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# Using Liminality to Understand How Identity and Temporary Status Influence Interns' Vulnerability

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Issues of wage exploitation, sexual harassment, discrimination, and substandard learning experiences during required, for-credit internships have been documented across a number of disciplines (Kvansy et al., 2017). Many fields have institutionalized the expectation to take on a (usually unpaid) internship. These issues relate to social and economic justice in two ways: first, students with greater access to social and economic resources have greater ability to find and complete an internship whereas other students find unpaid internships to be a costly barrier to entry; second, students performing the internships are vulnerable because as they often lack basic protections and are incentivized to not speak out against poor treatment (Bocchiario et al., 2012; McLeod et al., 2019; Roscigno, 2019). Consequently, although required for-credit internships have potential to provide students with experiential learning benefits, those benefits are likely greater for students who already have means and they must be weighed alongside the issues of sexual harassment and discrimination, which are disproportionality felt by minority students.

In this article, we focus on the issue of identity formation related to the internship because identity formation provides a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding social and economic justice outcomes. The formation of two different identities are relevant here, first is the formation of a professional identity that occurs during an internship. Using the concept of liminality (van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1969) we view the internship as a space during which interns transition between their previous identity as a student and their new identity as a professional. Viewing the internship as a liminal space helps to understand the larger transition that the intern is experiencing when they are not yet a professional but also not quite a student anymore. The second relevant identity formation is the temporary identity that people develop as they step into the role of an in-

tern. Saks and Ashforth (1997) posited that people create a temporary identity when they enter a temporary space (e.g., internship) as a means of coping and functioning while protecting their core identity. Similar to literature studying temporary workers (Garsten, 1999), the temporary nature of interns' roles and identities is critical for understanding how power differentials emerge and operate during internships that cause interns to experience and persist through poor learning experiences and exploitative work relationships, as well as how these factors influence the longer-term development of a professional identity.

In this theoretical paper we elaborate on the nature of temporary identities and identity formation and how they are related to issues of exploitation and justice in internships. By viewing the internship as a period where a person is transitioning and as an intersection between two identities (student and professional), we can better examine the dynamics of their temporary identity and experiences as an intern. Our theoretical framework explains some of the key underlying social and economic justice issues present in internships and it also highlights avenues for educators to intervene to improve the internship learning experience for all students.

## Theoretical Framework

The concept of liminality originates in the field of anthropology and the work of van Gennep (1909) and Turner (1969) and focuses on how changes take place during a rite of passage. A liminal space is the transitional period or threshold between two states where there is a distinct before and after (Turner, 1969). Liminal spaces include individual experiences, such as the transition between adolescence and adulthood that is often marked by a religious ritual, and collective experiences, such as holidays (that separate two seasons) and commercial flights (that transition between two destinations). In the organizational or workplace

context, liminal spaces include a new worker's time as a trainee and the formation of a new organization (Söderlund & Borg, 2018). Within the literature, Söderlund and Borg (2018) identified that liminality has been referred to as a process (e.g., training, forming a new organization), a position (e.g., temporary worker), and as a place (e.g., a festival, a sports event).

An internship can be seen as an individual liminal position that is in between the academic and professional spaces, where the intern is shedding their identity as a student and forming their identity as a professional. Mele et al. (2021) used the lens of liminality to study psychology internships, finding that, like other transitions, internships involve a change in identity and status for the individual. Psychology interns in the study expressed feeling complex emotions, including confusion, insecurity, anxiety, and ambiguity, as well as an unclear status when interacting with patients and staff as they were no longer seen as a student, but had not yet achieved the status of a professional psychologist (Mele et al., 2021). This range of emotions and the presence of paradoxical identities have been seen in other types of temporary employment arrangements (Söderlund & Borg, 2018), and carry implications for the role of the supervisor and other factors that can influence the transition being experienced by an intern (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015; Mele et al., 2021). As a liminal space, an internship provides for a unique and important transformational experience for people forming new identities as professionals, but the complexities of this transition are vast and underexplored, particularly the dynamics that lead to the positions of vulnerability and powerlessness for the interns (Beech, 2011; Garsten, 1999; Hawkins & Edwards, 2015).

The following sections focus on how students form their new identities related to their internship and how that factors into issues of social justice. First, we explore how identities are formed. Then we discuss the power dynamics within the liminal space of the internship. Last, we discuss how the identities of people from marginalized backgrounds are affected by this process.

