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## "It's Not About You": Exploring the Liminal Experiences of Graduate Forensic Coaches

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“It’s Not About You”: Exploring the Liminal Experiences of Graduate Forensic Coaches

By

Christopher P. Outzen

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

In

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“It’s Not About You”: Exploring the Liminal Experiences of Graduate Forensic Coaches

Christopher P. Outzen

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student’s committee.

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Advisor-Leah White, PhD & Director of Forensics

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Committee Member-Christopher Brown, PhD

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Committee Member-Heather Hamilton, PhD

## Abstract

The following document is a capstone thesis project focusing on the unique experiences of graduate forensic coaches through lens of *liminality*, a performance theory used to describe a sense of being between social identities when going through a rite of passage. The author contends that this liminal experience has unique characteristics which are important to consider in the context of identity and forensic culture. In order to gather data, the author utilized qualitative, semi-structured interviews with current graduate forensic coaches. The resulting interviews were interpreted using a process of open coding to determine key themes of the experience. The author discovered that the most salient characteristics of the liminal experience for graduate forensic coaches included adapting to new institutional and geographic structures, shifting perspectives from competitor to coach, reconciling undergraduate with graduate level experiences in forensics, keeping roles and identities separated, motivation from intrinsic needs, and tensions in social relationships. Based on the participants' experiences, the author concludes that this particular manifestation of liminality is unique because the participants continue to seek validation they received during the competitive forensic years. Additionally, the liminal experience is non-directional and lacking a defined social identity to complete the rite of passage. Finally, the individualized cultures of forensic programs at various universities complicate any active effort to help graduate forensic coaches cope with the ambiguity inherent with the liminal state.

This thesis was written by Christopher P. Outzen in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Fine Arts-Forensics from the Department of

Communication Studies at Minnesota State University, Mankato in Mankato, Minnesota.

Outzen has entitled the project "*It's Not About You*": *Exploring the Liminal Experiences of Graduate Forensic Coaches*. The thesis was submitted in the spring of 2014.

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Finally, thank you to all who are a part of forensics. As a community, you have always inspired me and helped me to find my academic voice. I can sincerely say that my experiences as a competitor, coach, and community member have kept me inspired to complete this research and motivated to stay a part of this great activity.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

It is safe to say that the intercollegiate forensic community would be very different if it were not for the presence of graduate forensic coaches. The role of the graduate assistant, whether for research, teaching, or coaching, is considered invaluable by most colleges and universities. Semenza (2005) explained that graduate teaching assistants can be incredibly useful and supportive in academia, to the point where their labor is exploited. Semenza's point about the dependence on graduate assistants cannot be understated and is easily seen in the forensic community. Schools which are fortunate enough to have a graduate program often benefit greatly from the presence of graduate students willing to take on some of the coaching and administrative work which previously may have been done by faculty and alumni. Furthermore, Elton (1989) suggested that graduate students can learn a lot from engaging in the coaching and judging side of the activity, gathering a host of new perspectives, insights, and resources. However, Elton also cautioned that the experience is not always a positive one. The multiple roles graduate students face combined with a general lack of training places graduate coaches on an "emotional and intellectual roller coaster" (Elton, 1989, p. 55). Although the experiences of graduate forensic coaches are varied and how they perform their roles are far from universal, the tension they feel is worth investigating.

The tension that Elton (1989) indicated was echoed and expanded by Chouinard and Kuyper (2010) through an autoethnographic performance. Chouinard and Kuyper took a performance trip back to their time as first-year graduate forensic coaches,

reflecting on the multiple roles they played and the complications that arise in the graduate coach experience.

They explained:

We both found ourselves very close in age to our student competitors, which presented its own thorny process of identity negotiation. We wrote and re-wrote new identities for ourselves, trying to figure how to best play the role of friend, while maintaining the position of “boss.” (Chouinard & Kuyper, 2010, p. 128)

Chouinard and Kuyper went on to note that this tension exists in coaching, judging, and administrative forensic work. The roles are further complicated by the tensions existing between forensics and other graduate student responsibilities. It was a tension that Kuyper referred to in the performance as a “strange liminal space” (Chouinard & Kuyper, 2010, p. 146).

The concept of liminality is not novel to those within performance studies. Turner (1974) described liminality as the performed moment of being “betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (p. 232), often when considering a ritual rite of passage. However, Bell (2008) further noted that the concept can also be applied to those who are between social and cultural structures. Chouinard and Kuyper (2010) certainly did not use the concept lightly; their performance script is rife with suggestions that they experienced periods, perhaps years, of liminality in their role as graduate forensic coaches. Elton (1989) likewise, albeit less explicitly, suggested that graduate coaches experience a feeling being between multiple states of being. Based on these observations,

it is worth considering the possibility that the state of the graduate coach is one of extended liminality.

Graduate forensic coaches' positions in forensics are uniquely complicated because they are simultaneously budding educators and forensic coaches, roles which individually create unique tensions. It is worth addressing the struggles of these individual positions before considering how graduate forensic coaches inhabit both roles in tandem and the complications related to the dual nature of their position.

### **Graduate Teaching Experiences**

Many graduate forensic coaches are not paid explicitly for their work as coaches during their graduate careers. Rather, they are often primarily teaching assistants for the basic course, a position which is a period of transition in itself. The graduate teaching assistant (GTA) has become a staple hire in departments across the country.

Communication departments, noted Rhodes (1997), have been especially dependent on GTAs to teach their basic course, either under a faculty member or as autonomous, stand-alone classes. Semenza (2005) suggested in extreme cases, GTA labor is being exploited in exchange for educational opportunities. There is no question of the presence of GTAs in communication studies and their experiences are linked to quality education, for them and their students.

Lieberg (2008) noted that first-time teaching experiences often result in a tension between apprehension and excitement. She acknowledged that there are many variables in teaching that could go awry and lead instructors down an unknown path. Turman (2001) echoed this sentiment while describing graduate school as a setting of ambiguities.

Interestingly, Turman noted specific tensions of graduate school which seemed to suggest experiences of liminality. He explained:

One is expected to develop a level of independence as a GTA while being dependent on senior faculty for the courses being taken...It is unclear when one is assuming a role as a student, or as a fellow staff member. (Turman, 2001, p. 266-267).

Turman's thoughts on the ambiguous nature of graduate school are echoed by both Lieberg (2008) and Semenza (2005). Lieberg (2008) explained that first time college instructors, GSIs and new faculty, are often thrown off by the transition from student to instructor and the coinciding shift in responsibilities. Semenza (2005) suggested another potential pitfall which causes issues is the typical age of GTAs. Although this can make it easy to relate to students, it often results in neither students nor faculty being able to see GTAs as anything more than a friend or a first-year student, respectively.

However, Staton-Spicer and Nyquist (1979) explained that graduate assistants have gone beyond the role of assistants and have taken on many responsibilities reserved for full instructors. The result, they argued, is that these graduate instructors face the added pressures of providing high quality instruction while maintaining their own role as students. However, Rhodes (1997) noted that this added pressure is not usually backed up with training. "The lack of proper training may also increase the insecurity, anxiety, and uncertainty felt during their socialization as GTAs" (Rhodes, 1997, p. 55). Rhodes further explained that GTAs face the stress of dealing with students in new ways which challenge their emotional scripts. Because the teacher and student relationship is so

emotionally one-sided, GTAs may find themselves emotionally drained. Young and Bippus (2008) also noted that GTAs tended to suffer from having role conflicts stemming from their dual role as student and instructor. This often resulted in GTAs being unsure of how to handle their role in the classroom, especially when it came to issues of classroom management and establishing and/or maintaining credibility.

In many cases, these new responsibilities and role conflicts experienced by GTAs resulted in them taking their own action to seek out some kind of closure or improvement in the situation. Rhodes (1997) noted that, based on the principles of uncertainty reduction, many GTAs will seek out as much information as possible about their teaching position in order to reduce their ambiguous state. Turman (2001) noted that where ambiguity was involved, especially when it came to teaching technique, it is not uncommon for GTAs to seek out an instructor they believe exhibits effective teaching and begin to shadow or model their teaching behavior. Roach (1991) reiterated the fact that credibility is often the biggest area of difficulty for GTAs. Roach argued, to cope with their role conflicts, GTAs use specific strategies, usually different from or in higher numbers than professors, to establish authority and maintain behavioral control in the classroom. Essentially, it seems that GTAs find their own status troubling and actively seek ways to negotiate their struggles with role conflict.

It is worth noting that many authors seem to agree that providing training to GTAs would be a huge benefit to them and reduce some of the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in their position. Stanton-Spicer and Nyquist (1979) noted that, for improving the GTAs instructional competency, a training program based upon initial assessment,

intervention in areas for improvement, and reassessment would be an ideal model. Young and Bippus (2008) argued that GTAs should be trained from the very beginning, focusing on pedagogy and confidence-building. They suggested that GTA confidence in their pedagogical training and their own abilities to teach is the key to negotiating their unique position. Rhodes (1997) reported similar thoughts, suggesting that training can help to reduce GTA uncertainty during their socialization and provide a supportive environment for GTAs to work out potentially troubling emotional problems which occur in the classroom. Her ultimate recommendation, along with Young and Bippus (2008) and Stanton-Spicer and Nyquist (1979), is that training for GTAs would go a long way to improving the quality of their teaching and reducing their uncertainty concerning their roles in the university.

### **Forensic Coaches' Experiences**

In addition to working as a GTA, graduate forensic students take on a coaching role, a position which is challenging to even the most experienced full-time forensic educators. The role of the full-time forensic coach, especially one who holds the title "Director of Forensics" calls for coaches to act in multiple different capacities.

Bartanen's often cited suggestion that forensic coaches must be the "jack of all trades" (as cited in Pierce, 2003, p. 1) calls to mind the seemingly never-ending functions a coach must perform.

Gill (1990) explained that forensic coaches face a number of issues which add to tensions on the job, such as justifying the educational value of the activity, being responsible for the team's competitive success, and little to no monetary or time

compensation for the extra responsibilities associated with being a forensic professional. However, “These variables, however, do not appear to be as important as the time required in determining whether a coach will remain a coach” (Gill, 1990, p. 185). Richardson (2005) noted that this kind of time demand could be one contributing factor to the common trend of early forensic coaching burnout. Richardson detailed two general causes: environmental (related to university, program, and tournament pressures) and individual (personality, intrinsic motivations, and attitudes toward competition). However, he warned that there are multiple factors which contribute to the tensions related to coaching burnout and that the factors which Gill (1990) ranked as less influential than time commitment should not be dismissed from discussion.

However, one role for coaches seems rife for potential tensions: mentoring. White (2005) noted that mentoring students is a naturally-developed relationship of learning which goes beyond typical student-coach boundaries and is mutually transformative. White noted four common models of mentoring as previously identified by Buell: cloning (which White did not discuss because of its negative reputation in academia), nurturing, friendship, and apprenticeship. When applied to forensic coaching, White offered perspective on the benefits and drawbacks of each of these models. Although the friendship and nurturing model can provide intimate connection and emotional satisfaction, White argued that these mentorship styles can become emotionally exhausting to coaches and may blur professional boundaries between coaches and students. The apprenticeship model, which features less emotional connection and more professional development, avoids the pitfalls of the previous two models, but “the

relationships that develop will most likely not be as interpersonally rewarding” (White, 2005, p. 91). Additionally, White reminded readers that these mentorship tensions are a natural part of the job, that forensics as an activity makes mentoring connections between coaches and students a natural development.

Full-time forensic coaches face tensions in areas of their life outside forensics as well. Dickmeyer (2002) explained that coaching became a juggling act for him, struggling to keep up “being an individual events coach, teacher, researcher, active member of my college community, husband, and father” (p. 57). He contended that the constant travel often necessitates poor health choices, which is compounded by the nearly 8 month long competition season. Dickmeyer further noted that the demands of forensics present considerable tensions in personal and professional spheres outside forensics, including academic life and the ability to “engage in and sustain relationships” (Dickmeyer, 2002, p. 59).

Rogers and Rennels (2008) echoed this problem, stating that former forensic coaches generally agreed their forensic career had a negative impact on their romantic/non-platonic relationships. Additionally, Rogers and Rennels discovered that those surveyed also tended to put family ahead of forensics, including in decisions to retire as forensic professionals. Dickmeyer (2002) anecdotally reported that since retiring as a forensic professional, his relationship with his wife and children improved, friendships developed more naturally, his health improved, and his academic and teaching career have also improved. Essentially, forensic professionals face challenges because of the demanding nature of the activity. It requires the time and discipline of a



career unto itself, but it is tied to other positions in academic institutions and is a drain on time usually reserved for interpersonal relationship development and maintenance.

### **Graduate Forensics Coaches**

GTAs and full-time forensic coaches each face unique struggles in their positions. However, graduate forensic coaches usually inhabit both roles simultaneously in addition to maintaining their own student-status and developing as scholars. White (2005) noted that the nature of forensics makes a deeper connection between students and coaches more likely. However, she noted that this connection can be especially difficult for young graduate coaches, close to the same age as students, because the relationship may develop in a way that blurs the line between professional and friendly relationships. White cautioned that this can be conducive to a friendship style of mentorship, but it can also present problems for graduate coaches when it comes time to distinguish themselves as authority figures.

Morris (2005) similarly noted that graduate student coaches may have a hard time moving from competition into judging. Morris suggested that first-time graduate coaches, fresh out of competition, often struggle with writing objective ballot critiques because, as students, they were taught to evaluate and to advocate for their beliefs. The result is often recommendations on how an event should be done or a demonstration of the history of forensics, not a genuine critique. Related to White's (2005) discussion about the transition from student to coach from a mentoring perspective, Morris (2005) also noted that young new judges, such as graduate students, may be tempted to overly familiarize

themselves with the competitors they are judging, especially if the judge and competitor had been friends on the circuit when both were competing.

Graduate forensic coaches also struggle with developing as forensic administrators. Elton (1989) made specific observations about the struggles of the director (DF) and assistant directors of forensics (ADF) at the University of Minnesota, both of whom were graduate students at the time. Elton noted that, although inhabiting these roles may inherently be a good learning experience, lack of training in administrative work or coaching forensics can leave these graduate directors feeling lost. Additionally, graduate coaches in administrative positions seem to struggle finding their place on their own team. The graduate student DF and ADF were also unable to find their place in the circuit, often recognized only as forensic coaches, not as graduate students who happened to be coaches.

