistants ‘below’ them, as well as from doctors ‘above’ them: the assistants aspire to carry out tasks that formerly belonged to the nurses, while the doctors are increasingly performing ‘care’, interacting with patients. Even in a highly specialized bureaucracy, such as a hospital, the boundaries are rendered ambiguous, resulting in what seems to be an epidemic of stress among personnel within the various national healthcare systems.

Beyond this, the concept of liminal career enables us to simultaneously consider the positive and negative aspects of contemporary career development. On the one hand, liminality may entail crisis, or even stress. Since those who experience liminality lack clear social markers against which to define themselves, they might experience what Turner calls ‘symbolic stress’ and be exposed to ‘vulnerability’ (1967: 108). In other words, the stage of liminality is associated with anxiety, ambiguity and uncertainty in social relations, since organizational members are placed in a social limbo (Garsten, 1999; Sturdy et al., 2006). On the other hand, liminality can also enable creativity, since it dissolves conventional social constraints and allows for the emergence of new social patterns and cultural identities (see Swan et al., 2015; Beech, 2010).

The well-established distinction between the organizational career and the boundaryless career gives the impression that career development is either governed by boundaries that demarcate clear functional, organizational and hierarchical domains or that careers now proceed in the absence of such boundaries. Although a thorough critique has been leveled at the concept of the boundaryless career (Dany et al., 2011; Inkson et al., 2012; King et al., 2005; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010), there has been a reluctance within career research to reject the concept as such. Some scholars have criticized the concept without dismissing it (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010),

while others have insisted on the existence of boundaries within career development (Inkson et al., 2012; King et al., 2005). However, the predominant form of critique against the concept of boundaryless career accepts the basic premise that boundaries can either be present or absent within career development. As such, the discussion has been polarized between those who believe that careers are bounded versus those who claim that careers are boundaryless. However, as Baruch notes, such 'extremes rarely provide a true depiction of real life situations' (2006: 127). In particular, the distinction between the organizational career and the boundaryless career fails to acknowledge that although boundaries influencing career development are present, they might nevertheless be ambiguous, diffuse and unclear. Instead of subscribing to the concept of the boundaryless career, we have therefore developed an alternative concept, that of the liminal career, in order to capture such situations.

The concept of the liminal career can here draw attention to how employees cope with situations in which they have to negotiate ambiguous, diffuse and unclear boundaries. To develop the concept, we have discussed the liminal career in relation to three boundaries that are central within career development: *hierarchical boundaries* separating employees and managers; *functional boundaries* demarcating the work domains; and *organizational boundaries* establishing a distinction between the inside and the outside of the organization. Using the illustrative example of ENC, we have showed how the concept of the liminal career can highlight how employees experience these boundaries as diffuse, requiring them to navigate in an organizational climate that lacks clear markers for career development. For the employees, the career boundaries have become blurred (Fleming and Spicer, 2004). With the concept of the liminal career, we can see that although these boundaries are present at ENC, the employees nevertheless struggle with how to define them and relate to them. In turn, the concept of the liminal career can help us understand how employees and managers alike deal with a career in 'social limbo' (Turner, 1974: 57), a limbo that occurs due to ambiguous career boundaries. Compared to the concept of the boundaryless career, the liminal career concept has three advantages. First, it retains the existence of boundaries, in fact it places boundaries as the center of analytical attention. Second, a liminal career perspective allows for a consideration of both the positive aspects (for example, the creativity it sparks) and the negative aspects (for example, the stress that it generates) of such situations. Thirdly, the liminal career concept connects flexibility directly to boundaries as a measure of how one copes with liminal experiences and challenges connected to one's career.

The proponents of the boundaryless career concept assume that flexibility is achieved by eradicating boundaries. Once boundaries are removed, individuals can then enjoy boundless flexibility by moving freely across occupations, spaces and organizations. For example, functional boundaries associated with an organizational career tie employees to specific occupations, while those engaged in a boundaryless career constantly reinvent their professional identity and endeavour to remain flexible on the labour market (Hirschhorn and Gilmore, 1992). What this assumption underestimates, according to Inkson et al. (2012: 333), is that boundaries

not only constrain, but also *enable* flexibility. Thus, boundaries can provide support for career progress and movement. Conversely, according to Smith, this positions implies that organizations without boundaries fail to facilitate flexibility:

> Without the clearly defined hierarchy of roles and responsibilities that characterized its ancestor bureaucracies, the flexible organization lacks the reference points by which one is able to tell whether one is moving forwards, backwards or sideways or not moving at all in one's career (Smith, 2007: 196; see also Sennett, 2011: 15).

