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More Than Just Sticks and Stones: Effects of Interpersonal Interactions on Liminality and The Negotiation of Identity

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Abstract

Exploring my lived experiences through my academic lens evidenced emergent themes that expand how interpersonal communication influences identity construction and development in liminality. Interpersonal communication during liminality can be separated into four themes specific to the interaction: support, rejection, complication, and acceptance. The fifth theme expands on the idea of constant liminality at the personal level. This exploratory study showcases the impact of interpersonal communication as it intersects with liminality and social identity. The purpose of exploring these emergent themes is to add to the ever-growing discourse of interpersonal communication studies. What follows is an "unpacking" of these themes with specific examples pulled from the narratives.

Keywords: interpersonal communication, liminality, autoethnographic

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Chapter One: Introduction & Literature Review

I cannot remember the time or date of this event, but I can remember looking in the mirror a short time after my twenty-sixth birthday. I traced the lines, wrinkles, and scars on my face with my eyes. I seldomly examine myself so closely. Mainly because staring at myself begins to raise more questions than answers. I furrowed my brow as a list of questions flooded my mind. Do I look like a normal twenty-six-year-old? What is a normal twenty-six-year-old? Am I normal at all? What is normal? My focus is suddenly returned to the present moment as my fiancé's hand touches my shoulder and comments on how handsome I look.

It is at moments like this I begin to wonder how much of an impact our interpersonal relationships and interactions have on the negotiations of our identities. This qualitative autoethnographic study holds my lived experiences as a man, an academic, a soldier, a bi-sexual, and simply just a human to an academic lens to shed some light on my question. How do interactions with individuals effect the shaping of our identities during liminality? Liminality is state of being between an old identity and a new identity. Having experienced the impact of interpersonal communication I am driven to explore liminality from an academic perspective. My academic perspective is informed by qualitative constructivism, liminality, narrative, and social identity research.

This exploratory study adds to the ever-growing academic discourse of interpersonal communication studies. The connection between interpersonal communication and identity formation is dense with research; however, studying interpersonal interaction during times of liminality needs more exploration. The following literature review serves as the starting point for contextualizing the concepts and vernacular utilized in this study.

Literature Review

Interpretivism/Constructivism and Qualitative Research

      Exploring how interpersonal communication affects liminality and identity construction requires an ontology that values the social construction and interpretation of individually lived experiences. Ritchie et al. (2013) provide a comprehensive explanation of interpretivism/constructivism and qualitative research. Interpretivism requires a researcher to understand the importance of observations and their corresponding interpretations. Science mirrors the social world in the aspect that people make observations and interpret. Social scientists do the same; however, they check all aspects of their interpretation against values, ethics, and formal rules of research. Constructivism is similar but posits that knowledge is actively created in the space/time between observations and interpretation. Both epistemologies place value on "studying people's 'lived experiences' which occur within a particular historical and social context" (Ritchie et al. 2013, p. 7).

      With this idea in mind, the authors (Ritchie et al. 2013) assert that understanding has little to do with empirical questions like "how many…?" or "what causes…". Rather, qualitative research is a broad approach that researchers use to understand the "what, how, and whys" of the world. This type of research belongs to multiple academic schools and has a large array of different methods like interviews, focus groups, or autoethnography. This notion of constructivism/interpretivism is useful in understanding my own experiences with liminality, or the ambiguity and disorientation that occurred in my transitioning from one sense of self (or space) to another. This approach allows me to fully explore the "what, how, and whys" of my own experiences within the context of liminality and interpersonal communication.

Liminal States

Although liminality (in this context) is an individual experience, it is experienced by everyone. Liminal states are most present during identity construction and identity construction is directly influenced by experiences within the liminal state. The term liminal state was coined by Arnold Van Gennep (1960) as the instance when a person is actively going through a change in social position. This is not to be confused with liminal space which refers to hallways, doorways, etc. Van Gennep's focus for this phenomenon was in the context of non-western traditional rites of passage that marked a change in identity. He broke this transition into three parts. Preliminal, the state before the change when one is still in the old social position. Postliminal, the completion of the transition from one state to another. Liminal is the more confusing of the three. The liminal state is between the post and preliminal. In this state, one is no longer what they were but is not yet what they will be. A good example of this is the Mexican quinceañera. There will be a time when the person is not a girl or a woman, but actively transition from one to the other. That is liminality or a liminal state. Van Gennep utilized this idea in the study of non-western cultures and has been problematized for being ethnocentric. However, Van Gennep's original idea serves as a starting point for complicating and understanding western cultural transitions.

Victor Turner (1974) took Van Gennep's idea of liminality and complicated it. He still recognizes liminal to mean the traditional transition of people's social position. However, Turner is more interested in the liminal state rather than the pre or post-liminal. He posits that modern western societies have a similar but different transition process focusing mainly on when people are betwixt and between identities. These transitions parallel liminal but are not traditions of a pre-western world. These transitions are referred to as liminoid. The liminoid may mirror or even

copy the liminal; however, the liminoid refers to transitions in social position or identity within the context of modernity.

In conjunction with liminoid Turner also coined the term communitas. Communitas is the social group that may form when more than one person is going through a liminoid transition. Turner (1969) outlines three different types of communitas. Spontaneous communitas is a sudden togetherness felt by a moment of shared state liminality. For example, a graduating class or refugees fleeing war have shared liminality amongst their respective groups. Normative communitas refers to a group becoming normalized into standard society. Lastly, there is ideological communitas which mainly concerns the idea of utopian societies making the concept nonapplicable to my lived experience.

Thomassen (2009) expands on Turner's idea by pointing out different types of liminoid states. These three types are coined in reference to the duration of time for transition to start and finish. These types of liminality can apply to both liminal and liminoid states.

