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Identity Transitions:  
Possible Selves, Liminality and the  
Dynamics of Voluntary Career Change

**IDENTITY TRANSITIONS:  
POSSIBLE SELVES, LIMINALITY AND THE DYNAMICS OF  
VOLUNTARY CAREER CHANGE**

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## ABSTRACT

This article develops a model of *identity transition* in voluntary career change. Identity transition is the process of disengaging from a central, behaviorally-anchored identity while exploring new possible selves, and eventually, integrating an alternative identity. The article discerns limitations of existing perspectives on identity change with respect to non-institutionalized passages and offers a new model based on ideas about the evolution of possible selves. The model proposes that people elaborate possible selves continually by modifying their activities and relationships and making sense of life events. These elaboration processes vary by transition stages, as possible selves evolve from mental images to socially grounded, enduring identities. Early explorations alter established identity commitments, giving rise to a middle, liminal period in which possible selves are selected for provisional trial and conflict between old and new identities heightens. Tentative selves develop buffered from the rules and obligations that govern better established identities until people gain enough experience to retain or reject alternatives; transition narratives help people integrate retained identities and claim them successfully across social settings. Implications of this model for research on identity and career dynamics are drawn.

## IDENTITY TRANSITIONS:

### POSSIBLE SELVES, LIMINALITY & THE DYNAMICS OF CAREER CHANGE

Our work identities situate us by providing an answer, albeit provisional, to the question “Who am I?” As researchers continue to document changes in the employment contract, the rise of boundaryless careers, and, consequently, the increased likelihood of career change over the life-course (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), understanding identity transitions becomes increasingly important. While calls for tackling the inherent multiplicity and dynamism of identity and identity processes have multiplied (e.g., Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000), how work-related identities evolve in the absence of externally-imposed role changes remains largely understudied and poorly understood.

The idea of identity as multiple, relatively fluid and frequently unstable, is especially pertinent for the study of career dynamics. Because people have multiple identities, and these can change significantly in the course of a lifetime, any theory of career dynamics must necessarily encompass the notion of identity transition. Yet, most existing empirical and conceptual work on careers concerns early socialization and institutionalized status passages such as entry (Louis, 1980b), promotion (Hill, 1992; Ibarra, 1999), and transfer (Beyer and Hannah, 2002), processes in which shifts in identity are clearly linked to changes in the position the individual occupies in the social structure, and concomitant changes in the expectations of, and exchanges with, those with whom the person interacts in performing the new role. With some notable exceptions (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003a),

scant empirical research has investigated the non-institutionalized career changes that tend to occur later in a person's career.<sup>1</sup> As a result, several theoretical issues pertaining to identity transition as a process remain undeveloped, particularly the mechanisms by which people develop alternatives to those identities from which they wish to disengage, and the dynamics of transition when status passages are not formally demarcated.

The purpose of this article is to identify crucial gaps in our current thinking on identity transition and to develop a perspective on the mechanisms and dynamics by which work identities evolve and, eventually, change in some fundamental way. I use the term *work identity* to refer to a person's work-related self-definition, i.e., the attributes, groups, roles and professional/occupational experiences by which people define themselves in a work role (Schein, 1978). While people have many, frequently mutating identities, some are more central to a person's overall self-definition, and are more deeply embedded in his or her daily life, while others are only relevant in specific contexts and situations (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Stryker and Serpe, 1982). Central identities, such as work identities, are characterized by a greater degree of intensity: the degree of effort expended in the role and integration between self and role (Ebaugh, 1988).<sup>2</sup> I use the term *identity*

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<sup>1</sup> One exception is a stream of adult development research concerned with the mid-life transition, during which many adults typically consider making a career change (Osherton, 1980; Levinson, 1981; Sheehy, 1974). This work, however, focuses on the timing of changes relative to the adult life cycle and the relationship between changes in work and personal spheres, rather than on how and why work-related self-conceptions change.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes (1958) argued that people have one or a few "master statuses" around which we organize our self identity and by which we are primarily known in society. Master statuses include sex, family and occupational roles. Master statuses help prioritize and integrate our other roles, in such a way as to prevent role conflict and overload.

*transition* to refer to the process of questioning, and eventually disengaging from, a central identity while exploring, and eventually integrating another. Identity transitions usually accompany, but are different from, *career change*, defined as any major change in work-role requirements or context (Nicholson, 1984; Brett, 1984).

The article situates itself within a small but burgeoning stream of literature that links role transitions and identity processes (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 1999, 2003a). It builds on several of the key insights that have emerged from this literature, notably the notion that people make transitions by publicly experimenting with provisional selves that serve as trials for possible, but not yet fully elaborated, professional identities (Ibarra, 1999) and actively engage in identity work to claim, revise, and manage the boundaries demarcating their various identities (Ashforth et al., 2000; Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufman, 2006). It advances this literature by explicitly differentiating the identity work of non-institutionalized transitions from the well-known processes associated with more routine or organized passages, and by combining emerging ideas about how possible selves are elaborated with existing notions of transition stages to illuminate the identity dynamics that fuel non-institutionalized or voluntary transitions from beginning to end.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section briefly reviews the literature to pinpoint key gaps in existing knowledge about non-institutionalized career change and identity work. The second section proposes a new model based on ideas about the evolution of possible selves by transition stages, paying particular theoretical attention to the dynamics of a relatively ignored middle, or liminal, period. The discussion offers

directions for research and theoretical development on identity transition; it also suggests how ideas about identity transition can inform the existing literature on career dynamics and identity processes.

## **PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

### **Career Socialization & Work-role Transition**

Career change has been studied and conceptualized as both outcome and process. Frameworks focusing on the outcomes of career transition provide concepts that describe the magnitude or novelty of the change from one role to the other, such as the number and intensity of changes involved in any given career transition (Hall, 1976) or the degree to which the role permits the exercise of prior knowledge, practiced skills and established habits (Louis, 1980a; Nicholson and West, 1989). Frameworks focusing on the transition process identify the phases of change, with most models based on Van Gennep's (1960) separation-transition-incorporation cycle (see Ashforth, 2001 and Barley, 1989 for reviews). Although causes of career change are beyond the scope of this article, most scholars concur that a combination of push (e.g., job dissatisfaction, reduced prospects) and pull forces (e.g., appealing alternatives) (Ashforth, 2001; Lee and Mitchell, 1994) produces change.

