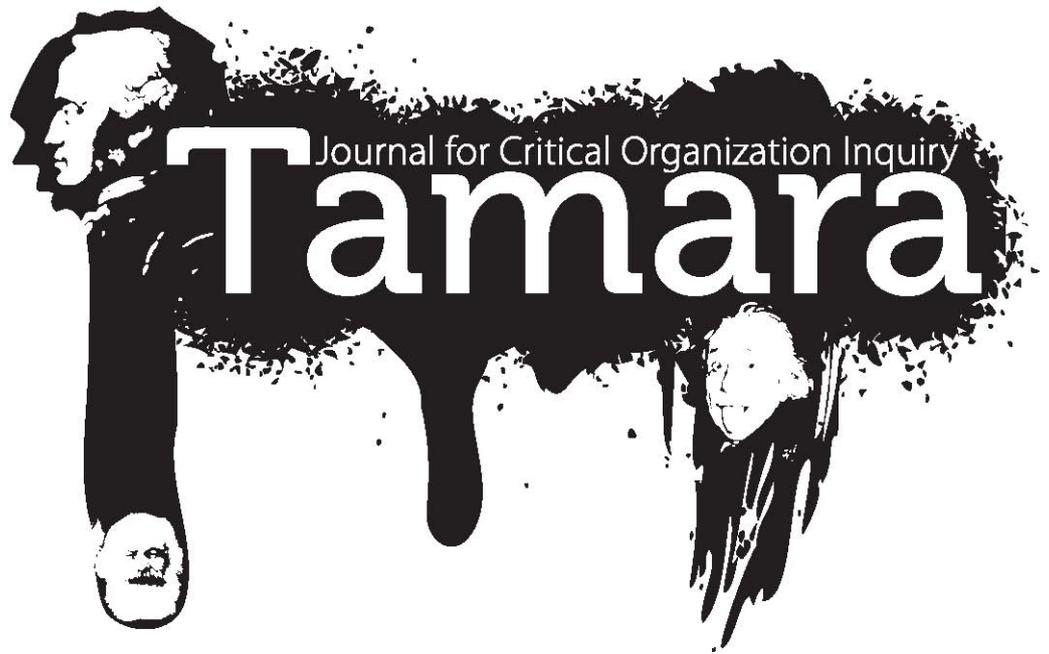


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Transitional Spaces: The Phenomenology of the Awayday

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Abstract

In this paper I will investigate the phenomenon of the awayday and its potential as a transitional space as well as how it fits into management discourse. Transition is central to the awayday, often on a literal level (of being away from the office, for example). Furthermore I want to explore whether this shift from place or routine has any bearing on the feelings and experiences of the employees: does it represent a psychological transition? Does the irregularity of structure of the awayday provide a space for reflection? Does it alter the way the individual thinks about work or identity? I will discuss this apropos Turner's concept of the liminal. My empirical data led the research. I interviewed members from two organisations that had recently been on an awayday and used their viewpoints to shape my understanding of the effects of transition on issues of identity whilst theoretically couching the discussion of the awayday within the context of 'fun at work' and how the awayday provoked questions about identity (both singular and multiple) and boundaries.

In this paper I want to investigate the phenomenon of the awayday – what does it mean? How is it perceived and experienced by employees? And how does it fit into management discourse? I also want to investigate its potential as a transitional space. The *Encarta* online dictionary defines 'transition' as 'a process or period in which something undergoes a change and passes from one state, stage, form or activity to another'. Thus transition involves moving from state/stage/form/activity x to state/stage/form/activity y. On a literal level, the awayday often involves the temporary shift from environment x to environment y in terms of a change of location. Sometimes awaydays are held in the usual workplace but what is imperative is that, even though employees do not enjoy a change of location, they do not undergo a normal working day and are involved in activities or events that are a departure from the norm. I want to explore whether this shift from place or routine has any bearing on the feelings and experiences of the employees: does it represent a psychological transition? Does the irregularity of structure of the awayday provide a space for reflection? Does it alter the way the individual thinks about work or identity? The concept of the liminal or liminality which is rooted in anthropology has recently entered organisational studies (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003, p. 269) and is pertinent in theorising about the awayday. Liminality concerns a point of transition between two positions and is temporary rather than permanent. The awayday fits into this schematic understanding of the liminal but is also more integrally linked to the ontological understanding of liminality that the anthropologist Victor Turner proposes, which I shall discuss in due course.

The precise starting point of the phenomenon of the awayday is difficult to ascertain. The phenomenon of the awayday was only made possible because of a range of factors that changed the perspective of work from being regarded in terms of the division of labour (in industrialisation), to the focus on the post-industrial and management perspective at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this latter perspective, work is regarded more from the standpoint of contributing to identity and well-being. The philosophy of management was that the individual was to be regarded holistically rather than merely in terms of their work output.

