

Business Incubators as Liminal Spaces

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Introduction

Of late the notion of liminality has been applied to a range of social and organisational issues: consulting (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003), identity reconstruction in organisations (Beech, 2011), MBA courses (Simpson et al., 2009), temporary employees (Garsten, 1999), hotels (Pritchard and Morgan, 2006) to name but a few. Victor Turner (1966), in his seminal work on the ritual process in primitive societies, acknowledged that with the specialisation of society and culture and the progressive complexity in the social division of labour, what was a set of transitional qualities in primitive societies, has now become itself an institutionalised state - 'Transition has here become a permanent condition' (Turner, 1966, p.107) or as Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) reinforce 'liminality is becoming the modern condition'. Hence turning organisations into liminal/transitional spaces has now been routinized.

More and more organizations are operating liminally and this paper will argue that the concept of liminality can be usefully applied to understand and business incubators and theorise the process of incubation. The paper is inspired by Czarniawska and Mazza's work on liminality (2003) which shows how consultants take organisations through transitions. Business incubators – defined as spaces where organisations are developed over a limited period of time through the provision of shared office space, administrative services, business assistance and organised networking (Hackett and Dilts, 2004a; Hansen et al., 2000) – offer occupants an inherently limited, temporary, organisational experience. Business incubators would seem to represent the liminal organisational form par excellence, since they are designed to support the initial stage of a growing business, and that once mature enough is expected to leave, and cross over to the next threshold: self-sufficiency. Hackett and Dilts (2004a) however point to the problem that the literature business incubators is descriptive and exploratory with a few attempts of theorising which was reconfirmed later on by other authors (Bruneel et al., 2012). This current state of theorising about incubator-incubation is an open invitation to bring theories from a wider spectrum of disciplines into that context in order to better understand them.

The purpose of this paper is to seize that opportunity and contribute to the understanding of business incubators by offering the theory of rites of passage as a schema for the business incubation process. Furthermore a business incubator operates in a mode of liminality as it offers tenant companies temporary transformational experience. Hence such a transition oriented initiative can be conceptualised as liminal space. The analysis is based on initial ethnographic fieldwork at a business incubator for social ventures (SVI – social ventures incubator). The data includes staff and tenant interviews, programme documents and field notes from the social ventures selection process for the first cohort to join the incubation programme. We will argue that a business incubator operates in a mode of liminality for the development of tenant companies.

We proceed as follows. In the next section we present the concept of liminality – going back to its origin in anthropology, exploring its features and applicability to business incubation. The section after that presents the business incubator (BI) context. The third section lays out some of the methodological considerations and the context of the empirical setting. In the fourth section initial ethnographic empirical findings are discussed vis-à-vis the theory of liminality. Finally we conclude with the contribution of this paper and its significance: theorizing the process of business incubation as a rite of passage and therefore eliciting the business incubator as a liminal space, thus establishing a robust theoretical ground for business incubators.

The Concept of Liminality

The concept of liminality was first introduced by Van Gennep (1909) in his analysis of ritual behaviour in primitive societies with regards to the dynamics of group and individual life. Human life follows a linear progression with different rites of passage from one age to another. Van Gennep defined 'rites de passage' as 'rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age' (cited in Turner, 1966: 94). He examined those rites in terms of order and content. Each rite of passage consists of three phases: separation, transition and reincorporation. The author calls this the schema of 'rites de passage'. The word schema presupposes a dynamic character. It signifies both a process and a structure – dynamics and a pattern. These three subcategories are not developed equally in every set of ceremonies – for example at a funeral the emphasis is on the separation rites and at marriages this is the reincorporation phase.

In order to better understand rites of passage it is necessary to elaborate on the content of each phase. Separation includes symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the person or group either from their previous fixed place in the social structure or from a set of cultural conditions (a state) or from both. During the intervening 'liminal' (transition) period, the ritual subject's (passenger's) characteristics are ambiguous; she goes through a cultural realm that has none of the attributes of the past or future state. In the third phase

(reaggregation or reincorporation) the passage is completed. The ritual subject is in a relatively stable state again and thus has rights and obligations which are clearly defined and 'structural'. Turner explicitly notes the 'structural' and spatial characteristics of the rites of passage. The structural aspect is denoted by the use of the terms separation, margin and reaggregation with their reference to ritual. The terms preliminal, liminal and postliminal are used with reference to the spatial transition. These terms are concerned with units of space and time 'in which behaviour and symbolism are momentarily enfranchised from the norms and values that govern the public lives of incumbents of structural positions' (Turner, 1966:166).

Some of the organisational contexts that the concept of liminality has been applied include MBA courses (Simpson et al., 2009), temporary employees (Garsten, 1999), hotels (Pritchard and Morgan, 2006), management consulting (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003), identity reconstruction (Beech, 2011) to name but a few. The increased interest and application of the concept out of its original context suggests its wider usefulness especially in organisations which offer temporary organisational experience. One of those organisations is the business incubator currently explored in academia atheoretically with a few attempts to theorise about their process models by borrowing theories from other disciplines (Hackett and Dilts, 2004a).

