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## **Master Thesis**

# **Inside Consultants: Revelation of Another Reality**

## **Application of liminality concept to the work of inside consultants**

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## **Abstract**

Providing of consulting services has been a subject of rapid development during the last three decades. This recent development has led to blurring the line between consultancies and outsourcing services. In this respect, consulting firms outsource skilled and experienced consultants who are contracted to work at a client site for a certain period of time. Consultants based at the client offices are thus in the role of insiders, establishing close relations with representatives of a client organisation. Such close inter-organisational cooperation significantly challenges traditionally understood organisational boundaries. As a result, outsourced consultants in the role of insiders find themselves in between their consultancy company and the client, in between inside and outside. In order to explore and map this uncertain position of inside consultants we apply the anthropological concept of liminality, introduced by Arnold van Gennep and further developed by Victor Turner. Moreover we bring to light Eliade's work on sacred and profane world and show how the Romanian philosopher's theory can benefit the view of inside consultants as liminal entities. This paper will thus provide an in-depth description of the complex dimensions of inside consultants' position, identity construction and their sense of belonging.

*Key words:* inside consultants; blurred organisational boundaries; liminality; hierophany; sacred and profane, self-identity; loyalty

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## Introduction

Providing of consulting services has been a subject of rapid development during the last three decades (Berglund and Werr, 2000; Newell et al., 2002; Alvesson, 2004). One of these recent developments has led to blurring the line between consultancies and outsourcing services (Nevo et al., 2007). In this respect, consulting firms outsource skilled and experienced consultants who are contracted to work at a client site for a certain period of time. Such a practice is used for many reasons, mainly if the client does not have necessary knowledge, if there is a deficit of skilled workforce on the labour market or if the client needs to cope with extra work that is expected to have only temporary character (Sturdy, 1997; Kubr, 1996; Bennet, 1990). In most cases, organisations use outsourcing services of consulting firms as a way of sustaining and enhancing their flexibility and cost savings (Lacity and Willcocks, 2009).

Consultants based at the client offices are thus in the role of insiders, establishing close relations with representatives of a client organisation (Kitay and Wright, 2004). Such close inter-organisational cooperation significantly challenges traditionally understood organisational boundaries (Wright, 2009). As researchers argue, the organizational boundaries become rather blurred taking into account the difficulties of determining what is inside and outside of an organisation (Sturdy et al., 2006; Paulsen and Hernes, 2003; Garsten, 1999; Remenyi, 2003). As a result, outsourced consultants (further referred to as “inside consultants”) find themselves in between two organisations - their consultancy company and the client.

In order to make sense of this uncertain position of inside consultants we use the anthropological concept of liminality, introduced in 1909 by Arnold van Gennep. In his work *Les rites de passage* (Rites of passage) he argued that individual's life consist of numerous transformations of his or her social status. Those are linked to important events in one's life such as birth, social puberty, initiation, marriage or death. As the author continues, these human passages are sometimes accompanied by ceremonies or rites that help the individual to move from one clearly defined position, group or situation to another. Accordingly the rites of passage usually include separation, liminal and incorporation rites, although according to van Gennep not all these stages are equally important or equally elaborated. In this sense

the individual is first relieved from the possessed social status to enter the transitory stage of liminality and finally is reincorporated into the society with his or her new status.

Whilst van Gennep is concerned with the whole process of passage from one structure to another, Victor Turner (1967, 1969) focused particularly on the liminal stage and tried to expand the concept beyond the field of anthropology. In line with van Gennep he argued that liminality is a midpoint, a temporal stage through which individuals are passing in their journey from a structured society towards another structured society. Turner argued that the stage of liminality is non-structured, non-hierarchical and thus consisting of liminal entities that are all equal. Liminality is thus associated with freedom (of structure, rules, customs or law), but it is limited in time, as the individuals return in the end to the structured society.

Both van Gennep and Turner discussed the liminality period as being related to the sacred and profane world. However, they do so in different ways. Whilst van Gennep discussed the liminal stage as being a transition between profane and sacred world, Turner pointed out that transition is a sacred time and place in itself, as opposed to the profane times and places of the structured societies. In order to better understand the role of sacred and profane world in relation to the concept of liminality we turn thus to Mircea Eliade's work *Le sacré et le profane* (The Sacred and The Profane) first published in 1957.

In Eliade's theory, the sacred space is related to divinity and by analogy to the absolute Truth, the meaning of life. The profane space is the daily world in which people live, governed by trivial daily concerns, specific to the industrial society. People living in the profane world do not reflect on their condition. They have special places (place of birth, first love etc) that have a certain emotional value, but these places do not reveal anything about the deep meanings of life. Therefore these places are not entirely sacred nor entirely profane (they are qualitatively different, but they do not reveal the Truth about life). For van Gennep the passage from profane world to the sacred was possible through an intermediate stage. For Eliade the passage is possible through a hierophany (that literally means the revelation of the sacred). Sometimes there is no need for profound revelations that imply a more complex setting. In the daily profane life some signs are strong enough to remind the individual about the sacred world.

This paper argues that the application of the concept of liminality as introduced by van Gennep, further developed by Turner and supported with Eliade's work might be a useful way of exploring and mapping the organizational standing of outsourced (inside) consultants. Although application of the concept of liminality is not new in the field of consultancy and organisational studies, the category of inside consultants placed at the client site for longer periods of time has not been a subject of deeper research yet. As we argue, inside consultants' position and work identity is problematic and hardly determined. The intention therefore is to apply the concept of liminality to describe more accurately and fully the complex dimensions of the inside consultants' position, identity construction and their sense of belonging.

The view of inside consultants as liminal entities reveals much about how they construct their self-identities and cope with uncertainties of their position betwixt and between two organisations. In this respect we found that due to long periods of time consultants spent at the client site they tend to feel rather incorporated into the client company. Connecting to Eliade's theory they live in the daily profane world. There are though different objects and events that constantly remind them their real condition: they do not belong to a certain company, or at least not completely. They are not permanent employees and they do not feel as consultants either. These objects and events help them have constant "revelations" of another reality, of the sacred world (in Eliade's terms). These are in fact the moments when they fully live their liminal experience. Accordingly, liminality in inside consultants' lives becomes a never exhausted experience, a space that makes itself permanent. As a consequence of living in a liminal space we argue that consultants as liminal persons are not able to construct neither a persistent work identity nor a sense of belonging. Instead, they build liminal identities to protect themselves and overcome the insecurity and instability of their occupation.

By applying Eliade's concept of sacred and profane world along with the works of van Gennep and Turner on liminality our research gives a completely new perspective on the liminal experience lived in organisations. We argue that liminality is not a temporary and clearly delimited stage, but rather a process in itself, that constantly breaks the homogeneity of daily work organizations. Moreover we give liminality back its physical aspect, arguing that liminality is not only a mental space as described by organizational studies (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Sturdy et al., 2006; Garsten, 1999). Our research contributes thus to the development of the liminality theory in the field of organisational studies and explain

consultants' perception of their own organisational standing betwixt and between. Overall, the study adds to our understanding of the inside consultancy by providing a new insight into consultants' working life based on the liminality metaphor.

## **Outline**

The paper is structured as follows. First a methodology section is listed, presenting the study approach and drawing attention to the data collection and data analysis processes. Afterwards, a literature review on specific characteristics of consultancy practice is listed as a point of departure for application of the liminality concept. In this respect blurred organisational boundaries are highlighted as an effect of consultants being present at the client's offices, constructing close relations with client's representatives. Accordingly, a consultant's role as insider or outsider is discussed as regards the extent of his or her internalization or externalization in relation to the client. In line with this aspect a problematic construction of consultant's work identity and shifting loyalty is addressed. The third section of this paper presents a theoretical concept of liminality as introduced by van Gennep and further elaborated by Turner. To enhance the view on liminal conditions and thus contribute to the research area, the theory is expanded with the insight into Eliade's work on sacred and profane world. The most relevant researches conducted so far in the field of organizational studies are mentioned and critically discussed in terms of contribution to the field of liminality and limitations. Finally, the empirical study of inside consultants gives an insightful view on consultancy as liminal experience. We structure our discussion around four main themes: the rites of passage, the physical aspect of liminal space, liminality as strength and weakness and influence of liminality on consultant's identity formation and loyalty. Study results are discussed in the light of the literature reviewed from the previous sections. The conclusion presents the main arguments, reflections on the findings and overall contribution to the theory and practice of consultancy.



## **Methodology**

In order to investigate the liminal space and time of inside consultants we have used an interpretive approach as we believe that the assumptions and research activities associated with this approach can bring important insights to our research topic. Thus, in line with Deetz's (1996) description of the interpretative studies we have focused on the full personal experience (social and life functions beyond the work process) and on the physical workplace as an important site of human action. Our goal was to show that liminality is a complex experience, socially produced and maintained through norms, rites, rituals and daily activity.

Our research is based on ten interviews, taped and transcribed, observation of physical workplace at one of the client company and field notes taken during a series of informal hangouts over a period of approximately one year. This rather unparalleled access inside the consultants group was due to the fact that one of the researchers is usually spending some of her leisure time in the company of inside consultants (who make up an important part of her group of friends). This situation allowed us to have an in-depth understanding of the inside consultants' experience and also a more objective view on our data as the social interactions were rather genuine and not set up by the researchers in order to gather data for their research. Moreover, most of the interviews were held outside the working place in search of a neutral space that would encourage the interviewees to speak more openly. We wanted the interviewees to feel out of their daily liminal space and therefore as much as possible out of its influence during the interview process.

The diversity of empirical material and the different, combined methods used for gathering it (interviews, observation and informal hangouts) allow us to have a clear and in-depth understanding of the consultants' experience. On the other hand, we used different methods for collecting data as a way to compensate for the rather romantic approach on interviews that we used and that can otherwise end up in being extremely biased and controlled by the interviewer (Alvesson, 2003). We have also tried to approach the material as reflexive as possible, keeping in mind several aspects: our data do not mirror reality, but rather construct it; a complex empirical material allows alternatives lines of interpretation and re-interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldböck, 2000). Such methods and process of interpretation can not give rise

to generalized claims, but can provide analytical insight into liminality and emphasize new aspects of the concept.

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the interviewees to speak rather freely about their experience. Moreover, participants were assured of individual anonymity, as the goal of our research was to explore liminality of inside consultants in general and not the case of a particular individual or company. The duration of one interview was approximately one hour.

The sample of interviewees consisted of two women and eight men, aged on a scale of 28 to 40 years old. All of them are IT consultants with an experience of more than three years in the field out of which more than one year spent on the same client assignment, at the client's office. Most of them work currently for the same client, but come from different consultancy companies. Their contract at the client is for a determined period of six months or one year, renewable upon request or if needed. None of them provide the client with specialized expertise, but have rather the same tasks as the client's own employees and less responsibility inside the projects. We have excluded from our study IT specialists hired for short-term periods of time for the purpose of fast proposed and implemented solutions as we believe that a strong embeddedness at the client site significantly contributes to blurring of organisational boundaries and a more profound experience of the liminal space.