In the 1970s affluent companies started having days away from the office. These days would take the form of a trip away from the organisation, which was often courtesy of the employer. This pattern became more popular in the 1980s (especially in certain sectors such as investment banking and law) as the awayday was recognised in its potential for team-building. They were regarded as *ad hoc* gestures that were idiosyncratic to the organisation. Their wider occurrence was not investigated. It was only in the late 1990s that the term ‘awayday’ has been commonplace in management culture. The popularity of the awayday has resulted in many organisations in both the public and private sector deciding to host them at least on an annual basis. There are even companies that specialise in bespoke awaydays for other organisations. These include the London-based ‘Impact Factory’ who market themselves as providing team building skills which have the following objectives: “learn to work as a team; reassess your team’s goals and direction; communicate better as a team; and give your team a boost of energy” (www.impactfactory.com, n.d.). Another organisation, ‘TeamAwayday’ (based in Middlesex) markets itself in the following way: “we specialise in designing, resourcing and leading creative and practical awaydays” (www.teamawayday.co.uk, n.d.).

What became apparent very early on in my research was that much had been documented about the peculiarities of an awayday in an individual organisation but that there was very little literature about the awayday as a sociological or managerial phenomenon. The awayday can be viewed within the context of management literature on the role of fun in the organisation. The Special Issue of *Employee Relations* 31 (6) emphasises the importance of “giving a critical voice to the notion of ‘managed’ fun at work” and the recognition that “people are multidimensional and that it is appropriate to engage with the human side of organising” (Bolton & Houlihan, 2009: pp. 557, 558). Individual organisations have written about their strategies for the awayday but little has been articulated about the general sociological aspects of the phenomenon and about its potential for transformation. It may indeed be because organisations take a pragmatic view towards the awayday and believe that it has to be bespoke for the specific organisation in order to maximise the returns. The precise application of the phenomenon then varies from company to company. For some the awayday gives employees the opportunity to focus on a work-related task without the distraction of day-to-day routines. Rowe and Okell (2009) wanted to investigate a topical issue in their organisation and organised an awayday as a platform to put forward their ideas to other colleagues. The awayday then functioned as a brainstorming sessions where colleagues assessed the feasibility of the project. Hambleton (2006) viewed the awayday as a pragmatic strategy to help future planning and scenario-building where each awayday marked a different stage of planning (p. 114). Another perception of the awayday is of the opportunities it provides to have fun – to socialise, dress down and to enjoy treats courtesy of the employer.¹ According to an increasing number of organisations, fun at work “is essential for enhancing employee motivation and productivity, reducing stress, and increasing customer satisfaction” (Karl *et al.*, 2005, p. 1). Temkin (1994) suggests that fun creates “relationships of commitment” (p. 36). Meyer (1999) also identifies the relationship between ‘having fun’ and retaining staff and adds how “fun workplaces also tend to ... reduce the chances of employee burnout or high absenteeism” (p. 13). One of the objectives of this paper is to flesh out the awayday by examining it as a phenomenon that causes change. The nature and intensity of change shall be explored throughout the paper. In order to understand more about the awayday, and how the individuals concerned made sense of it, I decided to interview employees who had recently been on an awayday.

Methodology

I decided to conduct a comparative exercise between two different organisations: one in the private sector and the other in the public sector. Karl *et al.* (2005) makes a distinction between the variable role of fun in the private and public sector. The more altruistic aspects of public sector employment may lead one to believe that workers in this sector are less inclined to value ‘fun at work’ precisely “because they want to help others and so having fun at work is not going to be a top priority” (p. 3). A counter-argument is that “because they are undervalued in terms of what they do, then this is more of an argument to have the element of fun at work ... it is welcome release” (Karl *et al.*, 2005, p. 3).

Organisation A is a private legal firm in Manchester with twenty solicitors. Their awayday was held just after Easter in 2009 and consisted of a two-day retreat in the countryside in Yorkshire. In contrast organisation B is a high-street retail chain, also based in Manchester. I interviewed 25 out of the 200 employees who went on the awayday, which was held in a hotel (with adjacent conference facilities) in June 2009. The crucial difference between the awaydays from both organisations was that for organisation A the awayday was a two day event, which started on a Friday and ended on Saturday evening. It was held in a hotel

near Ilkey in Yorkshire, which contained scenic grounds. In contrast the awayday for organisation B was only a day event, also held on a Friday. The difference in time-scales was reflected in the responses: respondents from organisation A had more to say about their time away from the office, as “*it felt like a mini break*” echoed a number of other responses. The actual activities themselves were broadly similar (the only difference being that in organisation A the respondents went for a walk in the countryside). These included ice-breakers, team-building exercises as well as the opportunity to chat and socialise informally. The facilitators of the activities in both cases were external motivational speakers, who also provided keynote speeches.

I conducted two sets of interviews, both before the awayday (two months in both cases) and two to three weeks after the awayday. This is because I wanted to investigate peoples’ perceptions of the awayday, and then their perspectives following the events. I deliberately decided to wait for a lag of time after the awayday to allow the employees time to return to their normal working life as well as to reflect on their experiences during the awayday. During the first set of interviews I did not indicate what was going to be asked in the second set, and focused only on expectations, and what respondents wanted out of the awayday.