By definition, career change processes are not institutionalized, as they do not form part of an established occupational ladder or organizationally planned career path, and

socialization processes are disjunctive, i.e., newcomers are not following in the footsteps of immediate or recent predecessors in their current organization or occupation (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Often, these are not just inter-firm but inter-sector transitions, for example, when a litigator leaves law to run a non-profit organization, a corporate employee starts his or her own business, a government official enters private industry or a consultant becomes a movie producer. The magnitude or novelty of the outcome, therefore, is not a variable but a defining feature of the phenomenon. While the initial impetus for career change may be voluntary or involuntary, the present model focuses on voluntary transitions, in which the eventual career changes are desired or sought out by the individual.

There is consensus in the literature that identity changes accompany major work role changes (Becker and Carper, 1956; Hall, 1976; Strauss, 1977).<sup>3</sup> But, since most existing work presumes institutionalized passages (e.g., Louis, 1980a; Nicholson, 1984; Schein, 1978), well-established identity change dynamics and mechanisms (e.g., on-the-job interaction and gradual informal inclusion), with the exception of anticipatory socialization, are premised on and follow an actual role change. Even in cases of variable socialization, in which cues about when to expect a boundary passage are unclear (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) and informal role changes precede the formal transition (Ibarra, 1999), the literature assumes that visible role models are present to suggest

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<sup>3</sup> This fundamental modification in a person's self-conception is due to changes in the position the individual occupies in the social structure as well as changes in the expectations of, and exchanges among, those with whom the person interacts; when structures and expectations undergo dramatic shifts, the people embedded within them must change internally to maintain or regain a sense of personal identity (Becker and Carper, 1956; Strauss, 1977).



possible selves and the destination is known *ex ante*. In non-institutionalized career change, in contrast, there is no clear or easily identifiable next position to assume or obvious role model to emulate, and separation is neither formally mandated nor socially celebrated. Other mechanisms, therefore, are needed to explain the evolution of identity that necessarily precedes voluntary career change.

The existing emphasis on institutionalized career change has also resulted in a gap in our understanding of what occurs in the middle, or “transition” stage of the change process. This phase is mostly treated as a liminal state in between institutionally demarcated endings and beginnings in which the person lacks a clear role identity (Ashforth, 2001; Trice and Morand, 1989; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Evidence from reports of voluntary transitions, however, suggests that liminal states also arise as people develop competing commitments to, and investments in, two or more seemingly incompatible futures (Ibarra, 2003a; Osherton, 1980). How the resulting identity conflicts are managed and potentially resolved has not been investigated.

Finally, institutionalized career changes – promotions, retirements, etc. – require little if any explanation as they are part of an accepted social order. Voluntary career change, by contrast, typically requires justification to both self and others (Ashforth, 2000). One of the reasons people experience liminality as a time of confusion, insecurity, or uncertainty is that they feel they have lost the narrative thread of their life (Ibarra, 2003a). Since making a career change often depends on externalities such as a job offer or project financing, compelling accounts are particularly important for closing the cycle of voluntary

change. Although Ebaugh (1988) documents how turning points help people make and explain role exits, the role of accounts, narratives and other rhetorical devices in creating meaning and negotiating identities has been virtually ignored in current work on career transition. More insight is needed into the means by which people incorporate impending changes into a newly revised self-concept and obtain its validation from relevant parties, absent an institutionalized role passage such as a promotion or transfer.

### **Identity work**

Identity refers to the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others (Gecas, 1982). These meanings or self-conceptions, are based on the social roles and group memberships a person holds (social identities) as well as the personal and character traits they display, and others attribute to them, based on their conduct (personal identities), (Ashforth, 2001; Gecas, 1982). As such, the self-concept consists of multiple identities that vary along dimensions including their centrality or importance to the individual, whether they reflect actual or potential achievement, and their temporal orientation (i.e., their past, present, or future), (Markus and Wurf, 1987). There is shared agreement that these multiple, mutable identities are socially constructed and negotiated (Baumeister, 1998; Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) but coexist within a self that has some degree of continuity across time and situation (Baumeister, 1998; Breakwell, 1986).

Despite a growing interest in identity processes in organizations, researchers still know little about how work identities change. Recent scholarship defines identity work as

people's engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising their identities (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Svenigsson and Alvesson, 2003), including the joint effort "by self (in claiming) and 'other' (in granting)" that creates, presents or sustains those identities (Bartel and Dutton 2001:120). This line of thinking provides insights into how individuals cope with multiple, conflicting, and/or ambiguous identities (Ashforth, et al. 2000; Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Elsbach, 1999; Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Svenginsson & Alvesson, 2003) and adapt role identities to better fit their sense of self (Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006; Van Maanen, 1997). The studies clarify how people tailor or manage conflicts among their various role identities, but they assume these identities as given, shedding little light on how a changing sense of self might lead a person to abandon tailoring or boundary management efforts in order to, instead, explore alternative careers and possible selves.

Finally, an obvious gap in both the role transition and identity work literature is that few empirical studies or conceptual treatments consider identity loss and gain processes jointly. By concentrating her analysis on how people shed roles they no longer want, Ebaugh (1988) leaves open many questions about change processes motivated by identity accumulation. Since additive and subtractive change processes involve inherently different dynamics (Albert, 1992), generalizing from studies of role entry or role exit to career change processes that involve both simultaneously may be misleading; and, by the same token, existing ideas about conflict management strategies (e.g., Ashforth, et al., 2001) may not fully explicate processes in which people must eventually choose among

alternative futures. In the next section, I propose a new perspective to fill these gaps in our knowledge about identity transition in voluntary career change.

### **A MODEL OF IDENTITY TRANSITION**

This article argues that identity transitions are fueled by alterations in a person's set of possible selves -- the images one has about who one might become, would like to become, should become, or fears becoming in the future (Markus and Nurius, 1986) -- such that discrepancies between present work identities and aspirations for the future widen over time. The sections below outline the means by which possible selves are created, embellished and adjusted, and propose a model of how they evolve from loosely articulated images to socially grounded realities over the transition cycle.

A conception of identity anchored in future possibilities rather than current role identities is important for the study of voluntary career change for several reasons. First, possible selves serve as motives or incentives for career change because people strive to become who they would like to be (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Second, these images of desired and feared future selves act as perceptual screens, shaping one's interpretations of, and responses to, unfolding opportunities or constraints. The impact of any objectively defined "push" and "pull" factors on career change (Lee and Mitchell, 1994), therefore, is mediated by their effects on a personalized sense of future possibility as well as the meanings attached to those possibilities. Third, one's hopes and desires for the future provide an interpretive and evaluative context for current identities. While discrepancies

between what people do and their sense of who they are lead people to customize their work identities (Pratt, et al., 2006), discrepancies between present work identities and aspirations for the future may lead people to change them altogether.