## **Literature review on consultancy practice**

### **Changing work patterns**

During the past three decades a growth of non-traditional working arrangements has been noticed in terms of temporary work and outsourcing (Bergström, 2001; Leighton et al., 2007). Many reasons of such development have been researched, the most significant including restructuring of industry, organizations' efforts to reduce costs, accessing highly qualified resources or focusing internal resources on core competencies (Lacity and Willcocks, 2009). Consequently, as pointed out by Leighton et al. (2007), contemporary organisations are very attentive when it comes to the number of permanent employees with a tendency towards continual headcount reductions. In this respect Remenyi (2003) emphasizes strict legislation protecting employees' rights in most of the European countries. Such legislation is leading to higher labour costs and reduced ability of organisations to flexibly reflect changes in their environment. A highly regulated labour market is also a case in Sweden, the country where we have conducted our research.

To deal with the situation and thus prevent costs and stay flexible and responsive organisations tend to hire skilled workforce through involving a third party. In most cases organisations outsource tasks or even whole departments not related to their core competence, such as HR, IT, marketing or accountancy. However, as Power et al. (2006) note, today organizations are likely to outsource also core services that support and sustain their competitiveness, brand image and reputation, including areas of research and development, innovation or software development. Outsourcing thus became a practice expanding in almost every field of business.

Besides new trends in organizations' practices and industry, a shift towards individualism among new generation of workforce has been observed (Leighton et al., 2007). People's work desires and expectations as well as ways of achieving them differ greatly from those of their ancestors. Whilst people born just after the World War II (so called baby boomers) sought for a work security and stability of long-life jobs, today workforce (so called generation Y) is very ambitious and looking for new experiences and challenges that might reduce loyalty towards a single employer (Hewlett et al., 2009). Time and place flexibility and opportunities

for both professional and personal development have become crucial for today employees acquiring entrepreneurial features. Compared to their older colleagues they are also more experienced in working and networking with people from different ethnicities and cultures. Having such characteristics, people in general do not stick to a single workplace, feel sceptical about mainstream corporate culture and are more willing to become freelancers (Leighton et al., 2007).

Both changes in society and desires of working individuals have created a breeding ground for expansion of outsourcing firms, employment agencies and work contractors of different size and specialization providing skilled workforce to meet the needs of client organizations. In this paper we are concerned especially with IT consultancy firms, whose outsourcing services have been the subject of recent development (Lacity and Willcocks, 2009; Saggi et al. 2007).

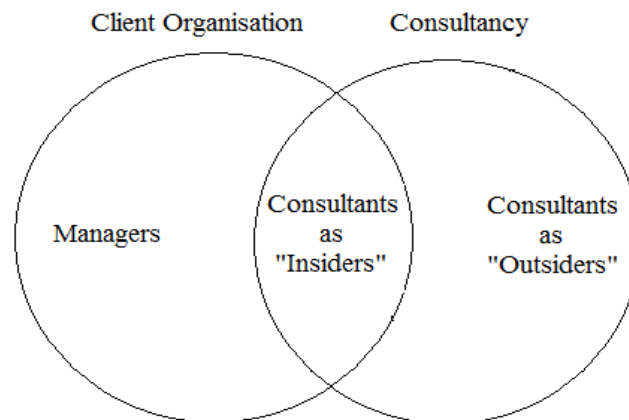
A rapid growth in the field of IT consultancy is linked significantly to computerization of the business world. The Internet and the Web revolution, the Y2K issue and a resulting need for implementation of new sophisticated systems represent drivers that led to an increased demand of organizations for IT services (Remenyi, 2003). In-house IT departments were no longer capable to deal with the constantly emerging requirements on IT systems and solutions. In order to handle the situation, organizations started to outsource much of IT related work through hiring skilled IT consultants.

Accordingly, IT consultants are hired by organizations with a lack of expertise, skills, and resources or those with a need for objectification and legitimation of action proposed by internal managers at client site (Sturdy, 1997; Kubr, 1996; Bennett, 1990). In this sense IT consultants are considered as experts in their field with a unique knowledge in hand. However, as noted by Kitay and Wright (2004), organisations might be also interested to hire IT consultants for more structured and routine tasks that are usually done by client's regular employees. IT consultants thus supports client to handle with insufficiency of employees or their temporary busyness with other assignments. Consultants' position at a client office is then described as an "extra pair of hands" rather than that of professionals with unique expertise (Kitay and Wright, 2004: 8).

## Blurring organizational boundaries

An increased use of consulting services brings on the questioning of organizational boundaries dividing an organization from the outside world (Remenyi, 2003; Domberger, 1998). As Kitay and Wright (2004) argued, hiring consultants has traditionally been seen as a simple purchase of skills and expertise by the client from an external provider. Such a perspective presupposes that organisational boundaries are clearly delimited, “with employees inside and others outside” (Kitay and Wright, 2004: 4). However, as Granovetter (1985) argues, relations with external providers might form strong social ties interfering client company’s boundaries, especially in the field of providing services.

Accordingly, Kitay and Wright (2004) distinguish between outsider and insider role of consultants. A key difference in roles is clearly visible in the figure the authors provided to depict the situation:



*Figure 1: Boundary Relationships of Consultants and Clients (Kitay and Wright, 2004:5)*

As the authors explained, the outsider role responds to the traditional character of a consultant based on market principles, where the boundaries between the client and the consultancy firm are relatively clear-cut. Consultant’s role in this respect is to provide appropriate solution to a given problem in reasonably short period of time, usually without the need to intensively involve the client. High fees of consultants often delimit duration of a contract that usually terminates as soon as the consultants have enough information to provide a report of findings and recommendations (Lacity and Willcocks, 1998). As a result, there is no time remaining

for consultants to engender a closer relationship with the representatives of the client company.

As Kitay and Wright (2004) suggested, there are both positives and negatives of such conditions. According to their research many outsiders praise their independence from client's politics and organizational culture. Practitioners also highlight valuable contribution of consultants' external perspective on activities and intentions of an organisation. Another asset for consultants is an opportunity to work on numerous assignments and thus gain a broad experience in relatively short time. On the other hand, several disadvantages of the consultants' role as outsiders have been revealed. These refer primarily to consultants' insufficient knowledge regarding the specifics of client business and thus applying rather general solutions. As argued by Fincham (2003), consultancy work is not merely about applying of consultants' knowledge but also about the ability to nurture good customer-client relations, which can lead to longer cooperation and establishing client's trust towards consultancy firm. In a similar vein Greiner and Poulfelt (2009: 2) pointed out that clients nowadays expect "their consultants to collaborate rather than to stand apart as lone objective evaluators". Internalisation of consultants has accordingly become commonly applied practice.

Consultants in the role of insiders refer to a relationship based on strong social ties between the client company and the consultants. In this case, consultants are firmly embedded within the client company usually for greater periods of time. An advantage of such relation is mainly that consultants familiar with the client's business are able to provide the most appropriate advice. As Sturdy (1997) pointed out, personal contacts and client-consultant close interactions also contribute to promoting of consultancy services. Accordingly, both the client and the consultancy profit from their intensive relations. In this sense organisational boundaries become blurred especially due to consultants' placement at the client office, which intensify the client-consultant interaction. Crossing of boundaries might be also caused by consultants converting to regular employees at the client site who thus become future clients for their former consultancies (Kitay and Wright, 2004).

## **Consultants as “Insiders”**

In this research we focus our attention on inside consultants working on long term assignments at a client’s office alongside client’s own employees. Such consultants are outsourced by their consultancy firms to become a part of a client’s team usually to cope with extra work or temporary projects when it is more convenient to hire a consultant than a regular employee. They do the job for the client company under a contract to supply highly qualified or standard services, depending on the client’s requirements. In most cases a client company provides consultants with necessary equipment and facilities (Leighton et al., 2007). A typical feature of such consultancy work is its temporary character (Garsten, 1999) as consultants work on a certain project for a period of time and after finishing it they move to another project for the same or a completely different client.

From the consultants’ point of view such working conditions can include both advantages and disadvantages, depending on the preferences of an individual. Leighton et al. (2007) suggest that this kind of consultancy work is praised especially by young and highly skilled individuals interested in greater mobility and eager to experience working on varying assignments in different work environments.

Motivations, aspirations or expectations of consultants and regular employees working alongside on the same assignment might differ (Leighton et al., 2007). While regular employees enjoy security and longstanding benefits of a permanent job (Kessler et al., 1999) consultants might take advantage of the flexibility and variety of assignments (Lee, 2007). However, consultants might also see their position as second-best, willing to switch to permanent employment if there was a chance as they might be eager for the feelings of security and stability that are linked with it.

As Leighton et al. (2007) pointed out; approaches and attitudes towards consultants in client organisations can diverge. In some cases consultants and regular employees are treated differently. The authors illustrated such a situation with an example of increased rewards favouring regular employees as an evidence of a client’s preference in their work. As the authors argue this attitude might be a result of managers’ scepticism towards a consultant status, praising the regular employment as the most effective work pattern. In some cases

managers demonstrate unwillingness to invest time and energy in consultants; perhaps even question their qualification and expertise (Willcocks and Plant, 2003). This might be a result of experiencing great dissatisfaction with hired consultants (James, 1998). Such drivers undoubtedly contribute to the fact that consultants usually represent only a marginal group of the workforce at the client organisation.

On the other hand, organisations can be found where consultants enjoy the same treatment as client's employees. They are respected for their valuable contribution that might be even greater than those of regular employees. In such cases managers usually hope that consultants transfer at least a part of their knowledge to regular employees (Koh et al., 2004). Leighton (2004) described such client organisations as rather new, highly specialized, and open to innovations, with flexible management practices and supporting equal opportunities at work.

### **Consultants' identity formation and loyalty issues**

Even though consultants are in general perceived as very flexible and adaptable (Garsten, 1999), they might find themselves struggling with construction of their self-identity due to specifics of the consultancy profession. Identity, as defined by Kuhn (2006: 1340) refers to "the conception of the self reflexively and discursively understood". For a considerable amount of time the concept of identity has been extensively discussed and problematized in the field of organizational studies (Alvesson et al., 2008; Cerulo, 1997). Scholars ascribe this research interest to the character of contemporary fast evolving society leading to "fragmented, discontinuous and crisis-ridden world" (Brown, 2001: 113). Such conditions often cause struggles during the process of forming a self (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

As working environment is a crucial place for constructing of self-identity (Miller and Rose, 1995), consultants are exposed to a new work identity formation each time they start to work on a new project. Accordingly, they might have problems to deal with a constant change of workplaces, the organizational culture they work in and their position/status in the client company. Moreover, consultants aware of a sooner or later change of workplace generally do not make a heavy effort to affiliate with colleagues at the client firm nor with other consultants at the consultancy firm (Garsten, 1999). They often become more reflective, with a greater self-control and watching carefully themselves (Brown, 2001). Consequently, the



notion of consultancy work usually disables the development of a community in the office (Garsten, 1999). A consultancy firm therefore has to strive in order to create a work community of consultants through strengthening their loyalty and enhancing their commitment to the firm. For this purpose, the firms usually organize various gatherings and parties where consultants have an opportunity to know each other better. The firms try to do their best in this respect as they are aware that a successful impact on consultants' identity leads to an increased loyalty and thus fewer consultants leaving their jobs (Alvesson, 2000).

