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Involuntary career Transition and identity Within the artist population

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine artists' experiences of involuntary career transitions and its impact on their work-related identities.

Design/methodology/approach

Semi-structured interviews with 40 artists in the Netherlands were conducted. Self-narratives were used to analyze the findings.

Findings

Artists who can no longer make a living out of their artistic activities are forced to start working outside the creative realm and are gradually pushed away from the creative industries. This loss of their creative identity leads to psychological stress and grief, making the professional transition problematic. Moreover, the artistic community often condemns an artist's transition to other activities, making the transition psychologically even more straining.

Originality/value

This study provides in-depth insights into how artists deal with changes in their work-related identities in the light of involuntary career transitions.

INTRODUCTION

In the past, careers were thought of as linear pathways of individual development within a stable employing organization (Schilling, 2012). Now, many workers encounter interruptions, setbacks, highlights and downtimes during their working lives as they follow meandering career paths that feature many organizational and thematic changes (Sabelis, 2010).

It follows that in today's labor market, which is characterized by more or less fragmented contexts, people continuously shape their identities (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008) in line with context and opportunity. One of the major risks associated with non-linearity is that of sudden and involuntary unemployment, which threatens workers across firms, occupations and industries (Lippmann, 2008). Changing labor market dynamics can also prompt and at times force workers to explore the labor market (Briscoe and Hall, 2006), transit between jobs, companies or sectors, or change careers altogether.

These factors present additional challenges to self and identity (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008), therefore understanding work-related identity transitions is particularly important in cases of non-linear and boundaryless careers. This is an understudied area in the HRM literature and little attention has been paid to how people claim work identities that are seemingly discontinuous, or how they otherwise deviate from socially scripted or highly institutionalized trajectories (Ashforth, 2001).

The qualitative study reported here sheds light on the situation of workers who are forced to work in a different industry. We look at how they experience this transition, how they deal with the loss of their professional identity, how they "sell" this involuntary decision to others, and the influence of their environment.

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in three ways. First, it provides insights into how individuals cope with involuntary career transitions. Such transitions are both costly and increasingly prevalent, and they have received only limited attention from

HRM scholars. Second, the study sheds light on the coping mechanisms of affected workers and the reactions of others. Third, by adopting a focus on the arts, where career commitment tends to be strong and careers are often precarious, the study illustrates that involuntary career transitions can involve the loss of an important professional identity and can encompass psychological stress and grief.

CONTEXT

The prevalence of involuntary transition in the arts is such that the artist population presents a unique opportunity to look at how career change influences work-related identity transition. This study focuses on workers in the Netherlands, where over 130 000 individuals are active as artists (Statistics Netherlands, 2011). These artists often hold multiple concurrent roles (according to Schreven and De Rijk, 2011, 16% versus 7% in the total working population) and, similar to artists elsewhere, they are likely to experience multiple career transitions (Bennett and Bridgstock, 2014). Moreover, previous research in the Netherlands has shown that between 60 and 70 per cent of graduate artists cease their artistic activities in the first four years of professional life (Schreven and De Rijk, 2011; Van Winkel *et al.*, 2012). In the study reported here, the primary reasons for attrition were given as economic, familial, or multiple unsuccessful entry attempts.

LITERATURE

Identity

For this study we adopted a commonly used definition of identity as a ‘self-referential’ description that provides contextually appropriate answers to the question, ‘Who am I?’ (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008). Identity construction in organizations has been conceived as a

mutually co-constructive interaction between individuals and social structures (Ybema *et al.*, 2009). While people may have many identities, some are more central to self-definition and are more deeply embedded into daily life, while others are relevant only in specific contexts and situations (Leary and Tangney, 2005).

Previous researchers have distinguished between how individuals identify themselves—their subjective identity—and how they are portrayed in external discourses: their objective or social identity (Watson, 2009). These two identities are not always in line, and incompatibility between the two is understood to cause dissatisfaction with work and career (Bennett, 2009; Mills, 2004). People who are intensely involved in two or more different social worlds premised on different identities have to manage competing role demands, which can lead to identity conflicts or tension. They also have to make different, sometimes opposing public representations of each world. As a consequence, people can feel fragmented (Ibarra, 2003) and can oscillate between ‘holding on’ to and ‘letting go’ of established identities (Shepherd, 2003).