In total I interviewed 45 respondents (20 from organisation A, and 25 from organisation B) on two occasions in a private room that was away from their workplace. The interviews were transcribed and anonymised, with respondents from organisation A being referred to by a letter of the alphabet which corresponded to the order in which they were interviewed, from ‘A’ to ‘T’ and respondents from organisation B being referred to ‘1’ to ‘25’, according to the order in which they were interviewed. I ensured that both samples were representative of the whole cohort ensuring that there were respondents of both genders, different ages, and different levels of seniority. Another control measure was to ensure that all respondents had been working for their organisation for more than two years and that they had previously attended an awayday in 2008. These conditions were important because I wanted the respondents to have familiarity of their workplace, which two or more years duration would ensure, and I wanted them to have had experienced an awayday before so that the phenomenon was not novel to them in 2009.

The interviews were semi-structured. I told the respondents that I was interested in the awayday that they were about to embark on (in the first interview) and that they had experienced (in the second set of interviews). My primary goal was to collate respondents’ experiences of the awayday – to see what they felt about the awayday, how it made them feel about their role and identity at work and whether it presented other observations in general. I am taking identity to be a fluid concept which allows for change and development: it “is the product of agreement and disagreement, it too is negotiable” (Jenkins, 1996, p. 5).

Another objective was to compare and contrast the responses in both sectors to see whether there was a qualitative difference in the perceptions held. I analysed the interview material by picking out ideas and phrases, which conveyed the individuals’ attitudes and feelings about work. And then cross-compared both sets of interviews from both organisations before examining the transitions from interview one to two, and both sets of the second interview to look at the impact of the awayday on the experiences of work that the respondents had.

Experiencing the awayday

The first observation is that there was a qualitative difference between the findings from interview one and two. In the first interview respondents from both organisations discussed their jobs and how they felt working for their organisation. Respondents from both organisations mentioned their workload, and how they felt under pressure to meet deadlines, as well as discussing what they perceived to be their roles within the organisation. Very little was said about their time outside of work, and if it was mentioned then it was discussed within terms of trying to balance the pressures of work and family life. I asked about their expectations of the awayday and many respondents told me that they had not given it a great deal of thought or that they thought that it would be used as a forum for management to both review the previous year and to make decisions about the year ahead. In contrast, the second interviews were more about the respondent’s perceptions of their role within the organisation and were focused on what they wanted to get out of work. In the second interview the respondents were, by and large, more assertive, reflective and creative (in the sense of being more expressive) in their statements about work. In the first interview many described their job in factual terms – ‘this is what I do, this is what I am paid for’. This did not occur in the second interview, where most respondents did not discuss the awayday with the view to imparting a series about facts about what went on in the awayday but were more keen to talk about the *personal* significance of the awayday – what the whole event had meant for them. Respondents were keen to explore their identities, the multiple and often conflicting roles that they occupy not simply in the workplace but in other settings as well, such as at home.

From the data of the second interviews it became apparent that the majority of respondents had found the awayday to be a positive experience. More than half the sample in both sets (15 out of 20 in Organisation A, and 14 out of 25 in Organisation B) found the awayday to be “*positive*” and “*energising*” (recurring terms used in the interviews) and that it brought about changes in their perceptions of their organisation and their role in it. Respondent 2 summarised the situation by commenting on how the social aspect of her awayday was the most enjoyable:

the day went really quickly as we were constantly in conversation...everyone was really curious to find out which area others worked in and what they were like. You get phone calls from people that you finally got to meet, and it was nice to put a name to a face". Respondent E stated how: "I thought that the awayday was well needed—it has been a long and difficult year, and the recession had affected finances and general morale.

When I questioned her about the awayday after its occurrence her mood had lifted, and she was more animated and ebullient in her responses: *"It was great, I met some really nice people, and found out that J--- T--- 's (who works in a different team) kids go to the same school as mine, and we decided to take it in turns to ferry our kids to school and back".* Respondents 4 and 6 had similar experiences: respondent 4 met someone he went to school with on the awayday, previously having been unaware that the said individual also worked for the organisation. Respondent 6 discovered that a colleague in her department shared her passion for salsa dancing, and they agreed to go to the same class, thus opening up the possibility for social interaction.

Although the above two experiences were unconnected with work-related issues, these new contacts initiated through the awayday enabled respondents to bridge the gap between 'work' and 'home' and instigated new networks and possibilities for interaction. Without the awayday these individuals may have not forged these links, links which had the potential to alter their perceptions of work. In 'Work/Family Border Theory: a New Theory of Work/Family' Campbell Clark (2000) argues about the inevitable connectedness of work and family systems – as much as people try to keep these two zones or domains separate there is always emotional crossover. "People are border-crossers who make daily transitions between two worlds - who make daily transitions between two worlds – the world of work and the world of family" (p. 748). She adds, "word and family influence each other, and so employers, societies and individuals cannot ignore one sphere without potential peril to the other" (p. 749). The transitional nature of the awayday can be seen to loosen the boundaries between 'work' and 'family life' thus inculcating a more healthy balance to one's overall life. And for respondent 3 it also provided a space outside 'work' and 'family life' and enabled her to define her identity in her own terms, instead of having it defined for her. She said,

it has been good to have been able to talk freely...I have been able to do that now, and was able to be myself at the awayday ... I like my job but you don't get a chance to be yourself – I'm customer controller number ___ and this is how I think of myself in the day (and then after work I'm mum to _____. I spend so much of the day fire-fighting – either answering the phone and sorting people's problems out, or having to deal with the backlog of emails – I suppose that's life in retail but the day away gave me the chance to put my feet up and really talk to people...it gave me time.