The loyalty issue becomes even more sensitive when consultants end up working for a long time for the same client. As Leighton et al. (2007) emphasized in their research, such consultants easily become confused about their real employer. They tend to question whether their employer is the consultancy firm, which pays them, or the client firm they actually work for. It is common that under such circumstances consultants primarily identify with the client organisation (Alvesson, 2000) and while doing so they gradually dis-identify themselves with the consultancy company (Costas and Fleming, 2009). It is a natural and inevitable experience that manifests itself as a result of long separation periods from the consultancy company.

Obviously, a consultancy firm willing to retain the consultants has to deal with situations when consultants might be tempted to exit the firm and join the client organisation. Besides enhancing the consultants' loyalty, most used practices to avoid their defections include rules preventing the ex-consultants to become employees of the client for a certain period of time after they have left the consultancy company. Some firms even develop and spread negative stories about disloyal ex-consultants (Alvesson, 2000).

An influence of the consultancy firm on consultants' identity might be also decreased by the consultants' commitment to a profession. As Leighton et al. (2007) emphasized consultants conscious of having unique knowledge, with an entrepreneurial attitude, tend to be loyal rather to their own profession and career development than to the consultancy firm or the client organisation. However, as Alvesson (2000) emphasized, this is usually the case of "fully authorized" professions. Otherwise such loyalty is rather supplementary and not conflicting with the loyalty towards the consultancy firm.

As already suggested in the above text, consultants in the role of insiders are placed betwixt and between two organisations, in the space formed by blurred organisational boundaries. Here they have to form their self-identity and face all the advantages and disadvantages of such position. As the space is somewhere in between, consisting of features both of the client and the consultancy, academics has started to use the term “liminality” in order to describe the new experience of consultants (Garsten, 1999; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Sturdy et al., 2006). The concept, introduced by Arnold van Gennep in 1909 depicts a three-stage transformation process usually accompanied by special rites. A comprehensive definition of the concept as well as outline of research in organisational studies is provided in the next chapter.

As we discuss in the following text the liminality concept is relatively new in the field of organisational studies. Application of the concept enables us to go beyond already researched characteristics of inside consultants and investigate their uncertain position more in depth. Accordingly, through the liminality concept we want to explore the experience of inside consultants as regards their specific and hardly determined position. We are especially concerned what pros and cons insiders see in their uncertain position, how they approach constructing of self-identity and create sense of belonging. Our research in this respect brings a new insight into the specific category of inside consulting services.

## **The concept of liminality**

Used for the first time in 1909 by Arnold van Gennep in his work *Les rites de passage* (Rites of passage), the word “liminality” actually derives from the Latin word “limin-, limen” which means “threshold”.

For the French anthropologist “the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another” (van Gennep, 1960: 2). All these human passages are sometimes accompanied by ceremonies or rites that help the individual to move from one clearly defined position, group or situation to another. The rites of passage theoretically include rites of separation (preliminal rites), rites of transition (liminal or threshold rites) and rites of incorporation (postliminal rites), although according to van Gennep not all these stages are equally important or equally elaborated. During the preliminary stage the person or the group is detached from a previous, clearly defined environment, having its own rules and regulations. During the liminal stage the person or the group is to be found in a special position, outside an established environment and therefore outside the sovereignty of rules. While during the postliminal stage the individuals are reintegrated into a new environment and a new order of things, the passage itself being consummated.

In his work van Gennep identifies patterns of the rites of passage in a series of important events in the individuals’ life such as: birth, social puberty, initiation, marriage, death. The position of the rites may vary according to the event, but the underlying arrangement is always the same. “Beneath a multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs: the pattern of the rites of passage” (van Gennep, 1960: 191).

In order to better understand how the rites of passage are functioning, van Gennep brings into discussion the territorial passage. Today most people are passing easily from one civilized zone to another. But this was not the case some time ago when the zones were clearly defined by borders and neutral zones and the passage from one zone to another was accompanied by several formalities. In time, the neutral zones have shrunk till they were reduced symbolically to stones, beams or thresholds. The rites carried on the threshold itself are the transition

(liminal) rites. They are intended to show that at a certain moment “the individual does not belong either to the sacred or the profane world” (van Gennep, 1960: 186), but he or she is rather isolated, held in an intermediate position. For van Gennep this isolation presents two aspects: on the one hand the individual is weak because he or she is outside a group or society, but on the other hand he or she is in a sacred position as compared to the society that represents the secular world.

Although van Gennep was the father of the concept, it was not until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Victor Turner’s writings that liminality has become really popular. Starting from van Gennep three-stage structure of rites of passage, Turner (1967, 1969) paid a special attention to the transition (liminal) stage and tried to expand the concept beyond the field of anthropology.

For Turner there are two major models of human interrelatedness: one is structured, differentiated and often hierarchical with many types of evaluations, separating individuals in terms of more or less; the other one is unstructured and relatively undifferentiated, made up of equal individuals without position or rank who submit together to a general authority. Their submission is not due to some sort of legal structure, but is more rather related to the fact that this authority represents the tradition and the community as such. The latter type, named by Turner “communitas”, is recognizable in the liminal stage.

According to Turner a society can function adequately only if it experiences an oscillation of these two models of structure and anti-structure. The history has shown that sooner or later, individuals living in a community feel the need of organization and guiding authority. On the other hand if all these attributes of a structured society are maximized, they can produce a renewed strive for communitas. “Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all” (Turner, 1967: 7).

At the individual level, a higher hierarchical position should be reached only by those undergoing the liminal stage. It is only by living the experience of liminality that the individual can be really transformed into something more than he or she was before (the ontological transformation). “Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low” (Turner, 1969: 97).

Depicted in this manner liminality becomes a midpoint, a temporal stage through which individuals are passing in their journey from a structured society towards another structured society. Liminality is indeed associated with freedom (of structure, rules, customs or law), but it is limited in time, as the individuals return in the end to the structured society: "... in rites de passage, men are released from structure into *communitas* only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of *communitas*" (Turner, 1969: 129).

But liminality is more than a midpoint. For Turner, as well as for van Gennep, the liminal stage is a complex and contradictory stage, associated with both strengths and weaknesses. As strength, liminality means freedom, "realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (Turner, 1967: 7), stage of reflection and scrutinization of central values and axioms. Withdrawn from their structural society with its values, norms and regulations, the individuals are encouraged to think and pass judgments on their society. In isolation they found the perfect time and place for reflection. The total equality among the liminal entities due to the relatively undifferentiated aspect of their society as well as an intense comradeship can be also seen as important strengths.

As weakness, liminality is depicted as a stage of transition between two structures. "The liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial" (Turner, 1969:95). The individuals undergoing the liminal stage bear no longer the attributes of the structure from which they were previously separated. On the other hand they have not yet received the attributes of the structure in which they will be next incorporated. Their position seems to defy the logic as it is neither one thing nor the other and still may be both. This ambiguous and paradoxical aspect is even better emphasized if we mention that some cultures and societies associate liminal entities with both death and gestation symbols (Turner, 1967).

The liminal condition is not only ambiguous and paradoxical, but it is also invisible from a structural point of view. Individuals placed outside the structured society and therefore outside any classification or definition do not exist, can not be defined or perceived. "As members of society most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see, when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture. A society's secular definitions do not allow for the existence of a not-boy-not-

man” (Turner, 1967: 6). Liminal entities may have physical bodies, but no position inside the structured society, therefore they are structurally invisible.

Because of the invisible aspect, the liminal stage becomes often associated with a seclusion site where individuals are isolated from society and forced to follow the rules of silence. They have no voice, but also no status, no property and no insignia. All the objects or marks indicating an individual belonging to a defined group or society are forbidden in the liminal stage as the liminal entities are free, they do not have a sense of belonging. Sometimes even their names are taken away from them; all are assigned a common designation and are treated alike.

Liminality is not only strength and weakness, but it is also related to the sacred world. For van Gennep there is a clearly marked social division between the profane and the sacred world and the passage from one to the other is done with the help of transition rites. “So great it is the incompatibility between the profane and the sacred worlds that a man cannot pass from one to another without going through an intermediate stage” (van Gennep 1960:1).

Turner on the other hand pointed out that transition is a sacred time and place in itself, as opposed to the profane times and places of the structured societies. *Communitas*, the human interrelatedness manifested in liminality, “is held to be sacred or holy, possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency” (Turner, 1969: 128).

### **The sacred and the profane**

For a better understanding of these two concepts and their link with liminality, we should turn to Mircea Eliade’s work *Le sacré et le profane* (The Sacred and The Profane) first published in 1957. According to the Romanian author, there are two totally different types of space and time: the sacred and the profane.

The profane space is homogeneous, neutral, having no qualitative differences between composing parts. Inside this space, there is no point of reference, of absolute reality. The profane space is the daily world in which we live, deprived by any symbolism and deep

meaning. Therefore people living in the profane space have lost their true sense of orientation as they only move according to the immediate needs of the day. Their existence is incorporated into the industrial society where everything is governed only by trivial daily concerns.

By contrast the sacred space is qualitatively different. It is a space full of symbolism and deep meaning. It represents the absolute reality, the absolute truth, the *axis mundi* which literally means the centre of the world. Universe itself come to birth from its central point and stretched out towards the four cardinal points, hence the primordial importance of the centre as the beginning of everything. Sometimes spaces are built as a repetition of the birth of the world from a secret centre and expanding towards the four cardinal points, taking thus the shape of a square (the square as an *imago mundi*).

“Revelation of a sacred space makes it possible to obtain a fixed point and hence to acquire orientation in the chaos of homogeneity, to found the world and to live in a real sense.” (Eliade, 1957:23) As explained above, all profane space is the same, it has a uniform structure therefore it offers no point of reference. It is therefore hard if not impossible for individuals to orient themselves inside the profane space. From this point of view homogeneity may be seen as a negative rather than a positive aspect, chaos rather than order. The sacred space on the other hand is a brake of this homogeneity which helps the individuals orient themselves and at the same time reveals the absolute reality, the absolute truth, the meaning of life. This revelation of the sacred during the profane everyday world is called hierophany (the word derives from Greek *hieros* meaning “sacred” and *epiphaneia* meaning “appearance”). The hierophany may take the form of an event or an experience. Sometimes there is no need for a hierophany; certain symbols or signs that do not quite belong to profane world suffice to indicate the sacredness of a place.

Sometimes the profane and the sacred space overlap each other. These overlapping areas are privileged places that can make a qualitative difference in the ordinary daily life without claiming to represent the absolute reality or without revealing anything on the deep meanings of life. Examples of such places are: a person’s birthplace, the scenes of his first love or the certain places in the first foreign city he visited in youth.