In the case of artists, deep emotional commitment to career (Duffy *et al.*, 2011) and the artist identity as the ‘authentic self’ (Costas and Fleming, 2009) implies that workers who no longer perform artistic activities may continue to identify as artists; yet there is little understanding of how these individuals negotiate potentially opposing identity states and inconsistent engagement with their desired careers as artists.

Identity transition

Identity transition refers to the process of questioning and eventually disengaging from a central identity while exploring and eventually integrating another (Ibarra, 2007). Previous studies on the process of identity transition (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Cunha *et al.*, 2010; Kennett-Hensel *et al.*, 2012) have identified three phases understood as separation (detaching

from the old sense of self), transition or ‘liminality’ (resolving ambiguity inherent to this indeterminate state), and reconstruction (establishing a new sense of self).

An assumption in models of work identity transitions has been that one work identity ends when another begins (Ibarra, 2003). More recently, however, researchers have acknowledged that identities are fluid and that multiple identities can co-exist (see Whittle *et al.*, 2009). Co-existence was of particular interest in the current study because our previous work with artists (authors, forthcoming) suggested that taking on a new identity might not involve the end of another work-related identity. Rather, we hypothesized that the addition of identities might generate a shift in how one sees and experiences the self in an already established work role. We thus acknowledged the possible co-existence of several identities.

Separation

Models of voluntary career transition commence when workers make a decision to change. This signals the end of the current situation and a decision to look for something new. In cases of involuntary transition, however, we argue that the separation phase might be more complex and is likely to feature loss, uncertainty and psychological stress.

Researchers generally agree that people first have to deal with their loss of work-related identity and the associated emotional reactions (Bonnano, 2009) before they can construct a different identity. This process can be thought of as a process of ‘grieving’ where the restoration of self-image after failure requires the release of the fulfilment obtained from that which has been lost (Freud, 1917). In the ideal case, individuals emerge from a work-related identity loss with a stronger and more authentic sense of personal identity. Having internalized a new identity that provides a coherent sense of self (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010), the loss triggers identity development (Dutton *et al.*, 2010) and growth (Maitlis, 2009). Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014), however, argue that workers who do not successfully

traverse the first phase of transition may experience on-going identity instability. These workers may be cognitively and emotionally consumed by loss, which stagnates their ability to let go of the old self and/or to embrace the new and changed self.

Transition

Work-related identity has been defined as “aspects of identity and self-definition that are tied to participation in the activities of work ... or membership in work-related groups, organizations, occupations, or professions” (Dutton *et al.*, 2010, p. 266). A work-related identity loss triggers an interruption to the existing identity whereby an individual lacks or loses a self-defining connection to an important social domain such as work (Ashforth, 2001). It creates the need for the development of a new sense of self and involves a liminal state between letting go of the old and moving on to the new (Conroy and O’leary-Kelly, 2014).

The most commonly discussed forms of liminality in occupational life concern cases of retirement and job loss, as a result of which a person is literally devoid of identity (Ashforth, 2001). The importance of the liminal period is emphasized in the extant research. The liminal period is defined by a dynamic process of self-construal, and Ashforth (2001) suggests that experiences in the liminal period determine whether an individual quickly assumes a new identity or experiences disorientation and a sense of meaninglessness.

A similar theme concerns the ‘vacuum’ experienced by role exiters (Ebaugh, 1988). In line with research on objective and subjective selves, research on voluntary transitions suggests that people with multiple commitments can experience liminality as a period of acute identity conflict (Ibarra, 2003) during which a “multiply-defined self” has multiple, incompatible definitions (Baumeister, 1986: 199). While it has been argued that a liminal period exists during career changes that are voluntary, the transition period is likely to be more complicated in cases of involuntary career change.