The first, and shortest of the three, is referred to as moments of liminality. These moments of liminality are characterized as a sudden event making the duration of liminality short. A wife may become a widow in cases of sudden death. That transition is almost instantaneous. In many cases, individuals may need more time to make sense of their new identity because of the lack of time in the liminal state.

The second type is the period of liminality. The main characteristic of this type of liminality is that the liminal or liminoid state lasts longer than a moment but shorter than a lifetime. Periods of liminality are the most common in life. The stages of growing up, relationship stages, developing hobbies are all examples of periods of liminality.

The third type of liminality is epoch. The epoch of liminality is a complex lifetime of being in a state of liminality. In these is instances individuals are no longer what they were but cannot or will not transition to that new thing. Interestingly some of the refusals and rejections to transition give way to new identities because of the possibility of communitas moving from spontaneous to normative. This concept is important for contextually understanding the communitas transitions that impact people's interpersonal interactions. This shift in communitas is largely dependent upon narrative and discourse surrounding the groups. As the narrative shifts so does the communitas's position within the larger discourse.

Narrative

In this study narrative functions as both paradigm and data. Humans construct and interpret their experience and their identity through narrative and storytelling. The Narrative Paradigm written by Walter Fisher (1985) provides a touchstone for understanding narrative's place in the world. Fisher defines narrative as "formal features of a story conceived as a discrete sequence of thought and/or action in life or literature." He goes on to add that any written or recorded discourse falls within these parameters. Fisher argues that not all stories carry the same value, however. Appraising the value of a narrative is outlined by the concept of "narrative rationality". This process involves employing standards like "facts, relevance, consequences, consistency, and transcendent issues" which on a larger scale can be called communication, or as Fisher put it "ordinary discourse". Ultimately, Fisher asserts that what is being discussed in "ordinary discourse" shapes knowledge rather than knowledge being omnipresent and unchanging. He goes even further to state "The subject of such discourse is a symbolic action that creates "social reality." In conjunction with liminal states, narrative study is the best way to

understand the socially constructed reality because it can only be observed by those who experience it.

Social Identity

Social identity is the amalgamation of our narrative about our lived experiences. Whether inductive or deductive, we construct our identity within our constructed narrative within our constructed reality. Allen (2011) contextualizes the socially constructed reality within communication and identity. Social identity is an individual and collective part of existence within a socially constructed reality. This is not to be confused with a personal identity which is a collection of personality traits and characteristics like shyness or confidence. Rather, social identity is a collection of titles or statuses made through communication between groups. Groups, organizations, and cultures share a cyclical relationship with people and groups. The group provides categorizations of people while the people define the rules and expectations for people inside and outside the group. These identities may be obtained like teacher or soldier. While other identities are ascribed like gay or man. It is important to note that neither the social constructions (organizations, groups, etc.) nor the people within them are static. They are changing constantly through discourse that is usually presented in the narrative format. A lot of the identities we embody are learned through the process of socialization. Many of these identities will become internalized as core aspects of who we are in our grand narratives.

Chapter Two: Method

There are three methodical assumptions that must be addressed. First, power at an interpersonal/organizational level changes hands as the individual shifts from one culture to another. Second, all names of individuals besides myself will be changed to protect anyone I speak about. Three, communication, culture, and identity are inseparably connected, and each

influences the other. These assumptions are necessary for understanding my lived experiences studied under liminality theory. The method that best fits my study is autoethnography.

Autoethnography

Adams et. al's (2017) notion of autoethnography serves as a more current foundational text for understanding the autoethnographic method of research. This text covers a brief history of the method, how to conduct the study, and the purposes/practices of autoethnography. In the late twentieth century, many researchers saw a need for understanding storytelling and narrative-based research. Autoethnography became popular around the 1990s with qualitative and interpretive social scientists. It allowed the cultural insiders to conduct cultural research using "personal experience and reflexivity to examine cultural experiences, especially within communication" (Adams et al, 2017, p. 2). The authors focus on how autoethnography is an attempt to communicate culturally based feelings, themes, and practices through in-depth descriptions and an academic lens that creates a pseudo familiarity with the culture. The authors posit four main purposes for using autoethnography. One goal of "autoethnographers [is to] offer accounts of personal experience to complement, or fill gaps in, existing research" (Adams et al, 2017, p. 3). There have been countless studies done on the military, but most are empirical studies that miss important details about military life. A second goal is to inform the reader of blind spots within institutional systems that may be problematic. One example is the loneliness felt during a transition through the liminal state between military and civilian life. We can only begin to help by understanding the loneliness through those who are experiencing it. The third purpose addresses more critical scholars' complaints about research needing to serve an active role in promoting societal and academic reform. Autoethnography does this by acknowledging the researcher's involvement and effect on the study. Lastly, autoethnography takes on an active

role by adhering to accessibility and approachability. The text of the study should be written in a

format and level of detail that can be understood by large and diverse groups. Liminality is

experienced by everyone; however, everyone experiences and recounts liminality differently thus

supporting the need for autoethnography.

> This process must adhere to a specific set of academic standards. Laurel Richardson's
>
> (2000 p. 2) criterion for evaluating [auto]ethnography follows:
>
> 1. Substantive contribution: Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social-
>
> life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) human-world
>
> understanding and perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of
>
> the text?
>
> 2. Aesthetic merit: Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative
>
> analytical practices open up the text, invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically
>
> shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?
>
> 3. Reflexivity: How did the author come to write this text? How was the information
>
> gathered? Ethical issues? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a
>
> product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to
>
> make judgments about the point of view? Do authors hold themselves accountable to the
>
> standards of knowing and telling of the people they have studied?
>
> 4. Impact: Does this affect me? emotionally? intellectually? generate new questions?
>
> move me to write? move me to try new research practices? move me to action?

5. Expresses a reality: Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived-experience? Does it seem "true"—a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the "real"?