The tension between being a developing researcher and a forensic coach is another problematic area unique to graduate forensic coaches. Elton (1989) indicated that one such area is the emphasis on graduate students producing forensic research. She explained that, in the event graduate students are the primary coaches, there are no full-time faculty to guide forensic research and few, if any, other graduate students who can give constructive, topical feedback and discuss the research. Perhaps unknowingly adding fuel to these expectations, Madsen (1990) argued that graduate students should be producing forensic research related to the real world applications of the activity, argumentation theory, forensic pedagogy, and tournament practice. Madsen did note several practical ways to present this research, including multiple interest groups at

conferences, student sections, and several forensics-related journals. However, Madsen did not address the struggles noted by Elton (1989), that the lack of peers in forensics can provide roadblocks to beginning and developing forensic research.

Chouinard and Kuyper (2010) provided the most holistic look at graduate forensic coaches' unique struggles, highlighting the compounding nature of multiple sources of tension. They noted that graduate coaches often struggle with identity negotiation between being seen as peers and as coaches. They further noted that some of the functions that came with the coaching role, such as "surrogate parent" (Chouinard & Kuyper, 2010, p. 136) were unexpected and did not seem appropriate for individuals who were or are still young students themselves. In the end, they argued that these kinds of interpersonal tensions can be some of the most difficult to deal with, but because undergraduates gravitate to coaches with whom they best relate, young graduate coaches are often confronted with these issues.

In addition to the interpersonal struggles, Chouinard and Kuyper (2010) also noted that graduate forensic coaches have to inhabit multiple roles to their forensic experiences while maintaining their role as students. They have to be graduate students and often are GTAs in addition to coaching. Even within forensics alone, graduate students have to find a way to make a transition from a competent competitor to a competent coach, handle administrative tasks, and learn how to lead students while at tournaments. These multiple roles and tensions, especially between being neither a full student nor full coach in forensics, are what led Kuyper specifically to describe his graduate coaching experience as a "strange liminal space" (Chouinard & Kuyper, 2010,

p. 146). It is this specific application of liminality to graduate coaching experience that has provided the theoretical jumping off point for this thesis.

As evidenced by this brief insight into the problems caused by dual roles, it is clear that graduate forensic coaches face a unique type of stress. Graduate forensic coaches inhabit a space of multiple liminalities, a multilayered period of being betwixt and between life stages. As I complete my third and final year of graduate coursework, I have often felt these liminal tensions. Like Chouinard and Kuyper (2010), I have struggled to maintain a friendly demeanor appropriate for my age while still being a coach in charge of students. I remember competing against many individuals who became my students, some of whom were older and/or more competitively successful than I. I have often felt the struggle to perform administrative and coaching tasks, to be an authority figure, without feeling like I have any true authority. Trying to learn the ropes of academia, teaching, and forensics simultaneously have often made me feel stuck between multiple worlds, pulled by ropes in each direction, stripped of the old and yet unable to become new. In short, I am no stranger to attempting to perform my graduate forensic identity in a state of extended liminality.

Ultimately, the graduate forensic coach is an important part of the forensic landscape. However, through my own personal reflection and through the reflections of others, it is apparent that this time of professional and academic development is fraught with yet undefined uncertainties for these up-and-coming forensic coaches. In order to grasp better these experiences common to many in our activity, I set out to hear and understand the stories of graduate forensic professionals in the hopes of understanding

the in-between nature of graduate students in forensics. Through this research project, I hope to provide some understanding of what I refer to as the extended liminality of graduate forensic coaches.

### **Research Goal**

Chouinard and Kuyper (2010) encouraged other current/recent graduate forensic coaches to “share their experiences and the uniqueness of their own journeys with the forensics community” (p. 154). Therefore, I designed my research to build from their experiences an exploration of the extended liminality of graduate forensic coaches. Although it is impossible to generalize the experiences of all graduate forensic coaches, I utilized qualitative interviews with current graduate forensic coaches across the nation and develop themes from their experiences which can aid in understanding the extended liminality of the graduate coach experience. In the initial stages of my research, I used three research questions to guide the construction of my study.

RQ1: How do graduate forensic coaches experience liminality in their graduate career?

RQ2: How do graduate forensic coaches cope with this liminal state?

RQ3: How does the liminal state of graduate forensic coaches affect their performed identities in their graduate careers?

It is important to note that I chose to focus on the graduate coaches themselves. Their experiences of extended liminality may have an impact on the experiences of their forensic colleagues, students, or graduate students outside forensics. However, my focus

for this project is primarily to articulate the experience of extended liminality for graduate forensic coaches.

I also did not undertake this research solely for my own interest. I believe that this project is an important step to understanding the growing pains of the next generation of forensic educators. Elton (1989) bemoaned the lack of training many graduate forensic coaches receive, making their transition into coaching more difficult. Pierce (2003) echoed this sentiment, stating that, despite the demanding nature of professional forensics, very few resources exist for those who wish to pursue it as a career. I argue that this may be rectifiable, but only if we gain an understanding of the graduate student coach experience. By exploring and more fully articulating the liminal state of being a graduate forensic coach, forensic education and training can develop to encompass and negotiate this liminal state. I do not suggest that the liminal state itself can be resolved, nor do I believe it is necessary to do so. However, understanding the betwixt and between nature of graduate coaching is imperative to strengthening forensics as a competitive and educational activity, for students and coaches alike.

In the remaining pages of this thesis, I develop an image of extended liminality in the graduate forensic coach experience. In Chapter 2, I explore previous scholarly work on important concepts to provide a theoretical backing for the research. Chapter 3 justifies the qualitative methodology utilized and details its execution. Chapter 4 defines the themes developed through interview coding. Finally, Chapter 5 denotes important implications and limitation of the project. Essentially, this thesis presents readers with a

glimpse into the liminal experiences of graduate forensic coaches and what their performance of an in-between role could mean in the broader context of forensics.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Researching forensics requires a background in several different categories of literature. This particular project focuses on issues of identity performance and rites of passage. Therefore, three areas of literature must be addressed to provide an appropriate backing for research. First, it is important to explore the core concept of the project: liminality. Second, I will explore postmodern identity as the driving identity conceptualization for this project. Finally, I will explore literature which positions forensics as a culture.

### **Liminality**

Much discussion of liminality derives from van Gennep's (1960) work on rites of passage. Van Gennep noted that life is full of transitions and "there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined" (van Gennep, 1960, p. 3). Van Gennep developed his theory on rites of passage out of observations concerning territorial passage from one physical sacred space to another. Upon this passing, van Gennep observed that there was a middle neutral zone between the sacred spaces. He explained that "this symbolic and spatial area of transition may be found in more or less pronounced form in all the ceremonies which accompany the passage from one social and magico-religious position to another" (van Gennep, 1960, p. 19). The rites of passage, van Gennep argued, have three distinct phases or categories of rites. First, rites of separation, also known as preliminal rites, mark the transition out of the previous social realm and into the neutral zone. Rites executed during the liminal state, or threshold, mark the participants as in-



between spaces and identities. Finally, ceremonies of incorporation, or post-liminal rites, welcome the participants into the new social realm, often with a new identity. Van Gennep argued that these rites in conjunction with one another form a network of magico-religious meaning assigned to personal and social identity. This early work on liminal rites provided the groundwork for theories and applications of liminality in years to come.

The most prolific author to expand upon the concept of liminality is Turner. Turner (1974) began to build the concept of liminality from van Gennep's work on rites of passage. Turner expanded on the limen to propose that liminality referred to a state of being outside of, or on the edges of, everyday life. Turner explained that, during the liminal period, what I have referred to as a state of liminality, a state of limbo is experienced by direct participants in the ritual.

During the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the "passenger" or "liminar,") becomes ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification; he passes through as symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of his past or coming state. (Turner, 1974, p. 232)

In addition to this state of liminality, Turner noted that there is a state of outsiderhood, meaning set outside of structural arrangements, either due to the present situation or voluntarily. However, unlike those who are marginals (by Turner's definition, members of two or more groups whose cultural status and definition are distinct), ritual liminars have the possibility of a "final stable resolution of their ambiguity" (Turner, 1974, p.

233). Thus, Turner's initial definition of liminality refers to the between point of a transition between two status positions.

Turner developed his concept of liminality beyond a state of being and into the realm of performing liminality. He explained that many scholars, especially Goffman (1959), have demonstrated that everyday life is a performance with roles, masks, and statuses. However, Turner (1988) argued that liminality is the performance of removing the everyday structures.

But the performance characteristics of liminal phases and states often are more about the doffing of masks, the stripping of statuses, the renunciation of roles, the demolishing of structures, than their putting on and keeping on. Antistructures are performed, too. (Turner, 1988, p. 107)

Turner suggested that such performances of antistructure or liminality are often thought of as secret, but may just as easily be played out in the public setting. Play is the key word for this kind of performance because, as previously noted, structure dissolves in a state of liminality. Thus, ritual liminars can play with the components of their systems, experiment with their roles and statuses in a way that they could not do outside the liminal state (Turner, 1988).

Turner (1982) had previously noted that liminality is not necessarily a phase or state of being defined by time. Citing van Gennep's work, he explained that rituals often include an extended liminal phase. Based on his study of tribal rituals, this often takes the form of a physical separation from the rest of the tribe over a long period of time. The participants in the ritual passage are often considered invisible, outside of the rest of their

society. As Turner offered, “signs of their preliminal status are destroyed and signs of their liminal non-status applied” (Turner, 1982, 26). However, it is worth noting that Turner opened the concept up to more performance arenas than rites of passage. He explained that, although the concept originated from van Gennep’s works on ritual rites of passage, it can easily be applied to other appropriate aspects of culture.

In recent years, scholars have taken the possibilities of liminality and expanded their potential. Dickie (1995) explained in her study of international students phasing into United States society, that boundaries are a part of our nature as human beings. Learning and reinforcing those boundaries is part of the social process. However, Dickie noted that the exception is ritual, a time and space set aside for re-learning social and cultural boundaries. She explained that we tend to go through a period of readjustment when we enter or create a new reality; this readjustment is functionally a liminal phase. Beech (2011) took this process another step when he explained liminality as a reconstruction of social identity, entering a new identity that is meaningful to individuals and their community. Beech suggested that, although this new definition of liminality does not mirror the ritualistic conceptualizations espoused by van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1974, 1982, 1988), there are parallels between liminality and identity reconstruction in organizational or community cultures. In his study, Beech (2011) found the subjects of identity reconstruction, or liminars, were marked by recognized events which triggered the state of liminal identity, which rendered them invisible in a state “‘betwixt and between’ in which they can occupy a paradoxical identity...” (p. 297). Beech further noted that during this time, the liminars are socially separated from those with stable

identities, they have few rights in comparison to other members of the social structure, and this separation allows them to contemplate their role in society, arriving at a new identity which marks a distinct distancing from their old identity. Essentially, Beech (2011) and Dickie (1995) considered liminality to be interlocked with identity in a way that modernizes the concept beyond its traditional anthropological roots. Liminality and identity reconstruction can be woven together as an everyday occurrence.

More closely related to my research, Cook-Sather (2006) noted that students learning to become teachers often experience this liminality acutely. She argued that the final transition to becoming a teacher represents a structural transformation and a cultural change, “a re-imagining and re-organizing of power dynamics, relationships, learning processes, and the development of the teacher self” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 16). Like Turner (1984), Cook-Sather (2006) suggested that liminality goes beyond rites of passage and, in fact, beyond the linear progression conceptualized by van Gennep. Rather, liminars may go through multiple spaces simultaneously, “they engage in perspective-gaining and reflection *while* (original emphasis) they have their transition experiences” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 17). Mansaray (2006) made similar reflections on the work of teaching assistants (TAs), reflecting on their experiences as a series of boundary crossings, a consistent practice of shifting across time and spaces as demanded. Mansaray found that TAs often feel as if they are “on call” (p. 177) to perform tasks as necessary, but they do so without a sense of any real authority. Until there is an upset in the normal ordering of the classroom, TAs generally reside in limbo. The result of the system of

boundaries and tensions in TA work, Mansaray argued, is an ambiguity of position that cannot be easily erased.

Cook-Sather's (2006) discussion of liminality in learning to teach hearkens back to the experiences Chouinard and Kuyper (2010) detailed, thus deepening the link between liminality and the experiences of graduate forensic coaches. In fact, Gonzales-Weightman (2008) also considered the unique link between liminality and work as a graduate forensic coach in a brief autoethnographic reflection. He argued that graduate forensic coaches face multiple boundary tensions, including moving to a new team and culture, balancing academics and coaching, and simultaneously fulfilling the role of mentor and mentee. Essentially, the link between forensic coaching and liminality does exist, but the connection has yet to be fully fostered.

### **Postmodern Identity**

This research project has placed its focus on the liminal state of graduate forensic coaches. However, the liminal state as described suggests a link to postmodern identity construction, warranting its exploration in relation to this research. Turner (1974) described liminality as a state of being in limbo, betwixt and between fixed identity. This conceptualization of liminality as a state of destabilized identity parallels Lyotard's (1984) articulation of the postmodern condition. In his report on knowledge, Lyotard suggested that the time of the master narrative was passed and that stable, rational, and universal Truths were replaced with truth based on localized, historicized, and politicized contexts. He further noted that, when addressing the issue of identity, this critique of master narratives did not mean the breakdown of social bonds. "A *self* [original

emphasis] does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 15). Bell (2009) noted that postmodern critiques of language argue against an anchored meaning. This is the focus of postmodern theories of identity construction.

The source of much postmodern thought on identity is the seminal work of Mead (1934) and Goffman (1959). Mead (1934) heralded a postmodern identity construction when he explained that the self is distinct from the organism. Rather, the self is “essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience” (Mead, 1934, p. 140). Mead argued that the self was distinct from the body and not the social process; in fact, the self was a summative reflection of the total social process within the social group with which the self was engaged. By engaging in these social processes, Mead argued that the self takes individual attitudes of others within an organized society to form a generalized other, which influences the social behavior and the construction of the self within that given context. In essence, Mead divorced the notion of self from any concrete grounding which may provide a basis for identity outside social interaction. “The self is not something that exists first and then enters into relationship with others, but it is, so to speak, an eddy in the social current and so still a part of the current” (Mead, 1934, p. 182).

