**Finding our selves in space: identity and spatiality**

**Abstract**

This chapter explores the management and organization studies (MOS) literature concerned with the relationships between identity, space and place. We define identity-related terms and highlight the principal ways in which space is conceptualized in MOS. We then examine three categories of empirical and theoretical studies linking organized space and processes of identity and identification: workspaces designed to enable highly interactive modes of working; homes, where work is increasingly taking up residence; and spaces that facilitate identity change in ways unanticipated by managements. We then make suggestions for future research and conclude by highlighting the powerful dynamic reciprocal connections between space and individual and organizational identities.

**Key words**

Identity, identity work, space, place, workplace, new ways of working, homes, liminal spaces

**Introduction**

The past 20 years has seen a transformation of workspaces across the industrialized world. This radical change to the design of work buildings has been based on claims that architecture can help to realize organizational strategies by supporting ‘new ways of working’ involving flexible interaction that crosses organizational boundaries, facilitating adaptability, creativity and innovation (Duffy 1997). Such designs represent a spatial blueprint for the ‘network organization’, which as Castells (1996: 165) has claimed, is capable of continuous innovation because it is structured in a ‘variable geometry’ with a culture that is ephemeral, flickering and kaleidoscopic. They apply to a wide range of workplaces and workers, including offices (e.g. Dale & Burrell 2008, 2010; Hirst & Humphreys 2013; Kingma 2018), co-working spaces (Garrett et al 2017), universities (Baldry & Hallier 2010), corporate campuses (Kerr & Robinson 2015), and the university students who are the workers of the future (Hancock & Spicer 2011).

New workplaces look and feel strikingly different: most are constructed from reinforced glass, and have open plan offices and big atria. At first glance, they are legible - the layout can be comprehended quickly - but while it is often easier to tell what is what, it can be harder to discern who is who. Individual offices and physical walls are scarce, but seem to have been partially replaced by headphones. Simultaneously, as workplaces appear more striking, perhaps ‘iconic’, aided by increasingly ubiquitous digital devices, work is dispersing across spaces and times, such as homes, cafes, and the commute. An illustration of the spatial diffusion of work is the facilities organization WeWork, which provides flexible office space and business support for entrepreneurs who are ‘always working or always semi-working’ (<https://www.wework.com>). Alongside changes to the material workplace, it is clear that the spatial and temporal boundaries between work and non-work are being redrawn. As the geographer Doreen Massey (2005) argues, space is a product of relations, including those that establish boundaries. In Gupta and Ferguson’s (1992: 16) terms, space is formed through ‘a shared historical process that differentiates the world as it connects it’. We are at a particularly interesting point in this historical process, with rapid mutual reconstitution of differentiated and connected spaces, and with them, the identities of organizations and individuals.

Prior to this extensive shift in workspace design, space was mostly an implicit concern in management and organization studies (MOS). Notable exceptions which inspired later research are Gieryn’s (2000) review of place in sociology, Berg and Kreiner’s (1990) analysis of corporate architecture as symbolic resources that express the identities of organizations, and Yanow’s (1998) comparison of managerially ‘authored meanings’ of built space with those actually constructed by employees and other relevant audiences (cf. Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Halford & Leonard, 2006). The spatial reconfiguration outlined above has subsequently inspired a large body of research on the implications of space for organizing and work (cf. reviews by Taylor and Spicer (2007) and Weinfurtner and Seidl (2018). Indeed, in their authoritative book, Dale and Burrell (2008: xii) state that ‘the explicit enlistment of the material spaces of organisation as a managerial tool is an important development in the restructuring of power, corporate culture and employee identities’.

In this chapter, we consider the literature on space/place in relation to the ‘vast, heterogeneous and fragmented’ (Brown 2017: 297) literature on identities in (and occasionally of) organizations (He & Brown, 2013). Considerable literature suggests that *identity*, the sense of who we are and how we want to appear to others, is a fluid dynamic construction, which relates ‘to the (conscious) struggle to respond to the question ‘who am I?’’ (Brown, 2017, 2018; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003: 1168). These processes of identity construction have been explored by scholars under the banner of *identity work,* which Watson (2008: 129) describes as ‘*the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieu in which they live their lives’* (italics original). We agree with Brown (2018: 8) that ‘overwhelmingly’ research has focused on identities as ‘socially constructed through situated practices of language use’, for which space/place is one significant discursive resource. In our exploration of the relationships between identity and space/place, however, we draw also on Dale and Burrell (2008: 108; emphasis original), who maintain that the social actor is ‘a *spatial and embodied actor*, not just … a discursive construction’. That is, ‘real’ people inhabit ‘actual’ space, and issues of spatiality and embodiment are at least equally important in the constitution of identities in organizations.