Defining identity as possible selves is particularly important when investigating contexts in which attaining a desired future is predicated on abandoning the trajectory associated with a current identity. In the realm of careers, while some people simply accumulate work identities (e.g., I am a business consultant by day, actor by night), others may have to forgo a current role identity and its associated trajectory in order to assume a new one (e.g., I left a career as consultant to create a business using theatre in business events), and yet others make a clear distinction between what they do today and what they hope for the future (e.g., I am aspiring actor who still needs a ‘day job’ as a consultant to make a living). In each of these examples, a notion of oneself in the future is necessary to understand both the person’s current self-definition and their behavior.

### **Elaborating Possible Selves**

Markus and Nurius (1986) argue that possible selves are particularly sensitive to situations that communicate new or inconsistent information about the self. But, people may respond to their possible selves with inaction, as when possible selves remain fantasies; with active rejection; or with incorporation of the possible self into a revised self-concept (Schoute, 1991); we lack empirical or conceptual guidance, however, with regard to the elaboration mechanisms that necessarily precede rejection or incorporation.

Building on a diverse array of literature, the sections below argue that people elaborate possible selves as they modify their activities and relationships, and interpret life events through the lens of changing possibilities; the more fully possible selves are elaborated, the more they motivate change (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Schouten, 1991).

**Work Activities.** The saying “you are what you do” encapsulates the importance of work activities to a person’s sense of self. In most occupations “becoming” is a matter of learning by doing: apprentices learn a new craft by becoming active participants in the practices of a social community rather than by assimilating an abstract body of knowledge (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1991). What people do at work – what assignments or projects they take on, for example – is therefore an important means by which they both claim membership and change their work identities (Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001).

As people’s primary work activities change, these may come to challenge not only their sense of who they are (e.g., Pratt et al., 2006) but also who they want to become. Ibarra (2003a), for example, describes how new assignments and organizational changes can create disenchantment with anticipated career paths. Alternatively, extra-curricular activities (e.g., moonlighting, freelance or consulting work, volunteer work and courses) and ephemeral roles<sup>4</sup> that engage a person in a different type of activity, if only peripherally, frequently precede a more permanent shift to a different career (Ebaugh,

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<sup>4</sup> Zurcher (1970:174) defines an ephemeral role as “a temporary or ancillary position-related behaviour pattern chosen by the enactor to satisfy social psychological needs incompletely satisfied by the more dominant and lasting role he or she must enact in everyday life positions.”

1988; Kunda, Barley and Evans, 2002; Ibarra, 2003a; Stuart and Ding, 2003; Zurcher, 1970). Entrepreneurs often spend years building their business on the side, while maintaining salary employment until the new enterprise becomes viable (Hoang and Gimeno, 2003; Moore and Buttner, 1997). Similarly, Ebaugh (1988) found that one fourth of those who changed careers began retraining while in their old jobs, in several cases going to back school part time or working in the new area on the side as a personal interest or hobby. A typical example was an ex-astronaut: “About ten years earlier, he had begun investing in real estate, a venture which mushroomed over the years to the point that he realized he was spending more time and effort as an investor than in his career.” (1988:96).

The mechanisms underlying the effects of work activities on identity are experiential learning (Bandura, 1977) and self-perception (Bem, 1972). Extra-curricular activities and ephemeral roles (Zurcher, 1970; Ashforth, 2001) allow people to learn about options, test unfamiliar waters and accumulate experience as peripheral but legitimate entrants to a new sphere without leaving the safety of their current jobs. Because important differences between old and new roles may be unforeseeable, experience in a new role, and of oneself in that role, is necessary in order to assess its appeal (Louis, 1980a). Experiential learning is critical because self-knowledge cannot be obtained directly: rather it must be inferred or deduced as the self observes itself in the act of doing (Baumeister, 1998); once people begin to act a certain way, they gradually come to see themselves as the kind of person who acts that way (Bem, 1972).

As the appeal and feasibility of new possible selves increase, discretionary activity in the old sphere typically erodes (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003a). Extra-role behaviors, such as mentoring, volunteering for committees or task forces, and socializing outside work are important ways of asserting one's work identity. The increasing time and energy accorded to alternative activities sets off a gradual process of "mutual withdrawal" in which involvement in them diminishes the person's availability, and people in the old world respond in kind by asking and expecting less over time (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003a; Vaughan, 1990). Trying out new possibilities on a limited but tangible scale, therefore, also diminishes commitment to older identities.

**Relationships and Networks.** The fact that work identities develop in relationships with others is well documented in early career socialization and organizational entry research (Barley, 1989; Higgins and Kram, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Strauss, 1977) and grounded in theories of the self as an interpersonal being, whose identity claims are socially constructed and negotiated (Baumeister, 1998; Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). Interpersonal relationships and networks are powerful contexts and motives for identity transition (McFarland and Pals, 2005) because self-concept change depends on enlisting other people to inspire and lend social reality to desired changes (Baumeister, 1998).

Much like ephemeral roles, weak or extra-curricular ties promote identity change (McFarland and Pals, 2005). Meeting people outside one's occupational circles or re-activating distant contacts provides information about new, perhaps previously unknown,



options (Granovetter, 1979). Employees who switched to contract work, for example, had typically had exposure to people who made freelance work seem more viable or attractive than taking another full-time job (Kunda, *et al.*, 2002). But, simple access to information about new careers is insufficient for identity transition: key mechanisms include identification, the inculcation of norms and behavioral expectations, and social validation.

Identifying with persons in different roles or lines of work is both an important means of creating possible selves (Gersick, Bartunek and Dutton, 2000; Ibarra, 1999) and a well-documented determinant of behavioral change (Bandura, 1977). Identification with role models infuses behavior with meaning, goals and purposes (Foote, 1951; Strauss, 1977) and increases the likelihood that a person will assimilate role requirements as part of their professional identity (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979:234). Role models are prominent in anecdotes of career change, as people who embody new possibilities, and as mentors and teachers, support and help shape those possibilities (Ibarra, 2003a).