The focus on identity as existent through social interaction was continued by Goffman (1959). Goffman maintained that given impressions of self are rooted in two forms of sign activity: verbal symbols (and their substitutes) and actions which may be unique to the actor. However, different settings call for different fronts, or particularly

constructed expressed performances. Goffman suggested that this might be considered a “dramatic realization,” for “he [sic] must mobilize his activity so that it will express *during the interaction* [original emphasis] what he wishes to convey (p. 30). Essentially, in order to give off a certain impression of identity and self, one must actively make choices in social interactions which will express the self in a designed way. Often, these impressions are designed to appear as the only or most essential routine performances, thus creating a particular self in social interaction. However, Goffman noted that there is always the risk of a performance slip. The presentation, and therefore the self, is shifted, again undermining the permanence of identity. Essentially, Goffman’s framework is divided into two parts: the back stage region where performances of routine are prepared and the front stage where the routine is performed. Thus, the performed self can only be same self as long as a performed routine is prepared and given in the same manner, in the same setting, in the same social context. Ultimately, the impressions others achieve through our expressions in social interaction are what constitute identity. As Goffman described:

While this image is entertained *concerning* [original emphasis] the individual, so that a self is imputed to him [sic], this self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses. (Goffman, 1959, p. 252)

In the end, Goffman's act of divorcing the self from the individual reinforces the postmodern conceptualization of self as fluid and rooted solely in the ever-changing climate of social interaction.

Goffman (1959) and Mead (1934) laid the framework for discussing postmodern identity construction through social interaction. However, the discussion has been diversified and complicated as sociocultural contexts have shifted. Gergen (1991) proposed that postmodern identity has become afflicted by social saturation. He explained that a plethora of emerging technologies have exposed individuals to innumerable voices, so much so that the voices become "a part of us and we of them" (Gergen, 1991, p. 6). The result, he suggested, is that the self is no longer an individual with stable possessed characteristics. Rather, objective identity was replaced by perspectivism. He explained that "The concept of 'individual persons' could not be a simple reflection of what there is, but a communal creation—derived from discourse, objectified within relationships, and serving to rationalize certain institutions while prohibiting others" (Gergen, 1991, p. 140). Abrudan (2011) explained this notion further, stating that the postmodern identity is essentially a process of image construction from proposed image fragments in popular culture. The end result is a modeled identity and behavior in response to the images seen in television, films, and other forms of media.

However, this is the questioned reality of the postmodern identity. Gergen (1991) suggested that, with multiple realities, the self is indeterminate and lost by playing roles to achieve social gains, reveling in the liberty of performing multiple self-expressions, and becoming interdependent on relational interactions to construct the self. In fact,



Abrudan (2011) argued that identity is not stable but based on the ever changing landscape of identity tropes presented in the media.

The modern project for constructions of the self is abandoned in favor of a mobile project that can be changed and renovated in view of the opportunities made available by the roles that have appeared in society and the people's desire for change...the postmodern identity seems to be an extension of the multiple identities assumed by the individuals' selves, in search for the optimal option. (Abrudan, 2011, p. 31).

Based on Gergen (1991) and Abrudan (2011), it is evident that the postmodern identity is one which is inundated by fragments of the other, as made possible through technology, which ultimately results in unstable patterns of self.

The postmodern perspectives of identity of Mead (1934), Goffman (1959), and Gergen (1991) posit that what is performed is the construction of a fluid, situational identity. The performative nature of the self is one expounded upon by Butler in her multiple works on the fluid and socially constructed nature of gender identity. Butler (2006) explained that performativity "is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (p. xv). Essentially, Butler argued that it is through repeated performed actions that gender identity is impressed onto the body, although she clarified that the performativity swings between theatricality in planned, ritualized performance and linguistic notions of speech acts as impactful to identity. Butler argued that performative acts are coordinated based on a human need for

identity coherence. Every performed speech act, gesture, action, and desire produces what Butler referred to as “the effect of an internal core or substance, but [they] produce this *on the surface* [original emphasis] of the body” (Butler, 2006, p. 185). These performative acts then are not an innate part of one’s body but instead contribute to an identity fabrication aimed at imbuing the body surface with gendered meaning.

Butler’s (2006) notion of performativity does not preclude the impermanence of identity. Rather, it revels in the notion that gender identity is impermanent and constructed. She explained that “the reality of gender is itself produced as an effect of the performance” (Butler, 2004, p. 218). Bell (2009) clarified that performativity is not necessarily a method of fixing identity; it is simply the act of experiencing through language a “complex matrix of normative boundaries” (p. 177). These boundaries are embodied in us through performative utterances and actions. However, Butler (2006) explained that these boundaries can be broken through counter-performative actions, such as drag performance. The result, she argued, is a revelation of the imitative nature of gender itself and suggests the possibility for the resignification of gender. The variable boundary which constitutes the body does not need to be confined to the supposed natural performativities prescribed by social norms.

The postmodern conceptualization of identity, as fluid and defined through social interaction and performed language and action, provides tight parallels with the concept of liminality. Although van Gennep (1960) focused on ritual, Turner’s (1974, 1982, 1988) work suggested that the unstable, or in-between, identity inherent to liminality existed outside typical structure, a notion which parallel’s Mead’s (1934) assertion that

identity is non-existent outside social interaction. As Butler (2004, 2006) noted, it is through the act of performing that self is iterated and reiterated to give the appearance of a stable, embodied identity. Similarly, Turner (1988) argued that liminars play with their identity, continuing to interpret and reinterpret their roles and status in a space without structure. Ultimately, the core concepts behind postmodern identity bear similarity to the notion of liminality, as both addresses a process of identity work which unseats the notion of a stable identity and posits a socially performed and ritualized image of identity in constant flux.

### **Forensics as Culture**

Postmodern identity theorists paint an image of identity which is unstable, linked to the social setting in which an individual body engages. For graduate forensic coaches, much of this socialization occurs within the culture which has developed around the competitive speaking and debate. To those within the forensic community, there is no question that forensic culture is an important part of the activity itself. Full of unique rituals and meanings which have developed over decades to its present state, the activity is undoubtedly a unique subculture in American academia where forensic students and coaches alike engage in important identity work. However, forensics is also often characterized as an organization at both a national and institutional level. Therefore, understanding the basics of organizational culture is necessary in order to interpret forensics as a culture.

**Organizational culture defined.**

Organizational culture is a well-known communication concept which has been developed by many scholars. However, the concept is still rooted in notions of culture. Van Maanen and Barley (1985) explained that culture suggests a collectively created and maintained way of life among diverse individuals. Richmond and McCroskey (2001) echoed this notion, explaining that “a culture is a group of people with similar backgrounds who think, act, and communicate a lot alike” (p. 129). Organizations are a collective unit of operation; thus “the phrase ‘organizational culture’ suggests that organizations bear unitary and unique cultures” (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985, p. 32). Ultimately, both Van Maanen and Barley and Richmond and McCroskey (2001) established that the most basic unit of culture is a group of individuals within one system; thus, any formal organization with a group of individuals working under its heading has the basic potential for a culture.

Richmond and McCroskey (2001) argued that the organization-culture relationship works in both directions. On one hand, organizations exist within an exterior culture. Richmond and McCroskey noted that there is always a base of operations for an organization. Thus, organizations are impacted by the surrounding culture. Employees from their area bring their cultural values into the workplace. However, the organization also needs to take into account the needs and expectations of the community culture, as both the customers and the workforce from the area “will expect (or demand) that the organization will operate in ways that are consistent with the local culture” (Richmond and McCroskey, 2001, p. 133). There is also a culture which is interior to the

organization, which is impacted by several stimuli. The kind of work that is being done, the leadership of the organization, and the accumulated oral and written history of the organization brings a diverse set of beliefs, values, and traditions to life. Essentially, organizational culture manifests itself in a seemingly paradoxical relationship: “Cultures shape organizations...Organizations shape culture” (Richmond & McCroskey, 2001, p. 133).

Van Maanen and Barley (1985) noted that the emergence of culture in the workplace can be linked to four primary domains. The ecological context refers to the setting of the work space which involves the structure of workplace activities. The internal topography considers territorializing power of product placement, task assignments, and work shifts, among others, to influence social maps. Historical forces impact the current policies and operations of the organization, lending strength to management of both the internal culture and the external markets. Finally, the social demography refers to the types of actors involved in the organization, similar to Richmond and McCroskey’s (2001) acknowledgement of workforce culture impacting organizational culture. Although Van Maanen and Barely (1985) emphasized these domains for emergent culture, they further noted that disruption of these domains could result in the development of subcultures within the organization.

Beyond the emergence of culture, the elements and components of each unique culture are integral to the maintenance of the culture. Ott (1989) summarized these elements into three major categories. First, symbols in an organization have the power to espouse values and ideas beyond their denotations. “Any sign can be the raw material for

symbol creation when a group of people subjectively invest it with broader meaning and significance” (Ott, 1989, p. 22), Second, artifacts are physical or non-physical objects and patterns which may communicate information regarding the patterns of the organizational culture. Ott argued that these artifacts can be key to creating, maintain, and transmitting the truths of the organization. Finally, the patterned behaviors of those within the organization can communicate the values, beliefs, and assumptions through repeated, often unconscious, performance. Ott divided this element into two categories: behavior norms (the fundamental prescriptions of behavior that dictate everyday life) and rites and rituals (stylized modes of establishing meaning and identity within a controlled environment).

The presence of rituals in organizational culture is particularly relevant to this thesis, considering that liminality is derived from study of cultural ritual (van Gennep, 1960). Martin (2002) explained that these organizational rites and rituals play out much like drama, “carried out in a social context (audience), with well-demarcated beginnings and endings (like a play) and well-defined roles for organizational members (like a script)” (p. 66). Martin also noted that organizational stories play a powerful role in organizational culture. These narratives, she suggested, always carried a set of meanings and interpretations which become a part of the cultural framework in an organization.

It is important to note that the previously examined literature considered culture to be held by and within an organization. However, Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1983) argued that culture *is* the organization, as the elements of an organization manifest as a series of cultural performances. Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo proposed five

generic categories of organizational cultural performance: performance of ritual, performance of passion, performance of sociality, performance of politics, and performance of enculturation. Essentially, they argued that the organizational culture is not had; it is performed and constituted through collective practice.

**Forensics defined as a culture.**

Although organizational culture can be defined and constituted a number of different ways, it is apparent that organizations and culture can go hand in hand. Thus an illustration of forensics as a culture is appropriate for the continued establishment of important concepts in this research. Geertz (1973) argued that human beings operate within webs of significance that they themselves create; those webs constitute culture. Geertz's simple yet influential statement about culture as semiotic is important to consider with regard to forensic culture. In fact, it already bears striking similarity to Kimble's (2012) assertion that forensic students and coaches are members of a co-culture or set of co-cultures because the activity "possesses its own identifiable communication style, language choices, behaviors, and much more" (p. 74). Essentially, Kimble argued that forensics is a community steeped in its own customs and traditions, which have set it apart from dominant cultural spheres. Outzen and Cronn-Mills (2012) acknowledged this separation, but noted that the internal strength of forensic culture rests on the loaded meaning of the word "forensics." They argued that "forensics" is the key term around which the entire culture revolves, establishing its niche in academia at an individual and organizational level. The name encompasses a large body of students, educators, and alumni who would otherwise be separated from the activity. To take away "forensics"

from the activity would be to change the identity of its resident and the very nature of the culture inhabited. In short, the complexity of the term “forensics” is indicative of a strong web of meaning.

The cultural webs and communication patterns of forensics were most explicitly developed by Paine (2008). He explained that the forensic community demonstrated five factors, or value continuums, that marked forensics as a culture. First, he argued that forensics deals with values of individualism versus collectivism, such as in tension between individual events speech and the team framework in which those events generally take place. Second, Paine argued that forensics demonstrates a masculine versus feminine tension, which manifests in the community debate between education (designated by Paine as feminine) and competition (designated by Paine as masculine). Third, Paine noted that a power versus distance value set does exist in forensics, where inequality is the cultural norm based on a hierarchical system of power. Again, this becomes clear when examining the competitive nature of forensics. Paine noted that the fourth value, uncertainty versus avoidance, manifests itself in the presence of unwritten rules and norms which govern much of the activity, stifling student willingness to deviate from the structures of the culture. Finally, Paine argued that forensics demonstrates a tension between long-term and short-term orientation. He noted that forensics has a relatively short-term orientation, which has put it in contention with the long-term orientation held by many academic institutions and communities. Essentially, Paine’s examination of forensics demonstrated that forensics has clear communication styles which are patterned, deepening the impression of forensics as a defined culture.



Paine's (2008) mention of forensic norms as a part of forensic cultural values was expanded in his earlier work. Paine (2005) explained that forensics has a set of clearly written and defined rules. However, he posited that a variety of norms exist which function as an extra layer of rules to further define forensic cultural conventions. These normative rules arise from forensic competition. Paine explained that competitors are often driven by the need for consistency and to place a definable formula on success; "the more these [forensic judges'] decisions appear to abide by a mutually accepted body of rules or norms, the easier it is to make and accept the decisions being made" (Paine, 2005, p. 81). Newcomers to the culture must learn these conventions in order to pass as a member of the forensic community.

However, Miller (2005) argued that forensic norms and culture are not always consistent. Rather, forensic culture has proven itself to be variable within geographic distance. In his intercultural perspective on forensics, he explained that moving to a new region of forensics can result in going through the phases of culture shock. He noted that, although he initially felt like a passing tourist in the area to observe the unique way that forensics was performed, he was eventually overcome by the severity of differences between the two and was forced to make active adjustments to his forensic style. Miller explained that, although acculturation did set in, it was not without its limitations as to what he would and would not do. Essentially, although Paine (2005, 2008) suggested a number of overarching communication values and practices which define forensics as a national culture, Miller (2005) complicated this notion by noting that regional differences do exist, thus marking subcultural trends within the larger set of meanings.