My study will follow these guidelines, situated in a narrative paradigm, of negotiating my lived experiences in liminal states and how my interpersonal interactions affected the shaping of identity. This means I analyze communicated narratives during liminal states of my lived experiences as data. This communication may be interpersonal, intrapersonal, or mass communication. These liminal states are the areas of my life where I experienced some form of transition or change. I selected these stories for the large amount of connect that can be transferred into data. Also, these stories are some of the most important and life changing things I have ever gone through. Simultaneously, these stories cover a wide array of aspects form my live. If a reader does not identify or connect with one story, there is a vastly different one they might connect with. This is done in an effort to connect with diverse audiences. After isolating and analyzing this data, I will apply liminality and communication theories to explore the impact of communication in this unique state. Taking a step further, a thick description of my lived experiences provides support for how interpersonal communication impacts identity negotiation.

I provide five key events in my life where I was in different states of liminality. Functionally, these five states of liminality work like chapters in a book and will offer a layered account of my lived experience in combination with an academic interpretation and connection to emergent themes. These emergent themes are classified as liminality supporting, rejecting, complicating, and/or accepting interpersonal interactions. Life events follow: Becoming a Soldier, Coming Out, Back to School, Dealing with Death, Day to Day. Each section contains a deep description of the events and conversations. Please note that some of the events in these

stories may seem dark or even disturbing to some readers. After each story, I apply the academic

lens to connect liminality theory to my lived event. This will be done by highlighting the type of

liminality and briefly unpacking the specific communitas of each lived experience. This

connection of lived experience to theory is essential for contextual understanding. Next,

emergent themes will be connected to the life event situated in liminal theory to explore the

impact of the interaction and how it may have altered my liminality and identity.

Chapter Three: Data and Findings

Becoming a Soldier

I sat in the middle of a charter bus and counted the multicolor dots on the upholstery of

the seat in front of me. We had been instructed to put our heads down for the entire bus ride.

After counting dots for what felt like an hour, the bus came to a sudden halt. A man wearing the

iconic "brown-round" hat, that a Drill Sergeant in U.S. Army wore, stepped onto the bus silently.

Then all at once, this unassuming man erupted, "GET THE FUCK OFF MY BUS!" After being

screamed at, shaken down, and doing what felt like every pushup ever, we were gathered in our

quarters. Our senior Drill Sergeant gave us the welcome speech which ended with, "You are here

because you have chosen to leave your old life as a civilian behind and become soldiers.

However, you have not earned the right to be called soldiers for the next twelve weeks you will

be referred to as trainees". This was Day Zero of the hardest thing most of us had ever attempted.

The hardest day that did not even start the clock on U.S. Army Basic Combat Training (BCT). At

the end of Day Zero with muscles aching and minds spinning, we had a ten-minute phone call

home. My throat and eyes strained to hold myself together as I heard my mother's voice catch as

she held back the urge to cry. Most of our conversations ended with "I love you" this one ended

on "you got this".

I had no way of knowing this would be my last phone call for two months, but those words "You got this" would carry me through this hell all the way to graduation. But that night I lost the battle against my tears. I lied in my bed staring at the ceiling awash with an ominous red glow of the mocking exit signs silently while tears poured out of my eye and collected between my head and the pillow.

I have never heard sixty people in one room be so quiet. The potential wrath of the Drill Sergeants superseded our desire to chat. But suddenly, I heard my battle buddy and bunkmate, Mike, humming "Sweet Home Alabama". I leaned down from the top bunk ready to fiercely whisper "shut the hell up" but then I saw that he also had tears in his eyes. In that moment I said what my mom had said to me, "You got this". Illuminate by the red glow of exit signs I saw Mike nod and say, "You too, man". Week after week we would suffer together through pouring rain, blistering heat, choking humidity, Drill Sergeant's crass shouts, exhausting push-ups, and vomit inducing tear gas.

Now I only had one thing left that drove my heart into my stomach. I am stood in a muddy and wet trench. I could not tell if I was shaking from the cold or the fear of what was to come. The night was a level of darkness I was unfamiliar with, actual pitch black. The sound of a siren shattered the silence as machine guns began firing live ammunition over our heads. I let out the manliest war cry my seventeen-year vocal cords would allow, as I dragged myself and my sixty pounds of gear over the trench wall. I crawled as fast as I could. Only stopping when a flare would wash the ground in a sickly yellow light. Sand filled every part of my uniform. My breath fogged up my eye protection not that it mattered because of the darkness. If Day Zero was the hardest day this was the hardest night.

My muscles felt like they were filled with battery acid, and my eyes stung from sweat. Something in my head or body snapped. I just stopped moving. Doubts started crept into mind. I did not want to be there. I did not even know if I wanted to be a soldier anymore. All I knew was I wanted out of this live-fire exercise. Suddenly felt a sharp blow to my helmeted head. It was Mike's foot. We made eye contact, and he yelled over the gunfire and simulated explosions, "COME ON, YOU LAZY BASTARD, DO WANT TO CATCH A BULLET TO THE HEAD? *YOU GOT THIS*! NOW, MOVE YOUR ASS"! So, fixed my sights on him and kept crawling. One week later we proudly marched across the parade field hearing our family members cheering for us. Mike made a funny jab saying, "You wouldn't even be here if I hadn't pulled you out of the sand during the live fire".

"Well, you are the only person that can hum "Sweet Home Alabama" and cry at the same time," I responded. We both laughed uncontrollably before saying our goodbyes.

A year after graduating from BCT I graduated high school and continued my military training in Advanced Individual Training (AIT). At Fort Eustis, I began learning the complexities of the UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter. The days were dedicated to reading manuals, learning tools, and stories of failures on the maintainers' part that led to pointless deaths. Many of my fellow classmates and I shared our collective desire to be crew chiefs one day. A crew chief is a soldier who flies with the pilots, handles maintenance, and during war served as a door gunner.