The previous attempts to apply the notion of liminality to organisational contexts take advantage of different aspects of the theory of rites of passage. Pritchard and Morgan (2006) explore the potential to conceptualise the hotel as a liminal site based on secondary sources and call for empirical research. Garsten (1999) conducted an empirical study on temporary workers depicting them as liminal people since they are viewed 'betwixt and between' organisational structures. The author suggests that new ways of organising and experiencing work are viewed through the lens of liminality in the face of contractual and temporal work. Simpson et al. (2009) apply the concept of liminality to the experience of Chinese students going through an MBA 'rite of passage' in terms of becoming a manager and its transformative results. Beech (2011) focusses on identity change in organisational contexts as a part of a process of liminality extending and developing the concept of liminality into identity work/construction literature. As the author points out in current organisational literature liminality is used as a position between and betwixt, of ambiguity and uncertainty. This does not include the processual, structural phases though. Currently 'in application to organizations, the definition of liminality incorporates instabilities in the social context, the ongoing ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings, the lack of resolution (or aggregation) and the substitutability of the liminar.' 2011: 288). He proposes a model which includes three liminal practices that relate to the orientation of dialogic identity construction between the individual and the organisation, integrating key concepts of identity theory. Considering the structure of the business incubation process and the people undergoing it leads us to believe that this process can be conceptualised as a rite of passage and the group of entrepreneurs who undergo that passage as a *communitas*, thus borrowing

from social anthropology and overlaying those concepts onto a business incubation process model. A *communita* is the Latin word for community of individuals which develops in a space with liminal characteristics.

An example how the concept has been applied to the field of management consultancy is presented in Czarniawska and Mazza (2003). They represent consulting as a liminal space for both clients and consultants. Consultants organise the rites of passage for the organisation that needs to change. However the authors find out that two parallel and causally related rites of passage occur: those for the employees and those for the consultants. The order of the phases is inverted for the consultants. The rites of passage for employees in the consultancy act start with separation, followed by a transition phase/liminal phase and finish with reincorporation. The order of the phases for the consultants is inverted starting with reincorporation into the organisation, transitional phase and finally separation from the organisation. Sturdy et al. (2006) on the other hand expand the notion of liminality to include the interstice between work time and non-work time. They argue that this adds another level of liminality. They suggest that eating offers a moment of liminality which is in the heart of not only consultancy but organisational life in general. Business dinners are another instance of liminality for organisational life where the actors make use of the liminal space in three ways: exploring and shaping political dynamics, assessing trustworthiness, and testing out and selling issues. Another contribution is that they found degrees of liminality exist that are directly proportional to the distance from the work place and conclude that liminality is not an absolute quality. They write about structures and layers of the liminal space created in that moment of the shared meal. The business dinner on the other hand is just one moment which is between and betwixt work and leisure time but it is part of the overall consultancy rites (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003). The dinner is just another example of the process of change that the consultants organise for the organisation in question which exhibits some liminal characteristics. It is a liminal space relative to work/organisational life with reference to the spatial transition, whereas Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) focus on the structural transition. Considering business incubators as liminal spaces, both the structural and the spatial aspects of the rites of passage are applicable. The process of business incubation relates to the former and the business incubator space and temporal experience to the latter.

What those studies haven't considered is Turner's (1966) notion of *communitas* as it is not applicable to the management consultancy act. The concept, applied to business incubators, is appropriate since they provide shared office space for its tenants and thus create a *communita* of their own. The contribution of Turner in relation to the rites of passage theory is his elaboration on the relationships between people in the liminal condition, eliciting their attributes as liminal beings and the development of the *communita* concept. Furthermore he offers the concept as an explanation of different movements that start in complex and literate societies.