The notion of forensic culture is further complicated by the presence of individual team cultures. Thus, within the national and regional forensic cultures, multiple team subcultures have developed. Consistent with existing literature on organizational culture, White (2010) explained that forensic team culture is as varied as the individuals which comprise them. She noted that the make-up of this team culture is intrinsically linked to team cohesion and success; a healthy and functional team culture is one which can reach intrinsic and extrinsic benefits. White's experience suggested that this team culture cannot be one which is demanded but rather one which must develop organically from members of the culture themselves. Rowe and Cronn-Mills (2005) explained that cohesion of a forensic team is rooted in several variables, including self-disclosure, acceptance, risk-taking, group development, task completion/performance, and metaphorical language. They argued that these patterns of communication and meaning are often established in informal ways amongst members of the team, such as in the confined spaces of hotel rooms and van rides. In fact, Rowe and Cronn-Mills noted multiple examples where time in the van can help to incorporate new members and make them feel like a part of the team. Essentially, team culture seems to flow best from a bottom-up approach, not from top-down.

White (2010) and Rowe and Cronn-Mills (2005) provided focus on team culture as it would currently exist. However, the connection to forensic legacy has proven just as important to team culture. Orme (2012) explained that storytelling is an important part of building and maintaining forensic team culture. She noted that forensic stories often rely on genesis stories and traditional narrative archetypes, such as "the underdog," in order to

make current members feel like a part of a legacy and to give them a personal connection to it. The result is a deepened connectedness to both current team members and past team members, which is essential to team success. Croucher, Thornton, and Eckstein's (2006) research supported this finding. They argued that students who are able to identify with a particular team culture are more attached to it; the result is that they are more motivated to understand their team's specific culture and to succeed in order to continue that cultural legacy.

Essentially, what becomes apparent through forensic literature is that forensics does constitute an organizational culture. The collective nature (Richmond & McCroskey, 2001) and the performative constitution of the activity (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983) parallel the trappings of organizational culture set forth in this literature review. As Kimble (2012) and Outzen and Cronn-Mills (2012) noted, even the term "forensics" finds itself connected to a web of interlocking and layered meanings. However, it is important to note that, as Miller (2005) argued, the forensic culture is comprised of a layer of subcultures, both regional and team. Team culture has proven to be extremely important to students who participate in the activity and provides meaning to their participation (Orme, 2012; Croucher et al., 2006). Forensics, thus, becomes more than a competitive activity; it is comprised of a web of meaning constituting a culture, one in which performed identity rises to the forefront of its cultural underpinnings.

Chapter 2 of this thesis combined a conceptualization of liminality, postmodern identity, and forensics as culture to set the stage for the research. It is evident that the cultural nature of forensics allows possibilities for ritual performance and identity work,

especially liminality. Liminal experiences that graduate students might face are reflective of a postmodern identity, defying stability and shifting with the nature of the occupied roles and social positions. The following pages of Chapter 3 are devoted to establishing the methodology of this project.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This thesis project approached the question of graduate forensic coaches and liminality with a qualitative lens. In addition to my natural inclination toward qualitative methodologies, a semi-structured interview approach is theoretically justifiable.

Therefore, this chapter will discuss the justification of my specific methodological choices, the specific methodological framework for this thesis, and the connection to identity construction.

#### **Justification**

My decision to utilize qualitative methods was made with consideration of the uniqueness of the method. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) argued that qualitative research has five important characteristics to consider. First, they stated that qualitative methods take the postpositivist approach, focusing on capturing as much reality as possible. Second, qualitative methods align well with “postmodern sensibilities” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 5). Third, qualitative methods are stronger at capturing the details of participant perspectives through interviewing and observation. Fourth, qualitative research is stronger at confronting constraints in everyday life. Finally, qualitative research methods can obtain rich description of the social world, which is valuable for interpretation.

These characteristics are an important part of my project. The liminal experiences of graduate forensic coaches cannot be universalized due to innumerable variables of locations, graduate programs, and individual experiences. Therefore, I worked from individual experiences to see if in fact any common threads might be present. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) articulated, my goal was to capture as much of their liminal reality as

possible, but I understood that this reality could not be all-encompassing. Additionally, I anticipated that much of the research would revolve around constraints within the everyday graduate experience that contribute to an everyday liminality. This everyday liminality, a constant state of transition and flux, is aligned with a postmodern sensibility. Lyotard (1984) suggested that the grand master narrative can no longer be considered credible, that knowledge of self and experiences is rooted in a “fabric of relations” (p. 15). Considering that liminality is the phase of transition, as defined by van Gennep (1960), discussion of the phenomenon fits well in the postmodern frame. Upon comparison of my research project and qualitative characteristics, a qualitative methodology is a justifiable research option.

In addition to approaching this research project qualitatively, I needed to make two more decisions regarding my methodology. First, after weighing out the various options for qualitative methodologies, I selected semi-structured interviews as an appropriate data-gathering technique. Second, I selected an interpretivist approach to frame the interviews.

#### **Justification of semi-structured interviews.**

I opted to use semi-structured interviews for data collection after weighing out all qualitative options for the project. I rejected ethnography and participant observation as methods for this research because of their emphasis on what Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) called unstructured data. They explained “Both ethnography and participant observation have been claimed to represent a uniquely humanistic, interpretive approach, as opposed to supposedly ‘scientific’ and ‘positivist’ positions” (Atkinson &

Hammersley, 1994, p. 249). Although this can be highly informative, my project required a scope of information that did not render immersion methods necessary or productive to my research goals. Furthermore, my involvement in forensics could have impacted the validity and detail of my observation. I felt that working from more structured data, such as direct interviews with fellow forensic coaches, would provide more validity to my research. Additionally, forensics is a competitive activity and the presence of a graduate coach from another team could impact the day to day events of the participants, a risk that Lindlof and Taylor (2011) cautioned against. Essentially, I believed that the risks associated with participant observation and ethnography was too great a risk to validity and therefore were rejected as potential methodologies. I also felt that any form of immersion method would be impractical for me as the researcher. As a graduate forensic coach with teaching responsibilities, ethnography and participant observation were not practical decisions for me to consider.

As a graduate forensic coach, I briefly considered autoethnography, but I ultimately decided that my degree program, the MFA-Forensics, likely alleviates some sense of forensic liminality and my liminal state would be altered as a result. Therefore, I chose in-depth interviews to gather data to address the limitations of the research situation and to align more closely with postpositivist tradition. Fontana and Frey (1994) explained that interviewing has a wide variety of forms and uses; the type of interview used is simply dependent upon the situation and experience being studied. I decided on a semi-structured interview form for a few reasons. Fontana and Frey noted that structured interviews could be problematic because it makes adjustment of the interview for the

participant or social context difficult. Structured interviews also depend on preset coding schemes. However, the experiences of graduate forensic coaches have been woefully underexplored, much less from a liminal perspective. Unstructured interviewing proved a stronger fit because this project is ultimately an exploration of liminality in a new context, requiring a breadth of understanding. Fontana and Frey noted that unstructured interviews can serve this purpose. Additionally, Taylor and Bogdan (1984) argued that unstructured interviews, in addition to providing flexibility and breadth in the interview, work well for those with previous knowledge of the interview subjects or the social context of the participants.

Because I am a graduate forensic coach, I am familiar with the activity, with the experiences associated with being a graduate student and coach, and with many of my potential interviewees. Thus, Taylor and Bogdan's (1984) proposed benefits of unstructured interviews could hold true. Additionally, I feel that the breadth of information described by Fontana and Frey (1994) would prove beneficial to my research. However, Denzin (1970) explained that unstructured interviews run the risk of being rearranged too much, to the point where the interviewer reinterprets questions and weakens the study validity. Additionally, being completely unstructured may conflict with potential interview time constraints. Therefore, I decided to follow a semi-structured interview process, or what Denzin referred to as an unstructured schedule interview. This approach afforded me the breadth of information and flexibility the interview situation requires while still maintaining study validity and control over the interview process.



### **Justifying an interpretivist approach.**

The execution and analysis of the semi-structured interviews were rooted in the interpretivist approach. Schwandt (1994) explained that qualitative approaches can generally be divided into two approaches: interpretivist and constructivist. The constructivist approach, Schwandt argued, approaches knowledge as pluralistic and plastic, or fitting purposeful human acts. By contrast, the interpretivist approach celebrates “the permanence and priority of the real world of first-person, subjective experience” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 119). The interpretivist approach is one which applies well to cultural experiences. Geertz (1973) advocated for an explicitly interpretive approach to understanding culture, explaining:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (Geertz, 1973, p. 5)

This research project is based in cultural conceptions worth studying from an interpretivist perspective. First, forensics does constitute a culture. Kimble (2012) and Outzen and Cronn-Mills (2012) each argued that the term “forensics” carries with it a series of meanings and understandings accessible to those in the culture. Additionally, liminality itself is a cultural concept, as it has been defined as the threshold step in rites of passage, as defined by van Gennep (1960) and expanded by Turner (1974). Because the central concepts of this research can be viewed from a cultural perspective, an

interpretative anthropology approach, as labeled by Schwandt (1994), is an appropriate mode of thought to guide the execution of this research project.

### **Specific Methodological Components**

#### **Interview setting.**

The interviews for this thesis were performed one of two ways. I was able to collect two interviews face-to-face with participants at a nationally-known collegiate speech tournament. The interviews were in no way associated with the tournament or assisted by the hosting university. The tournament was a central meeting place with a large amount of potential participants. Interviews were held in a common area of the university campus during the participants' free time from judging rounds of competition. Six interviews were performed via the video chat platform Skype. These Skype interviews were scheduled ahead of time via e-mail. Participants were able to speak wherever they felt most comfortable. I, as the interviewer, always performed the Skype interview from my private residence.

#### **Participant recruitment.**

Participants for this project were current graduate students who are also individual events speech coaches as a part of their master's or doctoral assistantship. I sent out a recruitment statement asking for participants who fit these criteria via the IE-L, a national e-mail list serv for individuals who are involved or interested in individual events speech, including many full-time coaches and graduate forensic coaches. The statement also included a request that the e-mail be forwarded to individuals who may wish to be a part of the project, but are not subscribed to the IE-L.

Through the e-mailed recruitment statement, 15 individuals responded as interested. Of these 15 individuals, 2 did not meet the criteria presented. Of the remaining 13 potential participants, I was able to meet with 2 participants at the collegiate speech tournament and another 6 were arranged via Skype. The remaining 5 could not be reached to schedule interviews. Therefore, this project consisted of 8 participant interviews. The participants were unevenly divided with regard to sex/gender, with 2 female and 6 male participants. All participants presented as Caucasian individuals. 2 participants were in doctoral programs, 6 were in master's programs. The concentration of participants fell evenly between the Midwest and east coast of the United States; there was no representation outside these areas.

#### **Data collection.**

Participants were asked to sit down one-on-one with the interviewer. As the researcher, I performed the interviews without any outside individual. Participants were informed of their rights in this project, most notably that they could reject any question they did not feel comfortable answering and could withdraw from the project at any time. The participants were then asked a series of semi-structured, open-ended questions to guide them through a discussion of their experiences as a graduate forensic coach. Questions were designed to be open-ended to allow the participants to discuss the issues they felt were most important. These questions were also designed to be flexible and allow for follow-up questions and continued discussion as the flow of the interview suggests. The questions used in the interviews have been included in Appendix A. The number of questions was limited in order to keep the interviews under one hour long in

order to account for participant schedules. The interviews ranged from approximately 25 minutes to 1 hour in length. During the interviews, I used audio recording for later transcription.

### **Data interpretation.**

Once all interviews had been performed, I transcribed all audio files. After transcription, I removed all potentially identifying information, including names, educational institutions, locations, etc. I assigned each participant a random letter to replace their name in the transcription and interpretation. In the following chapters, I note all participants as Participant “X” (ex. “Participant X implied...”). I saved all transcriptions on a password protected computer.

Once completed, I printed all transcriptions for coding. I followed a straightforward coding process, reading each interview closely for events, experiences, and reflections to determine open codes. I worked through the interviews in three rounds of coding. During the initial coding, I aimed to categorize the individual experiences of the participants. I recorded these codes in a separate document. I additionally noted key passages as evidence of codes, using the participants’ letter and the order in which the passage appeared (ex. Passages from Participant X were labeled “X1,” “X2,” etc.). During the second round of coding, I weeded out repetitive codes and added any experiences missed in the first round. I used the third and final round of coding to find parallels and related experiences to be categorized into larger themes. Once I considered the open coding complete, I examined the codes for larger axial codes to create an integrated picture of the graduate forensic coaches’ liminal experience.

### **Linking Methodology and Identity**

Although the interviews were semi-structured and guided, I anticipated that participants would be sharing experiences of their graduate forensic coaching, constructing and reconstructing themselves through language. I argue that this is an important aspect of my methodology because of the performative implications for understanding the liminal state and the identity of the participants.

Linguistic utterances are crucially linked to performance studies and the postmodern construction of identity. Butler (2006) argued that identity is iterated and reiterated through performative acts, “a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (p. xv). Butler noted that performativity swings between theatrical and linguistic conceptualizations. I argue that by manifesting their experiences through discussion, my research participants engaged in a performative act through which continued to negotiate their liminal state.

The importance of performativity in the interview context is further underscored when linked with Noy’s (2004) notion that the act of telling a story can constitute the act of self-change. Considering that liminality, by van Gennep’s (1960) definition, is an important part of a rite of passage, the possibility of engaging in transition or self-change through the manifestation of experiences in language and narrative cannot be ignored. Noy (2004) explained that the act of narration references both the events narrated and the event of narration, “thus drawing an association between the two that is fundamental for identity claims and for a sense of self-change to be performed with credibility” (p. 117).

Within this link, Noy suggested that constituting the self-change experience in language and presenting it as a narrative in effect constitutes the experience, taking both narrator and audience through the experience of self-change in the present context. Although my interviews did not specifically develop as narratives, the participants' relation of past experiences may have still allowed them to reframe their understanding of them in order to continue their identity work through performed language.

Having justified my methodology for this thesis. I am ready to consider the results of my interviews and coding. Chapter 4 will detail the results of the coding by examining the important themes developed from the interviews in conjunction with specific textual evidence provided by the participants. In Chapter 5, I will develop conclusions for what these results mean related to identity, forensics, and liminality.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

Since I have described my methodological procedures in Chapter 3, I can now discuss the results of my research. From the first two rounds of interview coding, I discovered 54 initial codes. I categorized these codes into 6 themes relating to the participants' experiences as graduate forensic coaches. I have included a condensed table of the 6 major themes and the initial codes which comprised them in Appendix B. The 6 themes include: Influence of existing structures, shifting perspective in a new role, reconciling undergraduate experiences, separation of roles and identities, intrinsic needs, and relational tensions.