Although particular people may be especially important in forming possible selves, many of the effects of relationships on identity development are network effects (McFarland and Pals, 2005). As newcomers begin to share the assumptions and values that define a new occupation, gatekeepers may offer inclusion and passage through informal boundaries (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Relationships that form part of homogeneous, close-knit and cohesive networks convey a clarity and consistency of identity expectations that is lacking in sparse, weakly-connected networks (Podolny and Baron, 1997). Consequently,

people who bridge different social worlds are more likely to experience identity instability and change than people embedded in dense, reinforcing ties (McFarland and Pals, 2005). Having network ties to scientists who have left academia for commercial sciences, for example, increases the likelihood of making the shift oneself, by facilitating the formation of a reference group that condones what the scientific community sanctions (Stuart and Ding, 2006).

As new or previously weak relationships intensify, and outside activities bring the person in transition in contact with more and more members of a new occupational community, the network embeddedness -- defined as a function of the number and affective importance of network ties premised on a given social identity -- of a new identity also increases (Stryker and Serpe, 1982). Ebaugh's (1988) ex-nuns, for example, began to cultivate relationships with lay men and women long before they left the order, using these contacts to evaluate how they might adjust to life outside the convent. As their questioning of their religious commitment heightened, the nuns intensified their contact with friends who had left the order. New reference groups generate new self-conceptions (Lieberman, 1956), providing a point of comparison and reflected appraisals that shape the focal person's self-understanding (Baumeister, 1998; Cooley, 1902). Validation processes are particularly important in career change because a person who is uncertain about his or her beliefs is more likely to seek support for them from others (Festinger, 1954).

In the same way, loosening the strength of old ties and allegiances may be as important for identity transition as making new connections, since established interaction partners can lock people into outdated identities by maintaining images of them that are consonant with those identities and expecting fitting behavior (Baumeister, 1998; Swann, 1987; Schlenker, Dlugolecki and Doherty, 1994; Strauss, 1977). One-fifth of Ebaugh's (1988) sample reported that a significant other responded negatively to their desire to exit; this negative response sometimes interrupted or retarded the exiting process. Ibarra (2003a) similarly found that people considering career changes faced doubt, skepticism, and pigeonholing on the part of friends, family and close work associates, who remained invested in the identity the focal person was actively trying to shed. As relationships premised on alternative possible selves become more deeply embedded in new professional networks, they also dilute the strength of ties within which established identities are validated.

**Life Events.** A diverse body of work has converged on the role of events, jolts and surprises as triggers for personal change. Accounts of career change invariably include events that sow doubts, provide publicly acceptable excuses for doubts already simmering, or serve as turning points that legitimize and spur a final decision (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003a). These precipitating events may range from major job, organizational and personal life changes to shocks or jolts produced by more mundane episodes (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Hall, 1991; Lee and Mitchell, 1994; Roberts, *et al.*, 2007). But, exogenous events rarely trigger change directly; people may ignore the information, dismiss it as irrelevant, blame the undesired outcome on fate, or deny its

validity (Schein, 1996; Swann, 1987), and an event of great significance to one person may be trivial to another. What transforms any given event into a change trigger is the meaning a person derives from it (Ebaugh, 1988).

Because people engage in active interpretation of who they are only when they are “showered with unexpected, sometimes traumatic, experiences that violate their sense of routine, normality or propriety” (Van Maanen, 1998:8), events heighten awareness of previously taken for granted self definitions and compel more concerted forms of identity work (Ashforth, 2001; Louis, 1980b; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Van Maanen, 1998). The mechanisms underlying the effects of events on identity transition, as discussed below, are sense-making and social justification.

While a person may have ill-defined or unconscious feelings of dissatisfaction with their career, an unexpected event may sharpen these feelings, making them more consciously accessible (Ebaugh, 1988). Negative events, such as facing a malpractice suit, getting a bad performance review or being laid-off, refute or call into question strongly held or cherished self-conceptions and bring feared possible selves more sharply into focus; positive events, such as the birth of a child or an unexpected job offer may have a similarly jarring impact, one that eventually alters what the person imagines for their future (Ibarra, 2003a). Events motivate exploratory behavior by setting into motion mental processes by which people begin to consider alternatives to the current situation more actively (Ebaugh, 1988; Hall, 1976; Ibarra, 2003a; Lee and Mitchell, 1994) and by becoming an organizing scheme for subsequent events (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979).

Events may also provoke insight or crystallization of what a person had hitherto known tacitly (Louis and Sutton, 1991; Langer and Piper, 1987), as in the many anecdotes of career transition in which a defining moment clarified doubts and impelled the person to decisive action (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003a).

Passages from one status to another involve not only changes of action and interaction but also of the “verbalized reasons that are associated with them” (Strauss, 1977:102). Events also justify otherwise inexplicable behavior, allowing the person in transition to construct a socially legitimate account for desired or intended changes (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 2003a; Linde, 1993). While early reflections may remain private, as people begin to engage in activities and relationships premised on alternative identities, they also create new contexts in which to test and elaborate emerging meanings, and these, in turn, may shape and change those interpretations. Becoming socialized into a new occupational community entails adopting stories deemed appropriate by the community; these stories typically hinge on specific events -- e.g., “hitting bottom” is a central feature of an alcoholic’s recovery narrative -- symbolizing critical passages (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As people gain more socially grounded knowledge about alternative identities, they also learn to tell appropriate stories about events motivating their desire for change (Ibarra, 2003a).

## **Evolution of Identity by Transition Stages**

A large variety of conceptual models identify phases of change and their associated tasks. Van Gennep's (1960) three phases of a rite of passage – separation, transition, and incorporation – provide a foundation for most models of role transition, while organizational identity researchers (e.g., Ashforth 2001, Fiol, 2002) have built on Lewin's theory of unfreezing, changing and refreezing and notions of alternating phases of exploration, provisional commitment and integration (Brown and Starkey, 1999; Ibarra, 1999) to conceptualize identity transformation. All describe change processes that involve “moving from an existing clarity of understanding to doubt, uncertainty, and/or ambiguity, and ultimately to a state of renewed clarity that resolves into an altered form” (Corley and Gioia, 2004:174). Yet little conceptual attention has been devoted to the dynamics that drive movement from one stage to the next in contexts lacking institutional mechanisms.

The present model of identity transition builds on these various frameworks, combining ideas about how possible selves are elaborated with a view of identity development as an evolutionary process involving the exploration, provisional trial and integration of proposed selves. As summarized in Table 1, although activities, relationships and events shape the evolution of identity throughout the process, the model proposes that their role and uses may vary as transitions unfold: the role of new activities and relationships evolves from simply providing information and exposure to becoming the social cocoons (Greil and Rudy, 1984) in which new selves mature; and, although significant events may

occur and shape private sense-making at any time, as a transition unfolds they are increasingly used to frame the public and elaborate narratives needed to legitimize a decisive break with the past. The model extends current thinking by identifying how these commitment shifting processes operate over the transition cycle and arguing that voluntary change dynamics hinge on a liminal period characterized by co-existing, competing identities to which a person is partially but not fully committed.