In order to understand *communitas* Turner presents two 'models' of human interrelatedness which are alternating and juxtaposed to one another. The difference between the two is in the unit of analysis. As opposed to the social-structuralist tradition which views society as a system of social positions with a hierarchical structure; in *communitas* the units of social structure are the relationships between roles, statuses and offices. The first model is of a society which is differentiated, structured, and often is a hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic roles with a system of evaluation, which separates men in terms of 'less' or 'more'. The second model emerges in the liminal period – it is a model of society which is unstructured or only structured rudimentarily, as '...relatively undifferentiated *communitas*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders' (p.96). Turner uses the Latin *communitas* instead of community as the former implies a modality of social relationship rather than simply an area of common living as in the case of the latter. *Communitas* emerge where social structure is not present. Buber (1958) only touches upon the spontaneous, concrete, immediate nature of *communitas* and uses the word community instead of *communitas*. The latter concept has a 'specific territorial locus, often limited in character' (Turner, 1966: 126). However Turner explains that *communitas* can only be understood in relation to structure. The author emphasises the importance of the dialectic between *communitas* and social structure. In *communitas* men are released from structure in order to return to structure after they have been revitalised by their experience in anti-structure (*communitas*). According to him society cannot function without this dialectic in an adequate manner. At different periods in each society *communitas* or structure come uppermost, however only together they constitute the 'human condition' with regards to man's relations with another man. 'Society (*societas*) seems to be a process rather than a thing – a dialectic process with successive phases of structure and *communitas*.' (Turner, 1966: 203). With regards to business incubators this potentiality reveals another mode of organisational structure, or more precisely as Turner would call it – organisational anti-structure. This modality is observed amongst entrepreneurs in a business incubator. All of them sharing the same space, networking in order to develop a structure i.e. company when they exit the space. Multinational organizations and any sort of large organisation cannot exist without structure. Start-up ventures on the other hand, often one person entities, thrive on social capital to survive and grow, therefore the human bond is central to their success.

Turner creates a list of binary oppositions or discriminations between the properties of the status system and those of liminality – table 1. This list is not exhaustive and could be considerably lengthened if we were to include a wider span of liminal situations.

Table 1 List of the properties of liminality and status systems:

Properties of Liminality	Properties of Status Systems
Transition	State
Totality	Partiality
Homogeneity	Heterogeneity
Communitas	Structure
Equality	Inequality
Anonymity	systems of nomenclature
absence of property	Property
absence of status	Status
nakedness or a uniform clothing	distinctions of clothing
sexual continence	Sexuality
minimisation of sex distinctions	maximisation of sex distinctions
absence of rank	distinctions of rank
Humility	just pride of position
disregard for personal appearance	care for personal appearance
no distinctions of wealth	distinctions of wealth
Unselfishness	Selfishness
total obedience	obedience only to superior rank
Sacredness	Secularity
Sacred instruction	technical knowledge
Silence	Speech
suspension of kinship rights and obligations	kinship rights and obligations
continuous reference to mystical powers	intermittent reference to mystical powers
Foolishness	Sagacity
Simplicity	Complexity
acceptance of pain and suffering	avoidance of pain and suffering
Heteronomy	degrees of autonomy

Source: Adapted from Turner (1966)

Turner had realised that the communita mode of society (or in our case organisation) soon develops a structure (a structure emerges) where 'free relationships between individuals become norm-governed relations between social personae'. Thus he distinguishes between three types of communitas – the existential, spontaneous ones; normative communitas in which with time the need to organize and mobilize resources and the necessity for social control over members of the group pushes the existential communitas to organise into a lasting social system; and ideological communitas – they apply to utopian models of society based on existential communitas. The last two types of communitas are in the realm of structure already and it is an inevitable process which all existential communitas undergo. They fall into law and structure. The author emphasises that structure is this-worldly and pragmatic whereas communitas is speculative, generating philosophical ideas and imagery.

More recently the popularity of anti-structure as a mode of organization can be demonstrated with the increasing attractiveness of the communities of practice (COP)

concept (Lave and Wenger, 1991). COPs feature in literature explaining how to harness their potential in multinationals (Wenger et al., 2002). The authors have realised the great potentiality of COP with regards to knowledge creation and management. Similarly Turner (1966) has pointed out the creative potentiality of *communitas*. Turner however has denoted the spontaneous character of those *communitas*: 'social life in complex societies is also punctuated, but without institutionalised provocations and safeguards, by numerable instants of spontaneous *communitas*' (Turner, 1966, p.137). He illustrates the pleasurable and desired character of spontaneous *communitas* by the resistance of many utopias to give it up for the hardships of the next phase as life in structure is full of difficulties. Spontaneous *communitas* have a magical attraction. COP on the other hand are interventions in the organisational life of big companies as action in structure quickly becomes dry and mechanical if the people in it don't '...periodically immerse in the regenerative abyss of *communitas*' (Turner, 1966: 139).

Business Incubators – features and current theorising attempts

The emergence and spread of business incubators – the UKBI claim that there are 300 incubator in the UK (UKBI, 2014) - in the last 40 years is an important organisational phenomenon as many believe they represent a new model (Campbell, 1989; Leblebichi and Shah, 2004) for organisational emergence. Hansen et al. (2000) think that the promise of the networked incubators, these are the third generation of business incubators (Bruneel et al., 2012), lies in their capacity to surpass other organisational structures in growing and creating new businesses. In academia however, there have been numerous attempts to theorise about the incubator-incubation phenomenon (Hackett and Dilts, 2004a) and the incubation process model (Hackett and Dilts, 2004b). These efforts explain different aspects of the incubation process, its elements (configuration) and the incubator itself but fail to acknowledge the process as a whole or take into account the incubatees' perspective. We believe that applying the theory of liminality and rites of passage to BIs and the BI process can fill that gap by providing both a structural, process view of the incubation process as well as a spatial/temporal transitional view of the incubator itself.