A similar theme that emerged from the interview data was that the awayday gave employees the opportunity to extend and diversify their networks, which would benefit them on a professional level. This observation was more pronounced in organisation B, where a number of respondents commented on how existing problems they had at work seemed to be addressed, and sometimes resolved by the fortuitous encounters with other colleagues who were often not in their immediate team or department but who were in a position to help them professionally. Respondent 10 made the following confession,

I've been having a really hard time at work y'know. Part of my job involves the making up of food hampers for delivery, which is okay. After five or six hampers have been made they then get taken over to a driver who is meant to deliver them. The problems I've been having is not with me but with one of the drivers who gets the hampers and addresses mixed up. I then get angry customers on the phones complaining that the wrong hamper has been delivered to their relative – I try and explain that it's not my fault. I've tried to speak to the driver but he just gives me dirty looks and then my boss starts thinking it's me that is the problem...Well, anyway I met this chap at the awayday and he coordinates the drivers or something, he is involved with doing the central rota. He told me that he would try and arrange it so that I got to deal with different drivers. He gave me his extension and mobile number as well which was kind of him.

During the conversation I could see that respondent 10 seemed visibly relieved that he was able to sort this issue, which had preoccupied him for a prolonged period of time, and was making him anxious and frustrated that his competence may have been compromised because of the mistakes that were being made. He expressed his relief in at being able to solve this problem without having to formalise the complaint by referring it to his manager. The awayday enabled this to happen, and he felt empowered about being able to tackle the issue without the intervention of higher authority, and also at the discretion and goodwill of his new associate. Mariotti (1999) recognises the importance of building networks within an organisation claiming

that “realising that people in a company are all part of a larger team – a larger “family” in a sense – is an important step” (p. 63). Applying this to the above case, respondent 10 was able to ‘build a network’ around the obstacle and that even though the ‘chop at the awayday’ wasn’t part of his inner network he was able to find a fellow employee who was still part of the organisation and whom he was able to count on.

A recurring idea in the responses was how the awayday gave respondents the opportunity to reflect on aspirations and goals at work. Respondent D told me how,

I never used to think about work beyond the project that I was currently working on. The two days away helped me think about what I wanted to achieve from working for ____ (organisation A)....like what I wanted to get out of it for myself. It wasn't so much about an individual project or task but about thinking outside the box, and reflecting...reflecting about work and what it means to me.

Respondent N defined the awayday in terms of a catch up. He conveyed his thoughts as follows:

there are always so many deadlines, and so much pressure to meet them that there is never anytime to take stock of things. Another factor has been constant change ... five years ago I was a para-legal then I became an assistant solicitor in personal injury and now I'm being asked to move into a different area of law. It can be so unsettling moving from one area to another but in this day and age I suppose its expected.

These ideas echoed many other responses about the need to keep up with change and face the demands of contemporary working-life. In the post-industrial age the demands that are placed on employees are immense, with employees having to attune themselves to organisational change, which Herriot (2001) identifies as becoming a “constant feature of business life” (p. 1).

Both awaydays included team-building exercises Respondent D posited a distinction between the team-building exercises and games which he was involved with on the awayday which were done with the objective of meeting and working alongside others, rather than to fulfil a specific target, and tasks at work which were often seen in terms of deadlines rather than the nature of the activity. Respondent D added, “at work you just get on with the task in hand but here, we were encouraged to think about why we were doing what we were being asked to”. Many of the respondents commented on the qualitatively different nature of these tasks/team-building exercises that were often more fulfilling and enjoyable than their work projects. Team-building invited them to think about self-knowledge whilst work concerned itself with getting the job done. I then asked respondent D how the awayday differed from a staff appraisal, to which he replied: “In a staff appraisal you are under pressure to show how you have met targets...also you have to account for your billing time...” In this exchange it seemed that the awayday offered Respondent D something that he was not able to find in his everyday work, nor in his annual evaluation. The awayday contributed to his staff development.

The evidence above suggests that the awayday enabled individuals to explore different aspects of their identity: the professional, psychological and emotional. According to Leary and Tangney (2003, p. 3) ‘identity’ refers to the capacity for self-reflection and the awareness of self. The awayday clearly provided the opportunity for individuals to reflect on their identities and their relation to others. In providing the forum for individuals to think about other aspects of their identity, the awayday closely adhered to the management work ethic brought about by the ‘human relations’ movement of the early twentieth century, which showed “interest in the realm of employee subjectivity – the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires that comprise our self-understanding or self-identity” (Whittle, 2005, p. 1301).