Reconstruction

As noted earlier, the re/construction of identity is enacted in the interplay between the individual's subjective 'self-identity' and the objective 'social-identity'. During the re/construction phase, individuals create identity narratives that must be socially tested and validated (Maitlis, 2009) in order to create a new and feasible story of self (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Central to this process is the informal, social context, which refers to subtle validations and invalidations received in interactions with one's environment (Ladge *et al.*, 2012).

The disorienting nature of identity interruption motivates individuals to progress through phases of transition. In the final phase, individuals are understood to emerge from a period of liminality and reconstruct their work-related identity. This 'reconstruction' is defined as a significant change in a role that a professional has enacted over time and which has been considered self-defining (Chreim *et al.*, 2007).

In the ideal case, then, individuals go through a grieving process and then, having accepted their loss, they start to construct a new work-related identity. This paper explores whether workers who are forced to transition may move to the reconstruction phase before regulating loss emotions and validating the loss narrative. It also asks how they navigate this transition process and how others view it in their community.

METHODOLOGY

Self-narratives are stories that make a point about the narrator. This study draws on self-narratives to gain more understanding of how artists experience an involuntary identity transition from creative professional to non-creative worker. By means of stories, people give coherence and continuity to multiple and ambiguous experiences. Furthermore, telling a story

helps people create meaning (McAdams, 1996) and increases the likelihood that their identity claims will be granted (Ashforth, 2001). The rationale for using self-narratives in this study was strengthened by the findings of previous research that has noted the use of self-narratives to manage strain in work identity (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) and to explain work role movements (Ibarra, 2003). Self-narratives are also acknowledged to help people revise and reconstruct identities during work role transitions (Glaveanu and Tanggaard, 2014; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010).

Artists tend to identify strongly with their profession. At the same time, the artist occupation is socially undervalued and many artists work more hours outside the creative industries than within them (Bennett, 2009; Mills, 2004). As a result of this paradox, it has been argued that professional status is derived largely from the construction and maintenance of an artistic identity and its effective communication to others (Bain, 2005). Moreover, our previous research suggests that artists might continue to identify with their artistic identity even when they no longer derive income from their arts work (authors, forthcoming).

Previous studies have argued that theory building can best be examined in extreme contexts because the dynamics being studied are more visible (Eisenhardt, 1989; Pratt *et al.*, 2006). Since artists feel strongly about their artistic identity, forcing these workers to execute non-creative activities is likely to strongly influence their sense of self. By using self-narratives to study artists who make involuntary career changes and to understand the ways in which they manage their loss of a cherished artistic identity, we focus on an extreme context in the hope that it will inform new understanding of involuntary career transitions.

2.1 *Sample*

This article reports on 40 artists in the Netherlands who had experienced an involuntary career transition. The artists were members of the largest creative industries trade union in the

Netherlands, which made its membership database available to the researchers. The union has a total of 34,286 members of whom 73% are male; the interview sample was 60% male and 40% female. Interviewees were aged between 23 and 61 years with an average of 36 years. Interviewees were phoned randomly from the database. The number of interviewees was not determined beforehand; rather, interviews were ceased once there was a point of saturation where little new information was obtained and where similar patterns re-emerged (Bowen, 2008). This point of saturation was reached after 40 interviews. In total, 51 individuals were contacted and 40 of them agreed to participate, which gives a response rate of 78%. The interviewees undertook different artistic activities, as shown at Table 1.

Please place table 1 here

2.2 Procedures

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were selected as the approach that would best capture the evolving nature of identity transitions through respondents' stories. Once ethical approval was obtained, the interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted about 1.5 hours.

An interview guide was used. The guide, which is included at Appendix A, contained open-ended questions and was based on themes identified in the extant literature on career transition, identity transition and creative work. Additional questions were asked when new themes emerged. The questions concerned creative and non-creative activities, artist identity, identity when doing other professional activities, and the transition from creative identity to non-creative identity.

It is important to acknowledge that researchers who conduct interviews are the main instruments in data collection and analysis and they inevitably bring bias based on their backgrounds (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). The interviewing researcher in this case was a

white, Dutch female aged 30 with a background in psychology and diversity management. She was working as a teacher/researcher in a business school and knew little about the creative industries. The interviewees thus had to explain themselves to a great extent when talking about their professional activities, while their psychological processes were easily understood.