We next review some of the major theoretical perspectives on space, and (where possible) indicate how identity is conceptualized in each. We then examine the relationship between space and identity in three overlapping categories of space: workspaces designed for new ways of working; homes, where work is increasingly taking up residence; and spaces notable for facilitating identity change, categorized as liminal, free or resisting spaces.

**Space and place in MOS**

While identity scholarship has partially converged on a set of conceptual definitions, there are few direct equivalents in the literature on organizational space; this literature is fragmented and based on diverse theories of space which offer different understandings of the spatial and embodied actor (Weinfurtner & Seidl, 2018). The following is a non-exhaustive summary of the key authors and concepts associated with space/place in MOS, deriving from geography, sociology, and anthropology, and where they exist, identity-related conceptualizations .

We begin with Lefebvre, whose work has been highly influential in MOS. Writing from a Marxian perspective, Lefebvre (1991) established that space is simultaneously material and social, and produced through and productive of embodied social relations. The core of his argument (1991: 39) is that space is produced through the interaction of three analytic dimensions: the material environment, designed to realize capitalism’s requirements; everyday routines of embodied action; and the meanings that inhabitants attribute to the spaces they occupy. While Lefebvre does not allude to identity he underscores the role of the body in the production of space. Thus, the embodied practices and understandings that construct space are also ‘definitions of selfhood internalized within the body’ (Simonsen, 2005: 5).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Organizational scholars have used Lefebvre’s spatial ‘triad’ to analyse ‘new’ offices (e.g. Dale & Burrell, 2008; Kingma, 2018), the incursion of work into homes (Wapshott & Mallett, 2012), the stabilizing influence of older, emblematic work buildings (Siebert et al., 2017) which can also be re-interpreted to express changing organizational identities (Liu & Grey, 2018). Similarly, while Lefebvre does not engage explicitly with gendered identities, several studies have extended his framework to account for the gendered and performative qualities of space (Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2015; Hirst & Schwabenland, 2018). Wasserman and Frenkel (2015) for instance define ‘spatial work’ as the spatial and embodied identity work performed by organization members which constructs and challenges gender and class distinctions. Less studied so far is Lefebvre’s (2004) analysis of spatiotemporal rhythms (an exception is Nash (2018)). These studies consider struggles between the domination of space, grounded in capitalist processes, and how users attempt to re-appropriate it.

A second stream of research, deriving from humanistic geography and developed in environmental psychology, conceptualizes the relationship between place and identity as *place identity* (Auburn & Barnes, 2006; Cresswell, 2012; Gieryn, 2000; Manzo, 2003). Place is defined as ‘a meaningful segment of space’ (Cresswell, 2012: 280) distinguished by its specific location, material form, and the subjective meanings, individual or shared, that are attributed to it. The emphasis is on the phenomenological study of being-in-the-world and on the situated meanings people attribute to places and to themselves, with particular emphasis on dwelling and home. These themes are reflected in MOS research taking this position, such studies of community lifeboating (Grey & O’Toole, 2018), temporary dwelling places in hair salons (Shortt, 2015) and regional entrepreneurship (Larson & Pearson, 2012; Rooney et al., 2010). Central to research on place is an emphasis on (usually positive) spatial meanings, and some studies argue for a conceptual distinction between space and place on this basis[[2]](#endnote-2).

Several interconnected streams of spatial research proceed from the assumption made in Actor-Network Theory (ANT) that agency is ‘the hybrid accomplishment of many actors with varying ontologies’ (Wilhoit 2018: 3). An eminent proponent is Massey (2005) who sets an agenda for a ‘process-relational geography’, in which space and material objects have agency and humans only become actors in association with them (see also Sergot and Saives’ (2016) appraisal of Massey’s work for MOS). Spaces are not bounded or defined solely by what lies within them, but are also constituted by all the elsewheres with which they relate. Echoing Brown’s (2018) definition of identity, space is ‘never finished … [but] a simultaneity of stories-so-far’ (Massey, 2005: 9). Thus, ‘identities/entities, the relations between ‘them’, and the spatiality which is part of them, are all co-constitutive (p.10). Research within MOS using this perspective has been developed in the Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO) stream of research (reviewed by Wilhoit, 2018) and has also focused on flexworkers (Richardson & McKenna, 2014), spatial modernization in the public sector (Hirst & Humphreys, 2013), and the absence of children from MOS (Kavanagh, 2013). Similar to Lefebvrian studies, space in this understanding is active, power-infused and politicized, but rather than assuming a class struggle, regards politics as unfolding from the inter-relations between a multiplicity of human and nonhuman actors.