The awayday as a transitional space

From the data collected I came to the conclusion that the awayday had great potential for transformation, and that this had hitherto not been acknowledged and investigated. Many respondents claimed that they genuinely felt different, experienced feelings that they did not during their working lives, and that on returning to the workplace they felt more uplifted and fulfilled. When analysing the interview transcripts it became apparent that, whilst in prosaic terms the awayday was a physical and transitional shift from the workplace to somewhere else, in symbolic terms it represented something else. Employees were able to escape from the constraints of being defined by a particular job role to express and experience selfhood from *outside* the boundaries of a specific role. This in turn gave them the opportunity to reflect. It was a liberating and empowering experience. The awayday gave many the opportunities to redefine their role/place in the organisation. And it represented a transitional space or threshold through which employees were able to be psychologically and spiritually revived.

The findings so far can be summarised as follows. During the awayday respondents from both organisations engaged in different activities, some more structured than others, which often had no relation to their work duties. The awayday is

extraordinary: it represents a break from the mundane and provides the opportunity for change and transformation. The displacement from the normal means that respondents from across the organisation got the opportunity to meet or interact in ways that would not be feasible in their everyday work environment. They are also away from the defining (and sometimes restricting) aspects of the workplace, such as their role and purpose in the organisation and whom they are accountable to. The experience of newness that an awayday offers, by virtue of being located in an unfamiliar space outside of work and by the shake up of normality, resulted in an experience of newness from the daily toil, which many respondents enjoyed.

I want to now turn to the writings of the Victor Turner to explain the behaviour and the attitudes demonstrated in the above findings. It is Turner's notion of 'liminal' or 'liminality' that is pertinent here. Both terms are derived from the Latin 'limen', which means *threshold* and refers to the bottom part of a doorway, which must be crossed when entering a room. Liminality was first introduced as a concept in anthropology in Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* (1960, first published in 1909). Here van Gennep describes rites of passages as having the following tripartite structure of: (1) separation, (2) liminal period, (3) re-assimilation/incorporation. In the second phase of liminality the initiate is stripped of his/her former status before a new status is bestowed in the third phase and the initiate is re-assimilated back into the community. The second phase is therefore an intermediary phase where status and identity is ambiguous. Some fifty years after van Gennep's analyses Turner picks up on the concept of the liminal as this transitional state. He notes that "the subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, 'invisible'" (Turner, 1967, p. 95). In other words, the status of individuals in the liminal state is both socially and structurally ambiguous. This is indeed the case in the awayday - the conventional hierarchies and patterns that hold in the workplace are suspended. There may have had a period of transition where people still assumed the roles they had at work but this soon passed into a more egalitarian environment. Respondent 5 was excited when retelling what happened to him during the team-building exercises that occurred during the awayday:

I found myself in a team with my line-manager and two senior executives – that was scary but they were nice and friendly and in this setting everyone was an important as the next person. In fact, in one of the tasks we were given which was to describe your favourite hero/heroine from a book or film and then discuss how this person was similar and different to you, I lead on it and presented our findings to the whole room... That felt good". At another point in the conversation he added, "it was revealing being able to find out about personal, (but not too personal stuff) about others because it brought out the human side (rather than the work side) in people.

The interaction that respondent 5 outlined can be described with recourse to a further ideas of liminality that Turner discusses, "as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations or ideas and relations may arise" (Turner, 1967, p. 97). This "phase of transition is situated in sacred time and space, as opposed to the profane times and places of the first and third phases" (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003, p. 271). The relatively unstructured nature of the transitional or liminal state means that there is more opportunity and potential for new ideas and relationships that would not normally have been formed during everyday working life to be formed. "People are betwixt and between ... positions" (Turner, 1969, p. 95) and this gives greater potential for striking up new relationships. Being away from the regular workplace meant moving away from the physical and psychological constraints of working life, which included the non-personalised but hierarchical environment of the office space, the structure of the organisation, and even the uniform (which was prescribed for the members in organisation B) or dress code, which once again often defined peoples' roles or identities. Being temporarily pulled out of that environment, (where people are often defined by their job title, and conceived of in instrumental terms) and being relocated in an environment where you are referred to only by your name (and not by your job title) and are able to style yourself was liberating. This process of stripping down or away echoes Turner's belief that "liminal individuals have nothing" (Turner, 1967, p. 98) but rather than being disabling this is liberating, there is "no status, insigna ... nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows" (1967, p. 98). Elsewhere he states that liminality is characterized by the "blurring and merging of distinctions. Persons who find themselves in a liminal phase are 'temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure'" (Turner, 1982, p. 27). Ironically this state of stripping down, when the individual is not defined in terms of their job or status but in terms of their individuality is the most empowering gesture. In the removal of hierarchies and power relationships we experience the undifferentiation of community. Turner (1969) adds that there is not complete egalitarianism because the "ritual elders" still hold power (p. 96). Equally, within the case of the awayday it would be a falsification to deny that management holds sway (and some of the problems with this notion are discussed later).

