



Careering Through Comedy: Liminal boundaries in freelance creative work

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Abstract

Comedians are well known for pushing the boundaries of taste, decency and social mores in their acts, often to hilarious effect. But professional comedians must also navigate a range of visible and invisible boundaries as their careers unfold. One of the pivotal shifts occurs with the transition from the live circuit to television. While these two domains are often seen as closely connected, live work and TV work are in fact characterized by very different rules of entry and progression. Drawing on 82 interviews with comedians and other industry players, this paper explores the risks and rewards involved in making the transition from one institutional context to another. In particular, we develop the concept of 'liminal career boundary' to explain how and why boundaries emerge in fluid, informal organizational contexts such as freelance creative work. This concept extends our understanding of organizational liminality as a state of disorientating in-betweenness, one that is partly objective (insofar as it is determined by key industry gatekeepers) and partly subjective (insofar as it is perceived by professionals who are attempting to cross a career boundary).

Keywords

career boundary, creative industries, freelance work, informal organizational contexts, liminality, stand-up comedy

Introduction

In Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* (1982), we follow the misadventures of Rupert Pupkin (Robert DeNiro), a wannabe stand-up comedian who dreams of one day making it big. Pupkin spends his time performing to imaginary audiences in his mother's basement and trying to get business meetings with talk-show host Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis). After repeatedly failing to

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land a spot on the talk-show, Pupkin kidnaps Langford with the help of an accomplice. Pupkin promises to release Langford on the condition that he is allowed to perform his comedy material on national television, a request to which the network reluctantly agrees. After the show airs, Pupkin is arrested and sentenced to prison – and becomes a celebrity in the process.

The film dramatizes a career transition that many real-world stand-up comedians experience in their working lives: the shift from live performance to TV work. Of course, most comedians manage this career boundary in a very different way to Rupert Pupkin. But it is a career boundary that is similarly fraught with both risks and rewards. In this paper, we explore how comedians navigate a range of boundaries as their careers unfold. These boundaries include negotiating with different venues on the live circuit, dealing with different comedy promoters and moving up the bill from an opening act to a headliner. However, the boundary between the live performance and TV work is a unique one insofar as it involves a shift into a new institutional context, one that involves a different set of rules and norms. In particular, the live circuit tends to follow established and relatively predictable patterns of advancement, with milestones clearly visible to those in the field; by contrast, television work operates in a far less transparent manner, where progression is frequently shaped by subjective judgments or serendipity. By examining how comedians encounter and traverse such boundaries, we aim to shed light on the broader processes of career development in freelance creative work. In particular, we contribute to two strands of the organizational literature.

First, we contribute to the study of career boundaries. Organizational research has examined the existence and functions of boundaries in different contexts (Dubois & François, 2020; Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh & Roper, 2012). However, the focus has largely been on boundaries as pre-existing structures and common passage points. What is less explored is the dynamic, latent nature of career boundaries. For example, a career boundary may be perceived as conventional until a professional attempts to traverse it and fails. At this point it is experienced as liminal – that is, the boundary suspends the usual rules and norms for progression and creates a sense of uncertainty and disorientation. This suggests that boundaries do not simply ‘exist’, obvious to all professionals; rather, boundaries appear for some but not for others on the same career path, and the same boundary may be experienced in different ways. By paying attention to the fluctuating nature of career boundaries, we gain a deeper understanding of how and why boundaries emerge and become relevant in fluid organizational contexts.

Second, we contribute to the study of liminality in organizations. Traditional anthropological approaches view liminality as a transitional phase bound by temporal and spatial confines. Recent organizational research, however, recognizes that liminality can be a more permanent state of ‘in-betweenness’ in the world of work (Bamber, Allen-Collinson & McCormack, 2017; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Söderlund & Borg, 2018). Previous studies have looked at how professionals experience liminality in a range of settings, highlighting the consequences – both positive and negative – for pursuing one’s career (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Lê & Lander, 2023). These insights are based on the understanding of liminality as rooted in unstructured and open-ended contexts (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). In comedy, the shift from live work to TV work involves moving from a loosely structured to a more tightly structured setting, yet it still triggers liminal experiences. To explain this paradox, we contend that liminality arises not only from disorienting environments or ambiguous job roles, but also from transitions between different institutional contexts.

In our analysis, we introduce the concept of ‘liminal career boundary’ to capture the (attempted) transition between two institutional contexts in informal employment settings. Unlike most career boundaries, which are often clearly defined, liminal career boundaries emerge when rules and norms are uncertain or shifting. Here, we extend Budtz-Jørgensen, Johnsen and Sørensen’s (2019) concept of ‘liminal career’, which describes the indeterminate nature of rules for progression and transition in formal organizations. We do so by examining how professionals navigate liminality in

careers defined by non-standard work arrangements, informal employment contexts and highly individualized career paths such as we find in creative sectors like stand-up comedy. This focus lets us explore how professionals forge a career in a context defined by unpredictability as much as personal agency. We argue that liminality in such settings emerges from the interrupted link between skills and progression in the shift from one institutional context to another; from the interplay between subjective and objective states; and from the role of key gatekeepers. We suggest that the study of creative careers will be enriched by considering the experiences of liminality among freelance workers, particularly during critical moments of boundary crossing.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section presents our theoretical framework, based on the literature on (a) career boundaries and (b) liminality in organizations. After stating our research question and outlining our method, we turn to the empirical material. Here, we examine how stand-up comedians perceive and pursue their careers, paying particular attention to the transition from the live circuit to television. We then conclude by presenting the concept of 'liminal career boundary', discussing its implications for refining our understanding of careers in informal organizational contexts.

Career Boundaries

Careers in the creative industries are defined by their unconventional characteristics (Hesmondhalgh, 2018; Mathieu, 2012). These are of interest not only because of the growing importance of the creative sector to society and the economy (Flew & Cunningham, 2013), but also because these industries often lead the way in developing innovative working practices (Smith & McKinlay, 2009). For example, the creative industries are characterized by non-standard work arrangements, short-term projects and flexible labour practices – trends that are becoming increasingly prevalent (Kalleberg, 2018). What is typical in the creative sector often becomes pioneering in conventional organizations outside of artistic spheres (Turrini & Chichi, 2013). And careers are no exception.