The three perspectives summarized above represent comprehensive theories of space/place, but there are also conceptualizations of specific spatial types, with particular configurations or which have particular effects. *Heterotopias* are ‘counter-sites’ in which diverse spaces within a culture are ‘simultaneously represented, contested and inverted’ (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986: 24). A space that is heterotopic jumbles together things that we would normally regard as incompatible; such unsettling juxtapositions force us into sensemaking activity, make acts of resistance possible, and allow transgression and the making of other forms of identity. Kornberger and Clegg (2003: 87) draw out the identity implications of the concept, defining heterotopias as spaces ‘in which we can play different roles, be what one normally wouldn’t be, be many persons, swap genders’. The quirky workspaces that are emblematic of Silicon tech corporations are examples of heterotopias; but so too are the homes of many workers where work has arrived, as we discuss later. The concept of *liminal spaces* derives from van Gennep’s (1960) theory of rites of passage, whose purpose is the transformation of identity. Liminal spaces are characterized by ‘anti-structure’, whereby liminars are free from former constraint or no longer protected by it, and in this denuded state can enter into communitas, a social bond in which social hierarchies and differences are less relevant (Turner, 1974: 96). Modern industrial space has few properly liminal spaces set aside specifically for ritual purposes; rather, they are liminal-like or liminoid (Turner, 1974), found in ignored, unseen areas at the interstices and margins. In their recent review of liminality in MOS, Söderlund and Borg (2017) identify ‘place’ as a key theme in the literature. We return to them later when we examine how liminal spaces bring about their transformative effects.

Clearly, there are many approaches to place and space in MOS. There are, for example, studies based on Deleuze (Kornberger & Clegg, 2003; Thanem, 2012), institutional theory (Lawrence & Dover, 2015), and geographical non-representational theory (Beyes & Steyeart, 2012; Kerr & Robinson, 2015; Våland & Georg, 2018). While the frameworks have different emphases, they all foreground the idea that identity is constituted by spatially embedded and embodied social action. Consequently, a significant part of our understanding of our identity ‘remains ineffable, residing in our bodies, perpetually escaping our ability to articulate it fully in words’ (Harquail & King, 2010: 1620). Accordingly, studies of organizational space often reach for this elusive embodied knowledge using qualitative or ethnographic methods, including innovative approaches such as material semiotics (Yanow, 1998) and sensual methodology (Warren, 2008).

We now explore the relationship between space and identity in three overlapping categories which have significance for identity: *workspaces* redesigned to expedite new ways of working; *homes*, where work is increasingly taking up residence; and *less managed spaces* notable for facilitating identity change, categorized as liminal, free or resisting spaces.

**Workspaces and ‘new ways of working’**

Workspace designs aiming to support ‘new ways of working’ based on spontaneous, networked interaction originated in the Netherlands with the architect and consultant Veldhoen (Kingma, 2018) and were subsequently popularised, especially by the influential architect Francis Duffy (1997) and associated consultancy firm DEGW (Dale & Burrell, 2008: 111-115). New ways of working are based on strong assumptions about how organizational flexibility is fostered. As Duffy (1997: 10) argues in his book, *The new office*, ‘unremitting teamwork’ can only be enabled by removing physical constraints and allowing staff the freedom to choose where and when they wish to work. These presuppositions about the fundamental importance of networked interaction have become widely accepted management beliefs: for example, Kornberger and Clegg (2004: 1098) quote a chief executive who states that good ideas are ‘rarely created when you’re sitting at your desk alone and tense’.

Workspace designs for supporting new ways of working share several features. Most or all employees sit in open plan offices and there is a redistribution of space away from individual allocations to collective areas, often in the form of large atria containing areas designed specifically for particular activities, such as meeting, eating, or playing. Reinforced glass is the preferred construction material; this provides natural light and visibility, it makes the building easily ‘legible’, and can simultaneously induce a powerful aesthetic experience (with ‘wow factor’) and an oppressive, high surveillance environment. Many workplaces are ‘aestheticized’ (Warren, 2008) by the incorporation of artefacts from non-work domains of social life, such as leisure, consumption and home. Hotdesking or ‘non-territorial’ environments, where employees do not have a fixed workstation but use any available desk which they must clear at the end of their work session, aim to support further unplanned interaction as well as making cost-efficient use of potentially expensive office space.