## How Identities are Formed in a Liminal Space

Van Gennep (1909) described social rituals and transitions as following particular patterns: first a separation phase, where the individual leaves behind their original state or identity, second, a liminal phase, marked

by ambiguity, instability, and uncertainty, and finally, an incorporation phase, where the individual takes on their new identity or status. As a liminal phase, the internship provides a space for questioning, learning, and even rejecting different possible (typically professional) identities (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015; Turner, 1969), often with a significant emotional component (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Söderlund & Borg, 2018). Garsten's (1999) examination of temporary workers provides a useful comparison when examining interns, as they note that being a temp is:

Open to definition. It may turn out to be a road to permanent employment, an explorative phase in the sphere of work and organization or a passage to a shift in career. It may likewise prove to be a dead-end street, with an increased sense of marginality in relation to organizational resources and to the labour market. (p.603)

Within all this ambiguity, however, there is some structure in how students may experience these transitions and form their new identity.

Beech (2011) posits that liminality can be driven by internal or external forces represented as a spectrum with experimentation on one end and recognition at the other. Experimentation refers to individuals taking a central and active role in creating their new identity. Recognition refers to people encountering new external information (e.g., knowledge conveyed from colleagues or supervisors at the internship) that might shock and surprise them and result in an epiphany that influences the creation of their new personal and/or professional identity. Reflection incorporates the internal elements of experimentation and the external elements of recognition; that is, a person develops their new identity through a mix of inputs from their environment and through their own questioning and exploration. The extremes of experimentation and recognition both apply to internships because some interns have the opportunity to shape their experience and guide the development of their new identity whereas others have more closely-regimented experience dictated by course requirements and rigid organizational cultures.

As interns step into this extended period of liminality, or in-betweenness, the literature suggests there is opportunity for growth and creativity that can lead to positive outcomes (Winkler & Mahmood, 2015). However, the literature presented here also underscores the importance of external

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factors and the immediate environment on a person who is in the developmental phases of a new identity that is often seen and treated as marginal and inferior within the organization (Beech, 2011; Garsten, 1999; Winkler & Mahmood, 2015). In sum, the process of identity formation in a liminal space may include oscillating between instances of outside influence and self-driven identity formation (Beech, 2011; Söderlund & Borg, 2015), but is nearly always accompanied by a range of mixed emotions amidst the uncertainty and a low status of power.

## Power Dynamics

Although educational internships are often considered as one of many types of experiential learning, they differ from other types of educational experiences in terms of the unique power dynamics that are created around the learner. Most obviously, learners enter new relationships with site managers and other organizational actors. These new relationships are also often an ambiguous mix of teacher-student and employee-employer. Current labor law in the United States generally recognizes this ambiguity and exempts interns from compensation under the Fair Labor Standards Act so long as the student is the “primary beneficiary” within the internship arrangement (see: DeCamp et al., 2015; Mersol, 2016). This updated standard pulled back from the previous stance asserted by the Department of Labor that had a stricter delineation between an intern and an employee (Department of Labor, 2010), and has made it easier for organizations to avoid paying interns while treating them more like employees. Moreover, unpaid interns are ineligible for workplace protections such as Title VII, which prohibits discrimination (McLeod et al., 2019). Thus, unpaid interns are often encouraged to act and learn like employees in a professional environment, but without any of the institutional protections afforded to employees.

Further contributing to the vulnerability and powerlessness of interns is their temporary status and their professional aspirations. As found in literature on other types of temporary workers, the temporary status of a worker does not allow them to fully establish themselves within an organization, leaving them as part of the periphery and arguably the lowest status members of the organization (Garsten, 1999). Temporary and peripheral workers are also conditioned to accept unproductive, discriminatory, or unfair behaviors from other organization members to protect their reputation, especially when seeking full-time employment (Keuhn & Corrigan, 2013; Rodino-Colocino & Beberick, 2015; Walker et

al., 2021). The institutionalized norms reinforced by this system discourage interns dissenting or resisting harmful treatment (Perlin, 2012; Walker et al., 2021).

In addition to the new relationship with a site manager and the ambiguous context in which that relationship operates, for-credit interns also maintain a relationship with their educational departments. An interns’ relationship with their home department is likely to be an important resource during the internship—for example, students can ask their academic supervisor to intervene if site managers are flouting their educational obligations. However, the academic component of an internship also creates additional pressures, especially when students must meet specific degree requirements, such as completing an internship within a specific time frame, earning a certain number of hours, and gaining positive evaluations from a site supervisor, in order to graduate. These pressures often influence how interns behave when finding and completing internships. For example, Odio (2017) found that sport management students’ main concern when searching for an internship was meeting their degree requirements while operating within their financial means, and many expressed the willingness to sacrifice a quality internship in order to avoid delaying graduation. It is likely that these students and others will tolerate poor educational experiences, and perhaps even exploitative work relationships, if they need an internship to graduate.