A key focus of research on creative careers has been the concept of the 'boundaryless career' (Casper & Storz, 2017), which refers to careers that span multiple employment settings instead of being confined to a single organization (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Originally coined to account for the demise of linear career paths and permanent job positions, the concept highlights the need for workers to develop new skills, cultivate professional networks and adapt to a constantly evolving job market (Arthur, 2014). Other related concepts, such as 'protean careers' (Hall, 1996), 'portfolio careers' (Mallon, 1999), 'kaleidoscope careers' (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), and 'mosaic careers' (Morris, McKinlay, & Farrell, 2023), also emphasize agency and flexibility in the way that individuals navigate career opportunities both within and between organizations.

Research on boundaryless careers has primarily focused on two areas: identifying career stages and understanding the skills and resources required for progression (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Tams & Arthur, 2010). These studies provide insight into how individuals advance through a sequence of steps and what attributes they need in order to do so. But they reveal little about the shifting, mobile boundaries that must be navigated along the way as well as the consequences for the individuals navigating them (Loacker & Śliwa, 2016). The unpredictability, or 'serendipity' (Stoyanova & Grugulis, 2012), in boundaryless careers cannot therefore be fully explained by focusing solely on typical career steps and individual capabilities.

From this perspective, the idea of the 'boundaryless career' has limited explanatory power because it overlooks the structural, institutional and social hurdles that are encountered in fluid organizational contexts (Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2019; Kinsella, Williams, Scott & Fontinha, 2022). Research reveals that professionals encounter boundaries related to class (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012), gender (Conor, Gill & Taylor, 2015), age (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013) and race

(Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013), among others. In addition, the informal nature of creative labour presents further challenges for individuals because personal and professional relationships become critical for career advancement (Alacovska, 2018, 2019; Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018). Creative workers may also feel pressure to adopt an entrepreneurial attitude and compete with others in the same industry (Loacker, 2013; Storey, Salaman & Platman, 2005). As a result, such individuals must be able to recognize and make sense of a range of boundaries – on a micro, meso and macro level – in order to secure work and build their careers (Gunz, Evans & Jalland, 2000; Jones, 2010; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Paterson, 2001; Platman, 2004). While 'boundarylessness' connotes infinite openness and potentiality, in reality it involves moving *between* and *across* extant boundaries in the field of work (Inkson et al., 2012; Zeitz, Blau & Fertig, 2009). For this reason, it is more accurate to speak of 'the transcendence and permeability of boundaries rather than [their] non-existence' (Mathieu, 2012, p.7).

The study of boundaries, especially in fluid organizational environments, has become central to career research (Dubois & François, 2020; Rodrigues, Guest, Oliveira & Alfes, 2015). Bagdadli, Solari, Usai and Grandori (2003, p.789) offer a simple definition of career boundary as the 'limits to career moves'. While this definition focuses primarily on the obstacles to career progression, it also invites consideration of *how* such obstacles impact on career progression. Boundaries, for example, can take many forms: they may be formal or informal, known or unknown, fixed or elastic (Dubois & François, 2020; Rodrigues, Guest & Budjanovcanin, 2013). Boundaries may even span different domains: some, such as occupational or organizational boundaries, are commonly shared among individuals working in the same field, while others arise from personal choices or factors unrelated to work (Eikhof, 2017; Rodrigues et al., 2015). Boundaries can also emerge in specific geographical regions (Gunz et al., 2000), labour markets (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2014) or ethnic groups (Ituma & Simpson, 2009), and they may be enforced by intermediaries in gatekeeper positions (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018; King, Burke & Pemberton, 2005). This tells us that career boundaries are complex and multidimensional; they can enable, constrain or punctuate key moments in an individual's working life in a myriad of ways (Inkson et al., 2012).

The insights above provide a rich understanding of what career boundaries are and how they function, especially in non-traditional work contexts that lack predictable paths for progression – the creative sector being an exemplary case. However, much of the existing research assumes that boundaries simply 'exist' in a given environment and are obvious to participants in a specific labour market. As a result, the focus has largely been on identifying these boundaries and determining how they help or hinder career advancement among a group of workers. This approach is static and limiting because it often equates 'boundary' with 'barrier', emphasizing how progression is blocked or impeded. What remains unexplored is how boundaries emerge – how they become visible precisely *as* boundaries – at key stages of an individual's working life. Given the inherent instability of creative careers, it is worth examining how career boundaries arise in artistic spheres and how individuals encounter, navigate and experience them. To capture these processes, we now turn to the concept of 'liminality' in order to shed light on the dynamics of boundary emergence in fluid organizational contexts.

Liminality

Initially rooted in anthropology, liminality (from the Latin *limen*, threshold) refers to a structured, transitional state between two clearly defined social categories, as articulated in Van Gennep (2019 [1960]) and Turner's (2017 [1969]) work. The idea of liminality was first proposed as a concept to understand the intermediate stage of a rite of passage, a kind of limbo into which one enters before undergoing a radical, life-altering transformation. Within the liminal space, normal rules and

customs are suspended for the duration of the transitional phase. As such, the liminal space is an 'anti-structure' (Turner, 2017 [1969]) that induces a sense of flux and disorder in those who pass through it. This conceptualization portrays liminality as a temporary, bounded phase that leads to a specific outcome, such as a new social role or a state of being. While this early view of liminality offers clarity in the context of tribal societies, it fails to fully capture the complexity of organizational life in which fragmented structures and flexible work environments create blurred boundaries and heightened uncertainty across different occupational groups (Söderlund & Borg, 2018).

Towards this end, Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) contrast the classic view of liminality – seen as a transition between two stable roles – with a more contemporary view of liminality within unstable and dynamic organizational contexts. In particular, they revise the concept as follows: the traditional 'finite, bracketed time period' is replaced by an 'open-ended, extended time period'; the 'highly institutionalized ritual guided by elders' is replaced by a 'self-guided process'; and an 'outcome [that] is always certain' is replaced by 'multiple [possible] outcomes' (2016, p. 50). In essence, Ibarra and Obodaru propose a shift from understanding liminality as a temporary, ambiguous position within a structured setting to seeing it as a fluctuating and open-ended process within a largely unstructured setting. They emphasize the need for empirical exploration of such a revised notion of liminality in order to uncover how 'new structural and cultural career categories emerge and become institutionalized' (2016, p. 60).