Although this is an important critique, stressing that flexibility, mobility and autonomy actually require boundaries to be in place, we can see that this view appeals to an understanding of organizations predicated on clear organizational, hierarchical and functional boundaries. This account echoes Deleuze's view on the societies of discipline that consist of 'environments of enclosure - prison, hospital, factory, school, family' (1992: 3-4). For Deleuze, all such environments of enclosure have today entered into 'crisis'. For this reason, Deleuze does not believe that there exists a simple return to such environments of enclosure that can be effected by reinstalling clear boundaries. Instead, Deleuze stresses that we must acknowledge how the boundaries that previously demarcated different enclosed domains have today become blurred (Fleming and Spicer, 2004; Johnsen and Sørensen, 2015; Weiskopf and Loacker, 2006; Fleming, 2015). Such a blurring does not imply that the boundaries have been dissolved, but rather that we are often unsure of when we have managed to cross a boundary. We experience, in other words, what Loacker and Śliwa see as both 'enriching *and* burdensome' (2016: 675), namely the experience of belonging professionally to a 'mobile middle', who is bound to keep moving in order 'to stay in the same place'. Conventionally, movement and transition has been understood as progressing from one position to another. However, as Loacker and Sliwa explores the paradox of having to move in order to retain a stable position, we suggest that the concept of the liminal career is able to capture this complexity.

Although boundaries might be installed within an organization in order to ensure flexibility in regard to career development, such boundaries might nevertheless become difficult for employees to locate, because it is unclear when they have actually crossed them or what the criteria for being able to cross them may be. While it is tempting to think of a system that contains clear boundaries which 'enabled one to plot the course of one's working life' (Smith, 2007: 196) as superior to the organizations lacking such markers, we follow Deleuze, who refrains from taking such a stance and instead argues that we need to understand the current reconfiguration of boundaries. In line with Baruch (2006), this paper has attempted to seek a more 'balanced' view on how careers unfold within complex sets of boundaries.

With the concept of the liminal career, we can better understand how experiences of career development change over time, yet remain tied to boundaries and the occasional blurring of such boundaries. Career, in its modern form, is a child of the disciplinary confines: the bureaucratic organizations, schools, factories, prisons. Here liminal experiences are tied mainly to the movement from the one to the other in the rite of passage connected to, for instance, taking off

one's working clothes and putting on the prisoner's uniform. As these people with one kind of identity enter a crisis and are reconfigured, the flexibility needed for passing between identities instead becomes a flexibility connected to blurred boundaries and unknown, potential vistas for one's career. This liminal career is not to be seen as either worse or better than the conventional organizational career of the disciplinary confine. But the liminal career is challenging and unsettling in new ways.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed critically the concept of the boundaryless career and suggested the development of an alternative concept, that of the liminal career. Although the concept of the boundaryless career has been widely used in career research, it suffers from considerable inconsistencies and weaknesses. Extending the critique of the boundaryless career concept, we have proposed the concept of the liminal career in order to show how boundaries might become diffuse and ambiguous. To develop this concept, we have discussed three boundaries that are central within career development: organizational, hierarchical and functional boundaries. Looking at how employees cope with diffuse organizational, hierarchical and functional boundaries, we have shown how the concept of the liminal career yields three distinct advantages compared to the concept of the boundaryless career. The concept of the liminal career places boundaries in focus by considering their ambiguous nature; it incorporates both the positive and the negative aspects of career development; and it connects flexibility directly to boundaries. While the concept of the liminal career will not solve all the intricacies of a field currently engaged in a reorientation, it may spur renewed engagement in career research and development.

The concept of the liminal career go beyond the momentary liminal experience connected to career advancement as a *rite of passage*. As previously mentioned, Trice and Beyer (1993) show how career promotions, such as the transition from being an employee to becoming a manager within a hierarchy, can follow the three-step liminal ritual pattern. In such organizational rituals, the superior who initiates the career promotion takes on the role of master of ceremonies, being responsible for ensuring that the ritual follows the three steps of separation, liminality and incorporation. In the liminal career, regardless of whether it happens in bureaucracies or post-bureaucracies, it becomes, first of all, unclear for the employee how to advance from one level to the other, i.e., from being an employee to becoming a manager.

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