Collectively, for-credit internships introduce complex and novel power relations that learners may be experiencing for the first time. Although the specifics of these power relations will depend on the unique context of each internship, most interns will find that the site manager is the most important person in their new learning experience. Following Hawkins and Edwards’ (2015) research on liminality in leadership learning, we can theorize the role of the site manager as a leader who possesses power during the vulnerable process by which learners navigate liminality and develop a new temporary organizational identity. Hawkins and Edwards (2015) drew on Foucauldian theorizing to note that knowledge is produced out of relations of power (Foucault, 1979). The educator, or, in this context, the site manager is a figure of authority and dispenser of legitimate knowledge. For this reason, and also due to the complex power relations noted above, site managers occupy a position of power and have inordinate influence over internship structure and outcomes. They will also have inordinate influence over the liminal space and temporary identity construction process. For example, Hawzen et al. (2018) identified how

many sport management interns had internalized norms about working long hours for little or no remuneration as part of their internship and class preparation. Irrespective of whether these professional identity norms are beneficial for students' holistic development, they are clearly advantageous for site managers in the sport industry, many of whom use unpaid internships to deal with increased work that accompanies seasonal fluctuations in demand.

This is not to say that site managers will always abuse their positions of power. However, it is necessary to consider the complicated interests at play in an internship, including the site managers' need to put organizational goals first, and how these might affect interns. Large scale evidence for site managers prioritizing organizational goals, especially profit-making, over learning goals comes from economic research of apprenticeship systems in Germany and Switzerland finding that some companies employ apprentices to lower the cost of production rather than to invest in training skilled individuals (Wolter & Ryan, 2011). Thus, many abuses of the internship relationship might not be seen as abuse at all, but a more subtle prioritization of what the organization and manager need that take advantage of the liminal space and temporary identity created during an internship.

### **Intersection of Identities**

Hawkins and Edwards (2015) note that students from diverse backgrounds are often separated from their pre-existing social ties and conventions and are subjected to a new and unfamiliar form of pedagogy. Indeed, it is likely that liminal spaces and identities, and the power relations at play, operate differently for students depending on the pre-existing identities and resources they bring to the internship, particularly given the white-male origins of experiential education and the white-male norms that still dominate many organizations (Hindman & Walker, 2020; James, 1996). To this point, the identities discussed have been limited to the temporary identity as an intern, and the identity as a student being shed as a professional identity is formed, however, students have other pre-existing identities that must be considered as they are relevant for examining the issues of social and economic justice.

A survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) showed that students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds are under-represented in paid internships (NACE, 2020). Black students in particular, who disproportionately make use of campus career centers compared to students from other groups, are at the largest disparity when it comes

to paid internships (NACE, 2020). Speaking to this population, Bonner (2011) argues that that African American students perpetually exist in a state of liminality (i.e., identity formation) throughout their college years. Citing the concept of a "double consciousness" introduced by W.E.B. DuBois, Bonner (2011) posits that African American students are constantly navigating a dualism between their academic and social self.

Considering that students are already navigating the development of their own personal, academic, and social selves, the development of a professional identity is not a process that should be viewed in a void. Allen et al. (2013) note that students seeking to adhere to the norms imposed by society for becoming the "ideal" worker in order to become more employable has profound implications that are inherently classed, gendered, and raced. Similar work in the area of disability argues that these intersecting identities represent forms of "oppression and exclusion" (Liasidou, 2013). These issues and inequalities, which are present in the labor market, are exacerbated through work placements in higher education (Allen et al., 2013; Burgstahler & Bellman, 2009). These dynamics are personified through the experiences of one student who used his ethnic identity as an asset or "unique selling point...to be exploited for commercial benefit" (Allen et al., 2013, p. 447), and a working-class student during a placement who experienced anxiety as she struggled with the external pressures to conform to the lifestyle and emotional standard of her male and middle-class co-workers (Allen et al., 2013). These anecdotes demonstrate the additional struggle faced by students with multiple visible and invisible intersecting identities that are not normally considered when examining the experiences of interns forming a professional identity. The range of emotions, anxiety, ambiguity, and powerlessness stemming from the internal and external processes and pressures associated with internships rarely account for the class, gender, race, or ability of the intern and the additional challenges many interns face as they attempt to adapt to an environment in which they are an outsider.