In the transition from the instrumental conventions and constraints of working life to the fluidity of the transitional space offered in the everyday, the potential for *communitas* is a distinct possibility, where people have shared goals and values and people are not viewed instrumentally but holistically. Herriot (2001) describes communality or communal sharing by the following characteristics. It “ignores individual differences and divides resources according to need. There is a strong sense of belonging to the group, and people derive their identity from their group membership ... a high value is placed upon relationships, altruism, generosity and concern for others” (p. 120). A couple of respondents D and J spoke of the need for community. Respondent D stated how: “*work used to be more community-centred, where everyone was like a family and had their role*”. When I questioned at what stage in his working life he was referring to he added, “*...when I first started out in the early 1980s ... maybe it’s because there were only seven of us, and we were building the firm from scratch – it felt like a group thing then Over the years things have changed and people wanted to look after their own patch ... the sense of community and sharing has gone*”. Respondent J told me how she felt that a greater sense of community is desirable in the workplace.

These days people spend so long at work and so in many ways you see work colleagues more than you do your family and friends ... It would be good to be able to have some of the trust that you can feel with people at home into the workplace. People separate work and life because at work you are constantly having to watch your back, and look out for yourself. It’s a shame that this happens and it probably does because you don’t get time to really get to know people at work, misunderstandings can often be sorted out with more communication but there often isn’t time.

The emphasis of awaydays on communication and team-building could offer a bridge between the spheres of work and home life, and provide a sense of solidarity.

Turner posits ‘society’ as being in opposition to ‘community’. Community is more democratic whilst society is structured and hierarchical. In a liminal phase society dissolves into community, and after the passing of the transitory stage society reigns once again. This trajectory can be mapped onto the relationship between work and the awayday. Relations in the workplace are hierarchical. The awayday presents an inversion of this (though not a complete one as indicated) and after the awayday the hierarchy is restored. I interviewed respondents shortly after their awaydays because I wanted to know whether they were going to use or bring some of their experiences on the awayday into their everyday working life. Many respondents had made contact with employees that they met on the awayday and some respondents seemed keen to make a change for what they regarded was the better. Respondent P told me that, “*I’m the youngest solicitor here and sometimes feel out of my depth ... but at the awayday I feel that I came out of my shell more and it’s changed the way I feel around colleagues, I mean I go for lunch with them now and don’t feel like I have to run off*”. It would have been interesting to follow up some of the leads six months later to see whether changes had been kept. In other words it would have been worth exploring whether the awayday was, as the phenomenon suggests, something that is merely transitory, or does/could it have longer lasting effects?

The awayday as a management strategy

Although the majority of respondents viewed the awayday in a positive way, in terms of giving respondents the opportunity to reflect, enjoy themselves and to make new contacts and revive old ones, there was also a core of respondents who did not view the awayday in such favourable terms. These respondents tended to see the awayday less from the perspective of the employee and more from the benefit of the organisation. And they felt that the fact that the awayday is instigated and organised by management and actually organised by external clients suggested that it was under tight control. In the first set of interviews when questioned about their expectations of the awayday six respondents noted how they were not told what was going to happen in the awayday and were not given a choice as to the location or the activities that they would undertake whilst on the awayday. Respondent L asked his manager for future details during his lunch hour but was told, “*it’s in hand...you just have to turn up and you’ll see then*”. When I pursued this idea with the respondent and suggested that it may have been a kindly gesture that management didn’t want employees to worry about the details and wanted to treat them he chipped in saying, “*that’s fine if your ten years old but I wanted to know what to expect*”. He viewed the lack of information as a paternalistic gesture. No employees received an itinerary in advance and were issued it with it on the day. The only information that they were given in advance was the date and location.

Four respondents (out of both cohorts) felt that the awayday was a well-earned break or rest but that it had no further benefits other than being a change of scene and a break away from the normal routine. They also felt that it also becomes an expectation for employees. Respondent 15 remarked on how she had already been to three awaydays in consecutive years and how, “*it is something that feels routine now, like having an end of year review*”. Respondent R acknowledged that she felt that “*Partners in law firms feel under pressure to organise awaydays because it’s the done thing. If they don’t bother, then there’s a sense that*