**Early Transition: Exploration.** Identity transitions begin as people start to act on possibilities that did not previously exist or that existed only in their minds. The transition may begin with changes in activities or relationships or with the jolt of a trigger event; the present model does not prescribe a fixed sequence, nor does it specify the relative impact of push and pull factors. Either strategic intent or serendipity may propel the process. A person may discover an unknown passion or skill fortuitously through their extra-curricular activities, or instead, consciously seek a new occupation. By the same token, chance encounters with those who have made career changes may lead people to entertain the idea of a similar shift (Ibarra, 2003a; Kunda, *et al.*, 2002); or, alternatively, they may consciously seek to establish ties compatible with desired selves, using these new relationships to pull themselves into new social circles (Ebaugh, 1988). Whatever the initial intent, these exploratory behaviors begin to create or amplify discrepancies between the actual self and desires for the future.

The effects of activities, relationships and events are expected to be additive, or mutually reinforcing. For example, an individual who has long harbored a novelist possible self,

may begin testing that self by writing on a regular basis (activities); however, he or she may have few social interactions premised on an author identity (relationships and networks) or occasions to reflect on a taken-for-granted career trajectory (events). If that person begins to reach out to other writers and actors in the literary field, and realizes, with a fortieth birthday approaching or a story accepted for publication, that the time is ripe to give writing a more serious shot, commitment to a writer self increases, motivating further behavior consistent with this identity. The article acceptance may motivate the person to seek out additional “writer” activities, such as a writer’s club, which, in turn, may lead to increasing inclusion in writer circles, and make more salient events that can be interpreted as meaningful with regard to a writer identity.

Salience implies both centrality to a person’s self concept and social grounding in recurrent and affectively important activities and relationships (Stryker and Serpe, 1982). The combination of these various commitment shifting processes, rather than any single mechanism, fuel identity transition by increasing the salience of possible selves premised on alternative careers, while simultaneously reducing the salience of current identities. Many people, however, stumble onto new possibilities but fail to intensify their involvement (e.g., as when a person pursues a hobby for a long period of time without attempting to make it an alternative career), or experience what might be seen as a precipitating event, but emerge unaffected. Virtually no existing work examines what identity dynamics differentiate people who continue on the course of transition from those whose movement is arrested after early exploration.



**Liminal Period: Provisional Trial.** Divergent, even contradictory, possible selves co-exist in all of us without posing any problem, as long as they remain hypothetical or loosely articulated. But, once people subject possible selves to more active or concerted trial, any pre-existing sense of identity clarity inevitably gives way to the doubt, uncertainty, confusion, conflict and ambivalence of a middle period documented in studies of rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969) organizational socialization (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979, Strauss, 1977) and work role transition (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003a). Despite frequent mention in work on transition (e.g., Trice and Monrand, 1989), this state of liminality has not received adequate conceptual attention in organizational research; yet, understanding liminal experience may be especially critical for illuminating the identity dynamics of non-institutionalized transitions.

Described in empirical reports as a state of uncertain identity in which people report feeling “in a vacuum,” “in midair,” “neither here nor there,” and “at loose ends” (Bridges, 1980; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003a; Osherton, 1980), liminality is defined as a psychological state in which the individual lacks or loses a self-defining connection to an important social domain such as work (Turner, 1969; Ashforth, 2001:14) or the experience of being “betwixt and between” two states or identities (Newman, 1999:91). The most commonly discussed forms of liminality in occupational life concern cases of retirement and job loss, in which a person is literally devoid of identity (Ashforth, 2001; Newman, 1999), or the “vacuum” experienced by role exiters (Ebaugh, 1988). Research on voluntary transitions, however, suggests that people with multiple, incompatible

commitments experience liminality as a period of acute *identity conflict* (Ibarra, 2003a; Osherton, 1980), defined as a “multiply-defined self, whose multiple definitions are incompatible”<sup>5</sup> (Baumeister, 1986: 199).

The quote below, from a literature professor trying to switch into a finance career, illustrates the identity conflict that characterizes the state of liminality:

“It is Sunday and I don’t know where to begin working... For now, it’s up for grabs: shall I clean the house; buy food for the family; read “El Burlador de Sevilla”, which I assigned to my students for class tomorrow; go to the business school to search the alumni database for names of people at the firms I’ve applied to; learn more Excel; or look for information about alternatives to an MBA program. My husband thinks I should start talking to people about staying here in some capacity or another. I, of course, want a new career, a new life, independence, new knowledge, excitement, passion, and challenges. In the meantime, I continue to learn and I continue to make mistakes. It is like living inside a hurricane.” (Ibarra, 2003a: 53).

Identity conflicts, like those expressed in this quote, may stem from various different sources. First, as people become intensely involved in two or more different social worlds premised on different identities, they not only juggle competing role demands, they also

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<sup>5</sup> This definition parallels traditional notions of inter-role conflict, defined as different roles having incompatible expectations (Katz and Kahn, 1978), as well as conceptions of identity conflict as defined by multiple identities vying for pre-eminence or privilege (Corley and Gioia, 2004:201).

find themselves having to make very different public claims about who they are and aspire to be in each; consequently, they feel fragmented (Ibarra, 2003a). Second, although a person may be attracted to a different career, “side bets”, the things of value that accrue in the course of a career (e.g., “golden handcuffs” such as stock options or retirement benefits, and intangibles including security, status and prestige) often bind people to identities that no longer appeal to them intrinsically (Ebaugh, 1988). When rival possibilities exist only in people’s minds (Markus and Nurius, 1986) or as provisional constructions that fluctuate from one interaction to the next (Ibarra, 1999), their existence may not threaten established identities. But, as real options begin to materialize, people often oscillate between “holding on” and “letting go” of established identities (Osherton, 1980; Shepherd, 2003).

Tension between competing selves inevitably mounts, therefore, as new possibilities become more desirable or attainable. A well-established identity conflict management strategy is compartmentalizing or erecting boundaries among competing identities so as to avoid direct contact and comparison (Ashforth, 2000; Breakwell, 1986). But, identity conflicts may be particularly intractable when competing identities are not comparable, as when certain possible selves are well-grounded in experience while others remain untested. Building on divergent streams of thought about transitional phenomena, this paper argues that buffering immature possibilities from the rules that govern the established order enables identity transformation by allowing people to stave off closure until sufficient experience affords an informed choice.

