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How are you feeling after last night? An autoethnographic understanding of liminality within rave.



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Abstract

The aim of this study is, through the reflexive examination of my own lived experiences as an inside member of rave culture, to expose the cultural realities of rave as a liminal space. I begin by exploring the extent to which involvement in rave and rave culture reflects transition, comparing the experience of rave to the early conceptions of liminality, contextualised by van Gennep within rites of passage. I conclude that whilst rave does reflect transition, to present it as simply part of a rite of passage neglects the social context and so is reductionist. I then go on to explore more contemporary adaptations of liminality aiming to explore the effect of liminality within rave on identity. I argue that the experience of rave is formative and so agree with Turner that liminality resolves personal crisis, as can rave. I then examine the reasons individuals choose to re-enter the space of rave using data collected from semi-structured interviews to supplement this section. I discover that an important reason for re-entering the space of rave is due to the support structures, escapism, and identity dissolution that exists within rave as a liminal space. Finally, I identify the wider impact rave has on society. I conclude by arguing that rave is significant, particularly in a postmodern social context and that as a result, liminal spaces such as rave are more prevalent and necessary.

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1 Introduction

Whilst standing in the queue waiting to be allowed entry into a club I had never been to, sharing a cigarette with people I could barely call friends having only met them hours prior, I was overwhelmed by a sense of excitement and trepidation. This was because for all intents and purposes I was at a rave. I had been out to clubs before but this was different. The venue was a dark somewhat dingy cellar space, and the sounds emanating from the entrance were hard, fast, and electronic. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this was a feeling I would become accustomed to over the course of my life as a student, as rave culture became intertwined with my experience of university culture and my transition from teenager to adult. I spent the night fully immersed in an ocean of bright lights and loud sounds, with people who were near strangers to me but who felt like close friends. As the night was all said and done, and I was left the morning after nursing a killer hangover, I looked at my phone to see 10 or so messages and friend requests; hey man, how are you feeling after last night?

My experience of rave culture has signified a period of great change in my young adult life. I am now approaching the end of my third year of University and as a member of rave culture. On the surface my engagement appears to have increased; I am now the social secretary of my university's DJ society and I play club nights, house parties and raves on a semi-regular basis. However, my emotional attachment to rave culture has changed. I no longer feel the same draw to re-enter the rave as I once did as a neophyte to the scene. Despite this it is hard not to recognise that rave culture is and has been a hugely important part of my life. My position as an active member of rave culture in a time of declining subscription offers me a unique perspective from which to analyse the liminal positioning of rave culture, as a space that one can enter and leave as they choose, separate from the rest of society. From this

position, employing the use of autoethnographic vignettes contextualised theoretically, supplemented with results from semi-structured discussion style interviews, I aim to both illustrate the experience of liminality within rave and rave culture, and explain its uses and synchronous, interdependent effects both on the individual and society. In particular, I aim to understand the extent to which rave reflects transition, the effects of rave on identity, both within the liminal space of rave and within external society, why the individual enters and re-enters the liminal space of rave, and the wider impact of rave.

Having briefly provided an introduction to the topic of rave and liminality, my second chapter will justify my methodology, offering a rationale for the research methods I have used, basing my decisions against theoretical analysis. Following this, I will present and discuss my findings in my third chapter, integrating a literature review so as to contextualise my position theoretically. In my fourth chapter, I will reflect on the autoethnographic process, detailing the challenges I have faced, in addition to how my perspective has been changed as a result of writing autoethnographically. Finally, I will conclude in my fifth chapter by reflecting on my initial aims and by summarising my main points.

2 Methodology

In this chapter I will provide a rationale for the methodological approach I have taken in understanding liminality within rave. Firstly, I will justify my alignment with an interpretivist paradigm. I will then rationalize my use of autoethnographic vignettes in addition to my supplementary interviews, including ethical considerations and methodological practice. Finally, I will address criticism of autoethnography.

In reflecting on the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2000), I was able to inform my methodological paradigm. They write that qualitative research is necessary to ensure a detailed interpretation and understanding of cultural realities, in my case, that exist as part of the liminal experience of rave (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Further, revising Silverman (2003), I found that a qualitative approach allowed for a greater understanding of these cultural realities, through the examination of the relationships that exists within them, between individuals and the cultural setting it and they exist in (Silverman, 2003). In addition, through reading Munro (2011), I found that a positivist approach would favor quantitative generalizable data, applicable to a target population at certain points in time. This led me to suppose that as I am studying liminality positioned both spatially and temporally, with multiple temporal dimensions, that a generalizable positivist approach would in fact be inappropriate. Through my reflection on these academic works I was able to conclude that an interpretivist approach favouring the collection of qualitative data was the most appropriate for my research topic. This was because, in particular, my aim was to examine the effects of liminality within rave on the individual and society, and inversely the effects the individual and society have on the rave as a liminal space. According to both Denzin and Lincoln (2000), and Silverman (2003), a qualitative interpretivist approach would best examine this relationship.

I then began reading more specifically about qualitative anthropological research methods. I found that, reading Holt (2003), and Méndez (2014), during the 1980's anthropological research underwent a crisis of representation. This placed greater scrutiny on ethnographic work, particularly the relationships and interactions between the ethnographer and subject, and the resultant effect on representation within their subsequent analysis (Holt, 2003). This led to the conception of autoethnography, an adaption of ethnography that utilized the researcher's own lived experiences to reflexively examine cultural realities (Holt, 2003). Due to the fact that I already had a history with rave and rave culture, meaning I already had a multitude of lived experiences to reflexively examine, I found this research method appealing. In order to facilitate the direction of the structure to my autoethnography I began by reading Barter and Renold (1999). They suggest that the use of vignettes within an autoethnography allow the author to create a personal narrative that, whilst articulated from the perspective of the author, leaves room for the reader to assign their own meaning to the cultural experiences recounted. They go on to write that it is important to maintain some level of ambiguity as it allows space "*for participants to define the situation in their own terms*" (Barter and Renold, 1999, pp. 5). As a result, I chose to employ the use of vignettes in my autoethnography. However, reading Sparkes (2000), it appeared that vignettes alone, despite articulating good narrative, would not constitute good scholarship. In his work on qualitative research he addresses the criticism that Denzin and Lincoln (1994) also present, that the narrative present in qualitative research, particularly autoethnography, results in a lack of objectivity, scientific reason, and empiric truth. Sparkes writes "something must be added to stories in the form of theoretical abstraction or conceptual elaboration." (Sparkes, 2000, p.24). As a result, I decided to present my autoethnographic position against a theoretical context so as to substantiate my findings. Integrating my literature review directly