they are being tight-fisted, and it's not seen as a good thing with external clients ... That's why they make a fuss with Christmas dos as well". I pursued this comment by questioning whether she felt that there were similarities between the awayday and the office/Christmas party. The response was that whilst the latter is entirely focused on having a good time and celebrating the end of the year, the former is more structured and focused on team-building and developing social and other skills. It is interesting that even though respondent R did not speak of any discernible benefits of the awayday on her outlook, she was able to recognise the potential that it held for others. The other three respondents claimed that whilst they engaged fully in the activities of the awayday it was a perfunctory exercise, which was done with the intention of placated management. Respondent G remarked how, "*management have a tendency to dress things up to make it look as if they are helping you out but actually it's just a way of them exercising their power...I mean they give you nice good and really splash out because they want you to toe the line, and feel grateful...*" The striking aspect about all of these respondents was that they were amongst the most senior (in years and experience) members in their organisation. This finding prompted me to investigate whether the reverse was true. I found that the most positive responses about the awayday were given by the more junior (but not necessarily the younger) members of both groups. For those who had relatively less power within the organisation being able to create a dialogue with a more senior member of staff was something that they might have not been comfortable doing during the hours of work itself. The autonomy and greater structural flexibility offered during the awayday gave these individuals opportunities that would have normally been unavailable to them. Thus the awayday offered the potential for mobilisation and transformation; it gave people a platform to express their ideas in a non-hierarchical setting, and was confidence-building.

The more circumspect attitudes articulated above demonstrate a Janus face of the awayday. On one side it can be seen to demonstrate the importance of personal fulfilment in work. On the other hand it can be viewed tentatively as a management strategy which regulates employees. It is another example of surveillance at work and there is a critical dynamic in terms of power and control. Tomlinson (2005) explores the pernicious aspects of a particular awayday, and reported how the employees' perception of the awayday was unremittingly negative: they felt as if they were being "forced" into a consortium suggests that the organisation of the awayday, rather than involving 'open communications', contained instead elements of the 'managed communication process' that tends to reinforce existing power imbalances and undermine trust" (p. 1183). Meyer (1999) stresses the importance of inviting employee suggestions as a way of addressing the power imbalance between management and employees as well as the more practical issue of finding out what works. He remarks how "allowing employees to suggest events is not enough. You must welcome informal or formal feedback so you can modify or eliminate unpopular or counterproductive activities" (p. 15). Getting external clients to organise the awaydays, which was the case for both organisations, was also even less personal. Reflecting back on my data, this is something that could have been put to respondent L who felt patronised by the lack of information provided about the awayday before the event. It raises the question: if employees were more involved in the process would it affect their perceptions and subsequent experiences of it?

Respondent C was vehement in his dislike of the awayday. He stated that whilst he enjoyed the more social aspects of eating together and chatting he felt that the team games and keynote speeches were a waste of time. When I asked him why he didn't want to take part in the games he suggested that he felt that he felt pressured to act a part, to conform, to perform even. When I asked him to clarify what he meant by this he gave me an example,

I arrived a bit late and missed the intros. People had already started the activities ... I sat on a table to two people I know quite well but they were behaving oddly, as if they wanted to set the rules by which everyone should play by. I felt really uncomfortable when we were given the team-task because I couldn't relax with them. At work, you know who the head honcho is but I didn't know what was going on here ... except that I couldn't be myself.

This respondent prompted me to think about the notion of organisation control. Is it possible to entirely suspend power dynamics and to assert complete autonomy or are there always forms of organisational control going on? "Underlying this "be yourself" ideology is the notion that employees are free agents, no longer objects of corporate control" (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 573). Perhaps another strategy at work here was a change from "hierarchical, bureaucratic control to concertive control in the form of self-managing teams" (Barker, 1993, p. 408). The ideal set up would be in a democratic environment where there was "involvement in decision making, team interaction, listening and sharing feelings, communication, and satisfaction" (Coopman, 2001, p. 261) but according to respondent C this was not the case and some members had already tried to assert their values and get others to share these values. It is clear that the issue of surveillance cannot be ignored when thinking about the awayday, and that the forms may be more implicit and less bureaucratic but they are present nonetheless.

The multifarious responses to the awayday suggest that it is both impossible and undesirable to pin the awayday down to one notion. It clearly represents different things for different people: it is a break from work; an opportunity for reflection;

socialisation; an opportunity for management to push forward with a new initiative. I have shown how, the awayday can be seen as an experience of the liminal which suspends social hierarchies and promotes the idea of community. Yet, for others, it displays a form of organisational control and the push ‘to be yourself’ and ‘let your hair down’ creates pressure for the individual to *perform* and don an “organisational persona” (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 574), which maybe a different persona to the one shown at work but is a persona nonetheless. The issues explored here as pioneered by the sociologist Erving Goffman in his studies of “impression management” revealed the flipside to the awayday. Whilst respondents who were positively disposed to the awayday enjoyed the possibilities of exploring their identities, one can argue that these identities were merely artificial impressions of falsity (see Burns, 1992, p. 116).

The awayday can be described as having “ambiguous goals ... which have ‘multiple, indistinct, incoherent or fragmented meanings, in which no single meaning is the ‘best’ or most coherent interpretation” (Jarzabkowski *et. al.*, 2010, p. 220). Many of these goals are not mutually exclusive – it is possible to socialise whilst also simultaneously being aware that the awayday is a management strategy (although this may affect the extent of socialisation). However, some of these goals display conflicting priorities, such as the need to exercise autonomy and the boundaries asserted by management. The presence of multiple goals and opportunities further supports the idea that the awayday is a liminal and transitional space.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the paper I asserted that in spite of its widespread popularity in organisations little research has been done to investigate the phenomenon of the awayday. It has universal currency amongst employees from different organisations but it is under-theorised. It is plausible that the constancy and continuation of the phenomenon in organisations may be as the result of peer-pressure, where directors and managers want to entitle their own employees with the same treatment that other organisations have. To do away with the awayday would seem as a deprivation and hence it continues from year to year with little regard for the benefits that may result.