### **Discussion**

Although the benefits of internships are often justifiably touted in education and industry, there remains a need to closely scrutinize internship practices. Examining internships through the lens of liminality, and therefore identity formation, provides a useful perspective for discussing and understanding what interns experience. The unclear transitional status of interns moving from student to professional manifests with confusion, insecurity, anxiety, and ambiguity as they

struggle with external forces that heavily influence their current state and the formation of their new identity (Beech, 2011; Mele et al., 2021). The norms imposed by the educational institution, the industry expectations, and, in some cases, legal status serve to ensure compliance and acceptance of their status as relatively powerless (DeCamp et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2021). These norms alone present a threat to social and economic justice, as the incentives across many industries are set against interns speaking out against or resisting poor treatment, exploitation, or even sexual harassment. Social and economic justice issues are exacerbated for interns that do not conform to the white male prototype who must navigate the additional burden of adopting organizational identities that are often narrow and exclusive. The process of identity formation and the complex challenges faced largely go unnoticed and unrecognized in the literature and in practice, but still contribute to inequality in access and experience during a pivotal career stage. With this theoretical understanding in mind it is imperative for instructors, supervisors, researchers, and others with influence over the internship process to help promote equity and inclusion.

### *Practical Implications for Experiential Learning*

An appreciation for the transitional and ambiguous state of interns, their relative powerlessness, and the intersecting identities that influence their experiences can inform practices to address the social and economic injustices that can emerge as a result. First among the recommendations for practice is for academic instructors and internship supervisors to be aware of the precarious and ambiguous status (Mele et al., 2021). Supervisors should empower students to engage in more experimentation while helping balance the external influences of the internship environment through reflection, and make sense of the field's current norms and expectations as they form their professional identity (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015). Preparing students for the experiences of liminality will help them take on more opportunities for experimentation and be aware of situations where unequal power relations might be abused.

A second recommendation is to continually examine the structures of power. Interns possess a low status within their organization and are largely incentivized to endure poor treatment when it occurs rather than speak out and risk delaying graduation and developing a negative reputation within the industry (Bocchiaro et al., 2012; Roscigno, 2019). Developing and promoting channels for reporting poor conditions or treatment during internships is

a positive step, however, this should not be relied upon as the primary method for ensuring a good experience as it disproportionately burdens the intern. Instead, as recommended by Steiner (2019), internship coordinators should facilitate and participate in discussions with the site supervisors and students. Relatedly, instructors should monitor and vet internship sites to ensure they possess positive cultures that stress equity and fairness, and refuse to approve internships at sites that do not. Overall, academic departments must recognize that institutionalizing internships as a curriculum requirement contributes to the internship power dynamic so they must use this position of authority to help students. Current labor laws are not enough. Interns need to know that they can rely on their departments to take their side and fix problems with site managers.

Finally, there is a need to continually examine the pedagogical and professional experiences of students through an intersectional lens. Particularly for white-male dominated fields such as engineering (Powell & Sang, 2015), sport (Aicher & Wells, 2013), journalism (Meyers & Gayle, 2015; Steiner, 2019), and hospitality (La Lopa & Gong, 2020), interns from diverse backgrounds are likely to have less access and be vulnerable to various forms of poor treatment. Instructors should sponsor students from under-represented backgrounds to help them overcome access discrimination, and then provide support through mentorship to help navigate any discrimination they may face. From a pedagogical perspective, instructors should continually review the design of their internship courses and take steps to make them more inclusive such as prioritizing learning outcomes, avoiding one-size-fits-all policies or approaches, and grounding pedagogical decisions in theory rather than in established practice (Warren, 1998).

### *Future Research*

Within the scope of this paper we focused largely on issues that related to social and economic justice pertaining to race, gender, class, and ability. However, there is an undeniable need for continued studies in these areas and for a broader examination of how other identities are affected as well (e.g., immigration status, sexuality, gender identity). Future research should continue to examine the process of identity formation for interns of all backgrounds in order to provide a deeper understanding. Furthermore, research could contribute in this area by identifying, testing, and promoting new methods for evaluating internship environments. Internships should provide challenges for interns to overcome, but those

challenges should be equal for all interns. Being able to evaluate organizations for their ability to deliver on equity and inclusion should be prioritized. ■

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