My classmate Josh said, "Could you imagine being a certified badass?!".

I replied, "I haven't given it much thought I came here to fix helicopters but being a crew chief sounds pretty cool.".

One of our instructors chimed in, "It's all fun and games until your entire career is devolved into getting shot at, shooting back, and patching bullet holes.". He continued, "Most of you came here not knowing a wrench from your dick… what makes any of you think you can handle that life. Why don't you guys focus on passing AIT first"? His words fell on deaf ears. Like many of my classmates, I had all come to a false conclusion that our job was in the rear with the gear. That BCT was just a formality or weed out process. We were warriors. Our Drill Sergeants said so. We did not endure twelve weeks of hell just to sit around and fix helicopters. Josh, stealing a quote from *Full Metal Jacket*, said, "We want to be heart breakers and life takes". For some reason, most of us were thirsty for blood and could even legally drink alcohol.

I spent a year in a maintenance company (the just fixing helicopters organization) then got scouted for a crew chief position in Alpha Company. If there was anything I earned during my year in maintenance, it was that Alpha Company was the rebellious but talented older sibling of our companies. My hunger for combat only increased as began my training. In my first year alone, I was the battalion's (level above company) top shooter during door gunner training. This hunger and borderline obsession would come to an odd conclusion.

College was over for the semester, and I was playing video games. My phone rang and I was confused that I was getting a call from my Platoon Sergeant. "Hello?", I said.

Sergeant Wilt responded, "Hey, just calling to let you know that there is a good chance we are getting deployed."

I asked, "Where to?".

He answered in a regular tone, "Afghanistan."

My heart sank. "Sound good," I said. That was a lie. I felt my nerves grip tightly as I pondered the way I felt. I tried to contextualize and rationalize my emotions. "Why am I nervous?" I asked myself. This was it, my chance to prove I am a real soldier. But that hunger for combat and thirst for blood had faded over the years of training. I had grown a lot. I did not want to kill anyone, and I certainly did not want to get shot or worse end up in a helicopter crash with nothing for my mom to bury but a pair of dog tags. A month after we had completed all the steps to deploy to the Middle East the deployment was canceled due to the General at the time deciding he did not need us. I felt relief accompanied by feelings of imposter syndrome. I did not want to be some sort of slick sleeve (a soldier without a combat patch on their uniform). To my surprise when I mention getting out no one challenges me and even supports the idea.

Coming Out

I was in high school when I became aware of my sexuality. Now going to high school in the rural Midwest creates a weird cultural wasteland of the "progressives" and "traditionalists". I use quotes because neither group really knew the sum of their identity, nor did they know what the words meant.

I was sitting with my friends at lunch chatting about the usual nonsense of high school life when I decided to casually express my sexuality to my friends. "Well, I am bi he is not all that attractive," I said in response to some question about what I think about Robert Pattinson (Twilight was very popular at the time). In that instant, one would have thought all the air had been sucked out of the area. Our table had become uncharacteristically silent. Trying desperately to break the silent stares of my friends I said, "It's not a big deal that I am bi. I am not the only dude that likes other dudes at this table". Then the bell rang burning that awkward moment into my brain. On my way home my mind spun in circles. Did I do something wrong? Maybe it was

how I said it? I could just tell them I was joking. This process of analysis went on for hours.

Finally, I reached the end of my mental labyrinth with no real remedies to my conundrum.

"Luckily this all happened on a Friday", I told myself.

Saturday morning, I got a text from my friend Kalli. "u up? call me". Dreading the

thought of a phone call I responded in the fastest T9 texting I could, "busy atm… brb" (atm = at

the moment/ brb = be right back). I avoid phone calls for a couple of hours before Kalli called

me. I had spent those hours drafting fake arguments in my head. I answered the call and Kalli

spoke first, "Hey… so I know that talk at lunch was kinda weird, but I think you just surprised

everyone".

"Surprised everyone? You and Tony are gay," I retorted. She responded,

"Yeah… gay… not bi. Look, I thought I might like boys and girls but at the end of the day, you

either like boys or girls. Plus, you don't act or talk gay". I felt attacked, exposed, invalidated, and

devalued simultaneously. She continued, "I get it. You have some gay friends that get a lot of the

attention. You shouldn't pretend to like both to get noticed".

"But I am not pretending!", I argued.

She paused and said, "Well, then you need to figure out if you like boys or girls." My

hurt feeling turned to anger. A level of rage I have never felt before. This rage transformed into

an inescapable web of doubts. I would spend my high school years dropping one group of friends

and attempting to start over with another. Never truly feeling like myself around my friends.

My family, however, was much more accepting of who I felt myself becoming. I do not

remember when exactly this was, but I remember it was warm. Sixteen-year-old me sheepishly

asked my mom if she had the time to talk. As if I was admitting to a crime I said it, "I am pretty

sure I am bi". The pause between my statement and her response was experienced in slow

motion as anxiety welled in my chest. What would she say? Did I make a mistake? What if is she

is not supportive? "Well, you have one hundred percent instead of fifty percent to choose from,"

she finally answered. The nervousness left as my mother and I moved to a different topic like

nothing had changed. This mixed bag of experiences made me cautiously optimistic about

expressing my sexuality and gender performance in the future.

College was supposed to be a different atmosphere. A culture of acceptance and deep

thought. For the most part, this is true; however, it is impossible to stop all the bad actors. I knew

that it was impossible to move through college experience without getting unwanted attention at

some point. At this point, I had completely changed my roster of friends as I learn who I was in

the context of the world. My new friends were supportive of my sexual identity. Many of them

are situated near me on the spectrum of sexuality. Although the LGTB community is largely

accepting and the organizations like Pride at EIU were more vocal about the inclusion of

pansexual and bisexual people, certain members were quick to challenge the validity of "others".