In anthropology, Turner (1969) extended Van Gennep's notion of liminal states to a range of modern-life experiences that share a bounded time and space in which the normal rules of everyday life are suspended. Curiosity, exploration, and even frivolity govern behavior during these periods, such that the person in transition can "violate the rules" or experiment with new identities safely, without danger of sanction. In developmental psychology, Winnicott (1989) identified transitional periods in which children imagine various possibilities for themselves in the future, and play out these possibilities via imagination and make-believe. Transitional objects, such as toys and blankets, serve as bridges between the external world of reality and constraint and the internal world of fantasy and future possibility. Transitional figures, initially the mother, and the play objects form a boundary region in which the child can gradually define and test out a newly emerging self, protected from danger.

These ideas about transitional states frame a wide range of work on change and transition which concludes that safety, suspension of the rules and separation from the established order are necessary conditions for people to give full rein to new possibilities (e.g., Brown and Starkey, 2000; March, 1979; Schouten, 1991). Building on this line of thinking, this paper extends the term *identity buffering* (e.g., Ashforth and Mael, 1989) to the use of temporal, spatial and relational boundaries to separate and protect the activities and relationships premised on new possible selves from those associated with well established identities. By erecting or maintaining boundaries between potentially conflicting selves, people can concentrate on one identity at a time rather than attempting

to integrate or resolve the conflicts prematurely (Ashforth, 2001; Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Breakwell, 1986; Shepherd, 2003).

This proposition is consistent with disparate bits of empirical evidence. Many of the side activities that people use to test alternative careers, unfold within a bounded time and space: an evening course, a weekend project, or an inventor's garage allow people to test risky or conflicting identities in a secure environment, until it is safe to claim the emerging identity – publicly and privately – as truly reflecting one's self (Ibarra, 2003a; Korotov, 2004). Temporal boundaries, such as those defined by sabbaticals, educational programs, vacations and leisure activities buffer people from institutional obligations, and thus grant license to play with new ways of being (Turner, 1969). Role exits, for example, are frequently preceded by returning to school (Ebaugh, 1988) or other forms of “sabbatical” (Ibarra, 2003a). When the suspension of rules is temporary, people can toy safely with possibilities, knowing that they will have to come back to reality again. Spatial boundaries, such as those around laboratories, scenarios, simulations, and role-plays similarly encourage departures from existing norms and procedures, by allowing people to suspend normal requirements for consistency and rationality, and, as they play with possibilities, develop new skills or self-images that can be transferred back to the mainstream (Brown and Starkey, 2000; Schrage, 1999; Schein, 1996).

The boundaries created by significant relationships also protect and buffer. Guiding figures, people from whom adults in transition gain the support and encouragement needed to consider new possibilities (Levinson, 1981; Strauss, 1977), are prominent in

stories of career change (Ibarra, 2003a). Guiding figures confer blessings, give advice, embody new possibilities, and help “interpret the signs,” serving as sounding boards for sense-making efforts (Strauss, 1977). The strong bond that develops between guiding figures and people in transition fosters psychological safety, providing a secure base for exploring new territory (Bowlby, 1988; Kahn, 1996). Professional networks and communities play a similar role, by providing models and support, as well as institutionalized accounts about how one becomes a full member of the group (Ibarra, 2003a). When these relationships form part of networks that are unconnected to the person’s ongoing work, they also provide a safe context for rehearsing tentative, even divergent identity claims without apparent inconsistency.

Buffering, however, can also shelter identities from environmental influences such that they can remain static for years (Breakwell, 1986). Closing the transition requires retaining and rejecting possibilities among those selected for a closer look, integrating the heretofore provisional self as part of one’s enduring self-concept and claiming it successfully beyond the circumscribed circles that nurtured its development.

**Late Transition: Integration.** Ebaugh (1988:123) noted that voluntary role exits tends to occur in close connection with a turning point, “an event that mobilizes and focuses awareness that old lines of action are complete, have failed, have been disrupted, or are no longer personally satisfying, and provides individuals with the opportunity to do something different with their lives.” Turning points, she argued, motivate the person to take the actions needed to complete the transition and help announce and explain the exit

to others. This paper extends Ebaugh's arguments by proposing that transition narratives are a key means by which life events are enacted as turning points and play a critical role in the claiming and granting processes prerequisite for integrating a new identity.

A narrative is a story that posits a history for an outcome (Weick, 1995). Self narratives, defined as "account(s) of the relationship among self-relevant events over time" (Gergen, 1997:187), are acknowledged means of sense-making and identity construction (Ashforth, 2001; Gergen, 1997; McAdams, 1997; Van Maanen, 1998) and examples of assuming a new identity as a narrative task abound in organizational research: the main business of Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, is the reconstruction of identity through the process of reconstructing life stories, and midwives mark their full passage from peripheral to full participation in their occupation by telling stories about meaningful events (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Likewise, people contemplating career changes face the challenge of persuading relevant parties – themselves as well as family, prospective employers, clients or financiers -- that the move makes sense and will work out well for all concerned (Ibarra, 2003a). Scant attention has been devoted, however, to how people claim identities that are seemingly discontinuous, or otherwise deviate from socially acceptable trajectories (Ashforth, 2001).

Narrative coherence in a life story depends on self-continuity and causality (Linde, 1993). Because transition narratives are necessarily discontinuity stories, they rely on turning points to establish causality (Ebaugh, 1988). Kunda, *et al.*, (2002), for example, found that

technical workers who made the transition from salaried employment to contract work, told stories that conformed to a common script:

“The narrative begins with the lament of an expert for whom the tension between the ideal of technical rationality and the political reality of organizational life has become a source of simmering discontent. Then, an employer’s action or an unanticipated event that undermines job security, leads the expert to act on his or her discontent. Aided by serendipitous encounters with the world of contracting, the expert finally chooses to escape the world of full-time employment into the world of contingent work, which promises a way of life more consistent with the expert’s world-view.” (2002:240-41).

Stories like this explain why choosing a seemingly lower status or more precarious work role not only makes sense but is also consistent with a fundamental aspect of who one is and always has been; they also demonstrate that the change is really not as discontinuous as it might seem, and that there are good and sufficient reasons for actual or impending changes (Linde, 1993). Identities claimed in narratives that are told and retold are more likely to be integrated as part of who we know ourselves to be.