against my autoethnographic vignettes and analysis would facilitate a comparative exercise (Sparkes, 2000). I discovered, through reading Geertz (1973), that by contextualizing my vignettes against existing theory I am able to create a “*thick description*”. My decision to integrate theory and produce a “*thick description*” was further corroborated by my reading of Jorgenson (2002) who writes that a thick description allows the reader to discern patterns of cultural experience despite not being a member of the culture being described. This she writes is further achieved through the comparative use of artefacts and theory (Jorgenson, 2002). Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) support this position, similarly writing that in order to properly illustrate the facets of cultural experience, an autoethnographer is required to compare and contrast their personal experience, as detailed in vignettes, against existing research. In addition, they suggest this is further achieved by the comparing of experiences of other cultural members against the experiences of the author (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011). Additionally, while it was important to me to maintain some level of personal narrative it was never my sole intention to present only myself as the object of study. As a result, I chose to supplement my autoethnographic position with data collected from interviews. In deciding how to structure my interviews I first read Hitchcock and Hughes (2002). They write that in semi-structured interviews greater depth is achieved by allowing the “*interviewer to probe and expand the respondent’s responses.*” (Hitchcock and Hughes, 2002, pp. 157). This felt most appropriate to my research considering my interpretivist paradigm that favors greater depth of understanding. Hitchcock and Hughes further suggest that creating a schedule of interview questions that are fairly broad additionally facilitates interviewer interviewee discussion and exploration of certain answers (Hitchcock and Hughes, 2002). As a result, I produced an interview schedule (See Appendix 4) of questions that covered broad topics allowing for both flexibility in the order I asked the questions and

how the questions were asked so as to assure depth of response. Hitchcock and Hughes go on to write that qualitative research values the establishment of "*rapport, empathy, and understanding between interviewer and interviewee.*" (Hitchcock and Hughes, 2002, pp. 159). Using this, I made the decision to interview people I already had existing relationships with who were also inside members to rave culture. The resulting high rapport, Hitchcock and Hughes write (2002), means that not only is a greater level of depth within answers achieved due to interviewees being more comfortable, but also potential risk to the interviewee posed by sensitive subject matter is reduced. This is because I am familiar with the interviewees, meaning that, in addition to having flexible questions, I am able to adjust the way in which I tackle potentially sensitive areas according to the interview subject (Hitchcock and Hughes, 2002). Before making more ethical considerations regarding my interviews I read Miller and Bell (2012). They write that ensuring the interview subject provides informed consent, conscious of research aims and topic, is vital. As a result, I produced an information sheet (See Appendix 2) that detailed my research topic in addition to informing participants that they were able to end the interview at any time. This, in addition to completing an ethics application (See Appendix 1) that was approved, ensured that I progressed with my interviews having considered and minimizing potential ethical issues. I then had to decide how many interviews I would conduct and the role they would play in supplementing my autoethnography. As my reading of Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), as well as my reading of Sparkes (2000) had shown, interviews perform the valuable role of comparing the experiences of the author, in the context of an autoethnography, with the experiences of other members of that culture. As a result, I decided to conduct three interviews with subjects at different stages of their involvement in rave. This allowed me, as informed by my reading,

to illustrate that my personal experience, and subsequent theoretical positioning, is one that is shared across different members of rave and rave culture.

Autoethnography as a research method, however, is not without critique. Initially, I had assumed that there would be little ethical implication of writing autoethnographically. By presenting my data as I experienced it, there seemed a low risk of me infringing upon ethical guidelines that may have been present had I chosen to conduct an observational ethnography. What I had experienced had already happened and would have done regardless of the research I was conducting. As a result, I was not putting myself or others in the way of harm for the sake of research. However, in reading Lovell (2005) this assumption was contested. Lovell (2005) argues that within autobiographical writing there exists relations of power between the writer and others represented in their text. That is to say that as the author I am in a position of power regarding my representation of others in text, specifically in my vignettes. As a result, autoethnography cannot be said to wholly resolve the crisis of representation (Lovell, 2005). Nevertheless, my representation of others in my vignettes remain anonymous, and the characteristics of their representations are reflected in the experiences of my interview subjects. Therefore, whilst I have the responsibility of representation in my vignettes, this responsibility is somewhat mitigated by the corresponding representations others present in their interviews. I would further suggest that representation is an ethical implication of all ethnographic work, particularly when considering subcultural groups that may face stigmatization from hegemonic society. I use the word implication here so as to outline that while representation is not an ethical problem per se, it requires consideration from the author nonetheless. In further addressing this critique I read Patton (1999) who suggests that methodological pluralism increases the comprehension of cultural realities in addition to minimizing issues of representation.

Therefore, supporting my comparative interview and theory use to contextualize my own autoethnographic findings. Another criticism of autoethnographic work is that it is self-indulgent. This criticism I encountered whilst reading Coffey (1999), who asks "*are we in danger of gross self-indulgence if we practice autobiographical ethnography?*" (pp. 132). In seeking to address this criticism I read Mykhalovskiy. He argues that to simply denote autoethnography as self-indulgent neglects how writing from the self simultaneously includes the other, and "*how the work on the 'other' is also about the self of the writer*" (Mykhalovskiy, 1996, pp. 133). Sparkes (2002) goes on to argue that autoethnography, having considered an academic framework, places the vulnerable self under scrutiny, and should act as a reflexive comparative exercise that can detail cultural reality with the same merit as other, perhaps more established, forms of qualitative research. As a result, to class autoethnography as a self-indulgent research method is a reductionist argument (Sparkes, 2002). This continues to support my methodological pluralism, and encourages me to move forward presenting myself as not the sole object of study. In addition, it encourages the inclusion of the experiences of other members of the culture, as well as other theoretical positions to compare and contrast my experiences against. By ensuring I maintain a level of self-scrutiny I will avoid self-indulgence.