But it is not only in the overlapping areas that the sacred and the profane meet each other. For Eliade as well as for van Gennep, the passage from the profane to the sacred space is possible through a liminal space and it is usually accompanied by rites. This liminal space may be represented by the threshold, a paradoxical place where two different worlds oppose each other but can also communicate to each other. In order to better understand the concept, we shall give three clear examples of such liminal spaces. The first example, mentioned by Eliade (1957) in his work, is the door of the church. The threshold in this case is the physical limit, the boundary of two different worlds: the sacred that reveals itself inside the church and the profane space of the streets in which the church is situated. At the same time the door of the church represent a symbol and a vehicle of passage from one space to the other.

The second example, presented in Eliade's work but also in anthropology (van Gennep, 1960), is the threshold of the human habitation which by analogy has become a place of great importance where different rituals of passage are performed: from the common shake of hands to the more sophisticated offering of sacrifices to some guardian divinities.

The last example of liminal space is also provided by anthropology (Turner, 1969) and is related to a tribe ritual. The Ndembu tribe in Africa is recognized for practicing matrilineal descend. Because of that, women's condition is one of struggle between fulfilling their duties as wives (following their husbands and rising children together with the husband in the husband village) and venerating the ancestral shades (contributing with children to the membership of their matrilineal villages). Thus some of the women that keep on residing with their husband may be caught with infertility by their matrilineal shades. The curative rites are meant to make the women remember those shades, so that they can continue to live with their husbands and still be able to bear children. The right relation between matriliney and marriage is thus restored. The place for performing the rituals is situated outside the village and is circled by branches of trees which are meant to delimitate the sacred space. "In this way a small realm of order is created in the formless milieu of the bush" (Turner, 1969:23).

Similar as structure to the sacred space, sacred time represents a break into the homogeneity of the profane time. "Just as a church constitutes a break in plane in the profane space of a modern city, the service celebrated inside it marks a break in profane temporal duration." (Eliade 1957:72)



Sacred time represents a primordial mythical time made present periodically through festivals. By participating to these festivals, the individuals are stepping out of the profane time and are entering the sacred time or the time of origins. During this passage the individuals are symbolically reborn, begin life over again with their vital forces intact, as the sacred time is indefinitely repeatable, circular, it does not pass, it is never exhausted. The return to the time of origin receives thus a regenerative function. But in some occasions this eternal return to a time of origin, to a past that is mythical, may be perceived as an impediment to human progress and creative spontaneity.

Profane time on the other hand is just “ordinary temporal duration, in which acts without religious meaning have their setting” (Eliade, 1957:68). It is linear and irreversible: it flows between birth and death, between a definite beginning and end. Profane time is closely related to an individual’s existential dimension.

### **Organizational studies and liminality**

Organizational studies have only recently adapted the concept of liminality in order to explain the new space and time created by the rapid changing environment of modern society. Among the most important papers on the topic we shall mention Tempest et al. (2004) on individuals working in inter-organizational projects, Garnsten’s (1999) on temporary employees, Zabusky and Barley (1997) on professionals who identify neither with their organization nor with their professional group and not least Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) and Sturdy et al. (2006) on management consultants. All these studies are based on the work of van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1967, 1969, 1982).

Because our case-study is also based on consultancy experience, we critically discuss especially the last two articles mentioned above. Moreover we further emphasize new aspects of liminality by enhancing van Gennep’s and Turner’s concept through Eliade’s work.

Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) paid a special attention to the consulting process that transforms a normal organization into a liminal one. Their working definition of liminality is the following: “a condition where the usual practice and order are suspended and replaced by

new rites and rituals” (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003: 267). The focus is both on outside consultants and employees who experience liminality as a profoundly unsettling experience, though in totally different ways. The entire process follows the classical three-stage structure of rites of passage established by van Gennep (1960): separation, transition and incorporation. It begins with the project start-up meeting (seen as incorporation for the consultants and separation for the employees), continues with the sharing of documents (transitional stage) and ends up with the presentation of the report (separation stage for the consultants and re-incorporation for the employees).

In this case the outside consultants are seen as always travelling back and forth, in and out of the liminal space, as they travel from one client to another or from one project to another. Although they experience a short period of transition while working on short term assignments, their relation with the clients remains though the traditional one based on market principles. We even argue that Czarniawska and Mazza’s (2003) attempt to describe the consultant condition as a liminal one is not very successful. They build their case starting from the external locus of control, seen “as a central facet of liminality, both in anthropological studies and in the practice of consulting.” (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003: 277). According to Czarniawska and Mazza’s, liminal entities have no control over their time or their actions. Going back to the anthropological studies we can see that liminality is actually associated with lack of structure and freedom. It is true that Turner (1969) mentions in his work that sometimes liminal entities abdicate control, but they become submissive only in front of general authority, an instructor or an elderly person who represents the tradition and the sacred space. Therefore, we argue that the external locus of action and time control in the case of outside consultants is not a clear case of liminality, or at least not similar with the case of external locus presented by the anthropological studies.

Sturdy et al. (2006) on the other hand bring new aspects of liminality into discussion. They argue that back-stage management consultancy such as business dinners can be seen as multi-structured, comfortable and strategic liminal spaces as opposed to the classical view that presents liminality as an unstructured and unsettling stage (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969, 1967; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003).

“Liminality can be far more structured than simply following ritualistic phases of transition” (Sturdy et al., 2006: 953). As liminal experience, business dinners are situated between work

and leisure, between professionalism and friendliness, between insider and outsider. Still organizational routines and structures (such as organizational hierarchy and functional division) as well as social routines (associated with dining, sociability, gender and class) remain an integral part of the liminal space.

Thus, instead of following the classic three-stage structure of rites of passage, Sturdy et al. (2006) structure their research around three layers of the liminal process and their specific rites. The three layers are represented by the dinner at the CEO's home, the dinner at the castle and the dinner at the pizzeria. Each layer brings different and valuable insights on the creative process of building liminality as according to Sturdy et al. (2006: 950), "liminality cannot be taken for granted. It is an ongoing social achievement...".

According to Sturdy et al. (2006) some organizational members (notably managers and outside consultants) use liminality actively in order to achieve important tactical objectives: assess trustworthiness, explore and shape political dynamics, test and sell issues. For these individuals liminality is no longer associated with anxiety and alterity, but it is rather a regular and normal haunt, a comfortable experience.

Another important contribution brought by Sturdy et al. (2006) to the field of liminality is their questioning of the unstable and transitional aspect depicted in anthropological studies as well as in organizational research. For Sturdy et al. (2006) liminality is a space that exists in parallel to formal organizational spaces "a traditional rather than a modern practice, where official secrets continue to grease the wheels of commerce" (Sturdy et al., 2006:929).

As regards our research, we have focused our attention on inside consultants because we believe that their special condition make them experience liminality in a different manner. Working at the client's site for long periods of time, the consultants tend to gradually identify themselves with the client and at the same time dis-identify with the consultancy company. The process sometimes goes so far as they seem to forget about their "betwixt and between" condition. But in all our cases, sooner or later the consultants are confronted with certain objects, events or rituals that remind them who they really are: liminal entities, doomed to linger in that liminal area forever, unless they do not choose to give up to the consultancy experience.

In line with Sturdy et al. (2006) our research questions the transitional and temporal aspects of liminality. If Sturdy et al. (2006) find elements and traces of organizational routines and structures in the construction of the liminal space; in our research the situation is reversed. We find that elements and traces of liminality are constantly present in the organizational life. For the inside consultants investigated liminality is not just one clearly defined step in a more complex process of passage from one organization to another, but rather a constant series of breaks into the formal organizational experience. Similar to Eliade's sacred time, liminality becomes for the inside consultants an experience indefinitely repeatable, never exhausted. Using Eliade's theory regarding the sacred and the profane and the manifestation of the sacred into the profane, we find that liminality is a private "hierophany", a succession of short but intense moments when reality reveals itself.

Based on Turner's description of liminality as strength and weakness, we also propose a more complex picture of the consultants as liminal entities as compared to the image drawn by Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) in their study.

We conclude that although liminality does not have a clearly defined structure and a fixed place in a classical three-stage process of passage it can have a bigger and more destructive influence on identity and loyalty formation. As a result, all the inside consultants we talked to were seriously considering to change their working experience and become truly integrated as permanent employees.

## Case study

Our research interest was centred on IT consultants who are outsourced by their consultancy firms to provide long-term (multi-year) consulting services. A distinctive feature of such consultants is their work placement at the client offices. Having 40-hour-a-week contracts renewed usually every six or twelve months they work on assignments along with client's regular employees. Accordingly, they are in the role of insiders, having close relations with representatives of the client company. As their job content is usually identical with that of the employees, this category of consultants is considered as an additional pair of hands rather than experts. In this sense consultants we focus on are hired to cope either with extra work or temporary projects when it is more convenient to hire a consultant than a regular employee. Although they are categorized as temporary staff within the client companies, their contracts are usually renewed over and over again. As a result they often end up working for the same project at the same client with the same people for several years more or less like regular employees. Each time they work exclusively on a single assignment. The client companies where they are assigned are usually located nearby consultants' residence so that consultants do not have to travel long distances or move around the country.

It is necessary to emphasize that due to the objectives of our research we focus neither on a single IT consultancy firm nor on a client organisation. We are rather interested in the experience of the above discussed category of IT consultants. Our interviewees are employed by different consultancy firms and contracted to three client organisations (further referred to as companies A, B and C). Still, similar characteristics of consultancies as well as client organisations could be identified. As regards the consultancy firms, common features included very flat organizational hierarchies with no ranking between consultants and just a small management team, good relations with the client companies based on longstanding cooperation and delivery of IT outsourcing services on the Swedish market. The client organisations on the other hand represented big reputable companies with a common practice of hiring inside consultants. The intention of such companies is usually to retain a certain level of flexibility and save labour costs especially due to strict legislation protecting employees' rights. In some cases consultants represent almost 50 % of the client's workforce. Admittedly, the ratio is very fluctuant according to the market and the client's needs. In case the number of consultants is too big, the company stops renewing their contracts or even tries

to convert consultants to regular employees. Obviously, due to the general terms of the contracts between client companies and consultancy firms, a conversion of consultants has to be done indirectly by consultants applying for a permanent job at client site.

The empirical study of IT consultants gives an insightful view on consultancy as liminal experience. The following study results discussed in the light of the presented theory are divided into four main themes: the rites of passage, the physical aspect of liminal space, liminality as strength and weakness and influence of liminality on consultant's identity formation and loyalty. Our main arguments, reflections on the findings and overall contribution to the theory and practice of consultancy are than reviewed in the conclusion part.

## Discussion

### General setting

As mentioned before in this paper, we are interested in applying the liminality theory to the inside consultancy experience as we believe that the special settings of this position may reveal new aspects on liminality.