The awayday is central to management discourse because it deals with critical issues that are central to management theory and practice, namely organisational strategies of getting people together to accomplish desired objectives. The awayday entails suspending the set hierarchies in the workplace and explores the potential for different groups to be arranged across social and recreational lines.

Earlier in the paper I referred to the awayday within the context of ‘fun at work’. Indeed the broader focus of the sociological and psychological implications of fun, recreation, socialisation, what might commonly be regarded as ‘non-work’ activities are of burgeoning importance in management discourse in contemporary culture. The emergence and implementation of the awayday in workplaces is not limited or localised to certain types of organisations and is becoming more increasingly widespread. This testified to its growing importance in management culture.

The interview data and related theoretical positions demonstrate the complexity of the phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to one formulation. There were mixed views about the awayday. For some the awayday was fulfilling on many levels, including in a professional and personal level. It was “existentially empowering” (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, p. 570) and represented the apotheosis of the management goal where the person was treated holistically and instrumentally, and not in terms of their job role. The awayday provided material satisfaction in the form of refreshments and the comfort of a luxurious setting. It also provided non-material satisfaction in the form of new social bonds, the formation of community.

The most positive aspect on the awayday was the opportunity to socialise, to meet new people and form new bonds, and to rekindle or reconfiguring existing relationships. Many forged new links with people in their organisation that were not necessarily connected with work but with activities, interests and shared values that took them out of the sphere of work. These links enabled respondents to begin a relationship that was based around the ideals of community.

Many respondents responded favourably to the social aspect because of the lack of social contact that they have during normal working hours since the intervention of technologies, such as emails. It was significant that it was generally the more mature employees who brought this up. And it was clear that the impersonal interchanges with people during the working day (emails, conference calls, phone calls, memos) had not reduced the need for human contact and the need to socialise which was clearly the most popular aspect of the awayday. Keenoy and Seijo (2010) discusses the paradox of “digital connectivity” which he claims puts people in instant communication with each other over a digital interface but also adds to “people feeling increasingly disconnected” (p. 184). The important point made here is that human contact provided in the organisation in this awayday (and indeed many others) provided a multitude of non-tangible benefits linked to emotional and spiritual well-being.

The awayday also elicited a series of negative remarks from respondents regarding measures of implicit and explicit control and the more difficult task for some of having to socialise with people that they didn’t know, respondents feeling self-conscious about the activities and many such as respondent K who wanted to keep work life and home life separate: “*I do get on with people but I’m not massively chatty and I’ve got my own friends ... and so I didn’t really want this awayday thing – it’s different*”

with the Christmas party because you can make excuses but with this who have to take part even if you don't want to". Furthermore she found the encroachment of the awayday on a Saturday "thoroughly inconvenient ... and troublesome" but when I asked why she didn't convey this she reiterated the importance of taking part as company policy. Fleming and Spicer (2004) give a similar example in their study of how "organisations use normative control to encroach upon the private lives of employees" (p. 77).

Although the majority of respondents were positively disposed towards the awayday, the negative issues that respondents have contribute towards a more critical appraisal of the phenomenon. The critical implications of my analysis are immense and reveal the potential significance, both positive and negative, that the awayday has for management culture. The strong sentiments that employees shared with me during their interviews suggested that, by and large, the awayday was not merely perceived as a neutral phenomenon but that it was influential in shaping and restructuring relationships in the workplace as well as perceptions of work and self. Thus the wider implications of awaydays need to be considered in order to ensure that they are effective. They should not be regarded as mere *ad hoc* gestures but as important evaluative exercises. Some respondents commented on how they wanted to be informed of the schedule of the awayday beforehand and employers should use the opportunity to empower employees by asking for their views on the nature or structure of their awayday. After the event employees should be provided with the opportunity to feed back their experiences to employers. By keeping employees informed both before and after integrates the awayday into the organisation more, rather than it just being viewed as an enforced and anomalous event. This also shifts the power dynamic – employees are not merely recipients but are instrumental in shaping the awayday. By recognising the significance that the awayday has (or could have) on the organisation and by involving employees more in the planning of the event may have a positive impact on working relations and trust. Andrew Ross claimed how "an 'awayday' can awaken an organisation" (Ross, 2005, p. 178). This short but apt phrase is a fitting concluding statement to this research. Whether to discuss a new initiative, get people together, or to have a team-building session an awayday has many functions and purposes and although transitory in nature has great potential in management and organisational studies.

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Electronic sources

<http://www.impactfactory.com>

<http://www.teamawayday.co.uk>

¹ These two perceptions are not mutually exclusive – a work-productive awayday doesn't preclude having fun.