Liminality, from this perspective, has become a perennial theme in organizational research. Empirical studies have explored the ambiguous or intermediate experiences of consultants (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015), temporary workers (Garsten, 1999), media professionals (Tempest & Starkey, 2004), undergraduate students (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011) and corporate managers (Ellis & Ybema, 2010). Research also shows that workers in liminal settings develop new skills to manage this state of in-betweenness. For example, mobile project workers need to cultivate a set of 'liminal competencies' in order to navigate professional relationships, create trust and transfer knowledge between the different organizations for which they work (Borg & Söderlund, 2015). To this extent, individuals may embrace liminality because it provides them with a sense of freedom and autonomy (Lê & Lander, 2023).

Similarly, liminality is linked to forms of identity work in organizations (Tansley & Tietze, 2013). As a way of forming, maintaining and revising one's sense of self, identity work involves a dialogue between inner sentiments and external influences (Beech, 2011). For this reason, identity work is likely to occur most acutely during key transitions, or 'rites of passage', in a professional's working life. For example, a merger between two organizations may require an employee to reflect upon, and actively transform, their notions of professional identity (Van der Steen, 2022). Sometimes social actors make a smooth transition from one identity to another, in which case liminality will be experienced as a temporary in-between state; at other times social actors will oscillate continually between 'old' and 'new' identities in a perpetual state of liminality (Ybema, Beech & Ellis, 2011). Here, scholars propose the term 'identity play' (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016), rather than identity work, to capture the experimental, open-ended nature of identity creation in loosely institutionalized settings such as freelance work. In both cases, liminality is seen as a space in which individuals are able to reconfigure their core sense of self in new, productive ways.

But liminality may also result in negative consequences. For example, Garsten's (1999) study reveals that temporary workers' efforts to connect with colleagues in the client organization often leave them feeling conflicted and unfulfilled. Similarly, Czarniawska and Mazza's (2003) research shows that consultants must constantly oscillate between liminal and non-liminal spheres, which – because they cannot control the job's temporal demands – makes them feel frustrated and disempowered. In extreme cases, liminality can create a state of 'dead-endedness' and despair, where individuals feel trapped with no clear path forward (Bamber et al., 2017). These studies suggest

that experiences of liminality can range from manageable transitions to periods of prolonged stagnation. They highlight the range of conflicts and tensions that liminality, as a discombobulating state of 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 2017 [1969]), can provoke.

The above is reflected in the concept of 'liminal careers' (Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2019), which captures the often perplexing nature of rules for progression and transition in contemporary organizations. Directly challenging the literature on boundaryless careers, Budtz-Jørgensen et al. (2019) view careers as fundamentally liminal in the sense that boundaries are often elusive and difficult to pin down rather than non-existent. In their study of a public sector institution, the authors identify three types of boundary that are experienced as liminal: organizational, hierarchical and functional. As a result of these boundaries, employees face multiple uncertainties: about the distinction between work and private life, between managers and subordinates, and between different professional competencies – all of which are crucial for career advancement within the public sector institution. The task for organizational researchers, then, is to explore 'how employees navigate indeterminate and diffuse career boundaries' (Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2019, p.4) in an atmosphere of pervasive ambiguity.

The empirical literature sheds light on how individuals respond to and deal with liminal spaces in their professional lives on a continuing, permanent basis (Bamber et al., 2017; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015). This stands in contrast to the anthropological view of liminality, which sees it as a transitional state within strict temporal and spatial confines. Yet organizational research still assumes a relatively clear state of liminality, even when the rules and norms within this in-between zone are uncertain (Söderlund & Borg, 2018). In more fluid institutional environments, such as we find in freelance contexts, the situation is likely to be even more complex; liminal spaces may be volatile and ever-changing due to the fragmented nature of career trajectories. We therefore respond to Söderlund and Borg's (2018, p. 897) call for research on liminality that probes into the 'relationship between process and position', that is, the relationship between how individuals perceive liminal boundaries and where individuals are located in relation to those boundaries.

Indeed, the experience of liminality is closely tied to the organizational context in which it unfolds. In more structured contexts, such as the public sector in Budtz-Jørgensen et al. (2019), liminal properties may be easier to discern by individuals who encounter them. Such thresholds (however tricky to navigate) stand in stark contrast to the pre-liminal state, characterized by well-established rules of progression typically found in traditional work environments. However, research on liminal careers has largely overlooked work in contexts that are defined by extremely loose institutional structures, informal employment contexts and highly individualized career paths – the kind of conditions we find in the creative sector. This matters because non-standard working arrangements are likely to pose additional challenges for professionals who cross multiple boundaries in the course of their career. While some scholars suggest that professionals develop 'liminal competencies' (Borg & Söderlund, 2015) to navigate uncertain organizational environments, these skills may not apply in informal contexts where serendipity and chance play an outsized role. This raises the question: *How do liminal career boundaries emerge in fluid organizational environments and how do freelance creative workers attempt to cross them?*

To address this question and develop a more refined understanding of liminal careers and career boundaries, we turn to stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy is a field defined by career paths within an unstructured organizational context in which work contracts are extremely short and mostly word-of-mouth. A comedian will cross a number of career boundaries in their working life, many of which are relatively predictable. Yet, as we will see, one career boundary stands out among all the others: the boundary between live comedy and television. It has the character of a liminal space because, while it may seem to be just another career step along a linear trajectory, the boundary is in fact ambiguous and indeterminate; it induces a sense of disorientation and uncertainty among those

who encounter it. In what follows, we integrate insights from the literature on career boundaries and liminality to deepen our understanding of how freelance creative professionals experience and make sense of key transitions in their working life.

Method

This article is part of a larger research project that explores the work and careers of professional stand-up comedians in the United Kingdom. A standard definition of a stand-up comedian is '[a] single performer standing in front of an audience, talking to them with the specific intention of making them laugh' (Double, 2014, p. 4), although it may also involve musical acts, double acts and sketch troupes. Like live music, stand-up comedy takes place in venues that range from the function rooms of pubs to dedicated comedy clubs. Taken together, these comprise the 'comedy circuit'. Beyond the comedy circuit, stand-up shows are held in regional arts centres and concert halls. At this level, comedians usually tour solo, performing under their own names. Stand-up comedians typically also seek work in television and radio, although the main source of their income derives from live performance.

In the last two decades, stand-up comedy has expanded to become a viable career choice in the creative industries. Obtaining accurate industry statistics is difficult, but in 2012 – the year we started collecting our data – there were an estimated 1,370 professional stand-up comedians working in the UK (Benedictus, 2012), which does not include the vast number of amateur comedians who perform around the country at 'open mic' events. The number of professional stand-up comedians is estimated to have more than doubled over the last decade and live comedy now contributes over £1 billion to the British economy (Healy, 2024).