### **Influence of Existing Structures**

The role of existing social and cultural structures plays an important role in the discussion of rites of passage. Van Gennep (1960) noted that rites of passage are territorial, a physical movement from one symbolic and spatial place to another. For several participants in this research, the physical movement from one educational institution to another also meant acclimatizing to the existing symbolic and cultural structures of the new territory. For several participants the geographic and institutional structures which they had entered were very influential in shaping their experience, especially the degree of their autonomy and comfort in the role of graduate coach. For some, geography played an important role in enhancing or detracting from their comfort. Of the eight participants in this research project, five stayed within the same relative geographic area or competitive district. Interestingly, these five individuals did not express any clear issues in terms of breaking into the coach and judge social circles at

tournaments because they were already connected with those around them. By contrast, the three who moved large distances felt isolated (not from malicious intent) and had a hard time becoming a part of the new social circle. Illustrating this point, Participant A stated:

And then coming down south to a totally different district where I meet various new people, that was very interesting because the district is known for being so friendly and welcoming. But at the same time, like, everyone, already had their friends that they had welcomed and they didn't really need to necessarily reach out...last year in my third year I really started to feel like I was a part of this district...

Essentially, Participant A explained that when entering a new area of the country or competitive district, it could be hard to break into the new forensic circle simply by being an outsider. Participant E, whose graduate school was located at the “crossroads of four different [competitive] districts,” noted that the tournament experience was greatly impacted by geographic location because it added to the variety of tournament styles seen, many of which sharply contrasted his tournament experiences in undergraduate. “There’s a bit of a culture shock that first tournament because it was a local small [location deleted] tournament and I was like, what was going on, you know, this is way more chaotic than I expected.” However, some participants chose not to travel too far, if it all, for their graduate work. For example, Participant B, who chose to stay at his undergraduate institution, noted that his relatively short distance to several family members was a factor in his decision. However, this may have also been influenced by a



sense of loyalty to the institution he attended. He explained, "...if I was going to continue coaching, I wanted it to be here with people I was comfortable with, the people I knew..." Thus, it appears that the geographical influence noted earlier in this chapter can be linked to the degree of liminality experienced in relational tensions, especially with regard to the competitive forensic circuit. The farther away from their undergraduate institution they traveled, the more difficult their social experience and the more pronounced their liminal isolation, paralleling van Gennep's (1960) emphasis on the spatial nature of rites of passage.

Apart from the influence of location, the institutional structures with which the participants had to engage were an important factor in their experience. For some, this included something as simple as the title they held. Participant A, a PhD candidate at his institution, explained that his position as Director of Forensics was *de facto*. "It used to be official probably six, seven years ago and so then there was that person in that position, and then that changed right before I got here." Participant E noted that his title as Director of Forensics was official, but only constituted ten hours of his assistantship, "which of course [forensics] is much more than ten hours." Participant C, another PhD candidate, explained that her position did not necessarily even have a title. "They also call me an assistant coach or assistant director of forensics, but that's not a technical thing. It's more like just because I've been there a long time."

The official tenure of the position also seemed to have an impact on how the experience was perceived. Participants, A, C, and E each had a longer time with their students (Participant E was accepted to his current institution's PhD program this year);

thus, discussion of their un/official capacity became salient. By contrast, master's students focused on how little impact they officially could have because of their limited time coaching with a program. Participant G noted that master's students participate in "a two year snapshot of that four year window," thus making relationships more difficult to form with students. Participant D similarly recognized her limited role in the program's official direction, explaining:

We [she and her fellow graduate assistants] were concerned about it considering that he [her new Director of Forensics] was more debate [than individual events speech]...I think there's the big concern of, once we leave, if he's going to be making a lot of changes...

Many of the graduate students recognized that their impermanence and their official titles (or lack thereof) made for a situation where they were coaching, but without final authority on many coaching decisions. Participant G explained that he felt that he still held a position of power, but a subordinate one which called for "trying to balance that power...with the balance of power that my assistant director and director have over me." Participant C explained that she often had to remind herself of her unofficial capacity, saying "even if I'm the one who's handling the students the most, coaching the most, I don't have the official authority. I think sometimes that does frustrate me..." Participant A explained that, in his master's program where he had more peers, conflicting perspectives of forensics made the decision-making process that much more labored. Essentially, the length and nebulous nature of graduate coaching assistantships were an

important part of the graduate forensic coach experience because it limited their perceived scope of influence.

The influence of the communication department where the team resided also played a part in the graduate experience and was generally characterized by either a lack of understanding or unwavering support of the team and its coaches. Participant A noted that his department was one where lack of understanding was clear, to the point where his graduate director remarked:

“I hope that the university can give you more diverse assignments so that you don’t, you know, have to put so much time into forensics” basically. At that point I realized that this person has no clue what I do, what my career aspirations are, or how this all fits together...So I think at a research 1 university, there’s just a different understanding of what it means to be a successful scholar and educator...

Several of the participants, such as Participants C, F, and G, faced a less pronounced lack of understanding because their graduate studies existed outside of communication.

Participant F, when referring to his home department in political science, simply stated “They don’t know what we do.” However, many departments were quite supportive, which seemed to make the experiences of the graduate coaches much easier, looking out for both teams and individual coaches alike. Participant D explained that her department “get[s] concerned for the three of us because we tend to get really excited about forensics. They wanna make sure we’re still doing our schoolwork, which is good.” Participant E, who has worked to get a speech team at his university in addition to debate, explained

that a strong forensic background in his department has allowed him to get what he needs through departmental support. Ultimately, the participants overall suggested that their role and their influence on the team is often shaped by external factors and structures from their geographic location, their institution, and even something as simple as their title.

### **Shifting Perspective in a New Role**

The physical and cultural space that the participants entered for their graduate work was an important piece of the puzzle because it informed and guided their perspectives as they shifted into their new role. Reconciling a new perspective affected the ease of transition to varying degrees, but all participants noted an element of perspective shifting. Participant A explained that part of this perspective shift is that “as a competitor, you think you have all the answers...” However, that sense of having answers is linked to the unique position of needing to be selfish as competitors.

Participant A further explained:

As the competitor, there’s a lot more sense of diva about everything, where it’s like, “Well, I’ve worked hard today on my events and performing and representing the college and university” and so it just makes sense that you like get to sleep the whole way home and should be able to eat what food you want...It’s just that transition from being the person you thought who had all the answers...

Participant A’s reflection was indicative of how the perspective shifts occurred overall, as a realization that the new role as graduate forensic coaches required a certain level of

uncertainty. As students, the demands of forensics were clear in terms of process, product, and rewards. However, as Participant A indicated, the graduate student perspective required recognition that their new demands from forensics were not always clear or stable.

Almost all other participants echoed this perspective shift, but addressed it in the sense of being totally devoted to the needs of the students. Participant G explained that he heard that sentiment echoed recently in a speech about a retiring coach. “I’ll never forget it, you know, it’s not about us as coaches, as people, as teachers, as educators, as professionals. It’s not about us. It’s about those that we affect.” Participant H also reflected on this perspective, explaining that it’s a transition from having one’s own speech events to focus on as opposed to putting that energy into others. The mantra “it’s not about you” seemed to permeate many participants’ coaching and tournament experiences, either explicitly or implicitly. Participant D noted that, when coaching students, she struggled to push them to do more because “I understood what I was capable of” but “I got frustrated with me putting new ideas out and then my students, without even a second thought, being, ‘I know I can’t do that.’ ” Participant F noted that the tournament setting was a site where it is explicitly no longer about the coaches but “accepting that you don’t control what goes on in those rounds.” However, while the accepted perspective was a student-focus, Participant H noted that, on some level, it is still about the coaches and their state of mind. He explained that “it was a lack of confidence in myself and the lack of confidence within my ability to be an effective coach as well as take care of others...I needed to figure out how to become a person that

can be able to take care of others...” Ultimately, the perspective shift suggested by participants was one that brought out the focus on students, but necessitated a look at one’s ability to shift that perspective.

One element of the perspective shift that ran throughout the interviews was the development of one’s coaching style. However, no one coaching style seemed to be present across the board. Participant F explained “I think of it as completely and 100% professional.” By contrast, Participant B did not eschew an emotional connection. “Then I started coaching with them and we became closer in that regard...that kind of connection...” Several of the participants noted that the trick of the finding a coaching style was dependent upon figuring out the relationship to the students. Participant C explained the struggle to find that coaching style is dependent upon how much of a peer the coach is to the students.

Because, what, maybe a year ago, less than a year ago, you were exactly like them and now all of the sudden they have to look up to you, respect you, listen to you...but then the other side of it is I had such close relationships with those people because they were, they were my peers and so the good part of it was we would maybe get together all the time and work on their stuff because we were so close in age, we were so close in, you know, in our worlds outside of forensics. Essentially, Participant C found that having a certain level of friendship could be productive. Participant E had a similar experience. He explained that he would “try to get to know them” in practices, on van rides, and by holding social events. However, he also explained that a key element of that respectful peer style of coaching is being honest with

the students and reminding them that coaches often face the same struggles, so “if I don’t get a draft of a speech back, it’s not because I’m ignoring them. It’s because I had twenty-five papers to grade or a twenty page paper that I needed to finish.”

However, the ability to have a strong coaching relationship with students also seemed to be dependent on age and years of experience. Participant A, in his sixth year of coaching as a graduate forensic coach, explained “I think it’s [relationship with students] the best now that it’s ever been and I think that that has a lot to do with the fact that I have more years of experience.” By contrast, several of the coaches recognized the difficulty that comes with being young and having a relatively small age difference with students. Participant F noted that he was unsure what he could teach his former competitive peers aside from “saying this is all great. You should enunciate more.” Participant C had similar concerns, especially with relation to competitive history as peers. However, experience and age did not just play a factor in coaching. For many, administrative tasks were impacted as well. Participant E, the Director of Forensics and a master’s student at his institution, explained that decisions there have been instances were decisions which he should have been a part of went over his head and through the faculty. “There are things like that that happen that I don’t think would happen if I were a faculty member.”

The act of taking on a new authoritative role also became a small part of the discussion. Participant F explained that, despite not competing anymore, tournaments have become “so much more stressful...when you throw in all of the different administrative duties and functions, it’s way much more stressful than I thought it was

gonna be.” Participant D made a similar observation, that despite having a Director of Forensics to handle paperwork and emergencies, she and her fellow graduate coaches were virtually in charge. “I’ve been in leadership positions before, but it was odd because I had worked with somebody that was in charge and decisions were made.” Essentially, the participants focused on the idea that, although they had previously been in charge, the accountability and final decisions had previously rested on someone else’s shoulders. Participant A summarized the position best when he explained the difference between his responsibilities as a master’s student and now as a PhD candidate and director.

I just think that the difference is that in that situation, there was someone over me who could say “No, that’s silly. It really is worth spending the extra night.” And here, it’s like, maybe we will drive to Arizona so we can afford to take people [to nationals]...part of the responsibility is a little bit stronger when you are, or whoever, is technically in charge that point because that’s who the problems are going to come back on, right.

In addition to the shift from competitor to coach, a shift in judging perspective occurred as well. Overall, participants indicated that they were not necessarily nervous about judging. However, the shift from being a competitor to being a judge took them from a focus on details and etiquette of forensics into a focus on the big picture of performance. Essentially, these former competitors indicated that there was a reprioritizing which occurred in regards to the elements of a strong forensic performance. Participant G noted that he started to create his own paradigm for events, but “all the shit that I used to think about, stress over...I don’t care...as a judge, it’s more big picture



now.” However, the transition was not necessarily immediate. Participant C noted that it’s a matter of both confidence and experience:

I remember the first year, I was so nervous about judging because again, like all of the sudden I’m judging a national champion. I was never a national champion, you know, many of us weren’t. So I think that it takes time to build up the confidence to say, well, you know, judging is very much a personal kind of thing. You just have to build up your personal identity in terms of “What am I looking for? What do I think is important?”

For Participant F, the same became true of his judging, but it was related to his inexperience in certain events. Claiming to have “no idea what I’m doing in an interp [oral interpretation of literature] round,” he explained that it took involvement and discussion with those more experienced in those events to start developing his ballots more fully and to provide thoughtful critiques. Essentially, the role as a judge also required a shift in perspective, one which for some required expanding their field of expertise and for others simply required developing a sense of the subjective and personal nature of speech competition.

Participant H perhaps summarized the experiences of the participants best when he coined the term “student of coaching.”

The transition was not only in a sense of becoming a graduate student and taking on that level but also becoming a student of coaching and that sort of transition is odd in the sense because you’re not really becoming a student but not really

becoming a teacher. And it is a weird definition because you're still learning the ropes yourself.

For the participants, shifting perspective from a competing student to a coach with responsibilities and a new focus was a very important aspect of their graduate experience. However, their stories indicated that it was important to not entirely disregard their own learning process in this new role. Beginning new roles in forensics, often within a new geographical and cultural environment, came with an almost requisite process of shifting perspectives.

### **Reconciling Undergraduate Experiences**

As participants shifted into their new role as coaches, the required perspective shift was influenced not only by the new geographic and team culture but by their undergraduate experiences. As I noted in the literature review, regional and team culture is an important element of one's forensic experience (Miller, 2005; White, 2010). Thus participants indicated that, as their coaching styles developed, reconciling their undergraduate perspectives and culture with their developing perspectives was an important element of the transition. The influence of the participants' undergraduate experience developed in a few small, but interesting, ways. Participant E, while starting his speech team, argued that creating a cohesive team culture was important to the future success of the team because it laid the groundwork for his authority and for future students to join. However, already established team cultures required integration for the participants, which would ultimately be successful or unsuccessful. Participant F explained:

...they've [his new team] done everything they can to sort of integrate us into what we broadly refer to as the [school name removed] legacy...there's no single instant where [director name removed] said, "Hey, all of you are [school name removed]."