3 Autoethnographic reflections in a theoretical context

3.1 Classic anthropology and liminality: rave as a rite of passage

I have considered the rave to be a liminal space that can play a pivotal role in the ritual transition from childhood to adulthood of those similar to myself, who subscribe to rave culture. To first contextualise the term liminality, I looked to its anthropological conception in the works of Arnold van Gennep. Van Gennep first described liminality in his work regarding rites of passage. Van Gennep articulated three points which structured rites of passage; preliminal rites, liminal rites, and postliminal rites (van Gennep, 1960). Within the preliminal stage of separation, the neophyte experiences a semi-metaphorical death of identity, whereby all sense of previous status is removed, and previous traditions and norms are abandoned (Szakolczai, 2009). Next, during the liminal stage of transition the neophyte faces induction into the ritual itself. Van Gennep proposes that two constants are held within this stage of transition; a conformity to a predetermined sequence of actions under the supervision and authority of a senior “*master of ceremonies*” (Szakolczai, 2009, pp.148). Finally, the neophyte undergoes a postliminal rite of incorporation, where a new fully developed identity is formed, and the neophyte is reintroduced back into society. From just this initial idea of liminality within the context of cultural rites of passage, immediate parallels to rave and rave culture can be drawn.

It was time to return to the rave as my second event soon approached. This time, with a greater knowledge of what to expect, I felt prepared. Having felt not quite on the same wavelength as my peers at my last rave, I was keen to meet up with a group of them for pre-drinks. So, I changed into baggier lighter-weight clothes, withdrew £20 from a cash machine, bought myself a 2-litre bottle of high percentage inexpensive cider, and jumped on a bus to take me closer to pre-drinks.

The atmosphere when I entered was already like a party on its own. The air was hot and smelt strongly of cigarette smoke and cheap booze. There was an excess of 20 or so people dancing manically to the steady thump of distorted bass, coming through what looked like a cheap speaker, attached to a pair of even cheaper DJ decks. It was clear that everyone was already in some state of inebriation, so quickly I swigged back as much of my cider as I could, without causing myself to vomit, so as to ease myself into a party mood and feel more connected to the group. I felt like a different person as we set off towards the rave. As we entered the venue, the bouncers searched me and I left my warm winter coat in the cloak room. Once again, I was immersed in the intense audio and visual experience that is the rave, my movements dictated by whatever song the DJ chose to play next. The following morning, I was once again left nursing a mean hangover, but with a reinforced sense of comradery and community, as well as a feeling of contentment and calm.

Here, all three stages of van Gennep's delineation of rites of passage are visible. For the preliminal stage, pre-drinking rituals are symbolic of one letting go of one's sober normal self, as well as pat downs and leaving outer wear in the cloakroom being symbolic of one literally leaving their outside life and status at the door. Having achieved separation from the rest of society by becoming immersed "*in a world full of intense lighting and loud sound ... far removed from social centers*" (Rill, 2006, pp. 652), one now enters the liminal stage. Here, both of van Gennep's constants are adhered to, although perhaps not strictly. While there is no firm set of predetermined actions to follow whilst at a rave, there are unspoken expectations that the majority follow, the most prime example being the expectation to dance. This ritualistic dance is overseen and controlled by the DJ, who can be viewed as the "*master of ceremonies*" (Szakolczai, 2009, pp.148), as well as the bouncers and bar staff who act to facilitate and safeguard the neophyte through their navigation of the liminal space. It

is interesting to note that the word MC, standing for master of ceremonies, has in fact been re-appropriated in the rave and electronic music scene to mean someone who raps over the DJ's music, or, to act to "*hype up*" the crowd (Rap Wiki, 2008). Finally, in reincorporating the neophyte back into society, the rave acts to affirm community bonds and allow for the letting off of steam. Hirschi, in his works on crime and deviance, wrote that deviance was a response to a lack of familial and social bonds (Hirschi, 1969). The lack of bonds consequently frees the deviant from certain social constraints (Hirschi, 1969). I would argue, however, that the relief from societal constraints within the liminal space of the rave, and the resulting deviant hedonism such as excessive binge drinking and drug taking, in fact strengthens social bonds and establishes comradery between peers. This is because in the context of rave culture, binge drinking and drug taking may not be viewed in the same way as they would be in external hegemonic culture. Leppel argues that the implications of binge drinking and deviance in the context of social bonds, are in fact flipped when the culture an individual is engaged in encourages such deviant behaviour (Leppel, 2006). This can be viewed as a response to the disunion of traditional family networks and community Cushman (1990) describes as being symptomatic of post modernity. The result of this is, he argues, is the shared societal feeling of loss and emptiness felt most prevalently by contemporary youth (Cushman 1990). In this sense, whilst having elements that could be considered counter cultural, such as deviant drug taking, the rave in fact acts to reinforce social bonds that connect the individual to the liminal subculture of rave, in much the same way familial bonds once created a sense of attachment with hegemonic society. The function of rave under this analysis therefore, is to prevent serious detachment from external hegemonic culture and to encourage social cohesion through the support structures that social bonding with peers promote as a result of engagement with rave and rave culture.

Goulding, referencing Measham et al 1998, argues that what distinguishes rave culture from mainstream culture is “*an emphasis on social bonding, the collective dance experience, a communal state of euphoria and the “happy” vibe*” (Goulding et al, 2010, pp. 266). Therefore, whilst rave culture is clearly distinct from mainstream culture, it is not necessarily counter cultural due to the intrinsic affirmation of social bonds that occurs within the rave as a liminal space. Rill (2006) writes that after returning to hegemonic culture following the exit from the liminal space of rave there is a sense of disappointment that occurs as a result of the inability to sustain the liminal ideal. The result of this is a desire to return to the rave state and realise that ideal once again. Rill likens the rave space to Bey’s concept of a Temporary Autonomous Zone (Bey, 1991). This is a space separate to social structure and control (Gray, 2001) where external boundaries do not infringe upon fantasy and expression (Rill, 2006). In the words of Bey this allows for “ *fleeting moments where fantasies are made real and freedom of expression rules before external reality intervenes*” (Bey, 1991, p. 5). This not only means that the longevity of rave as a culture is maintained but also means that rave acts as a “*revitalisation movement*” (Rill, 2006, pp. 657). Essentially, within rave, participants can immerse themselves in their fantasies and return to external structure having let off steam feeling “*refreshed and liberated*” (Rill, 2006, pp. 657), preventing detachment from society that can be detrimental. Therefore, using van Gennep’s conception of liminality to frame rave, we can conclude that transition is reflected to a measurable degree in the individual’s engagement in rave.