It is in this context that we conducted 82 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 64 full-time professional comedians; 11 amateur, semi-professional, or ex-comedians; and 7 comedy industry insiders who work in radio, television, print media and trade unions. A total of 67 of our respondents are men and 15 are women, which reflects the gender imbalance within the comedy circuit in general (Benedictus, 2012). The longest interview was two hours and fifteen minutes and the shortest was 40 minutes, with an average of one hour. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, and both authors were equally involved in data collection and data analysis. The authors also conducted non-participant observations of some of our respondents (alongside other comedians) in different venues, including four comedy nights in London and four hour-long shows at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. In this paper, we draw exclusively on our interviews with full-time professional comedians – that is, individuals who earn most or all of their income from comedy-related activities. To guarantee anonymity, all names have been changed.

We recruited participants in three main ways: (1) personal contacts; (2) snowball sampling; and (3) comedians' websites. Initially, personal connections with professional comedians were used to gather contacts for other comedians. However, this method of snowball sampling proved less effective than we expected. As a result, we contacted most participants directly via email through their professional websites. Despite being unsolicited, the response rate was surprisingly high. One limitation of this approach is that we couldn't reach 'household name' comedians since their contact information was not publicly available. Still, our sample reflected a fair cross-section of the comedy community in terms of age, experience and geographical location. All of our interviews were conducted in person, with one exception conducted on an online conferencing tool, and we spoke to respondents in a range of locations including cafes, pubs, hotel lobbies and comedy venues. Most of the interviews were conducted in London and Edinburgh, but a handful were conducted in other major cities including Glasgow, Manchester, Cardiff and Bristol.

The interviews explored the work history of comedians (Dex, 1991; Paterson, 2001). We were particularly interested in how comedians started work and developed their careers, as well as what their daily work routines look like. To analyse the data, we began by discussing each interview on a week-by-week basis, developing and refining a set of codes together. This approach is in line with the principles of ‘thematic analysis’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an approach that is aimed at identifying patterns and connections within a network of themes. This method allows flexibility in interpreting qualitative data because it does not require starting with predefined concepts. Instead, it enables themes – and subsequently theoretical constructs – to emerge from the data itself. We initially identified six main categories: ‘career development’, ‘Edinburgh Festival Fringe’, ‘role of agents, promoters and other industry actors’, ‘work and pay’, ‘learning and skills’ and ‘emotions and social life’. For this paper, we focused on the first three categories in order to explore creative careers in a fluid organizational context.

As we further explored our data, we realized that comedians experienced career boundaries in many ways, but one career boundary in particular emerged as a fraught transitional phase in which the previous norms and rules of progression no longer apply: that is, the transition from the live circuit to television. We then revisited the data related to this transition, analysing it as a liminal space, in order to examine the experiences of comedians who pass through it – and the consequences for those who fail to do so. These insights form the core analytical focus in this paper, which we will now explore in more detail.

Careers in Comedy

It is perhaps counterintuitive to think of stand-up comedians as pursuing a ‘career’ in the traditional sense. After all, comedians are – to use contemporary jargon – freelance creative workers who rely on their own wits (literally) to seek work from a range of promoters who run comedy clubs (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018). Consequently, permanent employment in comedy clubs is unheard of and written contracts are extremely rare, despite the best efforts of trade unions such as Equity’s Comedy Network. Nonetheless, comedians do conceptualize their own progression through the ranks of the live circuit and the comedy industry as a ‘career’ that can be explicitly planned and managed. Take the following examples:

I write little manifestos at the start of every year, which is just a fancy word for a list of resolutions. [Earlier this year] I wrote a plan, I wrote a ‘one to six months’, ‘six months to a year’, ‘18 months to three years’ plan. It’s just little things, like making sure I keep my joke-writing up, try to amass so many followers, perform at these festivals [. . .] The longer-term goals are to develop radio shows or produce radio shows, perform small theatre tours, ideally appear regularly in some form on television or radio. (Flynn)

I want to get exposure, increase my profile, try to get a bit more TV, see if I have an audience, get a bigger audience that would pay money to come and see me in a venue, and do a one-hour show or a two-hour show. That’s what I’m kind of working towards. (Bailey)

What Bailey and Flynn express are a series of career goals in the short, medium and long term that include finding regular work at certain comedy clubs; cultivating an audience that will come to see them on tour; and writing for and performing on radio and television. These goals serve as the compass by which the comedians set their course through the comedy industry, enabling them to recognize and act upon opportunities and advance their individual professional ambitions. In effect, such goals punctuate the key stages of what a career in comedy is expected to look like. Each step reflects a different career stage and professional status among working comedians. It is a career path that is widely understood and accepted on the comedy circuit. In other words, if they

are good at their job and continually develop their skills, comedians expect to cross one boundary after the next in a relatively predictable manner.

However, what Bailey and Flynn overlook in their accounts is the fact that one of these boundaries – the transition from the live circuit to television – appears as an in-between zone, or ambiguous threshold, that suspends the normal rules of career progression as a live performer. What's more, it is a liminal space that becomes visible only when the individual encounters it and attempts to pass through it. In the remainder of this empirical section, we outline how this liminal boundary emerges and how it is experienced by stand-up comedians in relation to the other, non-liminal boundaries in stand-up comedy.

Working the circuit

One of the notable hallmarks of stand-up comedy is that it requires no formal training; as a result, barriers to entry are virtually non-existent. This means that comedians often have a fortuitous start to their careers. Gilbert, who started performing comedy in 1997, is typical in this respect:

I used to make furniture, and then one morning on the way to work I heard an advert on the radio for a [comedy club] . . . where on a Monday night anybody could go [onstage] and have a go. So I just thought, 'Yes, I'll go down and have a go', and that is what I did . . . I wrote five minutes of material when I was going down on the bus and thought I would try my hand at it. And that's how it started.

Unlike other occupations, including those in the creative industries, aspiring comedians can start work almost immediately. What Gilbert describes is the most common route into comedy: an 'open spot', a short unpaid performance of between five and 10 minutes. This can take place either as part of an 'open mic' night comprised entirely of other unpaid amateur acts, or as part of a comedy night with more established professional comedians on the bill. Doing open spots is 'the real beginner's stage' (Seymour) in stand-up comedy since it allows fresh-faced newcomers to take to the stage without any prior instruction or proficiency: 'You do it for free, you do it on week nights, you do it to three people in a room above the pub' (Vernon). To this extent, open spots are seen as invaluable 'work experience' (Vernon) for comedians who wish to make a living on the circuit.