Being an inside consultant and working for long periods of time at the client's office creates a special setting and frame of mind. In a first stage, inside consultants are usually hired by the client for a period of six months. They are the "extra pair of hands" brought in to help the client cope with a busier period of time during a certain project (Kitay and Wright, 2004). At this stage the ties between the consultants and the consultancy company are still strong. The position is still closer to that of traditional consultants who know that their time spent at the client's office is limited.

But in most of the cases the contracts are renewed over and over again and consultants end up working at the client's office till further notice (more or less like a permanent employee). When asked for how long they have been working on their current assignment, some of them answered:

"Well ... it seems like forever! I started in March 2008, so it is two years and one month." (Simon)

"I started in April 2007, so ... three years ago. It is a long time!" (Sven)

It is at this stage that the inside consultants start feeling more and more part of the client company and less and less connected to the consultancy company. This is explained by one of our interviewees as follows:

"After you work for a while at the client's office you consider the place as your real job, you feel that these are your colleagues, this is the place where you work. So you feel a little bit strange when you go to your mother company. The environment there

is strange. When you enter the employer's office you do not feel like being at your company, the company where you work." (Alfred)

As expressed by Alfred, long term assignments at the client office will inevitably determine consultants to build a strong relation with that particular place and with the people working there. The environment at the client company becomes their daily reality, their real job. Therefore they feel rather confused when travelling back to the consultancy company. In moments like this (that our interviewees live quite often as we will further show) inside consultants realize that for them there is also another reality, that of the mother company. This special setting transforms liminality into a series of constant brakes of organizational experience, constant revelations of different realities. Instead of being just one clearly defined and temporary stage into the usual passage from one company to another, liminality becomes a never exhausted experience, a space that makes itself permanent. As opposed to the settings described by Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) or Sturdy et al. (2006) where consultants can exit the liminal space once they end their assignment or their business dinner, our interviewees are tied to one position that actually represents their job.

In order to support our stand we will further discuss van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage applied to our case study, but we will also emphasize the importance of the liminal physical space represented by the consultants' office and build a complex picture of the inside consultants as liminal entities.

### **The rites of passage – incorporation/ separation**

The specific way the consultants talk about their experience have indicated that the rites of passage are not clearly delimited and temporary as presented by van Gennep (1960), Turner (1967, 1969) or Czarniawska and Mazza (2003). The classical three-stage process: separation-transition-incorporation (or incorporation-transition-separation as in the case of consultants presented by Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003) is not the model followed by our interviewees. In our case study each stage becomes a process in itself: it starts in a certain point (the consultants' first day at the client office), but has not a clearly determined end (as the contract with the client is renewed over and over again). As we will further show, consultants are



confronted with separation, transition and incorporation in almost every day of their working life.

Instead of passing from one temporal stage to the other, the inside consultants experience a gradual process of incorporation into the client office/separation from the consultancy company. We associate this process with the organizational daily experience and the profane world (Eliade, 1957; Turner, 1982). While inside their daily profane world, consultants have constant revelations of another reality, that of the consultancy company, which make them live the liminal experience at the same time and pace with the incorporation/separation process.

In line with Czarniawska et al. (2003), the first day at the client's site, when consultants are presented to the rest of the team, may be seen as the starting of the incorporation process. This is how some of our interviewees described their first day at the client office:

“My boss went around with me and introduced me to a lot of people. He took care that I have my badge, and my computer and my own place where to sit.” (Lisa)

“On the first day I have been told to be at the client's reception at a certain time. My manager from the customer's site was waiting for me there, took me to the building and showed me my office, my desk, who are going to be my colleagues and he explained me, what I will be working with, when I will get all administrative rights, accounts and everything else. It took a while; not everything happened during the first day. There are some administrative steps in order to get access to the source code and everything else so it takes a while. I think it took about a week until I actually got my computer and my access rights.”(Alfred)

The inside consultants receive a badge containing the client's logo and the consultant's name and picture. It is their birth certificate proving their belonging to the new society and their passport allowing them access inside the client's offices. The badge is actually a very important insignia: nobody can enter the company without it, even if the person is recognized by the colleagues and if for some reasons there are persons inside the company without a badge they may be escorted to the entrance by anybody at any time.

They also receive a desk, a computer, administrative rights to use the client's network, an e-mail account and a designated place within a team: physical and non-physical "gifts" welcoming the stranger to a structured group and proving his or her belonging to the group. According to van Gennep (1960) when a traveller is incorporated into a new society he or she will receive first of all a place to stay (in our case consultants receive a physical office). This new home will entitle the newcomer to have access to a series of benefits and facilities belonging to the group, more or less like any other member of the group. All these offerings are a clear sign of the individual incorporation into the new society. In the same vein, the physical office, the administrative rights and the e-mail account become clear symbols of the consultants' presence inside the client company structure.

The ceremony of showing the consultant around performed by the project manager is an important part of the incorporation process. The fact that an authority is performing the ritual gives the event an additional weight. It is an official recognition of the consultant as member of the group.

On the other hand, the consultants' first day at the client office may be seen as the beginning of the consultants' separation from the consultancy company. According to van Gennep (1960) the incorporation into a new society equals with relinquishing the ties with the former society to which the individual used to belong. Sometimes the consultants even receive, when leaving the employer, a temporary identity card with the logo of the consultancy company, the consultants' name, their e-mail address and phone number at the consultancy company. This paper is supposed to facilitate their very first entrance at the client's premises and represents "a sign of recognition which incorporates the traveller into the other group" (van Gennep 1960: 37).

However, as van Gennep mentioned "the traveller's departure does not completely separate him from the society to which he originally belonged" (1960: 37). The departure is only the first step into a long process of separation from the consultancy company (respectively incorporation into the client company). These processes that run alongside become more and more obvious as the period of time spent by the consultant on an assignment increases. As explained by one of our interviewees:

“They (consultancy company) want us to attend the meetings. They send e-mails stating that we should attend and they also mention it to you when you talk to them. But then I just say that I could not come, that I had to work and make money and they don’t make a big deal out of it. Now I have been around for a while. I guess newcomers are expected to attend and they probably go after them and tell them. I can just call and say I am not coming.”(Kevin)

According to Kevin, the newcomers are more controlled by the mother company, but in time, consultants tend to gradually dis-identify themselves from the consultancy company. They are trying to build a more stable work identity so that they do not feel so much tear apart between two realities. Sometimes, the processes of separation from the consultancy company/ incorporation into the client company go so far that the only elements keeping the consultants tied to their consultancy company seem to be a contract, the salary and the yearly evaluation meeting. There are only small details left that seem to prevent the processes from having a clear end. When asked to describe their relation with the consultancy company some of the consultants have argued:

“My wages are coming from that way, but other than that ... I don’t know. There is not that much interaction with them. Sometimes you can have a feedback from your manager. If it is a good time, it is easier to have a discussion, but in bad times they don’t even bother to talk ... They try to get you involved in different things, but that is mostly nonsense.” (Kevin)

“They are trying to keep some kind of closeness, but I don’t know ... If you feel good with your assignment, if you like the environment at the client site you kind of have more cohesion and a warmer relation with the client.” (Simon)

Arrived at this point of their journey, the inside consultants seem to have forgotten almost everything about their “betwixt and between” condition. They seem rather incorporated into the client company and separated from the consultancy company. They live in Eliade’s (1957) profane world, where everything seems to be neutral and homogeneous, with no qualitative differences between the parts. It is a world where they feel part of the client company more or less like any other employee:

“I work everyday here at the client site so I feel more like I am working for this client than I am working for a consultancy company.”(Sven)

“From the work perspective, it doesn’t matter if you are an employee or a consultant. Everybody gets the same treatment. If you are inside a project, it doesn’t matter who pays you. You are in a team and work as a team.”(Alfred)

The fact that inside consultants are actually connected to two realities and have two work identities (consultant and employee) may create a feeling of constant tension and anxiety. Therefore in their attempt to build a more stable work identity, they are constantly trying to deny one part of the equation, namely the consultancy company. However, our findings indicate that their attempt is not very successful. All along their journey the inside consultants are confronted with objects, rituals and events that constantly remind them of their situation: not-employees-not-consultants and yet both. Based on Eliade’s theory on hierophany and clear examples from our interviews, we shall further illustrate how inside consultants are constantly living a liminal experience.

### **Hierophany – the liminal experience**

The liminal experience is situated at the border between the profane and the sacred world (Eliade, 1957; van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1982; Czarniawska, 2003). According to Eliade (1957) the passage from the profane daily world to the sacred world (which represents the absolute reality) is possible through a hierophany that may take the form of an event or a ritual. Sometimes there is no need for a profound revelation that happens in more complex circumstances. In everyday life certain signs can be strong enough to become reminders of the sacred world, without being proper vehicles of passage from one world to the other.

Applying Eliade’s theory to our case study we argue that although inside consultants seem trapped in the daily profane world of work organization, they have constant revelations of a different reality that transform liminality into an indefinitely repeatable, never exhausted experience.

Incorporated into the client company, inside consultants stop reflecting on their real condition; as one of our interviewees said: “You don’t really think of it after a while.” The office environment seems to become homogeneous, with consultants and employees being identical parts of one company.

However, according to our findings there are several signs, rituals and events that constantly reveal a different reality. Our interviewees are neither employees, nor consultants and yet they are both. Their place is neither inside the client company, nor inside the consultancy company, “or may even be nowhere in terms of any recognized cultural topography” (Turner, 1967:7). It is during these revelations or hierophanies that inside consultants fully experience their liminal condition. Therefore, in line with Eliade’s theory, we argue that liminality is not a clearly delimited, temporary stage as depicted by van Gennep (1960), Turner (1967, 1969) or Czarniawska et al. (2003), but more rather a series of repeated brakes into the homogeneity of daily organizational life.

In what follows we shall illustrate the hierophany concept and how reality reveals itself through signs, events and rituals giving examples from the experiences of inside consultants and critically discussing their meaning.

### *Signs*

According to Eliade (1957) there are several signs that may open the passage from the profane to the sacred world. These signs are objects or symbols that do not quite belong to the profane world and that are constant reminders of the sacred world.

Sturdy et al. (2006) are also talking about “boundary objects”, objects that belong rather to the workplace and therefore their presence during the business dinner is considered an intrusion and a threat to the comfort of liminality. The consultants and the managers taking part at the dinner have no problem in talking business, but they become rather anxious when business documents from the work place became visible.

During our research we have noticed that inside consultants are surrounded in their daily activity by objects or symbols that do not quite belong to the client’s world. They are either insignia of the consultancy company or objects that being different from the standard ones are

not associated with the corporate image of the client. We will further provide some example and shortly comment on them.

Our first example is the consultants' "business poster". Some of the consultants have at their desk in the client office a paper with their name and picture, their professional contacts (e-mail address and phone number) and also the consultancy company logo. This paper is posted in a visible place so that, any colleague that may need the consultants' help while the consultants are not in the office may be able to reach them. The inside consultants work daily in the client office, but their image is literally associated with the consultancy company logo.