2.3 Analysis

Shown at figure 1, analysis moved from basic coding through to the development of themes and conceptual categories. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In line with the approach taken by other qualitative researchers exploring identity (Kreiner *et al.*, 2009), analysis was inductive in nature and involved multiple readings to explore and analyze the data. To establish the credibility of the findings, we generated extensive quotes from the data, used multiple investigators for analysis and asked interviewees to confirm our understanding of interpretations and conclusions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The analytical steps are discussed in more detail below.

We employed a “naturalistic” coding process that started with reading each transcript without applying codes. Following Glaser and Strauss (1967), we then used a constant comparative analytical scheme that involved unitizing and categorizing the text, which was broken into units of information. These units were subsequently brought together into provisional categories relating to the same content. Two coders were used to reduce error and bias in coding the transcripts (Mays and Pope, 2000) and the inter-coder reliability was established. Cohen’s kappa (Cohen, 1960) was used in order to avoid chance agreement. Six rounds of discussions between the coders, modification of the codebook, coding and calculating the inter-coder reliability were necessary to obtain reliabilities of .86 to .95. An inter-coder reliability of .80 was used as a cut-off point (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The

analysis moved gradually to higher levels of abstraction, moving from a close association with individual cases towards a concern with broad analytic themes.

Finally, data were displayed in a way that is conceptually pure, making distinctions that are meaningful and provide interesting content. This included detailed discussion of multiple themes complete with subthemes, illustrations, quotations and multiple perspectives from different interviewees, as well as discussion of inter- and intra-theme connections.

Although coding is a widely accepted practice in the research community, it has been criticized for the potential to lose the context of what has been said. Coding may also result in the fragmentation of data and the loss of narrative flow (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). To avoid these issues we moved back and forth between the transcripts, the coding book and observational and methodological notes within the research diary (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009).

Please place figure 1 here

RESULTS

This study involved artists in the Netherlands, whose self-narratives revealed three major themes. These are summarized at table 2 and presented in more depth within the following section.

Please place table 2 here

Involuntary career transition

The artists in this study had all experienced an involuntary career transition, with finances the most important driver of change. Overall, artists reported increasing difficulties in earning

sufficient income from their arts practice. As a result, they explained feeling forced to consider other sources of income. Although artists had expected to be able to manage two or more simultaneous professional activities, they had found that the nature of their artistic activities did not support such a dual investment. Rather, artists described becoming trapped in a negative spiral where time spent on non-artistic activities led to a drop in artistic activities, which then reinforced their reliance on non-artistic work. Artists explained that their creative work required a large commitment of time and mental energy and that it needed to be “free from constraints”. When this was no longer the case, their experience was one of being “pushed away” from their arts work:

Painter, female, 38 years: It's not easy to make a living exclusively from artistic activities. It takes a lot of time to produce a painting ... But that's not the problem. The problem is that because it's difficult financially, you start to look for some other sources of income. In the best case it's something creative, but very often it isn't. So then you have two jobs and that's where it goes wrong. As an artist I need time, time to be creative, but that does not necessarily lead to something. But this “creative time” is gone because of this other job. As such, I'm painting less, I'm selling less and I have to rely increasingly on this job financially. This pushed me basically out of the creative world.

The transition away from artistic activities often created contradictory feelings and attitudes among the interviewees, who expressed feelings of confusion, anger, sadness, disorientation and even shame. Although they had accepted the need to secure income from non-artistic activities, interviewees felt that they had failed as artists and 33 of the 40 interviewees expressed feelings of grief. The following excerpt illustrates this internal conflict, which was expressed by three-quarters of all interviewees:

Actress, female, 29 years: Since I was a kid I felt I was an artist. It's kind of a vocation. I'm proud being an actress really and it's an important part of my identity, probably the most important one. However, I'm also giving some training in the healthcare sector and I'm teaching drama in a school. Although this provides me with a stable income, which is pleasant, it's also kind of double. I trained to be an actress, not some kind of trainer or teacher. I feel I'm not doing what I should be doing, it's confusing and deep inside I feel angry, very angry and frustrated at times, angry that I didn't succeed to just work as an actress, but there is no work for me.