Whether on the open mic circuit or at open spots at professional comedy nights, comedians need to work for free – often for extended periods of time – before they can secure paid gigs. Paul describes his early years on the circuit:

I was living in [the south of England] and I'd drive up to [Manchester] to do a five- or ten-minute open spot for no money and then drive back . . . You're not only learning the job, but you're [also] seeing people up in the north who own clubs seeing you, and so you're spreading your network of business contacts, if you like, even though you're not being paid.

Unpaid open spots are essential for comedians not only to gain skills but also to develop a professional network that they will later come to rely on for paid work. This network chiefly comprises promoters who put on comedy nights in pubs or who run dedicated comedy clubs. Promoters decide when to start paying comedians, when to move them up the bill and when to allow them to play more popular or prestigious clubs. Promoters are therefore crucial for enabling progression, which at this stage tends to be relatively linear and predictable:

99.9% of the time, you get an open spot and then you get a middle spot, then after a couple of middles you get an opener – you are the first act on the bill . . . Then you'll become a regular headliner, and of course once you're a headliner you can 'double up' [i.e. perform at two clubs in one night]. (George)

What George is describing here is the typical career trajectory of a circuit comedian over several years. While all comedians begin as unpaid open spots, some may end up closing the bill as the headline act. Beyond this, comedians can earn extra income by opening at one club and closing at another (and even doing a middle spot somewhere else in between). Comedians can follow a clearly defined career path on the live circuit, provided that they ‘consistently make an audience laugh’ (Jacques). Unpaid spots, middle spots, opening, closing and doubling up therefore mark key career stages for stand-up comedians.

Most of our respondents consider stand-up comedy to be largely meritocratic. Progress, in other words, is said to be based on a combination of the comedian’s performance ability, the quality of their material and the reception they receive from an audience. As Derek says, ‘There is nobody who has become a headline comic who has got there for any reason other than the fact that they are good at what they do.’ The reason for this, Derek continues, has to do with the immediacy of live work and the demands of interactive performance: ‘The promoters who run the clubs, they’ve got one hundred, two hundred, three hundred drunk [people] on a Saturday night demanding comedy, and . . . they have to put [on] someone who is going to deliver.’ Comedians therefore feel that progression through the ranks of the live circuit is based on skills derived from hard-won experience.

Fulfilling one’s career goals at this stage is thus considered chiefly a matter of hard work and persistence. Comedians do acknowledge that progression is not entirely determined by making audiences laugh and that it also involves networking with promoters: ‘It’s 90% how well you do during your time on stage, but [also] how you conduct yourself [and] how friendly you are . . . is definitely 10% of it’ (Tiffany). Yet the perception of meritocracy remains in part because comedians see that careers progress on the live circuit according to a predictable, sequential series of steps, a ladder that advances – slowly but surely – from low status and no pay to higher status and higher pay.

Beyond the circuit

The pinnacle of career success on the live circuit is headlining, a summit that may take a decade for comedians to reach. Yet, at this stage, progression is perceived to hit a natural barrier: ‘Once you can close every club in the country, what do you do next? Just go around and do it again? What about next year, and the next year, and the next year?’ (George). As Seymour puts it: ‘Headlining clubs is the glass ceiling; you cannot get further than that unless you go into TV.’

There is therefore an upper limit to progression on the live circuit. This limit is reached when comedians manage to successfully cross the boundaries that punctuate careers on the live circuit: different promoters, different clubs, different spots on the bill. The upper limit to progression on the live circuit, the ‘glass ceiling’ that Seymour speaks of, is both an achievement and a threshold that needs to be crossed in order to redefine career success – specifically, by entering the world of television. For this reason, many comedians set their sights beyond the live circuit as part of their long-term career plan. These are the goals articulated by Bailey and Flynn at the beginning of this section: writing for and performing on radio and television.

It is almost impossible to talk about careers in comedy beyond the live circuit without discussing the importance of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (‘the Fringe’), the largest annual arts festival in the world. Unlike the live circuit, the Fringe offers the chance for comedians to showcase an hour-long show instead of 10 or 20 minutes on a shared bill. The Fringe provides comedians with an opportunity to showcase their talents to powerful players in the comedy industry, such as television producers and commissioning editors. From this perspective, the Fringe serves a dual purpose: it allows comedians to ‘advance [themselves] creatively’ at the same time as it provides an access route into ‘tellyland’ (Vernon). Jez explains:

By going to Edinburgh, you're indirectly saying, 'Can I be on your [TV] show?' You're not approaching anyone and you're not even aware of anyone existing, but by being there you're on the dance floor.

Taking a full-length show to the Fringe effectively puts comedians 'on the map' (Jacques) since they will be exposed to industry insiders. Derek emphasizes the importance of the Fringe for careers in comedy beyond the live circuit: 'Name any British comedian [and] – with the possible exception of Ricky Gervais – they've [all] come through the Edinburgh machine.' The Fringe does not offer the same immediate rewards as the live circuit – that is, performing at more prestigious clubs or appearing higher up on the bill, both of which result in better pay. Instead, by performing at the Fringe, comedians may gain 'a bit of profile' (Tiffany) among key industry players in television.

For some comedians, television is 'the gold at the end of the rainbow' (Stanley) since it may allow them to build a profile and grow their live audience. The promise of television thus holds a particular allure for comedians, which is why they return to the Fringe year after year – despite the financial costs of doing so (e.g. venue hire, publicity, accommodation). As Vernon puts it:

Comedians at the Fringe are 'on a constant election campaign . . . saying, 'Pick me! Pick me! Pick me!' [. . .] Everyone believes they're about to break, they're about to make it, and things are going to take off. There's such a constant sense of 'Here we go! Here we go! Here we go!'