What counts as a business incubator Hackett and Dilts state 'is a shared office space facility that seeks to provide its incubatees with a strategic, value-adding intervention system (i.e. business incubation) of monitoring and business assistance' (2004a: 57). Moreover a business incubator is more than just a physical arrangement (Hackett and Dilts, 2004a; Bøllingtoft and Ulhøi, 2005) as it provides access to networks – the networked BI (Hansen et al., 2000). It is a nurturing business environment (Bøllingtoft and Ulhøi, 2005) with the main goal 'to produce successful firms that will leave the incubator financially viable and free-standing within a reasonable delay' (Aernoudt, 2004: 128). According to the latter business incubation is a dynamic process of business enterprise development.

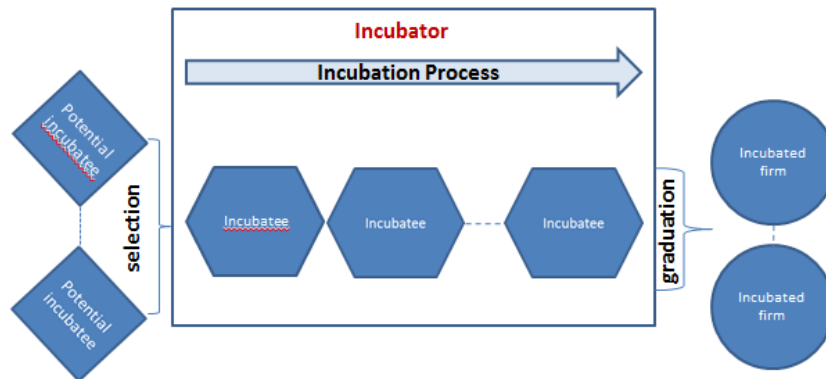
The above distinction between the BI as a facility and the business incubation process is evident in the BI literature. Its initial focus is on the facility and its configuration, later studies shift attention to the process of incubatee development and outcomes (Hackett and Dilts, 2004a). The latest trend in the field is the attempt to theorise about incubators-incubation. It has culminated with the development of the theory of business incubation, underpinned by the 'real options' theory and therefore derived from the financial domain (Hackett and Dilts, 2004b). According to the authors this theory provides 'the best available lens for capturing the operational setting and underlying logic that drives the incubation process of selection, mentoring and assistance, and resource infusion vis-à-vis incubatees' (Hackett and Dilts, 2004b: 48). They claim that it explains and predicts BI outcomes as well as helps understand the 'key factors for the facilitation of the entrepreneurial process' (Hackett and Dilts, 2008: 459). After testing their theory in a survey sent to 50 BI managers in the USA, they recognised a further limitation of their theory. That is the exclusion of incubatees in the evaluation of business assistance services in the development of their scale and to balance bias. In our view the community/community of incubatees is an important element of the incubator and the incubation process. They only manage to focus on the tangible resources such as financial as well as service based (monitoring and business assistance). They fail to recognise and include the intangible aspects of BIs as key factors in the entrepreneurial process facilitation. These include co-location in an environment of peers, social inputs, the possibility to obtain legitimacy and psychological support (Bøllingtoft and Ulhøi, 2005).

Furthermore very few studies focus on the indirect and social aspects of BI, the focus is primarily on the directly measurable aspects. In this respect the theory of liminality will enable us to include those elements as it incorporates the notion of *communitas* in itself, hence taking into account the soft, peer to peer, networking elements in the incubation process which other studies have ignored as a key factor in the incubation process for enterprise development.

Despite the theoretical naiveté apparent in standard accounts of BI processes (Brooks, 1986; Hackett and Dilts, 2004b; Peters et al. 2004; Soetanto, 2004), which fail to take account of their inherent and interesting relational and processual attributes, which a liminal approach facilitates, the literature does identify a series of elements, which are useful categories to incorporate in our more robust explanation: selection, infrastructure, business support, mediation and graduation (Bergek and Norrman, 2008). The temporal rite of passage is implicit in those elements. The latter authors select three of those five that are important for differentiation between incubator models. They consider infrastructure and graduation to be of no importance as most incubators provide administrative services (shared office space, equipment, reception and clerical services) and have formal exit rules. The other three they assert are the distinguishing elements of incubator models. This approach of eliminating some of the components might be suitable for their purpose of finding the incubators' best practice but is unfit for presenting an incubation process model in its

whole. On the other hand business support and mediation are components of the incubation component itself if we consider the incubation process as a sequence of three processes or phases: selection, incubation and graduation – figure 1. The infrastructure is the facility where the incubation process takes place and therefore is not part of the process sequence but it could possibly have an effect on it. This confusion most likely stems from the atheoretical nature of the study focusing on practice.