Kornberger and Clegg (2003, 2004) argue that buildings can be ‘generative’ – previously unimagined functions can emerge from spatial form if that form is ambiguous and fosters ‘positive power’, allowing movement and flow, and freeing employees to play with and reinvent their identities. Ambiguity can be fashioned by complicating inside/outside and internal boundaries to create ‘folds’ marking ‘the point where one state of being shifts into another to develop ‘spatial zones of becoming’ (Kornberger & Clegg, 2003: 84). Although Kornberger and Clegg are not referring explicitly to new offices, there are parallels with the ‘generative’ architecture they describe, with glass construction complicating external and internal boundaries, diverse spaces for mingling, and with pool tables (etc.) providing heterotopic surprises that startle employees out of rote practices. Commenting specifically on reshaped workspaces, Dale and Burrell (2008, 2010) use Lefebvre’s conceptualization to argue that they are conceived spaces whose rich symbolism and apparent freedom of movement and interaction aim to “capture hearts and minds’; that is, to encourage individuals to *identify* themselves with the organisation’ (2008: 99; emphasis original). Even the most liberating and inspiring designs are meant to orchestrate more of employees’ spatial and embodied identities, enveloping them in an organizational community with a shared identity that is energized and upbeat, thus ensuring cohesion even when employees are more spatially dispersed (Dale & Burrell, 2010). Concomitantly, they aim to project to their stakeholders an image of the organization as modern, transparent, and representing a decisive break with past bureaucracy (Hirst & Humphreys, 2013; Våland & Georg, 2018).

Empirical studies suggest a complex relationship between the organizational identities communicated by ‘new’ workspaces and how employees incorporate these meanings into their self-conceptions. Senior managers in Hirst and Humphreys’ (2013) study of a UK local authority claimed that their cutting-edge building was consonant with their desired identities as persons to be reckoned with - active, flexible and forward-thinking - and they adopted energetic networking practices with enthusiasm. Younger staff in Kingma’s (2018) study, too, regard the modern, glass buildings they worked in as communicating an ‘improved’ organizational identity that reflected back on them, and took advantage of the greater freedom it permitted over their time and place of work. Younger academics working in the spectacular University of Technology Sydney Business School (see: <https://www.dezeen.com/2015/02/03/frank-gehry-paper-bag-dr-chau-chak-wing-uts-business-school-sydney-opens/>) valued its ability to attract and amaze external audiences, but felt pressurised to live up to the standard of performance that the building communicated (Berti et al., 2018). Issues of occupational identity also arise in Baldry and Barnes’ (2012) study of university academics moving into open plan offices, the main outcome of which was an exodus of both academics and their materials except when required on campus.

More negative responses are observed in relation to artefacts imported from outside work – aiming to surprise and coax employees into redefining their individual and collective selves. Baldry and Hallier’s (2010) study of workplaces aiming to cultivate people who have, and are, ‘fun’ at work, distinguishes two forms, tailored to class distinctions: ‘fun’ for knowledge workers supports them to produce good ideas with pool tables, large TV screens, and a fridge full of beer; whereas ‘fun’ for employees doing boring service jobs employs plastic palms and the sound of breaking waves to create a cheerful esprit de corps and encourage smiling, laughing and flirting for work purposes. Baldry and Hallier (2010: 21) show that this provokes stringent ‘reality testing’ that assesses the genuineness and personal worth of such heterotopic juxtapositions. They conclude that ‘fun’ artefacts do not strengthen organizational identification, but instead are likely to lead to employees ‘faking’ the forms of identity they think managers desire, while hiding their authentic recreational identity.

Several studies have considered the implications of the temporary ownership of space inherent in hot-desking environments. ‘Clean desk’ policies forbid employees from personalizing their desk areas, and this leads to ‘identity threats’ because employees cannot express their distinctiveness (Elsbach, 2003). Byron and Lawrence (2015) show that using personal artefacts to convey individuality at work ‘appears to help employees feel more comfort with and connected to their organization and its members’ (p.317). That is, hot-desking militates against positive identification with organizations. It also disrupts useful work routines and relationships, promotes ‘civil inattention’ (Goffman, 1959), and polite indifference to those nearby (Hirst, 2011). Employees resist the imperative to move around by repeatedly using the same desk, termed ‘squatting’ (Elsbach, 2003) or ‘settling’ (Hirst, 2011). Millward et al., (2007), however, suggest that hot-desking does not alienate employees but shifts their focus of identification from their immediate work group towards the organization, though, these employees formed settled ‘neighbourhoods’ (p.556). In Kingma’s (2018) recent study of a ‘new’ office, a strict office etiquette prohibits behaviours such as not complying with the clear desk policy, regularly using the same desk, and finally (homing in on those inclined to make excuses for their rule-breaking) ‘searching for explanation and solutions outside one’s own scope of behaviour’ (p.13). The rules governing how this space is used, specifically anticipating resistant behaviours, signal a high degree of managerial determination to push hot-desking through.