Participant F indicated that his transition had been relatively smooth. However, Participant H did not have an easy transition into his new culture, as he found himself stuck between his notions of forensics as educational and the competitive bent of the team culture in which he was coaching. He stated:

It was more like they wanted me to do my job of finding competitive literature, competitive literature that is of quality. But that's not the point of forensics if you're talking about it from an educational perspective...if you did not have that, then you're placed in a position of blame for not helping the student to get to that competitive level. And it was kind of hard for me to get out of that position because I saw things differently from some of the pedagogy for that.

The contrast between Participant F and Participant H is a stark one and other participants fell in between their experiences. However, it was apparent that a successful transition from undergraduate to graduate team culture was an indicator of overall coaching success.

The link back to what was learned and developed as an undergraduate competitor was an important element in participant approaches to coaching. Participant H expanded upon his struggles and linked it back to the values he had been raised with as an undergraduate.

For me, it was always the education. I always wanted to do forensics because I wanted to learn something... Yes, it came from undergraduate but the influence that it had didn't go over so well because from that perspective they [his new team] wanted the more competition thing... It's hard trying to stray away from the place that you did undergrad and bring new ideas to other places because you're not entirely sure how they would perceive your ideas.

Participant H had one of the most extreme negative experiences out of the participants interviewed. However, others noted the influence of undergraduate values as well, often when it came to conflicting viewpoints with their colleagues. Participant D noted that one of her colleagues was the de facto director of his student run team. "So I come in and I have my own opinions and it's a little bit more like usurping his authority in some ways..." Participant A had similar experiences and recognized that, when multiple coaches worked with the same students, the variety of undergraduate backgrounds guiding their coaching styles could yield positive or negative results.

...in my master's program there were a lot of cooks in the kitchen, so to speak, which is a good thing. It's just everyone is coming from a different [competitive] background and so to get all of those different culinary skillsets crammed into the same kitchen, you end up with a meal that sometimes turns out marvelously and other times it's kind of embarrassing.

As multiple participants noted, the values and the styles that they and their fellow coaches had been raised with in undergraduate experiences played an important role in how well the whole "meal" came together.

It is interesting to note that those who indicated they had a relatively smooth transition began their experiences as a coach and, in some cases, administrator before they began their graduate careers. Participant G noted that he felt confident in his competitive abilities as a senior and so he spent his senior year focusing on “learning how to navigate the potential pitfalls...so that the transition from being the competitor to coach for me was more about nurturing rather than competing.” While Participant G focused inwardly to prepare himself for the transition, Participant B found his roots as a senior leader on the team. “...there’s a big focus on us as seniors to, you know, make this, make sure we have a very positive, great year and I felt a great deal of respect from my teammates.” Participants B and G both started the transition as senior members of their team. Participant E, however, had a far more in-depth transition which dealt with a more official leadership position on his undergraduate team.

And part of that was in my role, I was the team president at [school name deleted] for the last two years I was there and in that role I did a lot of the administrative stuff I’ve had to as a director. So for example, my last year there I prepared a team budget to submit to student government for our funding, which involved tournament planning and, you know, checking the tournament schedule, checking to make sure we have enough funding for hotels, that kind of stuff.

Participant E’s experience as an undergraduate is likely not one held by many undergraduates. However, the opportunity to begin a transition to graduate studies as an undergraduate competitor played a role in the ease of transition for several of the participants. Regardless of the specific experiences the participants had as undergraduate

competitors, the influence of these experiences was apparent and the compatibility of these experiences with the team culture they entered as graduate coaches was an important factor in the success of participant transitions.

### **Separation of Roles and Identities**

As participants expanded upon their thoughts and experiences in the interview setting, the multiplicity of their roles became very clear. Echoing postmodern identity conceptualizations (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959), participants indicated that shifting their identities in response to particular social stimuli was a part of everyday life and a way of coping with some of the liminal tensions experienced as they continued to adapt to their new position. Throughout the interviews, participants all discussed how they inhabited multiple roles beyond coaching. For example, Participant D explained “I’m always constantly trying to balance the role between being a teacher, being a student, and being a coach.” The triangle between coaching, teaching, and student roles was apparent in the experiences of several participants. Torn between these roles, Participant A explained that “These are three things that will literally take as much time as you’re willing to give them...” The other participants each seemed to realize that this was true as well because each of them found ways to keep their identities and roles separate from each other so that they could better be dealt with.

The participants found a number of ways to separate their roles to ensure that there was no confusion over what role they were performing in the moment. In some cases, this was a simple rhetorical switch, paralleling Butler’s (2006) discussion of performativity. Participant E explained that, in department meetings, he was sure to

introduce himself as the Director of Forensics to remind the faculty why he was in attendance. Participant B explained that he often would question his students as to which role he needed to play. “In fact sometimes when I’m having conversations with them, you know, I’ll stop them and say, ‘You know, are you talking to me as [Participant B] the coach or as [Participant B] the friend?’ ” As I previously noted, titles and roles assumed, officially or unofficially, by the participants was an important aspect of their experience. Likewise, these roles and titles were also rhetorically deployed to bring the experience back into their control.

Boundary setting was particularly important element to keep their roles separate. This was especially true of their struggle to maintain a personal and professional connection to their students. Participant H explained:

I was told you need to make friends but you can’t be friends with your students, so it was kind of, it was constantly jumping between the idea “Can you be a friend to your student or can you not be their friend?”

In some cases, this struggle was virtually nonexistent because a line was drawn between friends and professionalism. Participant F said bluntly “In terms of personal life, I don’t care. Personal life is tertiary.” By contrast, Participant C made a point to set her boundaries firmly to avoid forensics from becoming a dominant element of her life.

...I think it [forensics] can begin to kind of dominate your life. And some people, that’s by choice and they want it to. But if you don’t, if you have other things, like, you know, a PhD or relationships or other friends or other things you’re involved in, you have to make it really clear, you know. I’m your coach and I

have time for you. These are the times. I make lots of time for you but it's not gonna be when I'm out with my significant other or, you know.

Participant C may have been able to make this separation easily because of her status as a PhD candidate. However, others noted that it was difficult because they recognized that their new status meant they could not always socialize with the team. Participant F summarized the situation when he explained "I obviously don't try to, you know, impose myself on the students if they have like a team party. I'm not gonna force myself there because, honestly, that's just uncomfortable." Participant B faced similar feelings of discomfort, saying "there's gonna be an eighteen year old freshman there and I'm gonna feel like, really old." Despite the humor in these statements, it is apparent that participants felt that team socialization was not even an option, thus drawing an automatic boundary without much effort.

In some cases, the physical setting of the work being done helped to create an automatic boundary between coaching and personal identities. Participant B noticed that one of the biggest differences for him from competition was the ease with which he could avoid taking work home. "You know, I give notes, I talk with them, I give feedback on the performances, and then that's it." This separation also existed for Participant D, although it had to be a more explicit separation because she lived with one of her fellow coaches. She explained "we had to make specific ground rules that when we are at the apartment, we don't talk about speech and debate unless it's really important..." Overall, participants indicated that work and home separation was important to them. However, Participant C explained that there are times when the opposite is true, when boundaries



cease to exist because she and her students are totally engrossed in forensics. “Now at a tournament, my students have no boundaries; I have no boundaries to them, you know what I mean. I’m here for them all the time. If that means one o’clock in the morning, somebody’s crying, great.” It appears that participants were acutely aware of the appropriate roles in certain settings and were invested in keeping those worlds separated. However, for many participants, the key to making all of this separation work was learning to say no and accepting that it was ok to do so. Participant B explained that there’s always a slight tension between wanting to say yes and no to a student who wants to work unexpectedly. “And the answer is technically, yes, I do have time, but I really don’t because that’s time I budgeted for reading for class and I have to stick with that.” Thus boundary setting was an important part of these graduate coaches’ experiences, but it was entirely dependent upon knowing their limits and when to say no.

The separation of roles applied not just to the demands of their students. Participants explained that they had to find ways to keep their roles separated as well. In some cases, this was simply a matter of time management. Participant B noted that he had never seen himself as someone who was good at time management, “that’s maybe something I’ve maybe developed over the past year as a strategy to kind of, you know, negotiate all the different things I have on my plate.” However, in many cases this separation became a matter of prioritizing and figuring out what is most important. However, Participant C lamented that:

...when you’re with the students, you think this is the most important thing. But then you get into your graduate student office and you’re writing your dissertation

and you think this is the most important thing. Then you go to your yoga class and you think, maybe THIS is the most important thing.

Participant E noted that knowing his own goals has helped him to prioritize more clearly and to let some roles slide so that others can thrive.

It was a little bit hard at first but knowing what my goals are and that I want to be a director, that I want to be coaching, has helped to define a way of prioritizing what's important. So for example, they say that here, every class paper should be turned into a conference submission or a journal submission here. Well if one of my papers doesn't end up being submitted to a conference, the world doesn't end, you know.

Ultimately, the participants noted that some form of time management and prioritization allowed them to keep their various roles separated, even if that meant that some of the roles had to slip in order for others to succeed. Offering me a bit of direct advice from his undergraduate advisor, Participant A summarized the situation, saying "sometimes good enough really is."

Despite the focus on keeping the roles separated, there was a definite trend of participants recognizing that these separate roles had to be pieced together, remaining separate but existing in pockets of time around each other. Participant G explained that the very beginning of his day always consists of planning his time and scheduling his multiple roles around each other.

I commute up to [city name deleted] so my commute is about fifty minutes. So I like to spend that time kind of strategizing my day, right, figuring out what am I

gonna do... We utilize a lot of social media technology to communicate as a team, so I'll check, you know, Twitter. I'll check Facebook. I'll open the e-mails. And then I'll scheme, plan my day in terms of getting it down on a piece of paper.

Participant G's planning initially seemed extreme. However, when asked to describe their average day, each participant described a day where multiple roles existed side by side, but never overlapped, creating what I perceived as a hectic picture of life. For some, that hectic nature of juggling these roles was a struggle. Participant H, borrowing from forensic terminology, explained:

It's kinda like a yearlong POI or a yearlong poetry [speech events which splice literature together intertextually to create a holistic performance] where you're multiple characters and you're trying to figure out how it all works together. And there's going to be tension and for me that tension almost became too much.

The multiple roles inhabited by these graduate forensic coaches were overall maintained as separate entities, an active effort by the participants. However, the roles did not exist in a vacuum but rather had to be negotiated with each other constantly. As Participant A suggested:

In order to let them fill as much space as they can, you kind of have to just put them together like a puzzle and realize that at certain points, you have to break them down into pieces and be able to sort of make them all fit together.

The metaphor of a puzzle served as a particularly accurate reflection of participant views on the need to separate their multiple roles. In general, participants indicated that the

roles could fit together in a specific pattern, but had to be well-defined enough to function as separate pieces.

The separation of roles indicated by participants creates a landscape of identity performance reflective of postmodern sensibilities (Lyotard, 1984). Although multiple roles were inhabited, each individual identity was presented in situations where the role was necessary or most appropriate. In fact, this active deployment of identities seemed to be the crux of their identity work as graduate forensic coaches. Essentially, the participants perhaps unconsciously demonstrated an understood link between their liminal experience and postmodern sensibilities, resulting in an active negotiation of their postmodern identity.

### **Intrinsic Needs**

Throughout the interviews, participants noted that intrinsic needs could potentially be a driving force behind their experiences, even if their needs were at odds with those of their students. At the heart of these needs are the perceived benefits of forensics as an activity. Participant A noted that he always tells his students “this is an activity where you will get out of it what they put into it and as a coach, I’ve found that to be true as well.” Essentially, although they were aware of the benefits of competition, several participants noted that they felt attached to forensics because of the benefits they received as coaches. Participant H explained “I was able to finally figure out what makes me comfortable, what makes me confident as a teacher.” However, Participant C noted that there was something else rewarding about forensics, something more intangible that she clings to in the face of tension from those around her.

...it's articulated in that the other people in my life don't quite understand what I'm doing or why I'm doing it. You know, "Why would you drive all night to get a tournament, you know, be competing two days and then drive all the way back, be exhausted the whole week, why would you do that to yourself?" And I have to say to them, you know, if you just come and see it. If you just come and experience then you'd probably get it, you know. You'd probably get it.

As Participant C's thoughts suggest, the investment of coaches in forensics often seems absurdly high to those outside the activity. However, the investment varies from coach to coach. Participant D explained that she has already decided that she will not pursue coaching positions because, although she loved that activity, she did not see it as a career path. However, this resulted in tension with her colleague who was more invested. "He is a lot more invested in forensics than I am...it is a lot more important to him than it is to me." Several participants mentioned that their future in forensics was, as Participant C put it, "nebulous," which impacted their own overall investment and feelings of stress and tension. Most fell in the same camp as Participant F, who overall characterized his coaching experience as easy. He explained "I'm always happy to look at drafts...I don't see it leaving my long term plans, but I'm not gonna make it a focus."

The driving force behind the investment was often whether or not participants felt like they were ready to leave forensics. Some, such as Participant A, felt that they just were not ready to move away from the activity because it had given them so many benefits and they enjoyed experiencing those benefits passed on. Participant A explained:

I guess I've spent half of my life now in this activity...it's part of why I ended up getting a master's and now a PhD is that I realized I wasn't ready to be done with it. I like it. I like that I can see...a lot more with forensics because I need that more intimate connection to and activity and a university or a school and the students and to realize firsthand to really be able to see that growth and that development.

However, other participants were ready to grow and develop an identity outside forensics. Participant B explained that he had a great career as an undergraduate and, although he liked coaching, he was ready to put more time into himself than others. "I think after this year I'll want to be a little more selfish and, you know, kind of figure out what do I want to do? What do I want to do creatively, professionally in the next year?" In short, Participant B explained "I can just be something."

Participant B's willingness to admit to being selfish is reflective of another intrinsic tension experienced by participants, knowing that they give up a lot to be with the activity. Participant G explained that one of the only tensions that he felt between roles was when "I feel like I'm neglecting my reason for being here." The result, he noted, is "I've thrown sleep right out the window...But all the while knowing the stress is for a greater purpose for my future, for my field of study, and also for our twenty competitors." Participant A suggested that what forensic educators give up is often balanced with the intrinsic rewards.