Figure 1 Incubator-incubation concept map



Source: adapted from Hacket and Dilts, 2004a

To sum up the concepts of liminality and rites of passage can offer an integral view of a BI taking into account all its elements and the process as a whole. It can explain the spatial transition as well as the structural aspects of the process. By adding the notion of communita and using it to look at the group of entrepreneurs in the incubator it complements the current attempts to theorise about incubators and the incubation process by taking into account the social/relational aspects of a BI and incorporating them into the BI process model as a key factor. Therefore this theoretical lens offers a holistic view of BIs and the BI process.

Methodological considerations and the social business incubator - SVI

We offer a theory of the ritual process from social anthropology to theorize about business incubation and conceptualise the business incubator as a liminal space. The reason this is appropriate is due to the nature and characteristics of the incubation process described in literature and the empirical work undertaken herein. Therefore being there and being part of the journey which businesses undergo is the most appropriate way to gain a holistic, insider view of the process. Another reason to embark upon an ethnographic approach is that most incubator studies reviewed above were conducted employing interviews as a data collection method, most of which with incubator staff and directors (Hacket and Dilts, 2008, Peters et al., 2004, Bruneel et. al., 2012), or case studies (Grimaldi and Grandi, 2005). Only Bollingtoft and Ulhoi (2005) have used ethnographic data. However, their focus was the

reasons why the new networked incubator model has emerged and what its distinguishing characteristics are. They didn't use interviews with key informants in the study. Nevertheless we agree with the authors that a participatory approach is better suited for studying the dynamics and multiplicity of the BI process. Even though the study lacked explicit theoretical underpinning it is a step forward to a more engaged, embedded approach in doing research in BIs. It also suits the purpose of this current study which aims to develop a liminal conceptualisation of the business incubation process in order to better understand those tools for the facilitation of the entrepreneurial process.

Another methodological gap in past research is the omission of tenants' views in the studies. The need to include their perspective was recognised by Hacket and Dilts (2008) in their empirical study testing the theory of business incubation. Earlier Totterman and Sten (2005) were one of the first to collect directors as well as tenants' perspectives to find out how business incubators can help entrepreneurs build networks in order to benefit their business. The above discussion shows another important direction with regards to the selection of informants in future incubator studies which we address by undertaking an ethnographic approach including prolonged participant observations engaging with both staff and incubatees.

This paper reports on initial findings after a total of four months of field work (of a planned 16 months). This has involved 12 interviews, a month and a half of participatory observations, which were made possible by the invitation of the first author to teach a weekly yoga class at the business centre and more recently joining as a part-time paid administrator in the incubation programme. The initial phase after gaining access in February 2014 involved interviews with staff and tenants at the Social and Environmental Business Centre (SEBC) described below. That phase lasted approximately two months during which the first author gained understanding of the place and aspirations of both staff and people. This is encapsulated by something Peter, the deputy CEO, said very early on in the research:

'...at the moment we've just had a number of organisations arrive over the last few months who.... had had their idea already. You know... We're just help, you know, we're helping them with property solution really..... We're trying to create a business centre, innovation and incubation. A bit like St Paul's (another innovation centre in town) but with a social purpose and obviously with an environmental purpose as well... Marian (the centre director) has plans that you should talk to her about, about an incubator space, like a hatching space. Inside this incubator. So... everybody here we want to accelerate, but we need to be trying constantly, as the finances allow, to look for organisations that... need more help to accelerate if you like, who are genuinely being incubated.' (interview 1)

At that point in March the business incubator programme was at its idea stage which a couple of months later was a reality in the face of the SVI programme. At nearly the same time as the yoga classes commenced the recruitment for the SVI incubator programme

started. Once again the first author seized that opportunity and applied for the dedicated staff role as a programme administrator. The main purpose of the job is to assist the programme director with the successful launch, management and delivery of the SVI programme. More specifically that includes assisting with marketing of the programme, the application process, tracking applications through the database, coordinating the cohort of incubatees in terms of organising meetings, events and other activities related to the operation of the programme as well as assisting with the collection and reporting of monitoring data.

The SVI is an incubator programme project led by Unity, a charitable organisation supporting social ventures providing finance solutions, work space and business support. One of Unity's initiatives is Social and Environmental Business (SEB) which is a social enterprise itself aiming to create, nurture and catalyse new and existing businesses including social enterprises, voluntary organisations, start-ups, and charities. They provide business advice, impact measurement, coaching and affordable workspace. Through issuing of bonds and ERDF funding Unity have built a Social and Environmental Business Centre – the SEBC. The SVI is delivered in partnership with a local university, a social enterprise finance institution lending money to small businesses including social enterprises and a development trust. The collaboration of the partners for the Social Incubator Fund bid, delivered by the Big Lottery Fund on behalf of the Office for Civil Society, secured the funding for the delivery of this incubator programme. The programme is carried out by a team of three dedicated staff – a project manager, a business advisor and administrator (the first author). The programme is aiming to recruit social ventures in four cohorts over the first year and incubate them for 12 months. 11 people have been selected for Cohort 1 which joined the incubator in July 2014. Subsequently another three cohorts will join the first one every three to four months. The social ventures have access to free workspace, business advice, workshops and events as well as facilitated peer-to-peer fortnightly meetings. The programme is hosted and provided open plan office space in the SEBC where the dedicated staff will also reside. The incubation programme delivery will be presented in the empirical chapter below vis-à-vis the theory of liminality.