The examples of ‘fun’ aestheticization discussed above suggest a slant in relation to gender as well as class – with beer and laddishness for knowledge workers, and the implied passivity of the artificial beach for service workers. Recent research into gendered identity work shows that femininity has to be carefully managed, even in workspaces that appear gender-neutral. In contrast with many men who occupy the workspace unselfconsciously and expansively, spilling over into their neighbours’ space, women’s occupation of space is typically more tentative, aiming to appear competent, welcoming, and able to balance work and home life (Tyler & Cohen, 2010) and attentive to their presentation of status and sexuality (Hirst & Schwabenland, 2018). In a rich ethnography of the new Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wasserman and Frenkel (2015) show how the building was designed to ‘brand’ Israel as a Western, progressive country, using restrained, minimal design that was extrapolated into a dress and comportment code for its human components. This implicitly privileged men of European origin (the diplomats) over women, who risked being seen as ‘unprofessional and overly local’ (p.10). While most senior women met and exceeded these requirements, lower status women resisted with colourful office adornments, expressing a homely ‘maternal aesthetics’ (p.12). Emotionally and aesthetically understated identities expressing a ‘global’ outlook are favoured by this space, at the same time that local-ness, homeliness and motherhood are not.

**The other ‘new office’: identities at home**

Work has moved into the homes of many workers for at least part of the working week. Workspaces are now commonly hybrid, combining physical and digital spaces (Halford, 2005) and employees are increasingly teleworkers engaged in ‘flexible and distributed working arrangements’ (Thatcher & Zhu, 2006: 1076). Consideration of the implications of moving work into home needs to take into account the richness and complexity of home itself (Mallett, 2004). Manzo’s (2003) critique of the common-sense image of home argues that it is its historical separation from the workplace that has led to the endowment of ‘home’ with meanings of comfort, belonging, stability, rest and protection – everything that the workplace is not. The conventional (but increasingly atypical) Western family is central to this understanding: it ‘represents a particularly powerful disciplinary institution in which space and power unite to form a normalizing gaze we innocuously call ‘the home’ (Di Domenico & Fleming, 2009: 250). Moving work into a home from which it has been absent therefore represents the confluence of different cultural environments, forcing us to manage tensions between our public identities as employees and private, intimate identities as family members or friends, or as ourselves when living alone (Tietze & Musson, 2005; Richardson & McKenna, 2014; Wapshott & Mallett, 2012).

Given the alternative identities likely to be present at home and their associated temptations and distractions, it is unsurprising that managements would fear that working from home could reduce employees’ identification with the organization. Writing from a managerial perspective, Thatcher and Zhu (2006) reasoned that organizations could potentially lose their hold over employees’ identities because shifting work into home disrupts the processes by which employees identify with the organization, leading to an uncertain situation whereby they must either re-establish their work identity or develop a new sense of self.

Empirical research on the home-work nexus since the early 2000s shows that such managerial anxieties have not been realized. Studies of managerial and professional workers indicate that (contrary to the suspicion that they would exploit newfound freedom to work less hard by privileging non-work identities) homeworkers ‘directed their energies at forging a new working identity that was convincing to both themselves and others’ (Brocklehurst, 2001: 459; Halford 2005; Richardson & McKenna, 2014). Workers in Brocklehurst’s study sought to maintain the separation between their home and work selves by recreating spatiotemporal work routines, such as donning office dress, creating dedicated office spaces, and adhering to normal working hours when working at home. However, they lacked a clear vocabulary to describe their new work selves, preferring ‘mobile worker’ over ‘home-worker’, with its connotations of femininity and unpaid home-based labour.