3.2 Liminal or liminoid: rave in a consumer society

Van Gennep positions liminality temporally within a rite of passage, and rave fits two main dimensions of this. The first is moment liminality. This is the short-term liminality experienced within the rave as a one-off event. The second is period liminality. This takes place over a

longer stage of a person's life and is most similar with a continued subscription to rave culture. Another example of period liminality would be going to university, something which I have already identified as running alongside my liminal experience of rave. However, liminality is not only considered temporally. Authors, such as Victor Turner, position liminality spatially as well as temporally. Having studied van Gennep, Turner further developed the idea of liminality beyond just the context of rites of passage. Having first, similarly to van Gennep, approached liminality whilst researching the Ndembu rites of passage (Turner, 1967), he began to reposition liminality to understand not only the temporal in-between moments or periods but also "*to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences as they shape personality, suddenly foreground agency, and (sometimes dramatically) bind thought to experience.*" (Horvath et al, 2015, pp. 46). Crucially, in regards to rave and rave culture, Turner in "*Liminal to Liminoid*" identifies that liminality within a contemporary consumerist framework takes the form of liminoid movements within art and leisure. Turner presents liminality, liminal identity, and "*liminoid moments*" (Horvath et al, 2015, pp. 47) as being synonymous with ambiguity and uncertainty, which he writes as being necessary to allow for one's persona to transcend social boundaries and hierarchies that are present within hegemonic culture. This allows for liminal entities to exist without anything to "*distinguish them from their fellow neophyte*" (Turner, 1995, pp. 95). This is what Turner considers communitas, an almost complete lack of structure within a liminal space that allows for a sense of comradeship resultant from the shared experience of ambiguity and lack of conventional structure and hierarchy (Turner, 1995). This dissolution of identity and becoming part of a wider empathetic liminal entity is something that is very much at the forefront of the rave experience. This I identify in my vignette as the feeling of connection with the people around me, achieved by allowing my day to day identity slip away, both

physically, in my leaving outerwear in the cloakroom, and psychologically, by becoming inebriated and immersed in light and sound. This is an experience similarly shared by my interview subjects who all seemed to articulate some abstract collective feeling that exists within the rave: *"rave culture is sort of built upon this euphoric feeling you get from music and the people around you that gets people in sort of a really nice spirit ... what comes with that is the conversations you have with people"* (Current Member). In critiquing Turner's approach to leisure as a liminoid activity, Horvath writes that in contrast to liminality, a liminoid experience is achieved through choice, arguing that it lacks the key characteristics of transition, such as status or identity change and the resolving of personal crisis, that are necessary to liminality (Horvath, 2015, pp. 47). Whilst a subscription to rave culture and the attendance at a rave event, with all the expectations and actions that doing so entails, is undoubtedly a voluntary enterprise, I would dispute that the result of this is that rave is uncharacteristic of liminality. Firstly, as aforementioned, social bonds are formed within the liminal space of the rave through the liquidation of identity into the collective whole. Simply put, the fact that everybody is viewed as equal within the rave means that an individual is able to make new friends easily, without the outside limitations they may face as part of their identity ascribed to them by hegemonic culture. This might indicate one reason an individual may re-enter the liminal space of rave, as an attempt to escape external social boundaries and relieve social alienation (Anderson, Kavanagh, Rapp, and Daly, 2009). The result of this increase in social bonds is a subsequent elevation of status. The function of rave in status elevation is particularly important to those who, similar to myself, are students. Students lack conventional agency and status. Hutson (1999) writes that young student ravers are unable to compete with adults for occupational status and as a result realise agency through the acquisition of subcultural capital (Hutson, 1999). This term, subcultural capital, coined by

Sarah Thornton in *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (1995), is an adaption of the works of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1985). Through attending a rave or subscribing to rave culture, one is able to foot themselves in the social hierarchies found in the external university sphere by becoming familiar with, and consuming, subcultural capital in the form of the latest trends in music, fashion, and slang (Hutson, 1999). Therefore, whilst there exists no structure or hierarchy within the liminal space of the rave itself, by familiarising with the “*hipness*” of rave culture one is able to place oneself higher in external social hierarchies. This may further suggest that an individual might continue to re-enter the liminal space of rave in order to continue to consume subcultural capital and further better their position in external hierarchies.

There is then some contradiction I must face when discussing the liminal positioning of rave. Whilst my initial reading and examination of my own experiences seemed to suggest the ideas of unity, communitas, and identity dissolution into a wider whole, further reading and reflection has highlighted themes of exclusivity, “*hipness*”, and ego.

By the start of my second year of university I felt I had become an established member of both rave culture and the wider university social sphere. I now had my own student house, one I shared with friends mostly older than me made through my participation in rave and the university DJ society. I had played a few club nights and raves now and was known mostly, to those not in my immediate friendship group, by my DJ name. I felt as if I had attained some level of social status; hanging out with older, “cooler” kids, wearing “edgy” clothes, and being invited to exclusive house parties and raves. However, whilst this was an exterior maintained mostly through a continued engagement with the rave scene, helping me keep in touch with recent trends etc, ironically, it was during the rave where this exterior seemed to break down.

Whether as a result of excessive drinking or the hypnotic immersion into light and sound, undoubtedly, when at the rave, all sense of external hierarchy completely dissolved.