Having two or more professional activities, often in different economic sectors, raised issues related to professional identity. Many interviewees pondered whether they could still identify as artists once their arts work had diminished. Seen in the quote below, in this new and ambiguous situation artists had problems knowing 'who' they were. This realization was very painful.

Visual artist, male, 54 years: It does something to me, this question of who I am. Artist or teacher? Being an artist is more than a job: you ARE an artist, you see? A teacher, well, that's just a job. I feel a little depressed, confused also. It's a kind of a mourning process. I have to accept that I cannot live from my activities as an artist, that I'm no longer an artist. It's as if part of me dies.

Interviewees also reported disparate feelings about their professional transition, aligning the benefits of regular income and higher revenues with the disadvantages of losing artistic integrity. This included the lessening of experimental practices in favor of

marketization or “arts for the sake of arts”. The idea of the arts being beyond the concerns of business or finances was still strongly present.

Loss of artistic identity

Shown at table 3, the artists in this study employed multiple strategies to deal with the loss of artistic identity, and these are in line with strategies identified from the literature.

Please place table 3 here

The first strategy concerned artists who took non-artistic work and began to develop the restoration of self before accepting their identity loss (Cornoy and O’Leary-Kelly, 2014) or regulating their loss emotions. We termed this an evasion strategy. Artists who engaged the second strategy, as seen in the quote below, spoke of their loss of artistic identity as an opportunity and emphasized what might be gained from it. These interviewees asserted that changing their activities and work-related identity was a chance to conduct other activities and to develop new knowledge and competencies. Davis and colleagues (1998) describe this as a “benefit in loss” strategy.

Visual consultant, male, 43 years: I’m a consultant now, a consultant. Who would have thought that I’d become a consultant! People look up at me in a different way now. I feel I get more respect also. I’ve become something else, from a visual artist to a visual consultant. It’s quite a change. I have to reconstruct myself, redefine myself. It takes time, but it gradually becomes clear who I am professionally.

In line with Frederickson *et al* (2003), the third strategy concerned artists who were looking for a reprieve from the loss orientation. A reprieve strategy is believed to assist with loss-related coping, and in this study the strategy was employed to shift attention away from the loss, allowing the artist to move forward in the way that Boerner *et al* (2005) describe as a 'restoration orientation' that creates distraction.

Restoration was the focus of over a quarter of the interviewees. Table 3 shows that the majority of artists began to transition from their arts work before accepting their identity loss. Although 'provisional trials' (Ibarra, 2003) or temporary changes are common during the initial phase of transition, few artists progressed to the reconstruction phase. As illustrated below, most were caught in a liminal period:

Illustrator, male, 47 years: I had to move on - I simply didn't generate enough income from my drawings any longer. I have to support my family, so I can sit here and cry, but if I don't move my ass we just won't be able to pay for all the fixed costs. I'm now working at a bank. I don't like it, but I shouldn't complain.

In some cases, psychological stress and grief was hidden from friends and family such that an inward sense of shame, failure and involuntary transition was masked by the outward portrayal as a pro-active, voluntary career decision:

Creative therapist, female, 31 years: As soon as I started working as a creative therapist I started to feel better psychologically. Many friends and family were surprised that I easily changed profession, but the opposite is true. The difficult times were when you're not having enough work to feed your family and when you're torn between your passion and giving it up

in order to have a life like anyone else, but with a stable and higher income. It's a psychological, internal fight, an endless conflict.

Only five (12.5%) of the interviewees expressed a positive attitude towards their involuntary transition. Instead of looking back and thinking about their failure or loss, the five artists turned this unwanted situation into something positive:

Communication assistant, female, 25 years: No one knows what life will bring. My new job as assistant of this communication company is highly challenging and interesting! The ambiance is good, I learn new skills every day and I get to know new people. It's cool! Every experience is useful. I'm constructing myself.