While people always tell stories about who they are and would like to become -- particularly post hoc, to rationalize decisions taken -- this paper argues that narration plays a particularly important role in the later stages of transition for two reasons. First, by definition, compelling narratives are the product of hindsight and substantial editing



since people must first know what they want in order to search retrospectively for a causal chain that explains that outcome (Weick, 1995). With several options possible and none obvious, people mid-transition feel unsettled and uncertain of their own identity and, as such, struggle to find the narrative thread of their career (Ibarra, 2003a); the direct experience with possible selves accumulated during this stage helps them both make choices among alternatives and craft a coherent story.

Second, as discussed above, desired selves remain incomplete and tentative without the stamp of approval of relevant gatekeepers and one's social entourage (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). While buffering helps people to rehearse divergent claims in a safe setting, it also protects fledgling or provisional accounts from broader social verification. With practice, and interaction with others who tell their own transition stories, people develop more compelling narratives, making it easier to claim and be granted the new identity across situations. Since identities invoked across a range of social interactions become more salient (Stryker and Serpe, 1982), acts of constructing, telling and retelling a convincing narrative gradually help the person incorporate the new identities into a revised self-concept.

## **DISCUSSION**

This article argued that identity transitions unfold as people's activities, relationships, and the meaning they make of the events of their lives increase the salience of new possible selves. In the early stages of the transition, people expand the variety of possibilities they

imagine for the future and begin to explore new options, gradually increasing their social and behavioral commitment to alternatives. The hallmark of mid-transition is the experience of liminality, as people feel caught “in-between” conflicting, incompatible identities, none to which they are fully committed or ready to give up. To manage the emerging conflicts, people select one or more of the emerging possibilities for closer inspection, but also erect boundaries to separate and protect still immature selves from the rules and expectations that govern established identities. This buffering allows fledging selves to become more fully elaborated, but also shields them from the broader social validation needed to become part of one’s enduring self-concept. Increasingly informed and coherent sense-making heralds the end of the transition cycle, as narrative strategies help the person craft accounts that motivate them to resolve earlier conflicts, claim the new identity across their various social circles, and as such, retain and integrate a new identity.

While the arguments that people construct identities by situated, social action, and that desired futures, rather than existing identities, provide the basis for interpreting events and motivating action are not new (Baumeister, 1986; Gioia and Thomas, 1996), the proposed model adds value in at least three important ways. First, by focusing attention on identities situated in the future, i.e., possible selves, and explicating the processes that shift the salience hierarchies that organize them, the model offers a much needed perspective on identity dynamism, particularly in situations lacking institutionalized rites of passages. Second, the model underscores the unique character of liminal experience as a pervasive feature of identity transition. While most existing models include an

undefined, middle transition stage, its identity dynamics had not been to date adequately conceptualized. Third, the proposed model builds on and extends recent thinking on diverse forms of identity work by proposing ways in which buffering and narration propel transitions from early explorations through to completion, absent a formal passage. The sections below discuss further the contributions and implications of these ideas.

### **Future Research on Identity's Dynamism**

Although the theory developed here does not seek to predict who will attempt a career change or make one successfully, the number of people who contemplate career changes is necessarily higher than the number who actually accomplish them; accordingly, a model of identity transition must suggest conditions that differentiate those who move past the exploratory stage, or who actually change careers after testing alternatives, from those who do not, as well as identify factors that might derail or set back the transition at any point in its evolution. The present conceptualization provides at least a partial answer by identifying conditions that propel possible selves to greater definition and elaboration; when these conditions are not present, the transition fails to begin, is interrupted or must loop back to an earlier stage.

As discussed above, people constantly explore possible selves but many do not intensify their involvement or take action after what might have been a precipitating event. Similarly, a person might move from contemplating to testing a favorite possibility only to discard it on the basis of their experience. In Ibarra's (2003a) study, for example, a

consultant used a sabbatical to explore becoming a scuba diving shop owner, only to conclude that a career based on his hobby would lose appeal over time and refocus his search on more conventional career options; other participants failed to find employment in their domain of choice and, as such, were forced to modify their search. Failed experiments and the feedback they generate can stimulate further exploration, leading to additional trials (Ibarra, 1999) and a prolonged liminal period (Schouten, 1991). By the same token, if narratives developed within a cohesive but insulated social circle fail to attain legitimacy outside those circles, movement along the transition cycle may be impeded. The present model is not linear but characterized by loops and iteration among stages.

Many individual and contextual variables that I do not treat explicitly – the transferability of skills, interests and experience between the old and potential, new career, barriers to entry into a new occupation, the reactions of key interaction partners, the availability of jobs in the desired domain, and the reversibility of the exit,<sup>6</sup> – may moderate both the experience of transition and outcomes such as the length of the process or whether an actual career change results (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988). While one person may complete an identity transition having made fundamental career changes, another may conclude a similar cycle by re-affirming past choices (Ibarra, 2003a;

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<sup>6</sup> Ebaugh's (1988) own findings provided many counter-examples to her moderating conditions. For example, while some of her occupational exiters considered jobs tangentially related to what they were doing before (e.g., business teachers found jobs as accountants in business, police officers went into private security work); others, notably the physicians, moved into completely different lines of work (e.g., law, real estate). Likewise, although she found that fields with relatively low barriers to entry, such as real estate, tended to be attractive second careers, she also reported a high incidence of returning to graduate schools (e.g., law, engineering) among her examples.

Levinson, 1981). The failure to make a career change does not preclude identity transition, as people also modify work identities by changing their internal orientation to the role already held (Louis, 1980a). And, while people may be prevented from pursuing a new career for a variety of exogenous reasons (financial or family constraints, for example), they may still fashion a self-definition that is, as a result of the transition process, grounded in highly elaborated images of who they want to become.

A second contribution of this article is a set of ideas about the experience and identity dynamics of the liminal period. The model suggests that identity transitions unfold initially by way of additive processes (Albert, 1992), as new selves must develop before old possibilities are discarded. But, the resulting multitude of selves creates the discomfort and conflict associated with liminality (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988) and sets the context for its own resolution in the later stages, when a more difficult operation, change by subtraction, is required (Albert, 1992).