I consider this, in part, to be a result of the commercialisation of rave culture in the past two decades. Hutson writes that the result of the commercialisation of rave culture has given way to a whole industry built on profiting from subcultures such as rave, that encompass occupations such as club owners, promoters, and professional DJs. Further, he argues in order to maximise profit, those involved in the industry must reproduce and maintain hierarchies of subcultural capital so as to encourage consumption (Hutson, 1999). He references Thornton's (1995) work on rave exclusivity and subcultural capital arguing that to maintain such hierarchy club promoters become selective about who to let DJ and enter the club as a means to attract the biggest crowds and maximise profit (Hutson, 1999). Wilson goes as far as to write that "*rave, while embodying the potential for transcendent connections among its members, has become … a business that exploits glorified and nostalgic images in order to sell' the dance party to youth*" (Wilson 2006, pp.158-59). This again encapsulates the almost paradoxical nature of the contemporary rave scene, highlighting the stark contradiction of authentic experience and the manufactured subcultural capital consumption hierarchy. In addition, through commercialisation we are able to see the wider effects that rave culture has had on hegemonic British culture. Siokou and Moore (2008) write that due to the continued popularity of rave culture from the 1990's, the organisation of raves has increasingly been through larger companies and organisations centred on profit. As a result, raves have become more widely advertised and promoted, and rave music and style has permeated into popular culture (Siokou and Moore, 2008). This is something that was also identified by my interviewees. One of my interviewees, a current member of rave culture,

noted how “*most people in their 20’s will have been to a rave*”, the result of which, he identified, is that there are clear rave music “*influences in songs that are in the charts like it’s quite clearly impacting all sorts of popular culture*” (Current Member).

3.3 Rave and identity: shaping the self in a postmodern world

The resolution to the contradiction that Thornton’s ethnographic discovery of rave egoism and subcultural capital illustrating hierarchy (Thorton, 1995), presents to Turner’s conceptualisation of communitas within liminality (Turner, 1974) is reached, Hutson argues, by approaching the rave as a “*temporal process*” (Hutson, 1999, pp. 69). Hutson, in essence, argues that by recognising the rave as a liminal space, that exists as an in-between stage both spatially and temporally, there can coexist hierarchy and the absence of one. Hutson goes on to argue, similarly to Rill (2006), that external differences and social boundaries are gradually removed via engagement in hedonism (drink and drug taking), dance and “*other ritual processes* that transform structures of subcultural capital into antistructure.” (Hutson, 1999, pp. 70). Therefore, despite the pressures of consumerism the experience of rave is able to remain formative and genuine as it exists within a liminal framework. The accumulation of items of subcultural capital also act to contribute to identity. Goulding et al argues that in a highly mediatised modernity subcultural activity has become no longer feared as folk devils like previous anticultural youth subcultures such as mods, teddy boys, punks, and skinheads. Instead, it is recognised as an important and legitimate medium for the construction and expression of identity (Goulding, 2002). Authors such as Giddens (1991) write that in the postmodern context consumption and leisure activities are arguably more important than traditional anchors for identity such as occupation or relationship status (Giddens, 1991). Authors such as Jameson (1991) and Strauss (1997), who detail the extent of choice within identity formation that exists in the contemporary world, argue that this leads to identity

fragmentation or what Kellner (1995) presents as identity confusion. This can certainly be recognised as being characteristic of liminality within rave. The rave presents contradiction by simultaneously stripping role, status, and external identity whilst also immersing the individual in new music, fashion, and presenting them with a clean slate from which to make a multitude of identity choices. Within this modernity of endless choice, Gergen (1991) argues there emerges individuals bombarded with countless conflicting identity options, decentring identity. Gergen terms this "*multiphrenia*" (Gergen, 1991). This, I would argue, constitutes one of the main personal crises that the neophyte faces before entering the liminal space of the rave. I propose that whilst rave reflects an abundance of choice that may lead to the decentring of identity, by placing it liminally, it also acts to resolve the crisis of identity fragmentation that is imposed by the postmodern world. This, I posit, is why my experience of rave has been so entwined with my experience of university. University is undoubtedly also a liminal process, and to me offered the similar clean slate as rave did, due to the fact I knew no one at my university. The resulting identity crisis, I feel, was resolved by rave which allowed me to more freely express my identity, and encouraged me to extend these aspects of expression to the outside world. For example, the clothes I wore to raves slowly but surely became part of my everyday wardrobe, as did the music I was listening to at raves become staples of my Spotify playlists. To resolve the apparent contradiction rave presents by appearing to decentre identity through an abundance of choice whilst also appearing to encourage free expression and the construction of identity, one must accept the rave as liminal in the context of the postmodern world that surrounds it. I posit that the choices presented by rave are not experienced whilst engaging in the rave as a liminal space and in fact exist externally. That is to say, similarly to the way Rill (2006) and Hutson (1999) describe

external status fading away within the rave, so do the imposed postmodern pressures of choice.

As I have already discussed, entering the rave allows one to let off steam, realise certain fantasies, and obtain status, illustrating some of the effects that rave positioned within a liminal framework has on the individual and the subsequent benefits that might have on the rest of society such as increased social cohesion etc. I now want to further explore the effects that engaging in rave and rave culture as a liminal process has on the individual and their identity, so as to address one of my initial aims. As previously discussed, Turner argues that the result of engaging in a liminal process is the resolution of a personal crisis and change in identity or status (Turner, 1974). As I have already touched upon the aspects of status and identity change, I want to consider the idea of crisis resolution. Turner suggests that individual moment liminality, in the context of rave this would be the one-off occasion of going to a rave, can be caused by a sudden significant event that drastically impacts one's life, such as the loss of employment or death of a family member (Turner, 1967). The result of this is that the purpose of entering/re-entering the liminal space is an attempt to resolve or overcome some personal crisis or issue. Whilst in the context of Turner's work the entrance into the liminal space is directly caused by the sudden detriment to the individual's life, i.e. it is not a matter of personal choice, re-entering the liminal space of the rave is. This again would suggest that rave is a liminoid activity (Horvath et al. 2015). However, whilst entering the rave is a matter of choice it still performs the same necessary role of crisis resolution characteristic of liminality. In discussing his occasional re-entrance into the rave space one of my interviewees, an ex-member to rave culture, reflected how experiencing a break-up had impacted his involvement with rave. *"Yeah like even though I don't go to raves that often I know it's always there if I need. So like last year I broke up with my girlfriend and like you don't really have the*

same support structures at like work and stuff so for a while I was really struggling like with who I was and like just really stressed you know. But like yeah rave helped out a lot with that because you can go back to it whenever and you can meet people and just go with friends. I don't know, for me I think it just helped to sort of ground me back into like reality" (Ex-Member). This clearly illustrates the way in which entering the liminal space of rave is in fact both formative and an aide to personal crisis. By existing as a space for people to return to a sense of self is reaffirmed (Beech, 2011). Beech (2011) writes that it is at the intersections of social structure and agency found in liminal spaces such as the rave that identity reconstruction can be most effectively explored (Beech, 2011). The crisis again that faces most people when entering the liminal space of rave seems to be one of identity and sense of self, symptomatic of the postmodern context rave exists in. This both provides explanation as to why someone might re-enter the rave space and also the effect of rave on identity. Conversely, it seems a drastic change to one's life or sudden personal crisis might signify one's exit from rave, perhaps initiating the neophyte into another liminal stage. This was illustrated in my interviews. When a current member of rave culture was asked if they could see themselves no longer subscribing to rave culture and going to raves, they responded that the more responsibilities attributed to having a family would mean a continued subscription to rave culture would not be possible. "*I have to say to myself at some stage look this isn't a career you know like it's just a stage in my life that's been really significant, but at the same time like part of the experience is being able to let go at some point.*" (Current Member).