Transitioning from the live circuit to television, typically via the Fringe, is a common career goal shared by many comedians. However, if advancing on the live circuit proceeds according to a relatively predictable sequence of events – racking up stage-time, honing one's comedy skills and building relationships with promoters in different clubs – then crossing the boundary to television is a far more ambiguous and uncertain process (even though, before comedians reach this threshold, it is widely perceived to be uncomplicated). The fact that many comedians manage to successfully traverse the boundary between live performance and television serves to hide the challenges involved in crossing that particular threshold. This can be frustrating for comedians who have invested years in advancing on the live circuit, moving step by step from open spot to middle spot to headliner. George comments on this experience:

You see people who . . . are on the circuit with you get their own TV shows, then you think, 'Right, after headlining, that's telly.' [But] it isn't. There isn't a queue, there isn't a ladder. It happens to some people at other times and some brilliant people never, and no-one knows how or why.

April concurs, highlighting the serendipity of her own television work:

There have been a few things that have gone my way and that is literally because I have stuck around long enough for that luck to happen; and it is quite arbitrary who decides who is funny and who isn't on TV, like TV producers who suddenly latch on to you. It's an accident, it's not anything else.

The progression of comedy careers beyond the live circuit has more to do with the whims of television producers and commissioning editors in large media organizations than with building relationships with promoters, gaining experience, honing skills or making audiences laugh. Unlike live work, television work often involves being 'tapped on the shoulder' (George) by powerful industry players.

The transition to television is not necessarily linked to seniority or experience, a realization that frustrates performers who think of comedy as a meritocracy. Gilbert acknowledges 'there is a lot of luck involved' to breaking into television, but he also suspects that career opportunities beyond

the circuit are partly influenced by 'the way that you look'. He elaborates: 'You're a handsome skinny-jeans wearing comic . . . you're half-way decent, and you're going to be scooped up and be immediately put on TV.' From this perspective, youth and appearance (rather than experience and talent) are seen as some of the key attributes required to break into television. Alongside youth, race and gender also play a role, as April observes: 'It's not meritocratic for television . . . You will note that a lot of TV, the comedians that go on are young white men.' For our respondents, the leap to television is made by temporarily suspending the rules and norms that govern career progression on the live circuit, thus acting as a liminal boundary that causes a sense of disorientation and confusion among those who encounter it.

Crossing the liminal boundary?

It is hardly surprising that, in this febrile climate with potentially lucrative rewards on offer, some comedians feel their careers have stalled if they are still working on the live circuit after a certain period of time. Jez reflects on his own career trajectory. He began as a stand-up in the early 1990s and started to appear on high-profile TV shows in the mid-1990s as a direct result of a successful year at the Fringe:

I was 27 years old and doing comedy for four years and suddenly I'm on panel shows going out to four or five million viewers and live television and being flown around the world to do festivals and things. It was very exciting but quite scary . . . I didn't have the maturity at 27 to realize that options could come at another time . . . I have made a living for 17 years, so there's no bitterness. But . . . there's this thing of, 'How come [Jez] is not more well known? How come [Jez] is not a bigger name?'

While Jez feels content being 'a big fish in a small pond' – that is, a well-seasoned professional comedian who is able to headline the biggest clubs on the circuit – he still feels damaged by the experience: 'My ego got a bit dented by it all. You know, I picked up a microphone and the world went mad and then the world stopped going mad and I was still holding a microphone.' This leaves Jez in a career situation where, as he puts it, 'I'm not on the way up, I'm not on the way down . . . what I am is a bloke who had a bite at the cherry and dribbled it out.'

What is striking here is how reaching the highest level on the live circuit is reframed as a kind of failure. The threshold between the live circuit and television is not a linear or straightforward one, and comedians are not guaranteed to traverse it. For some, making the transition into television can be a smooth process. For others, it can be a challenging obstacle – or a boundary that can be partially crossed once and never crossed again.

This sense of disappointment is echoed by other comedians who earn their living from the circuit, but who do not regularly appear on radio or television. Brianna, who turned professional more than a decade ago, expresses frustration that she is still a jobbing comedian after so many years in the business. As she puts it, she is 'just making a living doing the circuit . . . nobody knows who the fuck I am, basically. I've got zero profile, and I've been going too long for me to suddenly make it' (Brianna) – by which she means to break into television. Seymour has been a professional comedian for eight years and finds himself in a similar position: 'I'm not new enough to be a brand-new thing that is exciting and I'm not quite experienced enough to be a headliner as a big act, so it's a real middle level at the moment. I need to come up with something.' It is this elusive 'something', usually some kind of television breakthrough, that many comedians are searching for even as they continue to perform on the live circuit.

It appears, then, that the transition to television can occur only relatively early in one's career. If it happens at all, the leap to television usually takes place when a comedian is still fairly young – and

not necessarily at the pinnacle of their live circuit career. This uncomfortable truth (which may only be experienced years into a career in stand-up comedy) conflicts with comedians' expectations of progression based on experience and seniority.

It is this realization that leads George to note wryly that 'you spend all this time trying to get on the circuit and then you want to get off it'. The irony of this fact is not lost on Andrew, an established comedian with 20 years of experience, who dedicated his career to becoming a regular headliner at the top clubs in the country instead of going to the Fringe with a solo show every year:

It's incredible how invisible you are as a good headline-level circuit comic. You could keep doing that for the rest of your life and it makes no difference at all – you have to be either on telly or be seen to be on tour. [. . .] Twenty years on the comedy circuit has absolutely achieved nothing from the public perspective of who I am in comedy . . . It's quite bleak to realize that you've gone round and round and round. (Andrew)

It is telling that, for Andrew, 'getting really good' is seen as a meagre reward compared to other acts with higher profiles who appear regularly on television. This suggests that opportunities to move beyond the live circuit (however arbitrary or capricious in nature) effectively change the meaning of being a 'successful comedian'. Subjectively, success is experienced as being 'visible' – that is, public exposure via television appearances and solo tours. Indeed, Vernon says he would prefer to do another job altogether than have a career in comedy solely on the live circuit:

In ten years' time, what I'd like is to have maybe my own radio sitcom [or] TV sitcom . . . and also be spending six months of the year touring with new shows . . . If I don't do that, I'll probably back down and go and do something else, go and live in the country and be a teacher or something. If I'm still just doing the same types of gigs ten years on, I'll be quite disappointed.

These narratives tell us that the liminal boundary that marks the threshold from the live circuit to television is one that serves to redefine the very notion of career success for comedians who, up until that point, had been progressing according to relatively linear patterns of advancement. Whether or not comedians manage to traverse the liminal boundary, the norms and rules that have shaped their career trajectory are momentarily put on hold as they attempt to navigate the transition from one stage to another. The feeling of dislocation that such liminality produces is felt especially by those who cross the boundary only temporarily (like Jez), by those who try yet fail to cross the boundary (like Brianna, Vernon and George) and by those who realize that the boundary exists only when it is too late to cross it (like Andrew).