Following the contextual information above, it is necessary to mention that the social incubator trend started with the launch of the SIF in July 2012 (Big Lottery Fund, 2014). Since then the fund has enabled the launch of 10 social business incubators and all its £10m have been allocated. Apart from one small paragraph (Aernoudt, 2004) these types of incubators do not feature in literature due to their relative novelty, and the release of public funding to look for innovative new models from which to deliver previously publically delivered services (i.e. business support through Business Link). As defined by the Cabinet Office 'social incubators are organisations that support the growth of social enterprises (businesses with a social purpose) that are in their early phases and need intensive support to develop their ideas.' Ten years ago a social incubator's aim, as featuring in academic literature, was to support the development of companies hiring people with low

employment capacities (Aernoudt, 2004). The aim of this project is to follow the process of incubation of the first cohort over 12 months in order to gain insight into the process of this new type of incubator which will also have implications for their management and further development.

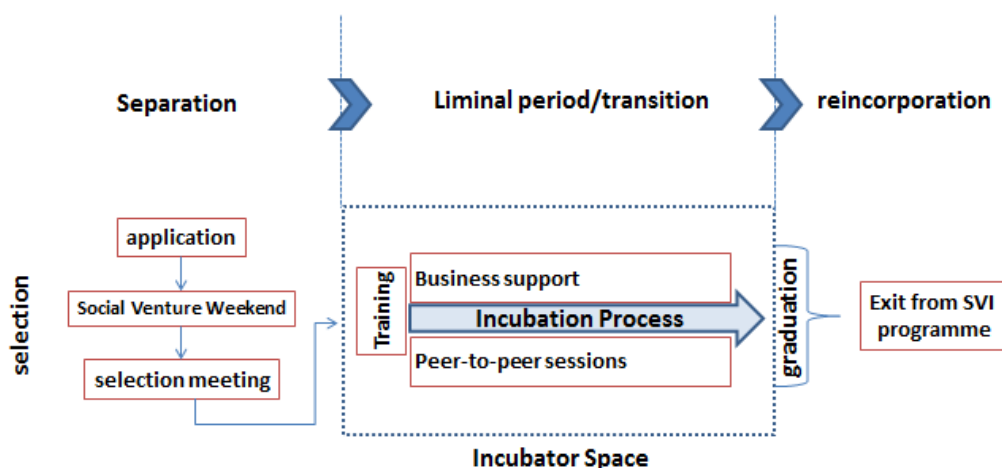
Findings

The structure of the empirical analysis is divided in two sections. The first section presents the empirical findings of the initial stage of the SVI programme vis-à-vis the rites of passage schema, analysing the data available at this point in time by linking the phases in the business incubation process namely selection, incubation and graduation to the phases of the rites of passage: separation, transition/liminality and reincorporation. Currently documents and participant observation field notes have been collected for the selection phase. The rest of the schema analysis will be based on documents and plans/idea discussions between the partners and the programme director, as the data is not complete. The second section of the findings is dedicated to the SVI community, applying the concept to the cohort in the business incubation programme. Once again, that section is brief and under development as the cohort joined the incubator in July 2014.

The SVI rite of passage

As mentioned in the SVI business plan the SVI programme aims to work with entrepreneurs and early stage social ventures to 'explore and develop their ideas' '... to support these people to develop their ventures faster and more effectively than if the programme had not been available'. The transformative aspect of this initiative focusses on the idea/venture itself which is to change. The process is divided into three parts: each corresponding to a different part of the rites of passage schema – Figure 2.

Figure 2 SVI rite of passage timeline



Selection

Initially named 'kick start' this stage encompasses the application of ventures for the programme, the social venture weekend and the 'sifting' meeting. In terms of time and temporal characteristics it comprises the time before joining the SVI programme. The twelve months of the programme start once the ventures move into the SEBC office space. The specific criteria for selecting social ventures or ideas for such are informed by the objectives of the programme. Entry into the programme is granted, based on the following judgements: ventures most likely to access loan finance; ventures from a diverse geographical areas in the East of England; most likely to increase revenue and be sustainable; job creation potentiality; investment readiness, ability to increase social impact and its measurement. Each component of the selection will be described and analysed separately. Essentially as in the rites of passage separation stage, the aim here is to separate the social ventures that are suitable for the programme from all the applicants who filled the online contact form. The time spent on this is approximately two months.