3.4 Liminal functions of drug use within rave

The fact that there seems to exist multiple contradictions when considering the rave as liminal suggests that one must consider two planes of liminality that coexist. I refer back to the multiple dimensions of liminality aforementioned; the moment liminality of going to the rave

that exists with more spatial emphasis, and the more temporally based period liminality of the long-term subscription to rave culture. My position is that as rave culture is a subculture and so intrinsically is linked to the external hegemonic, it cannot escape the pressures of choice and inherent hierarchy of the postmodern world. The freedom comes from the spatial and temporary liminality found within the rave, what I would argue to be "*pure liminality*". This liminality is achieved by "*bringing both personal and collective, and spatial and temporal coordinates into play.*" (Horvath, 2015). I interpret Des Tramacchi's (2001) position on ego-death within rave as more of a deliberate "*ego-suicide*" whereby individuals are active in their attempts to shake off unwanted aspects of their decentred identities, escaping temporarily from the trappings of postmodernity whilst also beginning to resolve the personal crises that arise from identity fragmentation. Tramacchi's discussion goes on to cover experiential transcendence resulting from drug use. His position is that collective consciousness and group identity is more often than not a result of prominent MDMA use at raves (Tramacchi, 2001). He writes "*During the plateau of MDMA effects interpersonal differences appear to evaporate producing a condition of almost total identification of self with other.*"(Tramacchi, 2001, pp. 174). Whilst I would agree that a heightened sense of empathy resulting from taking MDMA is a common and effective way for identity dissolution and reaching communitas, I do not believe that it is a necessary component to attain a state of "*pure liminality*". This is because the experience of the external is so vastly different to that of the rave, merely existing within the liminal space is enough to allow for the desired detachment from identity and responsibility. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the effect of drug use in contributing to the liminality of rave.

I remember it must have been my fourth or fifth rave. Not late enough on to have already established myself in the external scene but not early enough that I didn't already know what

to expect and what to do. I had just arrived with about six other friends and we started to look around, scoping out who had already arrived, who was DJing, and what type of music was being played. This was in order to decide whether it was worth queuing for the bar now or making a beeline straight for the smokers to wait for more people to arrive. We decided on the latter.

The smoking area was considerably busier than inside the place. Clearly everyone else had had the same idea. As I pushed my way out and began to roll a cigarette, I accidentally locked eye contact with someone on the other side of the smoking area. He was huge. I estimated about six foot three, with biceps larger than my head, and covered in tattoos and piercings. Needless to say, I was somewhat nervous as he approached. He sidled up to me, looked over his shoulder then back to me, then asked "are you looking for the way out?" Confused, as we had quite obviously just arrived, I replied "No, would you like me to leave?" He chuckled and smiled back at me "No worries bro."

Baffled, I recounted my experience to my friends, much to their amusement. What I had misunderstood as a weird almost aggressive confrontation was actually the suggestion of a drug deal.

I think this vignette and the language used by the drug dealer in this instance aptly encapsulates the role of drugs at a rave and their contribution to maintaining a liminal space. By taking drugs or drinking excessively it becomes much easier to detach from external influences and allows for an easier dissolution of identity. Thereby, separation is ensured and easily maintained. Moore and Miles argue that drug use and excessive drinking within the rave setting is an attempt to cope, made by young people, in response to the increasing pressures, responsibilities, and identity demands thrust upon them by the social structures

they operate in (Miles and Moore, 2004). They further posit that the creation of a fluid identity achieved whilst in the liminal space of the rave, through the use of drugs, acts as a stabilising force to reaffirm social cohesion and eventually re-centre identity. They write, “*drugs play a key role in providing young clubbers with a liminal space in which they can put real life on pause. This is not merely an escape from real life but more than that, a counter-balance to it*” (2004, p.521). Here Miles and Moore place the role of drugs in a similar vein to my previous positioning of Hirschi’s bonds of attachment in the context of rave. They argue that in a postmodern world of choice and uncertainty drug taking provides a necessary escape space that is dependable and reliable, preventing serious detachment from hegemonic society (Miles and Moore, 2004). I would argue that this prevention of detachment is even more effective within the context of a rave. This is because the physical space acts to elevate the liminal experience of drug taking and provides a physical escape in addition to, rather than just in place of, a psychological one. Additionally, the group setting, darkness, and disorientation present in the rave as a space allows for a certain level of anonymity whereby the transgressions of external norms such as drug taking is encouraged and the potential identity dissolution can be more fully explored (Jaimangal-Jones, Pritchard and Morgan, 2010).

My interviews also highlighted this sentiment. All three of my interviewees were keen not to position drugs as a necessity to rave, “*it's not that you need the drugs to do the raving, like I go out to raves and don't do drugs and still have a fun time*” (Current Member). However, all three recognised that the use of drugs seemed to heighten the experience of rave, “*for example (if) it's a small room the music like fills the room, and like when you're fucked, it's going to feel better, like when you feel the music it is like a more intense experience and a better experience I think.*” (New Member). Again, my interviewees seemed to articulate a collective community feeling that was particularly strengthened through the use of drugs, “*at*

raves people are able to have these quite intense experiences of euphoria and communication with other people and drugs sort of help to allow this to happen." (Current Member). Here the feelings of euphoria and communication are a clear reflection of Turner's communitas, elevated by both drug use, the immersion into sound, and distinct separation from society that characterise the liminal space of rave. It would follow then that rather than being an integral component, the use of drugs acts to compliment the liminality of rave. Again, the effect of rave on identity seems to run alongside the possible reasons for re-entrance into the liminal space, with the dissolution of identity providing relief from external postmodern pressures.