As argued in the previous section of this paper, badges are important insignia, proving the individuals' belonging to the group. The inside consultant receive them in their first day as a sign of incorporation. But the colour of the badges is different in all the client companies we had access to. In one of the client companies for example the consultants have grey badges and the permanent employees have orange ones.

"I am grey, so I am a consultant and orange ones are employees. That is how you can distinguish us."(Lisa)

When asked if they usually notice the colour of their colleagues' badges some of the consultants said they never look for it:

"Most of the people don't even know actually if you are a consultant or a permanent employee. That's how people are interested in the label of their colleagues!"(David)

At a first glance it seems that David is not bothered at all by this difference, but latter on, during an informal conversation he confessed that he is always keeping his badge attached to the pockets of his trousers. This may be seen as a compromise between the rules of the company (stipulating that the badge should always be visible) and his desire of hiding his outsider mark.

There are also consultants for whom the badge is actually very important and they do express it openly. For them the badge is a symbol that defines a person's identity inside the working space:

“I check the badges for two reasons: one is to see their name, because sometimes you don’t hear the name or people just do not introduce themselves. I like to know who is who and what their names are. And then I automatically see the colour.”(Lisa)

It is therefore clear that for Lisa the colour of the badge is a constant reminder of her betwixt and between condition, of her frustration of being part of two companies and yet part of none of them.

The corporate e-mail address is another important sign that reveals the difference between permanent employees and consultants. Inside consultants receive their new e-mail addresses at the client company during their first week as part of their “welcoming” package. But the noticeable difference becomes a constant reminder of their liminal condition:

“If you are a consultant you have an «ex» from external in your e-mail address. You will always be remembered that you are a consultant. You are a part of the group, but you are a sort of not.”(Lisa)

The fact that inside consultants are constantly exposed to those signs - symbols of a different reality as compared to the daily organizational life – make them struggle with a non-coherent sense of belonging, with the tension and frustration of an instable work identity.

### *Events and rituals*

Anthropology as well as organizational studies have emphasized the importance of social events such as common sharing of the food, celebration of different important moments or team-buildings. Whatever the form or the reason for the gathering, being on the “guest list” is a clear sign of belonging to a particular group. Outside the working space, where organizational rules and regulation are lessened, individuals are able to communicate much easier and form stronger ties with the group (Sturdy et al., 2006; Rosen, 1985).

In our case study, the social events organized by the client company open up the space for new revelations:

“...some sections allow the consultants to participate if they pay their own bill, other don't allow the consultants to participate at all. There are also sections that ask the consultancy company to help sponsor the event. Then everyone participate. It is different; it is very much up to the manager of the department.”(Kevin)

Some of the inside consultants are invited to those events (just like any other employee), but the fact that they (or the consultancy company) pay for the bill is a clear sign of their position as outsiders (Sturdy et al., 2006). They are thus again confronted with their real situation: betwixt and between inside and outside, being part of a team and yet not part of it.

As concern the consultants' reactions, they range from finding more or less rational excuses for them not being invited till clear expressions of frustration.

“The big company parties are only for employees and I can understand that. We also have parties at the company where I am employed and they are only for us. There should be a difference between consultants and employees.”(Lisa)

Lisa, for whom badges, e-mails and all the other corporate signs are really important and frustrating as they clearly emphasize her outsider position at the client office, pretends all of a sudden that “there should be a difference between consultants and employees.” Her contradictory statements can be seen rather as a struggle to construct a coherent work identity and sense of belonging.

David on the other hand, pretends that he does not even notice the differences in corporate signs, but he is clearly bothered by the fact that he is treated as outsider and therefore not invited to the party. His statement sounds more like a hurt ego than like a declaration of indifference:

“We are not invited to the big parties organized by the client company, but they are usually bad anyway. I would not go even if I were invited.”(David)

While Alice, another consultant working for the same client as David and Lisa, is clearly expressing her disappointment, even anger caused by this particular aspect of her position:



“My manager has a party once a year and then I am invited. But you are not invited at the company’s parties which are usually for their own employees. And sometimes you get really annoyed. You work here and you will anyway find out because ten minutes later someone will come up and tell you, but you do not even receive the e-mail.”(Alice)

The fact that inside consultants are not all the time on the guest list can not be regarded as a revelation in itself. But the ritual of inviting or non-inviting people opens up the space for reflection, unfulfilled expectations and hurt feelings. It is the moment when inside consultants have their hierophany, a profound revelation of another reality, totally different from the homogeneous profane world of daily work.

There are not only the parties that reveal serious discrepancies between employees and consultants. Some of the meetings held at the client site are also important moments when reality breaks the homogeneity of daily organizational experience.

“Sometimes there are only employees meetings and then you know that the people not going are consultants. But it does not bother me. I usually take it as a calmer hour when I have time to do my stuff. And anyway the information comes to us in a latter stage. We get much of the information; just sometimes the employees get the information before us. Sometimes you really want to know that information because lately they have done a lot of restructuring and you want to know who is laid off and things like that.” (Lisa)

“ ... you are not invited to all the meetings at the client’s site. I mean they might have sensitive information they don’t want to disclose, but problem is that sometimes they might also discuss technical or work related stuff which would be good to reach you as consultant as well and which is absolutely not something secret which they want to hide, but they just don’t realize.”(Simon)

Although they do not say it openly and even try to hide their interest in the administrative or technical information revealed, inside consultants feel excluded from the team. As in the case of the other examples provided, they are faced with a continuous questioning of their identity as insiders.

The special moments of the year when usually people stop for a while from their daily activities and become more reflective, are also set as moments of revelation of the truth for our interviewees. It is the time of the year when they are directly reminded that they were outsiders and that they should always express their gratitude for being incorporated. It is a continuous return in time to the moment of their first day at the client office and to the beginning of their incorporation. As one of our interviewees told us:

“Just before Christmas they (client company) start asking the consultants where are the candies, because the consultants are always bringing candies for Christmas. It is like a tradition. It is a way of showing your gratitude. You have big bowls with candies and people are usually coming by and taking some. It is even a little bit of a competition on who brings the best candies as some departments have consultants from different companies. And if we bring bad candies, they let us know. It is always in a funny way, but they still say it. But this is it. You know that it is going to happen and you should not bother, although it does bother me sometimes. I am like everyone else. It should not be a difference. I know that there is a difference. But this is not the greatest place on earth to work for. If it was I would be really grateful. But like this, I can do my work somewhere else, I think.” (Lisa)

It seems that for Lisa this is the moment when she has the most profound revelation. She seems to notice and be bothered by all the signs, events and rituals that reveal her another reality. But the candy moment is a climax for her, her major hierophany. She feels almost humiliated as at this particular moment not only her identity as a consultant is destroyed, but also her entire identity as a professional is questioned.

### **Physical office – the liminal space**

Van Gennep (1960) as well as Turner (1969) have constantly underlined the importance of the liminal space for the entire ritual of transition. Anthropological studies offer numerous descriptions of such spaces. There are physical spaces full of symbolism and magical powers. Most of them are built according to some very well established criteria, outside the village of the tribe (outside community) and delimited by a real or symbolic line from the wild space around them. They are held as sacred spaces where the rituals are performed and where the liminal entities are sometimes kept in isolation.

In organizational studies, liminal space is to be found within the boundaries of the work organization itself. (Tempest et al., 2004; Garnsten, 1999; Zabusky and Barley, 1997; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003) although sometimes exceptions may come up as in the case of Sturdy et al. (2006) who studied the liminality of business dinners. But in most of the cases the purely physical aspect is lost. Liminal space becomes a virtual space. Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) describe the consultancy experience as happening in the same time and place as the proper work organization, but in a different space. “A liminal organization shares its legal boundaries and physical environment with a proper work organization, but it forms a virtual space, experienced differently by consultants, than by the regular employees.” (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003: 273). We agree with this, but we take the analysis one step further and prove that liminal space may also keep its original physical aspect assigned to it during the period of anthropological studies.

Having their own space in the client’s office is one of the most important aspects that makes the inside consultants to identify with the client (Kitay and Wright, 2004). The feeling is even stronger if we take into consideration the fact that our interviewees do not actually have their own office at the consultancy company. Their only office is the space provided by the client. But the rules regarding the distribution of the offices inside the client companies we had access to make a clear distinction between permanent employees and consultants. Liminality becomes thus more than just a mental space. It is also a clearly defined physical space. This is how an interviewee described the office at the client company where he is working:

“There are open spaces where about six people sit in a cubical and there are offices for two persons and individual offices. Typically consultants stay in the open spaces while the offices with one or two persons are for employees.”(Sven)

Immediately after this neutral description of the office, Sven felt though the need of defending the quality of the common space, his space, probably as a way of building his self-esteem in a world where his professional identity is constantly questioned:

“But it is ok. I mean at the end of the day it is more convenient to share a place with many people than with one person that is not so sociable.” (Sven)

On the other hand we have to take into consideration that liminal space can also be a positive experience, not only a negative one (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969; Garsten, 1999). As Garsten (1999) discussed, liminal space may also encourage creativity and be even a desirable working condition. In the same vein, one of our interviewees argues that:

“I like having my own place very much. I was a little bit worry at the beginning to share my office with so many people, but now I am pleased, because as soon as I have a problem someone in the office may know how to fix it. So it is a very good working environment.” (Lisa)

The arrangement of the offices seems to follow closely the pattern described by Turner (1969) in his anthropological studies: the liminal space is always delimited by a real or symbolic line from the surrounding space. In the same manner, all the cubicles in which consultants usually sit are somewhere in the middle surrounded by the individual offices of employees. The two types of offices are separated by a corridor, while the entire structure of the building has the shape of a square.

The way the physical space is arranged reveals the reality beyond the apparent homogeneity of the working environment. The office space of inside consultants is a space full of symbolism and deep meaning, the axis mundi, the centre of the world as described by Eliade (1957) in his work. Moreover, as Eliade argued, sometimes people build their spaces as a repetition of the birth of the world from a sacred centre and expanding towards the four cardinal points, taking thus the shape of a square. This emphasizes the importance of the centre of a construction as the place where the passage from daily profane world to the sacred world representing absolute reality becomes possible.

### **Inside consultants as liminal entities**

Arrived at this point on our paper, there is no doubt that inside consultants are liminal entities, situated betwixt and between the consultancy company and the client company, betwixt and between inside and outside. But liminality means more than an ambiguous and paradoxical situation. According to van Gennep (1960) and Tuner (1969) liminality is weakness and strength at the same time. Situated outside the structured society, liminal entities are

structurally invisible, silent and isolated; they have no possession and even no name. On the other hand, liminality is also a stage of reflection, associated with freedom and equality.

Based on the above-mentioned characteristics and on concrete examples from our interviews, we will further build a complex picture of inside consultants as liminal entities.

As argued by Turner (1969) liminal entities placed outside structure can not be defined or classified. A structured human society such as a proper work organization does not recognize an individual that is not-employee-not-consultant. The individual occupying such a position is thus structurally invisible which also means that he or she has no voice and no name.