...as much as I can't see the future yet without forensics, it's a reality that could one day exist...once you see all of your friends, you know just hanging out on the

weekend or going on a trip and being with their significant other or their friends or you know, all those types of things. And then at some point you're like, "Cool, I drive a van full of smell-footed nineteen year olds home from a tournament at three in the morning and then get up to teach on Monday"...I could see where that would lose its appeal if the drawbacks begin to outweigh the positives.

For some participants, it was clear that the drawbacks began to outweigh the rewards. For others, the rewards were still strong enough to keep them in the activity.

It is worth noting that some of the intrinsic needs and rewards existed within the tournament setting as well. Participant A explained that transitioning to a judge on the competitive circuit was fun "to sort of see behind the curtain, so to speak." Participant C further noted that it was nice to be able to sit back and watch events rather than worrying about her own. "It becomes something very different. You get a very different perspective on the events and competing when you are no longer a competitor and I think that's cool. It's a good thing." Continued learning was an important part of some participants' experiences. However, the competitive nature of forensics was also evident in the transition to judging and manifested itself as an intrinsic need for validation.

Participant G explained that, being raised in a competitive environment where judges' rank and comments are the ultimate means of reward, it could be difficult to shake the need for competitive validation. "Some [competitors] live and die by the ballot. And so, in similar ways, we live and die as coaches from, you know our students' success."

Participant H felt this tension acutely, explaining that he experienced guilt if "I coached them differently and they ended up not getting the ranks they wanted." Thus the

competitive environment was a gambling site for intrinsic validation, a practice that Participant F spurned and warned against.

...seeing your students' names on posters is validation that your way, you know, succeeds. And frankly, that's a little bit dangerous because the person I was talking to has been doing this for twenty years. And he said at first, yeah, that's exactly what it felt like... Twenty years later, eh, that connection's kind of lost...like chasing ghosts.

Participant F's observations reflected the overarching theme associated with the intrinsic needs of graduate forensic coaches. They can be powerful motivating factors which allow individuals to participate in a demanding activity, but their influence may only last for so long.

### **Relational Tensions**

Although some of the previously discussed themes have hinted at the notion of relational tension, the depth of their discussion warrants its own thematic development. As Goffman (1959) and Mead (1934) explained, social relationships are at the heart of a postmodern identity. Thus, the importance of social relationships to graduate forensic identity is not unwarranted. Relational tension existed on almost every level for these participants. For most of them, it started with their relationship with their students. Participant B had a particularly interesting experience, since he was coaching the same team he had been on. He explained that, although his transition had been overall smooth, with one friend "there was some friction there...I think it was just a new dynamic between us where weren't seeing each other as much and we weren't hanging out as



much socially.” Outside of pre-existing relationships, however, participants seemed to notice that tension with students was usually related to a coaching style. Participant H explained that “They did not like me putting my foot down, they wanted some flexibility with it but other times they wanted me to put my foot down and say “You’ve gotta get this done.” Participant E’s experience revolved around a student who “was one of the successful high school competitors and he really thought he was good and that he knew more about this than I did.” One particular tension that was discussed several times was the idea of coaches always being present. Participant C explained “But at this point it’s almost like I’ve been around for so long the team sees me as a given, you know and I am thinking, well, I don’t see myself as a given.” Essentially, tensions with student relationships were usually present, but were sparked by any number of variables.

Tensions with fellow coaches were also a fairly typical feature of the graduate forensic experience. Participant A said simply “some of the coaches, we were best friends, and others we drove each other nuts.” In many cases, this was related to the values and team culture of the individual coaches. Participant A expanded on his thoughts, stating “One of the biggest tensions was between people who sort of saw competition and education as being separate goals and those who saw them as being part of the same whole.” However, in other cases the tension was related to the graduate experience. Participant D, who teaches as well as coaching forensics, found herself in conflict with her forensics-only graduate colleague because “he thinks that I’m not doing enough with forensics as compared to him...” Although she says the conflict was usually

resolved easily, that tension was always present. In one case, however, the difference in perspectives and experiences manifested negatively. Participant H explained:

It was hard to actually try to make things at peace all the time like that because so many people on the judging, on the coaching staff had their own perspectives on things and it was really hard for us to listen to each other and we wanted to always keep it in our own input and sometimes it just got to be so much that it would silence some people...I felt silenced a lot.

This tension with fellow coaches often included faculty coaches as well. In some cases, such as Participant C, the relationship was overall positive. She explained “She always says that her graduate assistants turn into her kind of a thing or they take on each other’s traits, so I would say we are definitely friends.” However, Participant A noted that getting to that phase in the relationship is not always easy. “There’s a lot to be said for that tension of trying to impress the directors and the students and everyone, so it’s a tough balance.” The tension with coaches was not necessarily always a bad one, but most of the participants did not that the balancing act of maintaining a professional relationship.

As might be expected in an activity with such high demands for coach investment, personal relationships often suffered as a result of forensic involvement. Participant D noted that this is not necessarily all forensics’ fault, but it is a part of the larger picture of graduate forensics coaching. “If it’s affected anything, it’s just I haven’t seen them (laughs)...I really haven’t had a chance to talk to them and it’s not necessarily because of forensics.” Participant A explained that, in some ways, the separation was simply a matter of time.

My closest friends in the department were other forensics people because, frankly, when we were gone that many weekends for tournaments and stuff, it does sort of create this distance of, you know, you're not there to hang out with the non-forensics grad students on the weekend and that sort of thing.

When I interviewed Participant C face-to-face at the speech tournament, she noted that even that specific weekend impacted her social life. "Well school started up this Monday, this past Monday, at our school, so of course this weekend everybody is wanting to get back together and have chats about school and I'm not there." Essentially, the fact that forensic competition usually occurs on weekends created a temporary absence from everyday graduate life for these participants, reflecting the temporary removal from everyday life which characterizes liminality (Turner, 1974). However, because many forensic coaches must travel many weekends per semester, the absence takes on a more permanent feeling which emphasizes the liminality of the graduate coach position. As Turner (1982) explained, liminality is not necessarily defined by a set time and often extends over a long period of time. Without an opportunity to socialize within the same time frame as their cohort, graduate forensic coaches are essentially removed from the everyday throughout their tenure as graduate forensic coaches.

It is worth noting that even personal relationship where forensics was a shared interest felt a pull. Participant E said he found himself in a unique position when it came to sharing forensics with his husband.

There's myself the director and then my husband, [name deleted], is the assistant director...It's not easy having to see the same person for so long, especially when

we're taking some of the same classes together, because he's a PhD student here. So that first semester we had a lot of time together that wasn't always necessarily the most helpful because then we didn't have any personal life together. It was, oh, we're talking about classes or forensics or something like that. So we've been a bit more strategic...

Participant E noted that he and his partner have taken steps to preserve their personal life. However it is apparent that, even when dealing with those who are involved in forensics, personal relationships can be difficult to manage.

Finally, participants noted that their relationships at tournaments tended to face new questions and tensions at tournaments. For some, dealing with competitors who were once their peers was particularly thought provoking. Participant A noted that, even when it was not a realized situation, there was always a small tension in judging friends.

Fortunately, my two like favorite people from the circuits were also extraordinarily talented so I was never really put in that position of like, "Oh, this person should get the 5 [fifth place] in the round but will they hate me?"

Participant D explained that it can still be a tough experience when judging a former peer and friend, especially if they are struggling, because "I wanna help you, but I can't. I have to be unbiased and I am." However, Participant F argued that this is not necessarily the case all the time. "Like there's this sort of unspoken agreement where, 'Hey, you have the ballot. I'm gonna do whatever I can to get that 1 [first place]...do what you have to.'" Essentially, regardless of how the participants approached the situation, each of

them noted that dealing with the transition from peer to judge with their friends on the circuit had at some point given them pause for consideration.

However, participants also noted that the tournament experience was a chance for them to make their way into a new level of socialization with other coaches and judges. Participant B noted that he was not “quite as plugged in as maybe some of the other coaches.” Participant F echoed this notion, citing his personal nature that “I don’t really talk to a whole lot of people.” In contrast to Participants B and F, neither of whom was pursuing forensics as a career,

Participant E noted that he had difficulty of breaking into the coaches’ social circle, often because he was not yet recognized as the director for his team.

Getting into that circle has been a little bit difficult...I think it’s a combination of the team is new and they don’t know who the director is so if they know that [school name removed] is at the tournament, they don’t know who they’re looking for and I look like just another competitor...

However, not all participants had this difficulty. Participant G explained that his forensic “pedigree” afforded him access to a new social circle.

I’ve been fortunate enough to have a pretty distinguished coaching tree that extends, you know, nationally so if I don’t know someone exceptionally well, it never feels like that. It feels like, you know, I’ve known them for years through that coaching tree...I’m sort of just cool by association, if you will.

Although many participants were able to make some headway into the coaching circle, Participant H questioned the kinds of topics that he could discuss with fellow judges and

coaches. He explained that most of the topics were limited to “school, regular life, how things are going in the family, or it’s just things that aren’t really forensics related.” He noted that, although he can comment on seeing a student of another coach, there is a certain limit to what he felt he could say so as not to offend them. Thus, even though the coaches’ circle may be breached, the participants seemed to indicate that it takes time or connections to truly become a part of the inner circle.

Throughout Chapter 4, I have developed several themes from my interviews to paint a picture of the experiences of my participants. These themes included the influence of existing structures, shifting perspective in a new role, reconciling undergraduate experiences, separation of roles and identities, intrinsic needs, and relational tensions. In Chapter 5, these themes will be linked to the developed theoretical constructs in Chapter 2 to draw conclusions regarding the liminal experiences of graduate forensic coaches.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

After examining the transcripts of the interviews, I found 6 developed themes from the interviews which I argue are suggestive of a liminal experience as described by Turner (1974). However, the factors of this liminal experience developed beyond it simply existing. Through the research I have found that there is a distinct ambiguity in the rite of passage which is maintained by the constraints of the graduate forensic position. Furthermore, this ambiguity cannot easily be solved due to the importance of micro-level team culture in forensics. In addition to these two conclusions, I note the limitations of my research project and specific suggestions for future studies.

### **Conclusions**

First and foremost, I argue that the experiences of graduate forensic coaches are comparable to a liminal experience. Throughout the interviews, participants explained their experiences and their feelings as they entered into a new team culture, finding themselves in a space between their competitive self and being a full coach. They also found themselves stuck between their role as a student, learning the ropes of both graduate school and coaching, and a coach and authority figure for other students. This state of betwixt and between-ness parallels van Gennep's (1960) conceptualization of the three phases of rites of passage: rite of separation, liminal rites, and ceremonies of incorporation. Having already gone through a rite of separation by entering into a new role as a graduate forensic coach, participants performed in a liminal state where they found themselves between student and coach, in a position of authority but without the experience and title to assume true authority or control. As Turner (1974) phrased it, they

were “betwixt and between all fixed points of classifications” (p. 232). Even if they had a classification, such as a graduate forensic coach or Director of Forensics, the structures around them replicated a certain sense of ambiguity associated with a liminal state.

It is important to note that I am not suggesting that liminality in graduate studies is an experience unique to graduate forensic coaches. As several scholars, such as Beech (2011) and Cook-Sather (2006), have noted, graduate teaching assistants often struggle with an acute sense of liminality as they work to reconstruct their identity. Their experiences do exhibit similarities to those described by my participants. However, I believe that the liminality experienced by graduate forensic coaches may be different from that experienced by their graduate teaching peers because of their movement away from competition and performance. As I noted in Chapter 4, the participants in my study reflected on a perspective shift, from one of being a self-focused competitor to being an other-focused coach. As Participant F noted, sometimes this shift leaves coaches wanting for validation. As competitors, forensic participants receive multiple forms of validation for their work, through applause, ballots, and trophies. However, validation for coaching is much more difficult to find because the work put forward goes toward student performances, for which the student is then directly validated. Graduate teaching assistants certainly seek validation. However, the nature and frequency of the validation they have experienced previously is likely different from validation received by competitors in forensics. By staying in forensic culture but without the same validating feedback, graduate forensic coaches may find themselves in a deeper liminal position without external validation directly guiding their forensic work. Therefore, I believe that



what makes the graduate forensic liminal experience unique is the intrinsic need for validation beyond grades and teaching evaluations.

Additionally, the liminality of graduate forensic coaches is unique because, based on my participants' experiences, the liminality is non-directional. As Turner (1974) noted, ritual liminars have the possibility of a "final stable resolution of their ambiguity" (p. 233). The results of these interviews suggest that for graduate forensic coaches, the rite of passage is impacted by the lack of any fixed resolution of ambiguity. Ultimately, these graduate students then experience symptoms of a liminal state but without the understanding of what that liminal state is moving them toward. This sense of ambiguity was maintained whether or not the participants wanted to stay in forensics after graduating. Some of the participants made it clear that they desired a career path in forensics and wished to continue down that path; therefore, they were engaging in everyday performances which would eventually allow them to be incorporated as forensic coaches. Participants A and E both indicated that they made choices in their graduate schooling which led them away from a path of research common to academia and into forensics. Essentially, they engaged in an everyday version of ceremonies of incorporation. However, they also recognized that forensics was not necessarily a permanent career path; their willingness to continue coaching was not an indication of a commitment to that identity. Thus, even an intended career path in forensics was an uncertain final point of transition for the liminal state. In other cases, forensics was not the final goal and it seemed to create a somewhat directionless state of liminality. Participant F said that he had no desire to stay in academia, but he also seemed unsure of

what was next for his life beyond coaching and graduate school. Thus, although he coached and experienced some of the same liminal tensions of the other participants, his experience lacked a sense of anticipated completion for the rite of passage, leaving his future seemingly as ambiguous as it was before.

Essentially, the experiences and reflections of these participants indicate a challenge to the existing theory on liminality and rites of passage. Although the experiences clearly indicated a liminal state, graduate forensic coaches often do not have a known social category to transition into. Therefore, I question whether graduate forensic coaches can even move beyond the betwixt and between. Van Gennep (1960) conceptualized rites of passage with clearly defined phases known to all in the culture. However, the experiences of these graduate forensic coaches raise the question as to whether it is possible to move through a ritual without knowing what the end result of that ritual will be. Thus, although classifying the graduate forensic experience as a liminal one may still hold merit, viewing movement from forensic competitor to forensic coach is complicated by the potential lack of a defined resolution of ambiguity.