In the discussion section, we reflect on the implications of liminal boundaries for understanding careers in fluid organizational settings, such as we find in the creative industries.

Discussion

Our empirical material echoes existing literature that emphasizes the importance of boundaries in contemporary careers (Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2019; Inkson et al., 2012). However, our research reveals a new dimension of boundary crossing among freelance creative workers. A liminal career boundary arises in the transitional space where comedians move between distinct institutional settings, a zone of uncertainty in which the link between skills and progression unexpectedly loosens. There are several conclusions to draw from our empirical findings in terms of how we theorize career boundaries and liminality in the organizational literature.

Career boundaries

First, our analysis shows the dynamic nature of career boundaries and, in particular, reveals how they can emerge or fade over time. Boundaries may exist latently and become evident only when professionals encounter difficulties in advancing despite their hard-won skills and previous levels of success. For our respondents, most boundaries on the live circuit are visible and relatively easy to navigate: these are non-liminal boundaries. Such boundaries include finding work at different venues, dealing with different promoters and moving up the bill. The transition from the live circuit to television, however, is a more complicated boundary to traverse. At first glance it seems to be a career boundary like any other, just another step on the career ladder in the comedy industry. Yet, once comedians encounter this particular boundary, they realize that the transition in fact relies on an entirely different set of rules and norms. The problem for comedians is that they may not understand or be equipped to navigate these rules and norms successfully. Comedians typically assume that a career in comedy is meritocratic (for a critique, see Jeffries, 2017). However, rather than skill or experience, other factors – such as luck, age, gender and ethnic background – play a determining role in whether or not comedians cross over into ‘tellyland’ (Vernon). It is a career boundary, in other words, that bears the hallmarks of liminality. We can therefore add to the existing understanding of career boundaries through the concept of ‘liminal career boundary’.

The concept of ‘liminal career boundary’ helps us to grasp a unique type of career boundary in informal employment contexts such as comedy. Such a boundary may be invisible or only partly visible until professionals encounter it directly. From a distance, a liminal boundary can resemble a typical, or non-liminal, career boundary, one that can seemingly be crossed by following the established rules of progression within an industry. When a professional reaches the liminal boundary, however, it reveals itself as a threshold to a different institutional context altogether – a context that causes a profound shift in expectations and ambitions. This boundary is experienced as liminal not only because it creates uncertainty but also because it reframes fundamental career categories, such as the nature of career success, for those who encounter the boundary (regardless of whether or not they ultimately cross it). This is seen in our empirical material when Andrew says that he is just ‘going round and round and round’ in his career despite reaching the pinnacle of the live circuit, or when Brianna says that she has ‘zero profile’ despite making a living as a full-time comedian for over a decade. A liminal career boundary therefore transforms those who attempt to traverse it, for good or for ill.

Second, our analysis demonstrates that liminal career boundaries are multifaceted in nature and, as a result, will be experienced in a number of ways by professionals. Inkson et al. (2012) suggest that career boundaries serve three main functions: they enable, constrain or punctuate professionals’ working lives. As we have seen, the liminal boundary in stand-up comedy performs all three functions: it can *enable* the transition to television for those who cross it; it can *constrain* progression beyond the live circuit for those who don’t; and it can *punctuate* comedians’ careers on the live circuit for those who build their career goals around it. This tells us that a single boundary may in fact serve several functions, depending on who encounters it and at what stage they are in their career. For example, some, like Flynn and Bailey, see the transition from the live circuit to television as a milestone in their careers, a goal to aspire to like any other (*punctuating*). Others, like Seymour and Andrew, view this same boundary as a barrier to advancement, an obstacle they may never overcome (*constraining*).

For those who successfully transition from the live circuit to television (such as the ‘young white men’ Brianna mentions or the ‘skinny-jeans wearing comics’ that Gilbert refers to), the boundary is likely to be seen as just another step on the ladder in the comedy industry rather than a liminal space. So, the career boundary reveals itself as a liminal space only in cases of failure or

struggle; if crossed smoothly, it may go unnoticed or function as a boundary that supports career progression (*enabling*). When such transitions do occur, the liminal aspect of the boundary may remain latent or hidden. But when attempted transitions stutter or stumble, the boundary's 'in-betweenness' becomes painfully visible.

Importantly, a liminal career boundary redefines core career elements, such as 'entry' and 'progression'. These elements tend to be treated as taken for granted in the organizational literature, even in research that explores freelance or contract-based work (e.g. Morris et al., 2023; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006). As our respondents note, the live circuit has virtually no barriers to entry; almost anyone can 'have a go' (Gilbert) at stand-up comedy and perform onstage at an open mic night. Progression, here, consists of playing different spots on the bill over a period of years until one becomes a regular headliner around the country – the benchmark of career success on the live circuit. The move into television, however, is both a progression in one's career and an entry into a new institutional context, one that follows different rules and norms. Depending on whether or not one crosses the boundary, the shift from the live circuit to television will be seen either as the next logical step in one's career (i.e. progression) or as an insurmountable barrier that structurally positions an experienced comedian at the entry stage. From this perspective, the established vocabulary for understanding careers ought to be used with caution; the very categories that allow us to make sense of careers (e.g. entry, progression) are themselves unstable within the context of a liminal boundary.

The concept of liminal boundary also refines the notion of 'serendipity' in careers. Creative careers are commonly said to involve a high degree of variability and serendipity, which refers to unforeseen opportunities or hurdles in one's working life (Stoyanova & Grugulis, 2012). There is a strong element of chance and randomness in comedy careers, particularly in the transition from the live circuit to television, which leads our respondents to characterize liminal boundary crossing as an 'accident' (April) that happens to some but not to others. Our study, however, shows that serendipity is not just the perception of luck or happenstance in a professional's career. Instead, serendipity is a state of uncertainty that occurs when a professional encounters a liminal career boundary and when the established rules and norms within a particular institutional environment are suspended. On the live circuit, comedians are accustomed to a system of graduated progression, where career advancement is tied to structural positions (such as a spot on the bill) and the steady development of skills, all rooted in live performance. By contrast, the rapid success facilitated by TV work is perceived as perplexing and unfair, viewed as a 'serendipitous' leap rather than a merit-based achievement. Reframed in this way, serendipity is the outcome of a specific (liminal) career boundary rather than a generalized condition within freelance creative work.