“I do not like my assignment very much, but I can not talk with my manager from the client site about my problem. It is more like a silent agreement. He probably knows that I do not like my job very much (I have sent it in my feedback), but he is pretending not to see it and I do not talk about it with him.”(Lisa)

“Sometimes you try to find opportunities for new assignments and you mail your mother company. But I have not heard anything after that. So I don’t know if they really take your suggestion seriously, if they see the opportunity in the information you gave them.”(Max)

The two examples above show clearly that consultants’ feelings and thoughts are not taken into consideration. Individuals being outside a defined structure, or in the case of inside consultants belonging to two companies and yet to none of them, do not exist, they have no assigned place, therefore no right to speak and no name.

“When they come and offer drinks they pretend to be our friends, but we know that we are just numbers.”(Sven)

“Most of the time they want a consultant that is discrete, just no name consultant.”(Kevin)

The fact that inside consultants are ripped off their names is not only a sign of their structural invisibility, but also a method of establishing equality among them. Names are usually seen as

a strong element of individualization. Without a name, all persons are anonymous, therefore all the same.

As Turner (1969) has mentioned in his work, liminality is associated with total equality and non-differentiation among individuals. As long as there are no rules and regulations categorizing people into good and less good or bad, all the individuals are the same, they are all on the same level. In the same vein, our interviewees mentioned that there are no different levels of hierarchy such as junior and senior associated with their position. Moreover, it seems that the price paid by a client for inside consultants is pretty much the same. There are few rare exceptions when a consultant has experience in a rather unique area of expertise with not so many competitors on the market that a company is willing to pay more.

A liminal entity placed outside structure has no rights, but no obligations either (Turner, 1969). When comparing themselves with the permanent employees (people having their clear assigned place inside the structure), consultants realize that they have fewer rights and responsibilities.

“... as a consultant you don’t have the same benefits as the real employees. For example, you can’t have both laptop and desktop, you have only one computer, and the employees have both. Another example, they give you a SIM card but they don’t provide you with a phone. You have to come with your own phone or a phone from your consultancy company. And also for technical courses which are organized inside or outside the client company. Your company has to pay for them. Sometimes, if you want to attend them, there is no place, because the number of places is limited and employees have a priority to attend them. There are some differences from this point of view.” (Alfred)

“They want to put employees on positions of authorities and responsibility because naturally you do not want to rely on consultants who are only hired as help. The disadvantage relates to the fact that you can not advance. You can get some minor responsibilities, but you can not get to the real levels of authority and responsibility as a consultant. It is very hard.”(Kevin)

In Turner’s (1969) terms, no responsibility means freedom. But if we look at our interviewees’ statements, it seems that this is a freedom that they do not appreciate. For them

having fewer responsibilities is definitely not strength, but weakness. As mentioned by Kevin above, consultants can not advance in rank, as they will never be entrusted with more responsibilities usually related with important positions.

Max, a consultant working for the same client, also thinks that the lack of responsibility is a weakness, although he is talking about a totally different situation:

“...if I do not have any requirements or benefits from the consultancy company, I do not feel like part of it. It may work, but it is not a good way. Rules and regulations could make me feel more responsible towards my consultancy company. They just say do your job and earn some money for us. It is mostly like that.”(Max)

It is clear that for Max, having no responsibility means no sense of belonging either and he does not seem to enjoy this kind of freedom. He would prefer to take on more responsibilities and feel more like belonging to the consultancy company and not struggling with a feeling of isolation and loneliness.

Although they seem trapped in the daily profane world, where the work schedule is very tight and demanding, inside consultants do find the time and the space to reflect on their condition. The “confessions” that we get during our research are a clear proof in this sense. Being outside the structured society of a work organization they can actually pass judgment on it as anyway, their voice will be never heard or taken into consideration.

### **Identity and loyalty in liminal space and time**

As Miller and Rose (1995) suggested, the work environment to a great extent influences the forming of self-identity. Whilst for ordinary employees it is usually “a place of stable identities and everyday work” (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003: 273), for inside consultants work environment is characterized rather as a liminal space. In such space, as argued by Sturdy et al. (2006: 930), “relatively settled identities, routines and rules disappear. At the same time, new blurred or transitional identities, routines and norms are opened up”. In this respect Zabusky and Barley (1997) used the term of “liminal identity”. Based on their study of industrial scientists they demonstrated the existence of liminal identity on an example of

insufficient commitment of professionals identified neither with the organisation nor with the profession. In a similar vein we argue that inside consultants also possess liminal identities, though not as a result of being between a profession and an organisation but rather between their consultancy firm and the client company. This is because the essence of inside consultancy work is closely related to consultants crossing boundaries of a client organisation for longer periods of time. As a result they find themselves in a “liminal space where they are neither inside nor outside the client organization or consulting firm” (Sturdy et al., 2006: 933).

In this respect forming of consultants’ identities is continually influenced by their mother company and client organisation alike (Garsten, 1999). Both parties are concerned in this respect, although having different intentions. Whilst for a consultancy company retention of consultants is crucial as they represent its core competence, client organisation wants a consultant identified with its goals and values in order to work effectively.

In line with this argument inside consultants outsourced to the client organisation are expected to restrain their own intentions and adopt those of the client, to be flexible and adapt quickly to the client’s work environment (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Garsten, 1999). This is also a case in our research, where IT consultants must be prepared to adapt to and internalize the rules and practices according to the instructions given by managers at the client site:

“In each project, I have to adapt to the way the team members in my group work. If the customer says something I have to follow it and adapt to its rules.” (Alfred)

According to our findings, even inside the same company the rules and regulations may differ significantly from one department to the other or from one manager to the other. Therefore if the consultant is assigned with a new project at the same client organisation, he or she still needs to be prepared for changes. As Alfred put it:

“It depends on a manager in such a big customer’s company. Each manager can come with his own rules within his own group.” (Alfred)



Accordingly, working for an organisation whilst being employed and paid by another organisation might cause consultants struggling with building coherent self-identities and a sense of belonging. According to Sturdy et al. (2006) consultants „may experience significant uncertainty about their own identity, position and routines”. In a similar vein Leighton et al. (2007) discussed consultants’ puzzlement about their real employer, whether it is the consultancy firm, which pays them, or the client firm they actually work for. The consultants we interviewed are not an exception in this respect and confirm the arguments of the authors mentioned:

“Sometimes I feel that I do not know to whom I should be loyal to: is it the consultancy company or the client? Sometimes you just switch from one to another.”  
(Lisa)

“I am paid by my consultancy company and I get my salary according to the discussion with the manager at my consultancy company, but is the customer who see the actual result of my work and how I integrate to team, how much effort I put into work. So the consultancy company doesn’t have direct observations on this. It is only in the form of a feedback form and they receive it from their customer. Sometimes there are things that the company can’t see that the customer can omit.”  
(Alfred)

Both Lisa and Alfred confirm their confusion of relatively discontinuous and fragmented character of inside consultancy. Such puzzlement, as Garsten (1999) argue, might result in consultants’ difficulty to attach themselves to colleagues at the mother company or at the client site. In our case study consultants are indeed detached from their colleagues at the mother company, but they feel quite close to the people with whom their work on a daily basis at the client site. Max and Simon put it very clearly:

“I think I feel more connected to the people around me, with whom I work. I think it is hard for consultancy firms to form a team spirit. I think it is very hard for them to do that in a good way. “ (Max)

“...it is not easy to keep in touch with a mother company. You start to make friends and get to know people at the client site. Of course, there are meetings and pubs and

stuff like that at the mother company, but when you are in the heat of the work, you kind of don't really find a time anymore to participate.” (Simon)

Simon's and Max's quotations fully grasped the experience of all the inside consultants interviewed. While feeling strongly connected to the client company, consultants detach themselves from their consultancy firms. However, even though consultants feel closer to their colleagues at client site, they are not able to fully integrate and internalize themselves to the client company either. The consultants we interviewed are very well aware of it:

“You feel much like a regular employee and often you are treated as a regular employee. It is these small things that are different. Some meetings you are not invited to like all employees meetings. And you don't have all the benefits as employees have.” (Max)

In his statement Max emphasized “small things” that make him realize his consultant's position. As he pointed out, these things may refer to meetings or specific benefits received only by regular employees. Here again a hierophany is spotted as a variety of situations and moments constantly reminding consultants of their betwixt and between position. These situations often contribute to the internalization of feelings of substitutability and vulnerability, while constructing their liminal identities. Lisa expressed her experience in this respect as follows:

“...you hear every now and then that you should be grateful to be here. It sounds a little bit hard, but they (a client organisation) can always exchange you for someone else, you are aware of it. But the first times you hear it you can get a little bit scared.” (Lisa)

As Lisa put it, for the first time a consultant might be scared. However, as the time passes, one gets used to such conditions and internalizes them, with an impact on his or her identity.

In accordance with our findings we argue that consultants as liminal persons with hardly definable positions, betwixt and between two organisations build liminal identities to protect themselves and overcome the insecurity and instability of their occupation. Such identity based on individualism helps them to handle this particular situation.

## **Consultancy firm's efforts to gain loyalty**

The rather loose character of work arrangements between consultants and a consultancy company asks for extended efforts to strengthen consultants' „personal engagement, loyalty and shared visions” (Garsten, 1999: 615). The Consultancy firms, highly aware of the possible decrease in commitment and loyalty of their consultants, put a great emphasis on creating a community and nurturing good relations among the consultants. Therefore the consultancy companies try to enhance organizational belonging by organising regular informative meetings, social events, informal gatherings, team-buildings and such. They strive for creating the extended organizational identity described by Turner, B. (1971: 79) as “an internalization of boundaries outside the individual”. Such identity is demonstrated by consultants who behave and react as if their mother company were a part of them. However, none of the interviewed consultants demonstrated signs of extended organizational identity. This goes along with our argument that inside consultants do not possess a stable identity, as their ambiguous position does not enable it.

According to our study the inside consultants appreciate the efforts of their mother company to create a feeling of togetherness, but this depends largely on the duration of their employment with the consultancy company. Whilst at the beginning of their career they believe that the activities organised by the consultancy company are very important, but as the time passes they tend to rather ignore them:

“...we have breakfast meetings, business unit meetings and once a month is a pub night outside the working hours when we meet somewhere and go to a bowling club for instance. ...I guess I have been ignoring these meetings for like one year. ..I don't even remember the last time I attended them...” (Simon)

By not attending the meetings organised by his consulting company Simon demonstrates his detachment from it. In line with this Costas and Fleming (2009) discussed a process of consultant's workplace dis-identification. As the authors argued, consultants dis-identify themselves from organizational domination by forming more authentic identities. Using cynicism, humour, scepticism or irony one tries to handle the discrepancy between his/her feelings of “real me” and the role one has to play at work to sustain a sense of authenticity.