Luke was one of those gate-keeping individuals. We were acquaintances at best. We had

attended no more than two classes together. Luke had a laundry list of small infractions,

unwanted sexual advances, and microaggressions in my memory. However, one night at a party

Luke was either drunk on alcohol or pride. Unadulterated irritation washed over me as Luke

approached. In slurred words he started with some cheesy pickup line that I was not in the mood

for. I responded, "Look we have been over this. I am not going to have sex with you."

He retorted, "I bet if I had a pussy you would fuck me." A small pocket of silence

spawned through the loud conversations and booming music. My friend Rachael dawned a look

of disgust and began to speak. I interrupted her and responded, "Luke… honey, I won't fuck you

because you're an asshole, not because you are a man". There were some gasps and stifled laughs as I moved away quickly betting he had no response and fearing the possibilities if he did. Racheal and I weaved through the crowd with a confident swagger that I had been craving.

Back to School

At the time I started at Eastern Illinois I had already been in the Army for about a year. I had missed orientation and the first two weeks of classes because of military training. Starting college felt like a breath of fresh air. I quickly learned that people my age in college had no idea who we were. This was a time of growth and development. During my undergraduate career, I realized people were defined by two factors, where they came from and what they do. I was from Charleston (partly) and in the military. Unfortunately, these two factors were not easy for others to connect with.

It was a partially cool night for May on the outskirts of Eastern Illinois University's campus. I was headed to Marty's which was one of the closest and cheapest bars in town. I was due to meet up with some new friends I had made in some of my classes. We were celebrating the end of the semester. As the bouncer look at my driver's license, he raised an eyebrow. I was more confused than him because I had been twenty-one for months now. He gave me my ID back and as I walked past him, I heard him say something about "townies". I had heard the term before but never got the full explanation.

I traversed a sea of people on the dance floor and sat with my friends at a table. As soon as I got to the table I was questioned by Jordan, "Are… are you a cocktail guy"? Everyone at the table smirked with anticipation of my answer. I started to catch on when I noticed the guys were drinking light beer and the ladies were drinking assorted seltzer drinks. In an attempt to recover

some pride, I boasted, "Only if you consider a double whiskey and coke a cocktail". Which it is,

but not many college-aged people drink whiskey. Amy interjected, "Cut him some slack Jordan

at least he is not a townie". I felt a sharp catch in my throat as prepared to speak. The desire to

change the topic or lie about my birthplace was overwhelming. However, honesty is the best

policy and any attempt to change the subject would have drawn suspicion.

"Well… actually I was born here, but just born here", I said. The preceding conversation

felt like a cliché cop interrogation. "Wait! You're a townie"? Amy responded.

Hayden followed playfully, "So the truth comes out".

"I was only born here and graduated high school here. Plus, I have lived in different

states and traveled to different countries", I argued.

"That's got to be weird. You hang out with people who can't stand townies", Sam

pointed out.

I retorted, "It's not weird because EIU is a part of who I am not Charleston. Honestly, I

hate Charleston it's boring and backwards as hell".

Hayden playfully misquoted Shakespeare, "I think he doth protest too much".

"The gentlemen doth fail English too much, methinks," I shot back. We all laughed and

proceeded to enjoy the rest of the night without talks of townies or places of origin. The

interaction created a need to isolate myself from Charleston as much as possible for the

foreseeable future.

Years later, my graduate program brought changes that I could not wait to experience. I

was going to be a creator of knowledge, not just a consumer. I going to understand the world in a

more complex way. Being an academic was going to be part of me rather than just going to college for a bachelor's degree and a lengthy bar tab.

Intercultural Communication became a major source of my desire to explore identity through communication. The lengthy discussions of the self within culture formed in the basis of my academic thoughts. Not a moment or action went by without speculating the cultural influence in nuance detail. When it came time for our final project, I was bursting with excitement to explore the inner machinations of my culture. "I think you have an interesting topic Conlon", Dr. Jay said. She continued, "There is definitely a unique cultural conflict between the academy and the military sometimes". Serval of my classmates did not see their participation in graduate school as a part of their identity nor did they feel a sense of conflict in a cultural sense. Additionally, these same people had trouble seeing the military as a cultural identity. I did find support from the instructor. She had been in the military and has a Ph.D.

Then the moment of truth came. I took a deep breath as prepared to receive my graded first draft. With only eight of us in the class my paper was returned quickly. I hesitated to turn the paper over. My mind short circuited when there was a grade absent from the front and last page. I scanned pass the red correction marks searching for some kind of grade. Then I read the words "Set up a meeting with me so we can discuss a rewrite". I felt my heart sunder as I quickly exited the room. Tears streamed down my face for my twenty-minute commute home. Thoughts of inadequacy slammed my mind. "I guess I am not smart enough for graduate school", I told myself. I was nothing more than an imposter masquerading as a creator of knowledge.

Luckily, my mom who has been through graduate school talked me into a more proactive attitude for my meeting with Dr. Jay. "Conlon nothing you wrote is bad. What you are trying to write about is more suited for someone trying to write a thesis or dissertation. A lack of a grade

does not mean it is bad, we just need to narrow the scope of your paper", Dr. Jay said with a comforting tone.

I replied after a shy of relief, "I am going to be honest; I might have interpreted your notes as me not writing anything worth something. I thought that this was going to be a complete redo which is haunting given how close we are to the end of the semester".

Dr. Jay added, "I am never worried about the performance of student that have some imposter syndrome. It's the students that go through graduate school without a care in the world that I worry about". My final paper and I went on to earn an A. The project was everything I wanted it to be. An in-depth exploration of cultural identity conflict within the scope of a final class project.

Dealing with Death

"Why don't you start by telling me why you came here", asked Ms. Aims.

I paused to think then responded, "Because… I feel like my life is messed up and I tell people it is okay to seek help so I figured I would take my own advice".