The concept of liminal boundary thus advances our understanding of how careers unfold within unstructured organizational contexts. But the question remains: how does liminality emerge within the context of stand-up comedy?

Liminality

In our empirical material, we identify three characteristics that give rise to liminality in stand-up comedy careers. First, liminality stems from an interrupted link between skills and progression in the shift from one institutional context to another. Unlike the live circuit, where career moves are relatively predictable due to the close association between skills and progression, the transition to television is not solely dependent on experience or ability. This is because fast-tracking, based on other factors including age and gender, is common. Paradoxically, while liminality in organization studies is often connected to ambiguous job roles (Dille, 2023; Reed & Thomas, 2021), what we see in the comedy industry is the reverse. On the live circuit, the organizational context is largely fluid and loosely structured (e.g. multiple employers, casual employment) yet

the boundaries are experienced by comedians as non-liminal. In television, by contrast, the organizational context is more stable and tightly structured (e.g. large media companies, formal contracts) yet the transition to TV work is experienced by comedians as liminal. The paradox can be explained due to the different rules for entry and advancement in each context: on the live circuit the rules are widely known and commonly understood whereas in television the rules are far less transparent and more erratic. Liminality arises when comedians attempt to cross over from one institutional context to another without realizing – or realizing only too late – that the rules for entry and advancement no longer apply.

Second, liminality emerges from the interplay between subjective and objective states (Barley, 1989; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). In organization studies, research often focuses on how liminality generates both positive and negative emotions for those experiencing it (Lê & Lander, 2023). These emotional states are particularly evident in situations where professionals find themselves in a state of ‘permanent liminality’ (Bamber et al., 2017) and feel like they belong in neither one job role nor the other. Our research adds further nuance to the literature by showing how a liminal career boundary can alter professionals’ perceptions of their own career trajectory up until that point. In the pre-liminal phase, comedians might feel they are on the verge of a breakthrough, believing they are close to ‘making it’ (Vernon), by headlining gigs and performing at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. In the liminal phase, however, they see their career development in a different light: if they fail to transition into television, they may feel stuck, ‘not on the way up [and] not on the way down’ (Jez) but suspended somewhere in-between. This reveals a disconnect between subjective and objective states. Objectively, comedians continue to succeed as live performers and yet, subjectively, they feel a sense of disappointment or failure for having not crossed over. One explanation for this disconnect is that work-related liminality does not always involve a finite, transitional period. Turner’s (2017 [1969]) anthropological model suggests that one must leave behind a pre-liminal state and cross over the liminal threshold to arrive at a post-liminal state. By contrast, comedians are not compelled to give up live work to make the transition to television. This ability to remain in, or return to, the pre-liminal phase thus reshapes how freelance creative professionals understand and relate to their career trajectories.

Third, intermediaries and gatekeepers amplify liminal experiences. In anthropological studies of liminality, transitions are typically supported by elders or the wider community (Turner, 2017 [1969]). In modern career contexts, however, transitions are usually individually navigated and self-driven. Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) mention third parties in relation to offering (or withholding) support during career transitions, but, in comedy, these intermediaries (such as television producers and commissioning editors) shape liminal boundaries in important ways. For comedians transitioning into television, success often hinges on the influence of these powerful gatekeepers. The problem is that these gatekeepers are not readily available to comedians because they inhabit a different institutional context, beyond the live circuit. Comedians are left waiting to be ‘tapped on the shoulder’ (George) by industry insiders, a situation that stands in stark contrast to the agency they exercise on the live circuit. In other words, active relationship building with promoters – the main way to find work and advance on the live circuit (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018) – does not permit comedians to cross over into TV work. Key decision-makers play an outsized role in discovering talent in the world of television in a way that is profoundly alien to the experiences of comedians on the live circuit. Put simply, such gatekeepers intensify the feelings of disorientation among comedians at the threshold between the live circuit and television.

In this setting, individual agency is less effective in ensuring career transitions than some have suggested (Arthur, 2014; Tams & Arthur, 2010). Our findings echo the scepticism of Rodrigues and Guest (2010) and Rodrigues et al. (2013) regarding the ability of professionals to exert agency over their career in a supposedly ‘boundaryless’ context. As we have seen, individuals are not wholly

independent of the structural conditions they work under, and intermediaries can both enable career boundary crossing or reinforce career barriers. Our findings add further nuance to this critical perspective on careers. Comedians are free to exercise a degree of agency in moving across some career boundaries, such as those that demarcate one gig from another or one promoter from another. Yet comedians have less agency in traversing the liminal career boundary between the live circuit and television. This implies that agency is operational in some boundaries more than others, a finding that may resonate with other careers in the creative sector and beyond.

In sum, this paper shows a new appreciation of career boundaries from a liminal perspective. The boundaries that professionals attempt to cross, especially in less formalized settings, are not necessarily permanent in nature or durable over time but may, in fact, appear at some points and disappear at others. Some boundaries may be straightforward for some to traverse whereas others – especially those at the intersection between two institutional contexts – may be difficult or impossible for others to cross. Crucially, liminality is not simply a temporary, finite passage from one state to another; but neither is it always a permanent condition that shapes the experience of work within a particular employment context (Bamber et al., 2017). Rather, liminality is experienced in multiple ways by professionals, creating opportunities for some and thwarting progress for others, and reframing how individuals understand their own working lives and career trajectories. The study of careers would therefore benefit from taking into account the different experiences of liminality among freelance workers, especially at key moments of boundary crossing.

Conclusions

In this paper, we examined career transitions within informal organizational contexts and showed how (liminal) boundaries emerge and how freelance creative workers experience them. Previous research in the careers literature has explored liminality in relation to traditional organizational settings (Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2019). We extended these insights by examining liminality in an unstructured organizational setting, or rather, at the threshold of unstructured (e.g. comedy clubs) and structured organizational settings (e.g. production companies, media organizations). Career boundaries – and crossing them – play a central role in this context. Yet not all such boundaries are visible in the same way. Some boundaries are straightforward to navigate according to known rules and norms, while other boundaries are more complicated to traverse. As a result, professionals will experience certain boundaries as liminal spaces that generate a feeling of uncertainty and disorientation. Our study underscores the value of combining insights on career boundaries and liminality within organization studies in order to refine our understanding of how freelance careers play out in the creative sector.

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