Informal social context

It is important to emphasize the influence of the subtle validations and invalidations received in interactions with others at work (Ladge *et al.*, 2012). In this study, validation involved the approval of others in the artist's community to take work outside the creative industries. Invalidating interactions signaled that others disapproved and that the decision was not supported.

As observed in a previous quote, validation was important: "people look at me in a different way now. I feel I get more respect". Clearly, in this case the decision to become a consultant was validated by others. For many interviewees, however, having to stop or curtail their creative activity lead to an identity threat or stigma, which in turn reduced the variety of possible selves considered. Across the study, although individuals external to the artistic community tended to react positively to the decision to work outside the creative industries,

other artists were often critical. The excerpt below illustrates that some interviewees had to balance validation from the non-arts community and the rejection of the arts community:

Actress, female, 29 years: When I finally decided that I simply had to do something next to my work as an artist and I started to inform my “arts friends” about it, I felt rejected. They told me I [had] lost my integrity, that I shouldn’t mix business with arts, that I was weak, that I wasn’t a real artist. The artistic community is small, everyone knows everyone. In no time, everyone knew about it ... I got expelled from the community.

Discussion

This study focused on artists in the Netherlands who had experienced an involuntary career change from working exclusively in the creative industries to working outside these industries, driven largely by the inability to make a secure living from artistic work. In this section we give explanations for the findings, discuss implications for management and outline the limitations and avenues for future research.

First, as Maitlis (2009) has argued, a necessary step towards identity reconstruction is that of making meaning of the situation. For this to occur, people need to give their negative emotions a place and draw on their past selves to construct future selves, allowing for some sort of continuity or logic that is accepted both individually and collectively. In this study, interviewees identified strongly with their artistic occupations. It follows that involuntary career change was experienced as painful and led to many negative emotions. The inability to make a living from their artistic activities called into question strongly held or cherished self-conceptions and brought feared possible selves more sharply into focus. This motivated exploratory behavior by setting into motion mental processes by which interviewees began

to more actively consider alternatives to the current situation (Ibarra, 2003), but often without making meaning of the situation.

Second, interviewees described a process of grieving that related to their loss of identity as an artist. The strategies employed to manage this grief have been identified in previous studies (Boerner *et al.*, 2005; Davis *et al.*, 1998; Frederickson *et al.*, 2003): for example, some artists turned their loss into an opportunity to do other activities, and others coped with the loss by looking for distraction in other activities. Most interviewees, however, started a new professional activity before accepting their identity loss, which is likely to have negative consequences on the psychological wellbeing of these workers in the longer term. They did not have the time to grieve, nor did they move forward from the liminal phase. We have termed this an evasion strategy. The potential lack of resolution highlights an important difference between voluntary and involuntary career transition and is likely to have particular relevance to workers with failed business ventures and those with high personal and emotional commitment to career.

Involuntary career transition and the exploration of career transitions out of necessity rather than choice are common in times of high unemployment and redundancies. This study suggests that when transition occurs without giving negative emotions a place, the psychological process is more difficult and prolonged and the wellbeing of these workers is at risk. However, we can also learn from the small number of interviewees who had a positive attitude towards transition and perceived the change as an opportunity. This is line with the literature on grief and loss, which agrees that individuals express both negative and positive emotions when dealing with loss (Bonnano, 2004). We suspect that the different strategies for dealing with identity loss might result in different professional and psychological outcomes. We also note that the distraction strategy might relate to repression or avoidance. These aspects warrant further attention.

The third finding relates to the need, during the liminal period, to create identity narratives that are socially tested and validated (Maitlis, 2009; Pratt *et al.*, 2006) in order to create a new and feasible story of self (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Following the classic work on liminality undertaken by Van Gennep (1960), we anticipated that feelings of ambiguity, openness, disorientation, self-questioning and indeterminacy would feature as part of the experience reported by interviewees. Further, we anticipated that some artists might describe the reconstruction of their sense of self. What we didn't anticipate was the rejection of their transition by significant others, which was central to the feeling of isolation reported by many interviewees. Whereas people outside the creative industries were usually supportive and encouraging, many artists experienced the rejection of the artistic community. The informal social context emerges an important factor in how involuntary career transitions are experienced. This finding might also hold true in other professional 'communities' where people have a strong sense of belonging, such as in healthcare professions.