Later studies by Tietze and her colleagues which included not only the employees who had moved work into home but also their co-residents (in this case, family members) as research participants, indicate the extent to which work and home activities may become fragmented and interleaved. The employee at home is paradoxically both present and absent; although they are there, they may be unavailable to family members. Tietze and Musson (2005: 1341) recount a father who, when encountering his children, treats them ‘professionally, that means with some courtesy, but briefly.’ Tietze and Musson (2010) argue that the success or otherwise of the shift of work into the home is tied directly to identity issues, which in turn vary with specific circumstances such as the age of the child(ren) and the constitution of the family. Their conclusion is that homeworking can enhance identities as parent and employee, or it can diminish both, or the work identity can lose its hold as opportunities for future, more meaningful identities come into view.

A recent article by Koslowski et al. (2017) analyses the role of boundary objects (digital artefacts, household objects such as beds, kitchen tables, and the bodies of the home-workers) in the negotiation of work and home spheres of activity. Boundary objects by definition are those objects that connect distinct domains; in this study, the domestic space and the objects do not perform the work of separation on behalf of the human actors, because their meanings and functions are multivalent and ambiguous. Koslowski et al. (2017: 11) conclude that the overriding tendency is for workers ‘to create and legitimate the home-worker’s identity as a professional’, for instance by limiting interruptions from children, or working on emails while in bed with one’s partner. This form of identity work involves navigating between work and home identities on a moment-by-moment basis, and is challenging and tiring. While, as Richardson and McKenna (2014) argue, work is not simply colonizing the home, through the accumulation of small decisions and adjustments, work is creeping further into the home, into the bedroom and indeed the bed, and in doing so reconstructing our own identities and those of children, family members, co-residents and dependents.

**Changing identities: liminal, free and resisting spaces**

A wealth of studies consider spaces that enable, facilitate or indeed compel identity change in ways that are not necessarily congruent with organizational intentions. These studies use concepts of liminality (Daskalaki et al., 2016; Kociatkewicz & Kostera, 1999; Lucas, 2014; Shortt, 2015), free spaces (Rao & Dutta, 2012) and resisting spaces (Courpasson et al., 2017) to show how specific spaces/times can escape control by managers or other authorities, with a range of identity outcomes ranging from a sense of respite from the organizational frontstage to mutiny.

Liminal spaces offer respite from having to ‘keep up’ one’s official organizational identity or persona. In their anthropology of empty spaces, Kociatkewicz and Kostera (1999) wander about in the bowels of corporate buildings (basements, back staircases, and blocked-off corridors), encountering few other people but plenty of grime, dust, dampness and junk. From the researchers’ perspective, these are ‘places to which no meaning is ascribed’ (p.43), and hence, there is a sense of release of identity: who are you in a place with no meaning? What script is there for you to follow? The workmen the researchers encounter in a basement (whose spatial identities as low status or marginal workers are, presumably, crisply defined) assume they are just lost. The emptiness is accompanied by a feeling of subtle liberation or ‘meditative freedom’ (p.48). The lifts, stairwells, toilets and cupboards that Shortt (2015) analyses are similarly ubiquitous and unnoticed. Workers in hair salons use these spaces for temporary respite from the intense emotional and aesthetic labour of the floor, and indeed from the backstage of the staff room where jocularity is also obligatory. By dwelling temporarily in these places ‘a more autonomous non-corporate identity can be created and permitted to emerge’ (Shortt 2015: 653).

Liminality can arise when norms are suspended or absent, as the above studies show, but liminal spaces can also be created when multiple sets of norms are co-present. Research on translocal work, where employees work in more than one location, shows how repeated boundary-crossings complicate identities by inflecting them with multiple norms (Daskalaki et al., 2016; Lucas, 2014). This engenders a form of permanent liminality in which ‘one is never fully emplaced or fixed, and one is never just ‘I’ but also ‘an-other’ (Daskalaki et al., 2016: 192). Rigid identity categorizations cease to be relevant – refugee, migrant, cosmopolitan or more generally ‘other’, and the self remains suspended betwixt and between. Lucas’s (2014: 212) nomadic work-life journeying similarly gave rise to a liminal space enabling ‘non-status and un-anchored identity’ but also the freedom to ‘reshape and re-order [one’s] sense of self’. Costas’s (2013) study of international elites also demonstrates the complexity and ‘stickiness’ of what is often assumed to be frictionless movement. Opportunities for transformation or risks of confusion reside in the complexities of space generated by movement, which renders the individual as a border zone.