Application

This part of the selection process includes the time starting with the initial marketing activities about the Social Venture weekend up to the weekend itself. A number of online applications via the website contact form as well as referrals from partners are received and matched against the basic criterion. The suitable ventures are invited to take part in the weekend. The applications come from a wide range of sectors nevertheless the basic unifying characteristic that they all have in common is the social impact: 'we are looking for enterprises motivated by a social need....which have social impact' (field notes from a phone call between the programme director and a potential applicant, 03.06.2014). After they register and make a payment for the social venture weekend they are sent a baseline questionnaire collecting data on their business/idea. At that point most of the applicants are not physically present, as all communication is online.

The Social Venture Weekend

The SVW represents the organised formal event at which the next part of the assessment takes place. It is the platform for selection of ideas and ventures which have the potential to deliver against the objectives of the programme. The two important activities at that stage are the talks between assessors and applicants in the networking and pitching sessions. The weekend's other purpose is generic social venture training on topics like: marketing, business model, financing and pitching. The training and selection elements take 2.5 days starting on Friday afternoon. The venue and training are delivered by the university partner. The following evaluation and selection of participants took place after the weekend at a social venture selection meeting on the following Monday.

Social venture selection meeting

The 'sifting' meeting was held at the SEBC and attended by representatives of all the partners and the three dedicated staff team - 12 people in total. The aim of the meeting was to decide which of the 45 applicants will be taken on the programme. Six candidate ventures were kept in reserve and offered a further training course. 11 ventures were selected onto the programme.

The assessment of each venture is carried out by minimum two steering group team members representing all four partners and the dedicated staff. The effort and the inclusion of staff time in the process are substantial. The number of people involved in the assessment process demonstrates the importance of selecting the right candidates for the programme without favouring people as some '...people had some favourites but that didn't make the decision a definite yes as most had to agree. It seemed that all partners' opinions were appreciated and people were not ignored [with regards to making a decision]. There was a clear debate on the one or two.' (field notes from social enterprise selection meeting, 23.06.2014)

The three day training offered to the doubtful candidates and the selected ones is a time between and betwixt the selection process and the admission to the incubation programme and the building/the office. From a spatial perspective it takes place in the SEBC meeting rooms but not the allocated open plan office space which is to be offered to the selected participants only. However the ambiguous nature of some of the attendees is evident. In terms of spatial transition it is a time and space transition into the next phase which is the incubation process – 12 months of support and free office space. The social ventures will receive training in the form of lectures, workshops and facilitated peer group sessions as well as mentoring with the aim to develop a business plan to draw investment and become self-sufficient by the end of the programme.

Incubation

Approximately a month after the Social Venture Weekend and immediately after the three-day training all the selected participants move into the free workspace provided by SEBC where they have access to free business support (mentoring, peer learning and guidance) and are assigned business advisors. That is also the stage when some of the ventures will take jump start loans or equity investment. Apart from the formal training provided at the training week by the university learning consists of action learning on key topics – seminars and workshops on topics that are useful to the selected ventures. Temporally this part takes approximately four to five months. Viable ventures after that will be offered a bigger take-off loan. Provision of workspace, business support and mentoring will continue free of charge for the balance of 12 months. In effect the transitional and transformational part of the whole process is the incubation during the 12 months. At that time the selected ventures, some of which are partnerships, share the same office space working on their

businesses or business ideas, trying to grow and make them self-sufficient by the time they exit. The programme is there to '...support these people to develop their ventures faster and more effectively than if the programme had not been available' (SVI business plan, January 2014). This emphasis on the support and guidance through business advisors makes the latter the organisers of the rites of passage, analogous to the consultants in the management consultancy process (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003) and the 12 month incubation the social venture rite of passage to self-sufficiency. This part of the research remains to be developed further over the next 12 months of the incubation programme.

Graduation

The end of the programme is clearly determined temporally by the end of month 12 after joining the programme. The graduation is the completion of the programme and the exit of the ventures. However after that 'ventures will be encouraged to continue using space and support, but on a paid basis' (SVI business plan, January 2014). This means that they will have to be self-sufficient and able to contain the costs of their business and thus be 'incorporated' in the world of business where no guidance and protection are offered unless one pays for them. Beyond the above there are no other specific processes and events scheduled for that stage apart from exiting after the time has elapsed.

Summary

As Van Gennep (1909) has pointed out, the emphasis on the subcategories – separation, liminality and reincorporation is different in ritual processes. In the Business incubator programme outlined above the transitional/liminal period is temporally and structurally the most complex and elaborated comprising numerous activities. After the liminal period the selection of social ventures is the most important as it consists of approximately two months dedicated to it as well as three distinguished activities – application, social venture weekend and the sifting meeting. That observation corresponds to current business incubation literature in terms of its significance (Bergek and Norrman, 2008). Finally the last part of the schema is the exit or graduation from the business incubation programme. That stage is simply marked by the elapse of 12 months and exit from the programme as a free provision of workspace and support, and thus represents the reincorporation into the real world of business and society as a whole (or going back to structure to put it in Turner's words). The effort and time allocated to each of the three elements of the incubation process clearly shows that the incubation one is the most elaborate. The transformation of an idea into a stand-alone business that takes place over the 12 months of the programme is the essence and primary function of a business incubator. That observation supports the claim that business incubators are liminal spaces for business enterprise development.