During the interviews with the inside consultants we observed such behaviour in several cases:

“When they come (managers of the consultancy firm) and offer drinks (during a social event) they pretend to be our friends but we know that we (consultants) are just numbers.” (Sven)

„I never talk to the mother company (regarding problems at work) because I know that they do not probably even know what I am doing. Sometimes the person I contact at the mother company asks me who my manager is.” (Kevin)

Both Kevin and Sven with an amount of cynicism and scepticism describe their experience when it comes to their consultancy firms. In line with the concept of liminality their dis-identification might be viewed as an evidence of separation, van Gennep’s initial stage in the more complex process of rites of passage. According to the theory, during this stage one gets rid of his or her social status before being incorporated into another organized structure. Similarly, a consultant feeling more and more connected to the client company dis-identify and detach him/herself from the consultancy firm.

### *Wild-goose chase*

Garsten (1999: 616) argues that despite endeavours of consultancy firms to support a feeling of togetherness “the notion of community remains a seductive idea and a promise, undermined by the increased individualization and reflexive monitoring.” Our research revealed facts supporting and evidencing Garsten’s argument. As Max and Sven put it:

“I don’t feel like belonging to any company. I feel very independent.” (Max)

„...first of all I am not their employee. I know the way the company operates but I do not feel like part of the client company. Maybe when they gain in front of their competitors I feel a little bit of pride. But I will not put the name of the client on my bag... and not the name of my mother company either. Maybe because I am split between the two I am not fully into one.“ (Sven)

These statements indeed depict inside consultants as relatively independent and unaffected by the efforts of consulting firms to create a sense of belonging. Moreover, interviewed consultants expressed doubts about the effectiveness of these endeavours:

„I get more benefits from my client. They are more interested in seeing me developing than the mother company. The mother company is more interested in seeing me having an assignment and bringing in money to the mother company.”  
(Max)

“...the first year I started at the consultancy company we went to France to sky. We went to different events and so on ... Every second Friday we have either meeting at the office or lunch out in town... we have informational meetings once a month...”  
(Max)

In line with his statements Max does not seem to be affected by the efforts of his mother company, although he admits there are regular meetings, events and even trips outside the country organised for inside consultants. Max in particular offered a very critical view of his consultancy company, proving a very low level of loyalty:

“I think it is not very high profiled consultancy firm. I wouldn't brag about working for such a consultancy.” (Max)

Decreased loyalty towards consultancy firms has been also a case of other interviewed consultants. Most of them expressed willingness to join the client organisation or to accept a job offer as a regular employee:

“Yes, I would definitely consider joining of the client if I was offered a job, although not on my current position.” (Lisa)

In this respect consultants see a permanent employment as an opportunity to leave their liminal condition and enter a world of structured work placement.

As we found there might be several causes of consultants' loose ties to their consultancy firms. Obviously, it is primarily their work placement at client offices that affects them and presupposes rather sporadic contact with their mother company. Even though consultancies

organise regular meetings and events, most of them are optional what leads to the consultants' tendency not to attend them. Even if a consultant does not attend informative meetings he or she does not lack information as they are usually accessible through the web.

Another cause of consultants' decreased loyalty seems to be their lack of motivation in terms of almost non-existing chance for a career move within the company due to its usually very flat organisational structure:

“Well, there are like three positions (in the management of the consultancy company), so there are no chances (to be promoted). It is an extremely flat, matrix organization.” (David)

“As a consultant you don't get an opportunity to make a career or advance in the ranks so to speak. You have your competence and your specialties. I mean when you are hired as a consultant, you are hired to do a specific job which is almost always related to what you are already specialized in. There is much less opportunities to learn new things and advance and get more responsibility. Because when they hire a consultant they want someone who is good at this particular thing they need. That is what you do and that is why they hired you for.” (Kevin)

Both David and Kevin expressed their frustration regarding their career development. Such perspective is contrary to the desire of most consultants who choose this profession because of their high ambitions and eagerness to gain a broad experience. In this sense a career development is a crucial motivator and undoubtedly a mean of enhancing loyalty and creating strong ties to the company that employs them.

## **Conclusion**

Although the field of consultancy in general is a broad researched area, we think that the particular category of consultants in the role of insiders is not sufficiently addressed by the academics. In order to get a clear picture of how this category of consultants perceives their inside experience we have applied the anthropological concept of liminality.

Liminality according to van Gennep (1909) and Turner (1960) refers to a transitory unstructured space and time where all individuals are equal. Protected by rites of passage individuals are getting ready for entering their new social status while leaving a previous one behind them. Liminality is characterized by freedom of structure, rules, customs or law whilst being limited in time, as the individuals return in the end to the structured society. Accordingly, one's social passage consists of three stages – separation, liminal period and incorporation. The concept was initially introduced to describe human rites of passage in anthropological studies, e.g. birth, marriage or death. Further research has however developed the topic and thus enabled its application to broader areas of study (Turner, 1969).

In the course of the last few years, liminality has been repeatedly used also in the field of organizational studies, especially to investigate implications of shifting organizational boundaries. Consulting has not been an exception in this respect. Applying the liminality concept academics tried to explain effects of close consultants' cooperation with a client company (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003), temporary character of consultancy work at client site (Garsten, 1999) or the strategic importance of business dinners in the work life of consultants (Sturdy et al., 2006).

The essence of inside consultancy we focused on in this paper inheres in consultants' full time placement at client offices. Such a working condition leads to blurring of boundaries between the client organization and the consulting company. Consultants find themselves in between, being part of both organizations but at the same time part of none of them. Accordingly, we found the liminality concept very useful for exploring in depth the category of consultants in the role of insiders and for revealing new facts about their experience.

To explore the inside experience even further, we broadened the already applied theory on liminality with Eliade's work providing a more specific view on the meaning of sacred and profane world. Whilst van Gennep understands liminality as a transition between profane and sacred world, for Turner liminality is a sacred space in itself. For Eliade however, the profane space is the daily world in which people live, governed by trivial daily concerns, specific to the industrial society. To certain places, such as place of birth or of meeting their first love they attach emotional value, however these places are not entirely sacred nor entirely profane, as they do not reveal anything about the deep meaning of life. Accordingly, the passage from sacred to profane is possible through a hierophany referring to moments or events revealing the sacred space, the absolute reality.

The main contribution of this paper is therefore to show that liminality is not a clearly defined and temporal stage in a more complex passage from one structure to another as depicted in the anthropological studies (van Gennep, 1960; Turner 1967, 1969) and organizational studies (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003) alike. Bringing to light Eliade's theory on sacred and profane spaces and applying it for the first time to consultancy experience, we have showed that liminality can be regarded as a constant, never exhausting series of brakes into the organizational life. Confronted daily with signs, events and rituals, inside consultants have constant revelations of a different reality from the one in which they live. They are betwixt and between the consultancy company and the client company, between inside and outside. They are neither employees nor consultants and yet they are both.

Because of the specifics of their work (long term assignment at the client office), inside consultants are going through a continuous process of incorporation into the client company and separation from the consultancy company. At a certain point they end up living in Eliade's profane world, a homogeneous company with employees and consultants working alongside as part of one team. While inside this profane world consultants experience private hierophanies, moments of profound revelation when they fully live their liminal condition. As we have showed in our paper, the hierophanies may take the form of events (parties and meetings) and rituals (the consultants' offerings of candies for Christmas) that are able to open up the space for reflection, unfulfilled expectations and hurt feelings. Sometimes there is no need for a profound revelation which takes place in more complex circumstances. In the consultants' everyday life certain signs can be strong enough to become reminders of their liminal condition. These signs are objects or symbols such as badges, corporate e-mail



addresses, posters in the client office with the consultants' contact details. They are either different from the standard ones associated with the corporate image of the client or they belong to the consultancy company (like the business poster). Each example provided (each piece of empirical material) brings new insights on how inside consultants experience their liminal condition and is a clear proof of our stand regarding the never exhausting aspect of liminality.

Another important contribution that our paper brings to the concept of liminality applied in organizational studies is the complex picture of inside consultants as liminal entities. Starting from Turner's (1969) detailed description of liminal condition we have conducted an in-depth analysis of our empirical material and concluded that liminality is rather weakness than strength. In the case of our interviewees, liminality is an ambiguous and unsettling condition which makes them feel structurally invisible, silent and isolated. They do not have a clearly assigned place within a structure; therefore their opinion is usually not taken into consideration, they do not have the same rights as the employees (people placed inside the structure) and they do not feel like belonging to any company, but rather isolated. Even the characteristics that Turner (1969) mentioned as strengths, namely freedom and equality among liminal entities, have another meaning for our inside consultants. While some of them have mentioned that being an inside consultant brings them the advantage of switching much easier than permanent employees between projects, most of them complained of a confused sense of belonging, lack of responsibilities and almost no possibilities to advance and build a career. Therefore, freedom associated with lack of responsibilities and no sense of belonging and equality are regarded in our case as weaknesses rather than strengths. The fact that all of our interviewees are seriously considering to become permanent employees is no surprise in these circumstances.

The third and last contribution brought by our paper is the emphasis on the physical aspect of the liminal space. Organizational studies depict liminality as a mental space, an experience that happens in the same time and place with a work organization, but in a different space (Garnsten, 1999; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Tempest et al., 2004). We agree with this, but we take the analysis one step further and show that liminal space may also keep its original physical aspect assigned to it during the period of anthropological studies. According to Turner (1969) liminal space is first of all a physical space full of symbolism, a sacred place built outside the structured society and delimited by a real or symbolic line from the place

around it. Eliade (1957) is also emphasising in his work the importance of the sacred centre, as the very place from which the Universe itself was born. Surprisingly or not, the inside consultants' offices follow closely the same pattern: consultants we interviewed sit in cubicles with other persons. These cubicles are situated in the middle of the office space and are surrounded by individual offices where usually sit the permanent employees (representing the structured society). The inside consultants' office in itself becomes thus an important element of the liminal experience and therefore a place full of symbolism.

In contesting the temporal and clearly delimited aspect of liminality, in highlighting its physical aspect as well as in applying liminality to the rather unique and interesting work experience of inside consultants, this paper has touched upon important aspects that have not been adequately addressed by organizational studies. To draw this paper to a close, we would like to suggest three areas that deserve further investigation. The first is liminality itself. Here our analysis has showed that liminality in organizational life is a complex experience that means so much more than a betwixt and between condition. We pointed out some instances in which liminality manifests itself and how exactly it manifests. But there is considerable potential for developing a more in-depth analysis of liminality inside organizational life and of its influence on building work identity and loyalty towards a company.

The second area is related to the physical aspect of the liminal space. Although neglected by organizational studies, the physical liminal space had a major importance in the age of anthropological studies. We argue therefore that a closer look and a bigger attention paid to the physical space of the office as well as to the rules and regulations regarding the distribution of offices (if any) may reveal interesting aspects of liminal experience and of building a work identity inside the liminal space.

The final area with potential for further research is that of inside consultancy. There are numerous studies written on external consultants (consultants hired on short term assignments, providing special expertise) as well as permanent employees. But the important and interesting category of inside consultants is not so much taken into consideration by organizational studies, proving maybe once again their structural invisibility as not-consultants-not-employees individuals.

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