Contrasting with the sense of individual release or confusion implied by these studies, Courpasson et al. (2017) analyse collective ‘resisting places’ where ‘individuals can develop oppositional identities’ (p.238). Managers who considered themselves to be committed employees resisted certain initiatives by organizing meetings in places outside the reach of hierarchical control, such as basements, cafes or homes, which through repeated, intense and purposeful interactions became construed as valuable yet illicit. Rao and Dutta’s (2012) historical analysis of the timing of mutinies among the Bengal Native Army suggests that free spaces ‘insulated from the control of elites in organizations’ (p.625) emerged during or immediately after religious festivals. Festivals allowed large numbers to associate, whip up emotion and trigger collective identities. Drawing on the work of Turner, Rao and Dutta (2012) argue that the creation of communitas in festivals occasions the legitimate performance of illicit behaviour, including derision and challenge to superiors. Thanem’s (2012) poignant study of homeless people coping with an urban redevelopment that aimed to displace them shows how their identity work was synonymous with spatial tactics which constructed the city as a nomadic space.

The anti-structure (Turner, 1974) that defines liminal spaces may be benign or empowering, or it may be dangerous. In a compelling illustration of the danger of liminal spaces, Prasad (2014) describes his repeated crossings of Qalandiya, a militarized border between Israel and the occupied territory of the West Bank, and shows how, for him, this space brought about permanent identity change. Entering Palestinian territory is easy, but the return journey into Israel is subject to extreme security measures whereby incomers are squeezed through a narrow tunnel under constant threat of violence. Prasad experienced this as a liminal space, ‘neither wholly here nor wholly there’ (p.236). There, he shared the experience of extreme physical confinement with Palestinians and heard stories of atrocities committed against them and their family members. Instead of a blurring of identity positions as Daskalaki et al. (2016) found, in this fraught space, there can be no shilly-shallying: there is only a dichotomous choice between sharply demarcated categories. Prasad chose to reconstruct his identity through affiliation with the disenfranchised: as he remarks, ‘Qalandiya was redefining who I was – informing both the ontologies that I was constituted by and the ideologies for which I stood’ (p.233).

**Summary and directions for further research**

We started this chapter with Dale and Burrell’s (2008) insight that the use of space as a managerial tool marks a shift in how organizational power is exercised and identities are constituted. We have considered this shift in the context of workspaces that aim to push and pull us towards networking, constructing identities that are in Castells’ terms multifaceted, flexible, and kaleidoscopic, and at the same time incorporate a sense of togetherness and cohesion. We have considered the spaces at work and home where we think the effects of this restructuring are most significant, as well as the spaces where people can partially escape or gain respite from these authority structures. this power. Workspace designs aiming to support new ways of working are based on assumptions that people can use space fluidly, requiring little in the way of routines, and are aligned with the need to keep costs down while presenting an impressive or credible external appearance (e.g. Hirst & Humphreys, 2013; Kingma, 2018). But the tenacity with which employees ‘hang on’ to spatial routines that no longer ‘fit’ their new workspaces suggests that a satisfying and viable identity needs some stability based on shared spatial habits, in particular places, and nearby particular others and objects. As Lefebvre (1991) presciently wrote, the exchange value of modern space dominates its use value.

The mismatch between how workspaces are notionally ‘meant’ to be used and how they are actually used suggest a need to look through the other end of the telescope, so to speak, and begin not with the workspace but the work people do (that produces it). Auburn and Barnes (2006) write that ‘[t]he meaning of places ... is never fixed but only accomplished in and for the social engagement at hand (p.44). We advocate ethnographic studies of workspaces that begin with the work people do, what they see as their purposes, which other people, objects and spaces they need to fulfil them, the challenges they encounter and the workarounds they devise. There may be a generational shift in relation to acceptance of place- and time-independent ways of working and we think that this too is worthy of further investigation.

While research in workplaces has clearly highlighted a degree of reluctance and foot-dragging, the kaleidoscopic and fluid identity sought and predicted in new workspace designs is most evident in recent research on work at home (e.g. Koslowski et al., 2017). Early studies of home-working that showed employees recreating office routines, with chunks of time and space solidly allocated to one domain or the other, now seem almost quaint. For example, digital artefacts that were scarce until recently are now omnipresent, portable, sophisticated and alluring. Housing is unaffordable for many workers, especially young workers, and their domestic space is limited with no ‘spare’ rooms available for conversion to home offices.