The SVI Communita

The incubation programme is designed to be delivered by employing a cohort approach. The SVI will take up four cohorts of entrepreneurs over a period of twelve months starting on 20th June 2014 with the first Social Venture Weekend. This approach is also a requirement of the Social Incubator Fund. The training partner (the University) is also confident that it is useful in managing a programme with clear entry and exit points. Moreover it will benefit the participants as it will provide a clear path and a shared experience with people in the same situation so they can form 'supportive relationships' thus increasing their chances of success and with support provided coherently with ventures at similar stages (SVI business plan, January 2014). The benefit of peer-to-peer learning and support has been expressed by different members of the steering group at meetings too. A future aspiration will be the establishment of fortnightly facilitated peer-to-peer sessions at the SEBC:

'...sort of formalised peer to peer reflection sessions in order for them to share with one another what they are doing at the moment.' (programme director, field notes)

These initial thoughts and aspirations on adopting a cohort approach and its value to participants as well as the organisation of events to support it demonstrate the importance of the cohort in this incubation process. Currently most business incubators, as mentioned in another part of this paper, provide services to companies from 3-5 years on a paid basis with no organised peer-to-peer events or cohort approach in place. This new incubation programme is shorter and thus more intensive (12 months long). It places deliberate focus on the peer-to-peer relationships amongst the cohort (peer-to-peer facilitated sessions are provided by UK other social incubators) together with the common provision of infrastructure, business support and access to networks as in all extant business incubators so far.

The general flexibility and openness to applicants at different stages of the entrepreneurial process – from people at the idea level to start-ups needing some intensive support to revitalise their progress or getting them investment ready, speaks for this unstructured (in terms of hierarchical systems) nature of the cohort. As in Turner's communita, the emergence of these modes of human interrelatedness is only possible where structure is not present. The SVI employs that approach with the view to harness its creative and relational potentiality through encouraging and facilitating peer-to-peer bonding, training sessions for the whole cohort at the same time and place as well as shared office space facility for all.

Conclusions and further considerations

The preliminary evidence in support of conceptualising business incubators as liminal spaces has been provided by the initial ethnographic data from a 12 month incubation programme. This paper has included empirical data from the application and selection of social ventures for the first cohort of the programme. The business incubation programme consists of three phases: selection, incubation and exit/graduation. Those stages correspond in function to the stages of Van Gennep's (1909) schema of the rites of passage with different emphasis on them. The schema for the cohort journey (the incubation process) clearly demonstrates those three phases. The separation includes the application and selection of applicants through a platform called Social Venture Weekend. The following transformational phase or liminality takes 12 months of events, trainings, business support sessions, mentoring and peer-to-peers sessions sharing a common work space with the aim to support people to develop their business ventures in a more effective and faster way. The reincorporation stage simply represents the exit from the programme or as called in BI literature graduation.

The schema of the rites of passage is applied to the development of social ventures and thus used to conceptualize the incubation process. The other most evident outcome of this initial data demonstrates the emphasis on the liminal phase – 12 months of support and infrastructure provision. This temporal emphasis on that stage as well as the complexity and amount of activities involved in it provide preliminary evidence to support the view of business incubators as liminal spaces. It remains to become thorough as the research project unfolds.

The other indicator in support of the above is the development and emphasis of a communita for all the participants in the programme. The cohort approach with the importance placed on the development of peer-to-peer supportive environment and building relationships amongst the members of the cohort are also an essential part of Turner's (1966) extension and elaboration of the theory of the rites of passage. The communita mode of relationships gives another reason to propose the incubator as a liminal space and include social, intangible aspects as key elements in the theorizing about the incubation process.

Further data collected from July 2014 to June 2015 will provide strong empirical evidence including observational data vis-à-vis the participants in the programme which wasn't available at this initial stage. This opportunity will come from participation in the events organised by the training partner, in house events and activities organised for the cohort, daily observations 2.5 days a week, as well as further interviews with programme director and business advisors. The possibility of discrepancy between the initial plan for the cohort journey and the actual unfolding of the programme will become evident or not after the 12 months of field work. The risk involved is the continuous negotiation of access which the field researcher is faced with as she is employed by the organisation. However the initial empirical data has given us confidence to support the notion of business incubators as

liminal spaces for the transformation of ideas into social ventures. Furthermore this paper advances the efforts to theoretically explain and understand business incubators and thus offers a robust theoretical foundation for them.

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