Ms. Aims followed, "Messed up how"? The visceral memory of my friend's suicide flooded my mind. I gripped the arms of the faux leather armchair hard enough to almost bend my nails backward. My stomach turned as I relived walking into his room and finding him lying on the floor. In a trance live state, I recounted how he said he wanted to hang out while he was at home on leave. "Alex and I were good friends back in AIT", I said. "He was active duty and got deployed shortly after we graduated. I was never really worried about him dying in the Middle East. I was excited when he reached out", I continued. Aims' silence was deafening. I reluctantly continued, "I found him on the floor… I panicked… I think a part of me already knew what

happened. I was more in denial than trying to see if he was responsive. It took several minutes

for me to start CPR and call 911. He did not live with anyone else, so I had to help him, call for

help, and help myself all at the same time. The ambulance left with only the lights on". Aims

responded, "That must have been difficult to process. I managed to hold my intestinal fortitude

until after the police were done questioning me. I had never thrown up so hard in my life".

I continued, "No one talks about what to do after. Fuck I had to bring myself in here. I

mean I got other parts of my life that feel like they are falling apart but this feeling ruins my day

before it even starts. I can't blame Alex". Aims again chose silence. I responded to it, "I don't

have a plan to kill myself, but man I think about it. I worry that I will end up like Alex if I don't

do something". My "ten-foot-tall and bulletproof' image of myself was destroyed. Mortality had

been clarified through a handful of pills that I couldn't even pronounce. "Maybe I could have

helped… or wrote more… I didn't know… I just didn't know", I said as I began to lose my

bearing. Aims finally spoke, "Do you blame yourself"? I responded, "I feel like I am supposed

to, but I can't. I track solutions, not blame. But I am not seeing a solution". Aims responded,

"Acceptance is the end goal. It is not easy to come to terms with suicide. There is information

and groups that can help, but you have to believe that you did everything you could. Is there

anyone you can talk to"? I paused running through a list of people before responding, "I have

people I can talk to… but not about this".

Currently, this is not a day that goes by that I do not think about Alex or the other

brothers and sisters in arms I have lost. I am not as distraught as I once was. My largest support

during this time was actually graduate school. I had fellow academics that I could lean on. Even

if we never got into detail about my personal strife, they always listened in sympathized the best

they could. Many of my teachers instilled an aspect of critical academics that values activism.

This activism sometimes lessen the blow now that feel like a can advocate in proactive ways. I want to trade in my rifle for a book. Help people that feel what I felt. During my time in interpersonal communication studies, I have learned the importance of social support networks. Maybe I can help myself by helping others.

Day to Day

The sun hung low as I drove from work on the Sunday of a long weekend. I could not wait to take off my uniform physically and mentally. "I don't wanna play Army anymore", I said to my friend Christy over the phone.

"Are we going to college bars or townie bars tonight"? she asked.

"College for sure", I answered.

Christy then proclaimed, "Let's get some bros or hoes tonight"!

I followed her energy, "Both if we are lucky". The call ended and I began to think about how lucky I was to have some great new friends. Unwillingly, I thought back to Alex. "Why did I not seek help sooner," I thought to myself. The only answer I could give myself was, "too busy doing too many things." There are very few moments that one resides in one identity completely.

When I am on duty with the military I talk about the research and academics, and how we should really try to fix some of the issues we have in the unit or in the military as a whole. When I am at school, I talk about the military and how it applies to a subject of research or how it serves as an example of an academic concept. I think about how the military and the academy intersect with my sexuality offering concession and constraints. I think about where I came from and how it impacts where I am going whether I identify with it or not. Most importantly, think about the people I have interacted with along the way that have had the most profound impact on

who I am. The self is more of a shifting collection of identities and talking to people who see that makes a world of difference when the shifts occur.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Discussion

Exploring my lived experiences through my academic lens evidenced emergent themes that expand how interpersonal communication influences identity construction and development in liminality. Inherent to liminality is a feeling of uncertainty and vulnerability as well as opportunity and agency. This adds to the importance of analyzing interpersonal interactions within liminal states. Interpersonal communication during liminality can be separated into four themes specific to the interaction: support, rejection, complication, and acceptance. These narratives also support my fifth emergent theme that recontextualizes Thomassen's (2009) societal idea of constant liminality at the personal level. This theme supports that liminality is neither dyadic nor linear and sometimes perpetual. What follows is an "unpacking" of these themes with specific examples drawn from the narratives.

Liminality Support

Liminality support is the first emergent theme I have seen regarding the relationship between liminality and interpersonal communication. However, it is important to contextualize the organizational culture of the military. Johansen, Laberg, and Martinussen (2013) write about the Norwegian military in conjunction with identity. Their work still applies to the American military in the realm of military identity, warriorism, and organizational commitment. Ultimately, they positively correlate the identity of military personnel to the aspect of professionalism measured by organizational commitment. Meaning, that the military member believes in the organization's goals, will work towards those goals, and strives to remain a member. This observation is transferable to the American military. Also is important to note that

the military's use of power aligns with what Allen (2011) notes as concretive power in which the organization explicitly builds a rhetoric of identity that outlines what someone is supposed to identify with.

Liminality support can be found in all the narratives. There was support from my mom, my mentor, and friends. My mom supported my identity transition when coming out as bisexual. My friends strengthened that support as my sexuality developed through college. My mentor (Dr. Jay) supported me working through my identity conflict between the military culture and academic culture. My friends and cohort supported my identity changes in relation to suicide as I came to terms with the situation. The most notable form of liminality support came in the *Becoming a Soldier* narrative when my mom and my bunkmate supported the transition from civilian to soldier.