The divisions between work and home identities are now granular, assisted by these domestic spaces and objects that are multifunctional and thus always amenable to negotiation. Wapshott and Mallett (2012) suggest that even though conventional work-home demarcations have collapsed, ‘some form of boundary will almost certainly exist, some relationship between space and time, between being ‘at work’ and ‘at home’ (p.66). In other studies, however, a boundary is harder to discern, and work seems to take priority (Tietze & Musson, 2005; Koslowski et al., 2017). A great deal of identity work is devoted to earning and maintaining the trust of managers and work colleagues in return for the ‘gift’ of not having to travel and attend in person, and the ability to dovetail work and home tasks. The identity implications appear complex. Foucault and Miskowiec (1986: 23) insist that because our lives are still governed by inviolable oppositions between private and public, leisure and work, and sacred and profane, contemporary space has not been desanctified. Until recently, our professional identity work centred on work and the workplace whereas our personal identity work centred on the home. The steady creep of work into the home means that this separation and the ‘inviolable’ opposition it defends is under threat, and perhaps that sacred and profane too are being re-defined.

Studies of working at home make clear that work is done in the context of a life. We see this as a prompt to engage with Watson’s (2008) insight that we can only understand people’s identities and the role of work in people’s lives if we consider them first as ‘whole individual identities’ (p.450) made from but not reducible to many components deriving from work and non-work. In particular, and as the studies we have reviewed indicate, work-home relationships are thrown into relief when work is combined with parenting. Children’s lives will probably continue to be structured by temporal and spatial routines before and during school, placing some limits on work ‘creep’. However, we know little about the consequences for children if their parents for instance devote more time to working at home and interacting with them as ‘professionals’. The implications of organizing for children are one of the unexplored spaces of organizational research, as Kavanagh (2013) points out, and we think further interdisciplinary research centred on the home, including children, is merited. Also worthwhile are studies of people who live alone and who may find it still more difficult to resist the encroachment of work.

Both the workplace and the home are now stringently managed spaces for many workers. Nevertheless, there remain spaces outside managerial reach or interest where people can engage in alternative kinds of identity work. Such spaces, from an organizational point of view, are often regarded as worthless, old-fashioned, only functional for storage, as mere connections between more valued other areas, or as dumps. Indeed, they might not be what we would recognize as ‘a space’ at all because they are created by nomadic border-crossings, or, like Qalandiya (Prasad, 2014) they may appear to be tightly ‘managed’, recognizing, of course, that ‘space can never be closed, there will always be loose ends, always relations with the beyond’ (Massey, 2005: 95). In their review of liminal spaces, Söderlund and Borg (2017: 13) state that their effects are marginal, merely ‘[affording] the individual with some room for thought and peace of mind’. We agree, but suspect that their implications are more profound. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) distinguish between two kinds of identity work: outward-facing, concerned with how we present ourselves to others, and inward-facing. Inward self-identity refers to something ‘deeper’ and less accessible than (outward) identity, which is of ‘a somewhat more linguistic and social nature’ (p.1168). In highly visible corporate workplaces, and indeed at home, we see a lot of impression management devoted to embodied outward-facing identity work. Studies of liminal, free and resisting spaces suggest that inward-facing identity work is both subtle and necessary, enabling convalescence, re-finding oneself, and also generative of creativity by enabling an inner step that is a precursor for working back out towards the external. This deeper, simplified, stripped-down state may also be the form of the individual that participates in communitas, which studies show can be transformative. We think this form of identity work is worthy of further exploration, especially in an era of considerable visibility and personal exposure, both externally imposed and self-imposed.

**Final thoughts**

Our exploration of the intersection between the literatures on identity, space and place has highlighted the centrality of space and place in identity construction, and shown how workspaces, homes, and diverse other spaces are mutually constitutive. Our review of current and past research demonstrates that there is a powerful interaction between the management of workspaces and organizational and individual identity. We argue that this interaction is in dynamic equilibrium and is a key factor in resistance to managerial attempts to control identities, both in the conventional office and in new places of work such as the home. It appears that the proliferation of such new workplaces and spaces is likely to create new processes in both inward and outward facing identity construction. The implications of these, often technological and information-driven changes to the dynamic relationship between work places and identities are potentially far-reaching and worthy of further research. This could be directed to both inform and investigate space designers (architects, ergonomists, facilities consultants) whose decisions when designing, modifying, and changing organizational structures have such radical effects on identities.

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1. Lefebvre’s writing can be enigmatic and we recommend any newcomer struggling to make sense of his work to read Unwin’s (2000) insightful critique. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Although within the geographical literature there are arguments pro and con for making a distinction between space and place, based on the idea that place is meaningful whereas space is not, the terms have mainly been used synonymously in MOS, and most MOS studies of ‘space’ foreground spatial meanings. Making a strong conceptual distinction between space and place in MOS therefore risks further fragmenting the literature. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)