Current thinking on identity change has largely ignored liminality, partly because scholars have focused on roles and identities that are either synergistic or easily buffered from one another (Ashforth, 2001; Rothbard, 2001; Settles, Sellers, and Damas, 2002; Ruderman, *et al.*, 2002). This article extends the growing literature on strategies for coping with multiple identities (Ashforth *et al.*, 2000; Breakwell, 1986; Pratt and Foreman, 2000) by considering conflict among incompatible futures and suggesting that certain sequences, i.e., compartmentalizing preceding deletion or integration, may be more prevalent than others. The ideas developed here about how liminal experience can

incubate immature identities might also inspire further theoretical development on ways of managing problematic facets of identity including ambiguity (Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Corley and Gioia, 2004), threat (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996), and disidentification (Elsback and Bhattacharya, 2001). Finally, additional research on the nature and uses of liminality may lead scholars to supplement current conceptions of identity process as “work” with the notion of “identity play,” defined as the process of formulating, elaborating and evaluating possible selves (Brown and Starkey, 2000; Ibarra, 2003b; Schouten, 1991).

The ideas proposed here can also inform future research on diverse forms of liminality. At least two forms have been suggested here: liminality stemming from the simultaneous pursuit of multiple career paths, as when a would-be entrepreneur works on a new business idea on the side while continuing a day job; and liminality created by diverse forms of “time-out” as when a person follows an outplacement program, takes a sabbatical, or follows some form of adult education (Ashforth, 2001; Korotov, 2004). Ebaugh (1988) noted that liminality can be experienced over weeks, months or even years. Future studies might explore the extent to which exogenous variables, such as occupational status, financial resources, and family situation, make different varieties of liminal experiences more or less possible,<sup>7</sup> and how these variations, in turn, affect

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<sup>7</sup> An argument could be made that the present model explains best the career changes of professionals, managers or people in other high status occupations, who can “afford” liminality, and who are relatively buffered from hard economic knocks. Many of the examples provided from the literature support this conclusion, as they document the career changes of doctors, lawyers, academics, information technologists, and the like. But, there were a range of exceptions, including, for example, Ebaugh’s (1988) schoolteachers and Moore and Buttner’s (1997) entrepreneurs, for whom financial constraints led to transitions that

identity's evolution. Adult education programs, which include evening, weekend and multi-session courses, provide an excellent laboratory in which to explore diverse forms of buffering, such as time periods that are fixed or open-ended, or differing degrees of physical and social encapsulation (Greil and Rudy, 1984).

The notion of narrative identity developed here is consistent with a broad literature on the importance of verbal accounts in creating meaning and claiming identities (e.g., Ashforth, 2001; Scott and Lyman, 1968; Van Maanen, 1998; Weick, 1995) but extends these ideas by highlighting the role played by narrative in fostering identity integration after a period of fragmentation or conflict. It stands to reason, then, that if a transition narrative lacks coherence or conflicts with other identity claims, movement along the transition cycle may slow or be impeded. Although much has been written about what makes for a good story (Gergen, 1997; Linde, 1993; Weick., 1995), further research is needed to link narrative properties to transition processes and outcomes.

Other promising areas for future investigation concern sources and multiplicity of self-narratives. Some transition narratives are more readily available as institutionalized scripts (Ashforth, 2001); the engineer who becomes a manager, for example, follows a well-trod narrative path while the person who makes a less common or valued change faces the added challenge of inventing a unique story. While a consistent narrative told across diverse social circles consolidates identity, it also constrains the person to live up to the self they have claimed to be. Bateson (2004:69) argues that there are advantages to  

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entailed working two jobs, rather than taking a time-out to return to school or engage in volunteer or creative activities.

having multiple versions of one's life story, as different interpretations help people construct different futures. Future research on the evolution of identity might distinguish periods during which identity aims are best accomplished by telling variations on the same basic story line from periods in which a portfolio of different stories are needed.

An important boundary condition for the present model is its focus on voluntary change. In job loss, like in voluntary exits, the transition entails finding alternatives to a no longer viable possible self, and unemployment is often experienced as liminality (Ashforth, 2001; Latack and Dozier, 1986; Newman, 1999; Shepherd, 2003). But, involuntary transitions begin as change by subtraction rather than addition (Albert, 1992), and the alternative-generating and sense-making processes described here occur after, rather than before, the physical role exit; thus, they may evidence different dynamics. For example, the identity threat or stigma associated with layoff (Ashforth, 2001) might reduce the variety of possible selves considered; alternatively, having more time to explore alternatives might have the opposite effect. Finally, given the stigma of job loss, the involuntary career changer is likely to face an even greater narrative challenge in accounting for his or her predicament. Further research is needed to discern conditions under voluntary and involuntary transitions differ.

Clearly, identity transition needs to be better understood in a world in which individuals enjoy considerable choice regarding occupation, employer, and career paths (Albert *et al.*, 2000). Although this paper has focused on individual experiences and outcomes, the transition processes described here have many implications for scholars who study new



forms of work and external labor markets, settings and situations that are typically populated by people who have experienced, or are in the midst of, identity transitions (e.g., O'Mahoney and Bechky, 2006).

Until recently, research on careers has assumed that people develop and advance largely within the confines of a single organization and occupation, and that the transitions that pace their career are institutionalized in form and timing. Today's self-designing professional trajectories, which often involve moving from one firm, sector or career to another, both liberate and place important identity demands on individuals, requiring us to create, alter and dissolve identities as we move from one career phase to another. These continuous and shifting patterns of identity evolution and dissolution are a necessary part of human adaptation and change.

**Table 1: Elaboration of Possible Selves & Evolution of Identity by Transition Stages**

Means for Elaborating Possible Selves				
		Work activities	Relationships & networks	Life events
<div style="display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center;"> <div style="margin-bottom: 20px;">Early Transition</div> <div style="margin-bottom: 20px;">Liminal Period</div> <div>Late Transition</div> </div>	<p><b>Evolution of identity by stages:</b></p> <p><b>Exploration:</b> Exploring alternative possible selves</p> <p><b>Provisional Trial:</b> Selecting one or more possible selves for a more sustained trial</p> <p><b>Integration:</b> Retaining and discarding possibilities, integrating retained possibilities into a revised self-concept</p>	<p>Ephemeral roles, new assignments, and/or side projects used to explore alternatives</p> <p>Time and space dedicated to alternative work activities increases</p> <p>New work activities displace the old with respect to time, energy, and/or formal roles</p>	<p>New contacts and/or weak ties foster learning about alternative possibilities</p> <p>Network embeddedness and strength (frequency of contact and emotional intensity) of relationships premised on new possible selves increases</p> <p>Relationships premised on new identity displace old ties with respect to time, affect, and centrality to the person's network</p>	<p>Events prompt sense-making about alternative possibilities</p> <p>Events used to frame interpretations of subsequent events and make provisional identity claims</p> <p>Events are incorporated into public narratives that explain why change is (was) inevitable</p>

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