As discussed, liminality can be a phase of identity moratorium and acute identity conflict, and it can be both transformative and troublesome. This study strongly upheld Cornoy and O'Leary-Kelly's (2014) assertion that workers who do not traverse liminality can find themselves unable to release their former identity and can be consumed by loss. Of concern, this study suggests that prolonged liminality may be the most common situation for workers in the arts. A likely cause is that the challenge of enacting permanent change is exacerbated for workers who have a strong career calling (Duffy *et al.*, 2011) or passion for work (Vallerand *et al.*, 2003), which highlights the need for scholarly understanding of transition in these sectors.

The key finding of this study relates to the process of transition itself. Whereas previous transition models illustrate a linear progression from separation to reconstruction, we argue that involuntary transition is far more complex and that the addition of emotional

commitment to career is more complex again, requiring far more attention by HR scholars. As such, future research on involuntary career transition should encompass the psychological processes relating to identity and to grief and loss. We also propose research that makes the distinction between involuntary transitions determined by an employer and those determined, reluctantly, by an individual worker.

Theoretical and practical implications

In terms of theoretical implications, we reiterate that the interviewees in this study did not go through the transition phases identified in previous transition models in a sequential and ordered way. Rather, many interviewees held multiple incompatible self-definitions and found themselves caught in a liminal period that featured unresolved identity conflict and grief. This liminal period was commonly an enduring and psychologically difficult phase beset with confusion, anger, sadness and disorientation. Our results imply that the psychological dimensions of transition need to be better integrated into transition models and that the consequences of non-resolution of certain transition phases need more attention.

The results also hold broad practical implications. Although beyond the scope of this article, artists' increasing reliance on non-artistic activities outside the creative industries raises political and cultural challenges for governments wanting to invest in the creative industries as drivers of innovation and future economic growth (European Commission, 2010; 2012; Federation of Dutch Creative Industries, 2013). To meet their objectives, governments will need to consider supports such as subsidies and taxation relief, physical spaces for arts practice, career support, and support for professional networks. One potential strategy is to incentivize the provision of flexible forms of work that enable artists to engage in skilled work while sustaining their artistic activities and creativity.

Secondly, national statistics in the Netherlands show that involuntary career transitions are increasingly common as a consequence of the 2009 economic crisis (Statistics Netherlands, 2013) and it is likely that similar trends exist elsewhere. Both employees and HR managers are unprepared for such transitions. Our study featured workers who began to look for other jobs out of financial necessity, which means that their income expectations were not in line with their actual earnings. While this is characteristic of certain sub-sectors of the creative industries (Comunian *et al.*, 2011) it also applies to other sectors, and it highlights the need for HR personnel to create clear expectations about salary during the recruitment process.

A third implication for HRM relates to the psychological wellbeing of employees. This study shows that involuntary career transitions can have a profound impact on wellbeing. Moreover, we note that while a decision to transfer to another occupation or sector may be portrayed externally as a positive move, underlying doubts, confusion and grief are often invisible: both internalized and unresolved. Further, while there is often psychological support for employees during lay-offs, such facilities do not exist for employees who change careers on an individual involuntary basis, or for workers who are self-employed. The negative psychological consequences of transitions need to be addressed by HRM in organizations and counselors in affected sectors.

The fourth implication of the study is more sociological in nature and relates to preparing individuals for career transitions. Transitions are common and involuntary transitions almost inevitable as a result of trends such as globalization, increasing competition and the war for talent. Managing this requires a psychological orientation wherein change is accepted and anticipated as a normal component of career, and where professional and other forms of identity are positioned such that the negative psychological consequences of career change are minimized.