BCT and AIT are the first of many forms of liminality a service member will experience during their time in the armed forces. These forms are uniquely universal for all members in all branches. The is clear liminality outlined by the explicit expectation that all trainees were once civilians are becoming soldiers. This directly connects to Van Gennep's (1960) idea of the pre-liminal (civilian), liminal (trainee), and post-liminal (soldier). The trainee or liminal phase is the main area of interest. We can also look at Thomassen's (2009) types of liminality for more information on the type of liminality experienced which is a period or extended time of liminality. Although we are in a group, trainees' success in this period of liminality is largely based on individual acts. Another large supporter of my experience being liminal is the anxiety and duress outlined in my story. A lot of the fear, in this case, is created by the Drill Sergeants to strengthen resolve; however, they were not always around and there was still fear of failure, punishment, injury, or anything else that might come with the transition from civilian to soldier.

The Drill Sergeants' and AIT instructors' interactions in part create the liminality. They carry a responsibility to train new soldiers is fight a war they had been fighting for years. This is unique to America during the war on terror. They actively challenge trainees to move away from what made us who we are as civilians. The liminality also created interaction. Every trainee shared a feeling of anxiety, conflict, opportunity, and excitement. Through mutual liminality, we formed the spontaneous communitas coined by Turner (1974). This communitas brings with it support and empathy.

Liminality support is the active aiding of a person's transition during liminality. There are serval examples of this in my experience. First are my mom's supportive words. Up until I become an adult my mom was the foremost authority on what I could and could not do. The supportive words were the only support she could have given but they meant a lot to me and strengthened my resolve to become a soldier. Those words supported me reshaping my identity. The second example is the supportive words of my bunkmate. At first, we were complete strangers reassuring each other that this transition from a civilian to a soldier is possible and that we are going to do it. Mike and I might not have always believed in ourselves, but we believed in each other. A third example is the support I get from people both inside and outside the military about my choice to leave the military. This liminality support changes the experience of liminality. In an instance of uncertainty and anxiety, someone actively encouraged the liminality. The feelings of uncertainty and fear turn into feelings of empowerment and opportunity. Having a good support system during times of liminality return some agency when someone is betwixt and between social positions. This is one of the moments I moved farther from my identity as a civilian and closer to my identity as a soldier because of my mom and Mike's support. It is also important to note that not all soldiers construct their identities the same. My lived experience at

this moment has become a core structure in my identity as a soldier. Part of being a soldier is supporting other soldiers. When there is no support liminality becomes more challenging.

Liminality Rejection

To aid in contextualization, Kim et al. (2021) writes about a sort of paradox for young men coming out to their parents about being queer. Although the self-disclosure of can be a turning point that relieves much of the anxiety, it can also be a source of shame and disappointment if rejected. In my experience, I received nothing but support from my parents; my friends, however, were not as supportive because of a commonly accepted dichotomy surrounding the social identity of gay or straight. Nevertheless, liminality in this situation is still stressful and rewarding.

Coming out is rarely ever seen as more than a moment. Thomassen (2009) however identifies the coming experience as an epoch of liminality due to the constant interrogation and investigation of sexuality by outside (or mainstream) society. As in my story many people, especially non-dyadic sexualities, receive scrutiny from both sides of society. Van Gennep's (1960) pre-liminal applies in the sense that one is not "out" or open about their sexuality, and his liminal applies to the act of coming out. However, the communication surrounding "being out" requires one to remain in the liminal state due to there not being a well-integrated post-liminal queer structure. This liminality is thus continued by a lack of support from what was supposed to be a normalized communitas. Looking at Turner's (1974) idea of communitas there was no normalized communitas nor spontaneous communitas leading to an experience of outright rejection.

This second emergent theme, liminality rejection, has a large impact on the formation of identity. The rejection of someone's new identity emerges in *Becoming a Soldier* when the Drill Sergeants classify us as trainees rather than soldier despite wearing the uniform and being paid by the same government they are. Rejection is most present in the *Coming Out* and *Back to School* narrative.

In *Coming Out* the rejection of my sexual identity led to the rejection of the normalized comunitas. In college, I turn down opportunities to interact with queer supporting groups. This withdrawal, though somewhat self-inflicted, led to an increase in mental and emotional strain. Ultimately, the rejection of an attempt to move to a new social position led to stepping back into the old identity. The old identity however had undergone a less healthy change. I returned to not telling people about my sexuality and being closeted. The change was that I was now jaded about my experience. I only informed people I trust and tried to downplay how important being accepted was to me. This example does have a silver lining. Moving through liminality is not restricted by a limited number of attempts or linear progression. Now that the communitas has changed to be more accepting and I have more people supporting my sexuality I feel that I am much more open about my identity. Moving back to an old identity may be part of the process rather than a failure to change. When confronted with the second rejection by Luke in my experience I defended my identity rather than internalizing his words.

In the *Back to School* narrative my mentor and my mom rejected the idea of my not being ~~not~~ smart enough for graduate school or being some form of imposter. This does complicate the idea of liminality rejection because the rejection does not always have a negative effect or intention. This highlights the nuanced and contextualized aspects of communication within

liminality. Also, this further complicates the relationship between liminality and identity construction.

Liminality Complication

Heading et al. (2018) can be cited for contextualizing the liminality experienced by post-secondary education students. Students' liminal experience serves as an example of some of the more positive aspects of liminality. These aspects include gaining autonomy, personal growth, mental development, and new friends. They write about the rites of passage in the university reinforcing a separation between people of the university and locals of the town. Largely the transition of a student is a period of liminality (Thmassen 2009) lasting for four to six years depending on programs or degrees. Booth students and the locals have a normalized communitas (Turner 1974).

Combine Van Gennep's (1960) model for liminality with communicative interaction that college is one of the most talked-about rites of passage. The pre-liminal state of a non-degree-holding person is usually filled with conversations about when or if someone plans to go to college. Looking at the post-liminal there is usually a party with conversations about what college was like and what the future may hold. Shell et al. (2020) found that time as a student correlated to positive feelings about self and identity. This liminality can be complicated in a multiplicity of ways.