3.5 Liminal or limivoid: rave as a formative experience

It appears to me having considered the postmodern condition that we must re-evaluate the application of liminality beyond the structure that Turner imposes. Martinez' (2015) position is that "*liminality is back*". He argues that the characteristic ambiguity, constant change, transgression of traditions and boundaries, and dissolution of certainty that compose the postmodern world means that never before has liminality been so prevalent. Due to this constant change authors such as Szakolczai argue that individuals and groups are constantly entering liminal spaces throughout their lives (Szakolczai, 2014). He posits that the postmodern amplification of instability that faces society has in some places frozen, and in others reproduced, the process of transition that van Gennep describes (Szakolczai, 2014). The effect of this is that one constantly faces liminality at both a higher frequency and for greater periods of time. Thomassen suggests that as a result of this liminal condition excessive and extreme acts such as, acts of violence, drink and drug taking, sex, and gambling have now become normalised in leisure (Thomassen, 2015). Here exists rave, as a place where this extreme activity is present and in abundance. However, again I dispute that this extreme

activity is a necessity to the liminality of rave. I argue that in fact it is the mindset that is attached to the individual within the rave that constitutes the true liminal positioning of the space. I refer to Thomassen's observation of the "*diametrically opposed self/world-relations*" that are constantly oscillating within the liminal frame (Thomassen, 2015, pp. 2). In this he draws upon Weber's reflections on the "*world-conquerer world-rejector*" mindset present in times of historical crisis (Thomassen, 2015, pp. 2). In likening this to the experience of rave I once again refer to the contradiction of abandonment of and even rebellion against external societal structure that seemingly prevents detachment from said framework. Therefore, extreme acts within leisure and particularly within rave, rather than acting as sole components, act to further the liminal mindset. Thomassen surmises that for all the freedoms within liminal existence there must still be something on which to fall back (Thomassen, 2015). Thomassen furthers his position on liminality within leisure in his book *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (2014). He argues that the increase in extreme acts in leisure are a result of decentred identity that create the feeling of emptiness. These acts he defines as "*limivoid*", experiences of liminality that do not act as formative or consist of any experiential substance. Instead they act as attempts to desperately "*search for (meaningful) experience in a world of ontological excess*" (Thomassen, 2015, p. 16). In part, I argue this can be applied to rave. Certainly, entrance and re-entrance into the liminal space of rave is a response to a postmodern world of excess, and an attempt to find meaningful experience, as aforementioned. However, I dispute that the experience of rave is not formative and so cannot be considered a truly limivoid condition. Rave is a process that, under the conditions of post modernity, provides an essential function for today's youth. The result of the cold rationality and efficient bureaucracy that distinguishes post modernity (Sundaram, 1992) is that emotional detachment has become a fact of life (Wilson, 2006). As a result, social

cohesion, especially for young people, is low. Surely then, as a space that, as I have already written, can contribute to social cohesion and prevent detachment, the rave must be realised as a formative liminal process.

4 Reflecting on the Autoethnographic Process

As mentioned in my methodology, one major facet of the autoethnographic process is the way in which it interrogates the writer's own experiences. As such I have found the autoethnographic process to be both formative and self-scrutinizing. Considering this, as a result of the exploration of self I have undergone as a result of writing academically and autobiographically, several liminal processes become visible.

There first presented the challenge of facing the liminal space that exists between language and experience, "*between the known and the unknown, between the somatic and semantic.*" (Spry, 2001, pp. 726). In navigating this space, similarly to Wall (2008), there were conjured anxieties regarding self-representation, authenticity, and the maintenance of academic integrity. I wanted to present my experience of rave and rave culture in a way that did not conform to stigma that might surround the topic, whilst simultaneously providing an honest and academically viable account (Wall, 2008). In particular, I found it difficult to handle the topic of drug use. The misconception that drugs play a fundamental role in rave and rave culture was one that, from my position, was significant to debunk. To me, the value of rave and rave culture as a liminal experience lay in its formative role in my transition from teenager to adult. I feared by recognizing drug use for the role it played in this transition, and perhaps confirming the related stigma that surrounds rave and rave culture, the consequence and legitimacy of the liminal space would be diminished. Similarly to Anderson et al, I was cautious of the voluminous literature that concludes that "*club-goers are little more than excessive substance users who view clubbing as an activity to achieve intoxication goals.*" (Anderson, Kavanaugh, Rapp, and Daly, 2008). Nevertheless, examining the rave under a reflexive academic lens, it was hard not to recognize that drug use was functional in contributing to

the identity dissolution necessary to experience liminality (Jaimangal-Jones, Pritchard and Morgan, 2010). This was a point further reinforced by my interview subjects who all identified drug use as an important part of their own rave experiences. A concern not to stigmatize an already widely stigmatized group is a key ethical implication of social research especially on groups engaging in deviant activities. Therefore, in order to overcome this challenge and navigate the liminal space in between language and experience, it was important to take a sensitive approach in articulating the rave-drug relationship. I feel this was achieved by grounding my position within a theoretical context and though the execution of my interviews. As a result, I was able to both acknowledge the importance of drug use without further adding to stigma that might surround rave culture.

Positioning my experience of rave in the context of post modernity also came with inherent challenges. Much postmodern writing nihilistically struggles to assign meaning to anything, with a “*tyranny of possibilities*” (Weymann, 1989) decentering and fragmenting identity. As such, rave and other leisure activities are, to many authors, merely a condition of the postmodern plight to find meaning in life and pursue self-interest (Thomassen, 2015). To acknowledge this “*postmodern perspective which emphasizes the prominence of nostalgia and meaninglessness in modern amusements*” (Hutson, 2015, pp. 54) threatens the value of my experiences of rave and liminality as meaningful and formative. This posed an almost existential line of questioning of my own identity, the formation of which I had previously attributed to a longitudinal subscription to rave and youth subculture. Thus, I was entered into yet another ontological liminality, facing my own personal crisis of identity, characterized by a sense of ambiguity. Overcoming this crisis was achieved through writing and my interviews with other members and ex-members of rave culture. Finding the experiences of

others to be incredibly similar to my own, validates rave as an authentic shared experience, proving rave to be formative and resolving my crisis of identity.