Losing a self-defining connection to an important social domain such as work (Ashforth, 2001) is an accepted feature of involuntary career transition, and this study illustrated the importance of the informal social context. In involuntary transitions, lack of validation by the worker's community inhibits the reconstruction of a positive identity and intensifies emotional strain. Importantly, in this study the decision to change was made by the individual rather than by a third party. Despite being involuntary, a community might be more likely to condemn a worker's own decision as the abandonment of ideals and commitment. The resulting stigma created an even greater narrative challenge, and support for workers undergoing an involuntary career transition needs to take into account potentially negative reactions and the need for individuals to construct a narrative response to these.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although this study provides intriguing insights into involuntary career transitions, its limitations need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the study involved a sub-set of workers who tend to strongly identify with their occupation. For these workers, incompatibility between career calling and the ability to earning a secure living is likely to exacerbate the level of stress associated with involuntary transition. The findings cannot, therefore, be generalized to other groups of workers, other industries or national cultures.

We note, however, an increase in workers across the labor market who encounter complex career models involving multiple roles. It is therefore likely that the complex transition process found in this study is not limited to workers in the creative industries. Future research might seek to compare the experiences reported in this study with other populations. In particular, the ways in which workers deal with multiple work-related identities represents an important avenue for future research, especially given the rise in multiple job holding and work-related identities.

We advocate a multidimensional approach to understanding workers' reactions to involuntary career transition and acknowledge the importance of research that highlights the influence of coping style, social and economic assets, emotional and personal factors, ability, self-efficacy, talent and outcome expectations (see Brewington *et al.*, 2004; Prussia *et al.*, 2001; Riza and Heller, 2015). Although this study looked at the informal social context, many other contextual factors need to be explored.

The concept of identity confusion merits more research attention. While this second-order theme consisted of doubts, feelings of shame and identity uncertainty, there are many more sub-themes and complexities to unravel. Moreover, research on grief appears only rarely in the management literature. Although the grief literature does not focus on identity *per se*, it is valuable in the work-related identity loss context because it provides insight into how one lets go of the past and moves forward in a changed world (Bonanno and Kaltman, 1999). Therefore, the perception of loss in terms of someone's highly central work-related identity warrants research through the lens of grief and loss.

This study highlighted the impact of grief and the importance of identity reconstruction for workers undergoing involuntary career transition, and more research is needed to establish how HR personnel might support these workers. Initial experimental research might focus on HR practices and their influence on the involuntary career change experience. In the creative industries context, where many workers are partly or wholly self-employed and, according to this study, might face opposition from their professional communities, future research could examine workers' own strategies in more depth and longitudinally. Given the rise of complex careers across the labor market, this is important research that might: 1) Establish the efficacy of transition support and coping strategies in the longer term; 2) Seek to understand the impact of on-going identity instability when the first

phase of transition remains incomplete; and 3) Create a model of involuntary transition that encompasses transition decisions by both employers and workers.

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Appendix A: Interview guide, indicative questions

- Creative activities
 - What do you do for a living?
 - How do you feel about your work? Can you explain?
 - Why have you chosen this occupation?
- Non-creative activities
 - Why do you have several activities?
 - How do you feel about this?
 - How does this impact your creative activities? Synergies, barriers...?
 - How do you feel about working as an artist in the creative industries as well as in another position outside these industries
- Identity
 - Do you identify with your creative and non-creative activities?
 - Can you explain your answer?
 - Do you feel your identity has changed as a result of your non-creative activities?
 - What about your personal identity; does this influence your work-related identity?
- Transition
 - How have you experienced this transition?
 - How did others react? Did this influence you?
 - What has triggered the transition?
 - Do you feel there were different steps or phases in this process? Please explain.
 - How did you feel during the different phases?

Table 1: Artistic activities of the sample (n=40)

Artistic activities	Number	Percentage
Actor, puppeteer, theatre maker, director	6	15
Musician, composer, singer	3	7.5
Graphical artist, sculptor	10	25
Photographer	1	2.5
Writer, poet, illustrator	1	2.5
Painter	5	12.5
Dancer, choreographer	2	5
Producer, editor, technician	8	20
Designer	4	10