Turning to the narrative, liminality is complicated in *Becoming a Soldier*, *Coming Out*, and *Back to School.* Towards the end of *Becoming a Soldier* there is a complicated paradox between being a soldier, but not participating in the War on Terror. Becoming a warrior but not being validated through service while your combat hardened leaders endorsing the soldier

identity. In *Coming Out* a gap in the validity between being gay and being bi complicates one's ability to travers liminality. The *Back to School* narrative has the best example of liminality complication and how it adjusts liminality.

Back to School provides a prime example of interpersonal interactions that do not reject or support the transition. This emergent theme can be referred to as liminality complicating interpersonal interactions. As highlighted in my experience my friends did not reject my identity as a student nor did they support it. These comments larger diminish both the new and old identity. For those in student liminality, the process becomes complicated. The old social position becomes an inescapable title leaving one marked and contextualizing the new identity as unobtainable. This can create a large amount of intrapersonal conflict. Which later reflects in my graduate schoolwork when using my experience in an academic context. Having a mentor that supported and understood the complexity of my identity, and identity in general, led to confronting the complication without denying it. The complication comes from a lack of rejection, support, or acceptance. In this case, I was able to later come to terms with the mixed identity by referring to myself as a transplant to the town of Charleston and an EIU alma. Thus, acknowledging my life within the town, but indicating no hometown sentiment. Complicating liminality is not a bad thing. This is a good example of how liminality can be the site of opportunity. The people around me identified the two groups as locals and students. As someone who did not fit into either, I was about to negotiate a third option.

Liminality Acceptance

Mayton and Wester (2019) provide reasoning to advocate for the need to better understand the experiences of suicide loss survivors that helps contextualize this part of my study. Suicide loss survivors are the people that were close to someone that committed suicide.

The authors write about the many suicide loss survivors feeling isolated, stigmatized, and sometimes responsible for the death. Complicated forms of grief can lead to mental and physical issues.

Turning back to liminality Thomassen's (2009) of liminality connects to my experiences as a moment of liminality. Looking at Van Genep's (1960) model the pre-liminal is someone that does not know any suicide victims. The post-liminal is the suicide loss survivor. The liminal have ever is paradoxically simple and complex. The first moment of this liminality is only also long as it takes to hear or see what happened, a few seconds. However, there is the coming to terms with the death that can last a long time if not forever. Any adjusting comes after the moment and happens in conjunction with grief. This is one of the areas where military culture conflicts with the transition.

There is an explicit cultural expectation to be resilient and an implicit expectation to combat tragedy and hardship with gallows humor. During moments in liminality like this people may try to support but lack the contextual experience or education to support that transition. My reason was that no one around me knew what I went through. When people who did understand what I went through were present in my life I did not want to take them back to the pain they felt. Even in the place of normative communitas (Turner 1974) people may pull back from liminality support. This may lead to the final emergent theme of liminality accepting interpersonal communication. People have accepted the transition of the person, but they cannot or will not support the transition. The support might be present but not taken due to countless reasons. This emergent theme and supporting lived experience hopefully highlight the importance of understanding liminality from a more extreme angle. In this case, I wonder if there is a post-liminal.

There are plenty of instances of liminality acceptance that go relatively unnoticed because they are not particularly impactful. Acceptance may come in the form of tolerance, acknowledgment, or apathy. More interestingly, liminality acceptance highlights a dialectical aspect of interpersonal interactions within liminality. The individual is an integral part of the effect an interpersonal interaction has their identity construction and liminality. Meaning no two interactions or liminal states are the same. Liminality is not contained within dyadic identifies defined by old and new. Like with liminality complication there is more than two identities if a person may construct if neither old nor new are acceptable or accepted. Rather there is an infinite expanse of identities existing within a continuum of social identity and liminality.

Constant Liminality

Constant liminality can be seen in all the narratives. They are identified by the moments of shifting identities. All these narratives happened within a span or six years. There is a need communicatively to shift identity depending on the situation, time, place, and manner. Combining the need to shift between identities with need to grow in and out of identities supports the idea that liminality is a universal constant that varies in intensely and frequency.

Like in the *Day to Day* narrative, there is a swapping of identities that raises an interesting question. Is there really ever a post-liminal state? Van Gennep (1960) having coined the term defines it as the reintegration back into society with a new social position. Thomassen (2009) forwards the idea that modernity leads to a constant state of liminality within society. They argue that this is true even at the individual level. In terms of social identity under Allen's (2011) model, the construction may never finish. Who is to say that being a soldier is not just the liminal experience of a post-liminal veteran social status? How will identity change as communication surrounding topics related to liminality also change? What impact or ideas might

this angle of thought lead to? My point in these questions is to start a conversation about the intersection between interpersonal communication, liminality, autoethnography, and social identity.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. I am only one person among hundreds of thousands of National Guard Members and hundreds of millions of civilians. This fact only strengthens the idea that people have different but similar ways of communicating that impact their negation of liminality and identity. This type of research does not promote generalizability; however, I believe it is safe to say that this type of research promotes cataloging the individual's experience. This research also does not take power structures into account which would be important for future research. Ethically speaking, I have changed the names of people in the stories to ensure all potential harm of the study is limited to myself. Additionally, I must be taken at my word. I have no reason to lie about any of the experiences I share. There is no monetary, professional, or political gain attached to this study, and is conducted at my own expense. Lastly, the largest limitation is small amount of identity research that connects both communication and liminality at an interpersonal level. I would like my study to serve as an invitation to other people. Everyone experiences liminality at some point and has interpersonal interactions during that time. These lived experiences are invaluable to the study of communication. I hope to reinforce this area of interest with my own and other's future research.

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