Whilst the resolution to personal identity crisis that arose from the initial discovery of postmodern critique of the rave as liminal was found, through the further exploration of existing theory and the experiences of others, having scrutinized my initial conceptions of the functions of rave, a much more intricate and frankly different perception of what rave is and does has developed. I now evaluate my experiences of rave and rave culture completely differently to the way I did initially. This is something that I think can be seen clearly through the narrative of my writing. Initially considering rave and rave culture to be representative of my passage through university, from teenager to adult, I now consider the understanding that a subscription to rave culture merely reflects this rite of passage is reductionist and diminishes the wider social implications and the complexity of contemporary liminality. Through changing my interpretation of experiences, therefore changing how these experiences exist themselves, the way in which I inform my identity has changed (Hoerl and McCormack, 2001). Ultimately, I see myself as having changed through navigating the liminal process of academic writing. Writing autoethnographically, subjecting the self to such a high level of academic critical evaluation, has at times been taxing. Having never used autoethnography as a research method before, it was difficult not to feel some level of vulnerability whilst writing my vignettes and trying to contextualize experience. However, this vulnerability is a vulnerability that necessitates change, and positive change. At the beginning of my research I identified rave and rave culture as something that I had begun to feel less attached to. Much like my interviewees I felt uncomfortable at the thought of leaving the rave scene, “*I don’t want to think about not being part of it and not going to raves.*” (Current Member). “*It’s the saddest thing like thinking about leaving it behind like I don’t want to like think about it like*

one day I won't be able to do this anymore." (New Member). This, understanding liminality as I do now, I can identify as the personal crisis that entered me in to the liminal period of writing my autoethnography. By exploring this vulnerability through writing as well as navigating the many challenges that requires entering into liminal spaces, I have come to terms with my declining engagement in rave. I am reassured that the space will remain constant and accessible to me throughout my life should I need to re-enter, and that if I never re-enter the space again my experiences with rave have been meaningful and formative. Resolution to personal crisis is met, formation of identity is complete, and I am able to reintroduce myself back into society having navigated the liminal process of writing my dissertation confident in the support structures I have built through my engagement in rave and rave culture.

5 Conclusion

In concluding my autoethnography, to truly understand liminality within rave, a plethora of dimensions and facets must be considered. Firstly, in understanding how rave reflects transition, one must acknowledge multiple uses of liminality. Initially framing rave within van Gennep's theoretical framework, the process of going to a rave much reflects a rite of passage, including preliminal, liminal, and postliminal stages (van Gennep, 1960). In addition, a continued subscription to rave culture is also reflective of a rite of passage, as we have explored the close relationship it has with life at university. However, as the application of liminality has broadened beyond academic use within rites of passage, we must similarly extend our understanding of rave's reflection of transition. Whilst aspects of rites of passage can be said to be reflected in both rave and rave culture, to understand the elements of transition present in the liminal space of rave under these terms neglects the intricacy of an issue that requires further critical evaluation. Rave does not merely reflect transition from one point to another. Whilst it is prevalent during university life, rave largely operates independently from social boundaries and indicators, such as age, race, and gender. As a result, the transition reflected in rave must also be recognised as non-linear. To further comprehend the reflection of transition within the liminality of rave we must explore the relationship between rave and identity.

The implications that rave, rave culture, and liminality have on identity are intrinsically linked to individual transition. Furthering anthropological understandings of liminality, Turner made clear the dissolution of identity present in liminal processes (Turner, 1974). Similarly, to van Gennep, he understood liminal processes to be formative and an aide to personal crisis, albeit applied outside the context of rites of passage (Turner, 1974). My position then, is that

transition in the postmodern context is the constant dissolution and reconstruction of identity. Postmodern authors commonly refer to the project of identity as never ending (Bauman, 2001: Kelly, 2007: Grotewalt, 2008). Therefore, individuals are in constant transition between identities and experiences. The liminality within rave is significant in that it offers a legitimate means for the construction and reconstruction of identity (Goulding, 2002). The fact that it is positioned liminally both spatially and temporally means that, internally, it provides a reliable counterbalance to postmodern uncertainty (Miles and Moore, 2004). By contributing to identity dissolution and communitas, the liminal space of rave offers a safe space to explore individual expression without the judgement, pressure or hierarchy of the mainstream. In contrast to the external postmodernity, this encourages empathy over individualisation. To say that the rave offers an accessible liminal space in which to frequently reconstruct identity does not, however, mean that these transitions are not formative.

This leads into the significance of rave in the wider hegemonic context. It is easy to, at first, dismiss rave and rave culture as anti-cultural escapism focused on deviant hedonism. However, under closer inspection the influences of rave and rave culture become highlighted in outlets of popular culture, for example fashion and music, as a result of commercialisation. Yet to understand the wider significance of rave simply in terms of its pop-culture influence is still a superficial examination. The function of liminal spaces such as the rave are fundamental in preventing further fragmentation, social detachment, and individualisation symptomatic of postmodernity. The wider implication of the liminal space of rave is in its formative identity function, in its escape from social boundaries, in the relief from postmodern pressures. In providing a liminal space, the rave encourages cohesion, empathetic opportunity, and a chance to escape uncertainty.

Finally, in answering why the individual might choose to re-enter the liminal space of rave, I refer to the many functions that rave as a liminal space has in supporting identity construction, resolving personal crisis, and relieving postmodern pressures. It is important to note that although, as I have argued, rave and rave culture provides a constant space for the individual to re-enter at any point in their life, the liminal space of rave appears to be one that is more accessible to youth. In addition, whilst the liminal space of rave is one that helps to prevent further fragmentation and detachment from society, it is by no means the only liminal process that fulfils this role. As a result, given the opportunity to continue my research on liminal processes, I would explore the way in which they operate in different life stages or in a different cultural context. In a postmodern world of uncertainty, individualisation, and fragmented identities liminality has never before been so prevalent and functional. I think if anything is to be taken away from my autoethnographic understanding of liminality within rave, Martinez (2015) put it best. Liminality is back.

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