One surprising twist on the issue of unresolved ambiguity, however, was that participants who were not looking to forensics for a career path overall had a more positive valence in their discussion. Half of my participants did not express an interest in forensics as a career and, despite articulating certain stresses in their experience, they did not usually indicate the same depth of social isolation and concern over their status as the other participants. The participants who expressed an interest and/or willingness to have a career in forensics generally expressed their thoughts in a way that revealed more

concerns regarding their ambiguity. Beech (2011) noted that liminality is a reconstruction of a social identity, from a previous identity to one with a different meaning for the culture and community. Considering forensics is a complex subculture of communication studies known for its norms and boundaries, I posit that those who intend to continue coaching forensics are still stuck in the liminal state because the ambiguity of their impending social category is still unknown. However, knowing what some of the common elements of forensic coaching are places additional stress and expectations upon those who are willing to stay in the culture and complete their ceremonies of reincorporation. Bartanen (as cited in Pierce, 2003) and Gill (1990) both argued that forensic coaches carry a high amount of responsibility and tension with their job. It stands to reason that, when graduate forensic students recognize that they wish to coach for a career, demonstrating their ability to handle those pressures becomes a part of the ceremonies of incorporation. However, as I mentioned in my previous chapters, being a coach is often an extra responsibility for graduate students. Thus, graduate forensic coaches universally face a certain amount of ambiguity when it comes to resolving their liminal state. The pressure to actively fight the liminal state specific to forensics only places additional stress on those who intend to continue as forensic coaches.

A second conclusion which must be examined is, although participants understood their postmodern identity, it could be a factor in the ambiguity of the outcome of their graduate rite of passage. The need for a stable identity seemed to become an intrinsic factor in their willingness to be, as van Gennep (1960) would have phrased it, incorporated into a full coaching career in forensics. For some, like Participant A, there

was an apparent sense of identity stability in forensics because he had been involved in it for so long. In some ways, his forensic identity was interrupted by being a graduate student, not the other way around. However, the instability of identity as a graduate forensic coach was a common thread throughout the interviews and often a reason why they were ready to leave. Participant C even explained that she was not sure whether she would return to forensics when she graduated; it depended on whether an official position was available to her. However, to simply commit to being involved in forensics, regardless of other obligations, was not a part of her plan.

This lack of a stable identity and the associated pressures certainly makes sense when considering how Mead (1934) and Goffman (1959) posited a postmodern identity is manifested. They argued that the self was present not on the body, but through socialization and relational discourse. Under this premise, it is easy to assume that discovering a new social identity could be a social task for graduate forensic coaches. However, one of the major themes developed from participant interviews was the impact forensics had on social relationships, marked by a distinct lack of socialization and other relational tensions. Thus, forensics as an activity does not just remove the possibility of socialization in everyday life; it removes graduate forensic coaches from opportunities to play with their identity in the liminal space. Ultimately, I remember the statement that Participant B made regarding his decision to leave forensics. He stated “I can just be something.” Through his words and those of my participants in general, it is clear that being a graduate forensic coach is not conducive to identity work and, for some, this meant that leaving forensics was a way of resolving the ambiguity. Essentially, I argue

that experiencing an acute postmodern identity could be a contributing factor in the opacity of the final outcome of the liminal state. With so many potential roles to be occupied as a graduate forensic coach, visualizing any one, stable identity becomes complicated. Furthermore, without the same social opportunities as their non-forensic peers, the ability to perform identity work (from a postmodern perspective) is limited. This results in a state of suspended liminality until a final outcome can be visualized.

Because the state of suspended liminality impacts present and future coaches, the forensic community has a vested interest in interrogating the ambiguity. The obvious instinct is to find a way to solve it, but it is important to note that the ambiguity is not inherently positive or negative. It is simply an experience. As van Gennep (1960) noted, liminality is the middle piece of any rite of passage. It is an essential part of moving from one social identity to another; therefore, ambiguity and one's experimentation of roles within it is to be expected. However, considering the importance of graduate forensic assistants to forensic culture, we have a responsibility to not alleviate the ambiguity but to help these individuals cope with the feelings that are part of the experimentation. The participants indicated as a part of their intrinsic needs a desire for stable identity; however, this identity is not a part of the liminal state. Therefore, the focus of this project for the forensic community should not necessarily be on solving the liminality but rather engaging graduate forensic assistants in a way that helps them cope with the liminality in a way that encourages their identity work.

One seemingly reasonable approach to helping graduate forensic coaches cope with their liminality would be to start preparing them for the ambiguity early in their

careers, perhaps even beginning as undergraduates. It certainly aligns with the calls for training teaching assistants, made by scholars such as Rhodes (1997) and Young and Bippus (2008). However, the microcultural aspects of forensics present a further complication. As I noted in the literature review, forensic culture can be conceptualized on both macro and micro levels. First, the term “forensics” links a national circuit of speech and debate competition together through communication styles (Kimble, 2012) and behaviors (Paine, 2008). These overarching associations with forensics are the most often discussed levels of forensic culture, but Miller (2005) had noted that subcultures in forensics often developed in different geographical areas. Participant E noted this in his consideration of the laid back nature of tournaments in the southern portion of the country. However, perhaps more striking was role of team culture in the participants’ liminality. White (2010) noted that forensic team culture is varied based on the individuals involved. In most cases, this was apparent and consistent with the participant experiences. Participant H had by far the most negative experience with a team culture shock with his conflict over the purpose of forensic activity, to the point where he chose to leave forensics temporarily. Thus, solving the ambiguity and leading graduate forensic coaches more carefully through the rite of passage cannot be a macro-level effort. Given that much of the tension and ambiguity stemmed from shifting between micro-cultures, change to address the ambiguity would have to occur at the micro level.

The possibility of a micro-level intervention was addressed by several participants. Participants B, C, D, E, and G all indicated that they were given an opportunity to begin preparing for their transition as undergraduates and that this helped

to alleviate some of the ambiguity they experienced. Participant E was particularly vocal about his experiences and noted that he has already begun to prepare his students for the transition in similar ways. On face value, preparing undergraduates for their upcoming liminal state as graduate forensic coaches is a practical step toward helping them cope with the transition. However, the importance of the micro-culture of forensics still presents problems in this scenario. Undergraduates trained in one team culture experience only one micro-cultural level of forensics, which may not alleviate any ambiguity if the team culture they experience as a graduate student is dissimilar to the one they were trained in. In fact, I believe that such training could result in increased tension and inability to cope with perspective shifting as graduate forensic coaches because they would have to unlearn their undergraduate culture before relearning the culture as graduate coaches. Many of these tensions revealed themselves in my Chapter 4 discussion about the participants' reconciliation of undergraduate experiences with their graduate level experiences. Thus, their own experiences suggested a contradiction with their prescribed solution for alleviating ambiguity. Participant H explained that his severely negative experience "almost needs to be used as a cautionary tale to teach that we all have different ways of learning how to make those transitions being an undergraduate into the graduate world." Ultimately, the experiences of these graduate forensic coaches suggest that a rite of passage can be impacted by the clarity of the ritual outcome, thus creating an extended state of liminality. Unfortunately, providing graduate forensic coaches with the resources and skills to productively cope with the ambiguity is

not easily resolved, mired in the tension between macro-cultural expectations and micro-cultural realities of team organization culture and individual experiences.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Through this research project, I have made conclusions regarding liminality, identity, and forensic culture based on the experiences of graduate forensic coaches. However, I recognize that this research is incomplete and has potential for further expansion. Throughout the research process, the primary tension that I faced as a researcher was balancing the need to include a varied field of experience while still maintaining a specific focus on the research questions. Overall, this tension was well navigated, but it also manifested itself in three primary limitations. First, scheduling a block of time to meet with interview participants either face-to-face or online was very difficult. As the results and conclusions revealed, graduate forensic coaches already face struggles with balancing their time and fulfilling all of their obligations. As a fellow graduate forensic coach, I was sensitive to that need. Therefore, I planned my interviews to be approximately one hour in length. The result was that the participants provided me with data rife with excellent and articulate reflections, but shorter on life details than was expected. Therefore, the coding process became difficult because these highly specific reflections could not be easily assembled into common themes.

Second, my forensic background presented me with a unique tension, potentially advantageous and limiting. On one hand, my experience gave me an advantage in that I was able to predict what some areas of tension might be and focus questions on that experience. I gained an additional level of commonality with my participants as a co-



liminar. As I went through the interviews, I found myself sharing in the experiences of my participants because, as a graduate forensic coach in his final semester, have been balancing the same tensions. Therefore, this shared experience did give me a certain level of *communitas* and trust with my participants, something that Turner (1974) argued often develops from anti-structures, such as a state of liminality. However, the shared meanings and understandings implicit to the *communitas* proved to be a limitation as well, as the participants often assumed a shared experience and left certain aspects of their story unexplained. Admittedly, it was also difficult on my end to break out of my forensic background to question what we in forensic culture generally understand as a collective. Thus, although my forensic background was very helpful in preparing for this research and gaining the trust of participants, it likely impacted some elements of the interviews.

Finally, I believe that my research was limited by the sex imbalance of my participant pool. Of my eight participants, only two were women. These were the only two women who even responded to the call for participants initially. At first, I did not consider this to be significant. However, when asked if she had any final thoughts, Participant D expressed her surprise that my interview did not question her role as a female graduate coach. After she expressed her thoughts about the role that her intersection of sex and gender played in how performed as a coach, I realized that I had not addressed the potential difference of liminal experience between men and women. Therefore, these results cannot indicate whether participants had any unique liminal experiences as graduate forensic coaches based on gender. In order to deepen the

discussion of graduate forensic coach experiences, participant performance as gendered individuals should be explored as a potential variable in future studies on this topic.

The intrinsic needs of graduate forensic coaches proved to be a factor in whether or not participants indicated that they would be staying forensics. However, this theme was an unexpected development in the project, one which my interviews and research had not anticipated. Dickmeyer (2002), Gill (1990), and Rogers and Rennels (2008), among others, have examined the reasons why forensic professionals often leave the field. Wood and Rowland-Morin (1989) and Croucher, Thornton, and Eckstein (2006) have similarly studied what motivates forensic students in their competitive years. However, despite their pivotal and role in college forensics, an explanation for why graduate coaches become graduate coaches and the factors for their continuation in the activity have not yet been considered in a scholarly setting. Intrinsic motivations were not necessarily the focus of this project and therefore a detailed understanding of why graduate forensic coaches choose a career in forensics was not pursued. However, it clearly had an impact on their liminal experience. Therefore, an in-depth investigation of internal motivations for graduate students to enter coaching as a career would be an ideal and beneficial area of future research.

Throughout this research project, I have attempted to garner a deeper understanding of the liminal experiences of graduate forensic coaches. Chapter 1 focused on developing my research goals as a scholar and as a member of the forensic community. Chapter 2 examined existing literature in liminality, postmodern identity, and forensic culture to lay the framework for interpreting graduate forensic experiences.

Chapter 3 described the rationale for my qualitative methodology and the specific research procedures utilized. Chapter 4 provided a detailed examination of the results of my interviews, categorized to paint a picture of the participants' liminal experiences. Finally, Chapter 5 has discussed several conclusions developed from the interviews and addressed the areas of future development.

The significance of graduate forensic coaches to the forensic community is inescapable. Their experience as recent competitors, current graduate students, and developing coaches affords them with a unique perspective on forensic events that can be passed on to their students and colleagues. However, I have argued through this thesis that such a perspective also comes during a unique rite of passage, characterized by an extended sense of liminality and unresolved ambiguity. Thus, the role of the graduate forensic coach is not one which can simply be maintained as a practical matter of the forensic system. We must continue to discuss and study their role on our teams and in our culture in order to facilitate not only a greater sense of direction but to build more effective and assured forensic educators for the future.

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## Appendix A

- Tell me about a typical day in your life as a graduate forensic coach, both specific to forensics and outside of forensics.
- What is it like to be a forensic coach as opposed to a competitor? How has that transition been for you personally?
- What are some challenges you face now that you are a graduate forensic coach? Did any part of coaching come especially easy to you?
- How is your relationship with your forensic students? What is it like to be in a position of authority?
- How is your working relationship with your fellow coaches, either graduate or faculty?
- Tell me about your tournament experience now that you are a graduate forensic coach. What are the similarities and differences from your time as a forensic competitor?
- How do you see forensics fitting in to your larger graduate experience? Do you feel it fits easily or is it a difficult fit?
- Several forensic researchers have noted that graduate forensic coaches often feel pulled between multiple positions and identities. Have you experienced this? If so, in what ways? How do you negotiate those feelings?
- Do you have any other experiences or thoughts you would like to share which you feel are important when discussing graduate forensic coaches?

## Appendix B

| <b>Influence of Existing Structures</b>  | <b>Shifting Perspective in a New Role</b>   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Official Title</li> <li>• Coaching without Authority</li> <li>• Influence of Graduate Department</li> <li>• Hierarchy of Coaches</li> <li>• Impermanence of Graduate Coaches</li> <li>• Graduate Institution</li> <li>• Geographical Influence</li> <li>• Idealized Forensic Jobs</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We Don't Have the Answers</li> <li>• Years of Experience &amp; Credibility</li> <li>• Competitor to Coach Shift</li> <li>• It's Not About You</li> <li>• Becoming the Judge</li> <li>• Developing a Coaching Style</li> <li>• Walking in Students' Shoes</li> <li>• Coaching as Friends</li> <li>• Student of Coaching</li> <li>• Emotional Supporter</li> <li>• Treating Students Honestly</li> <li>• Shouldering Responsibility</li> </ul> |
| <b>Reconciling Undergraduate Experience</b>  | <b>Separation of Roles/Identities</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influence of Undergraduate Experience</li> <li>• Beginning Responsibility in Undergraduate</li> <li>• Entering a New Team Culture</li> <li>• Laying the Groundwork</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pieces of the Puzzle</li> <li>• Student-Teacher-Coach Triangle</li> <li>• Prioritizing Roles</li> <li>• Work/Home Separation</li> <li>• Lost Team Socialization</li> <li>• Rhetorically Separating Roles</li> <li>• Active Identity Work</li> <li>• Time Management</li> <li>• Setting Clear Boundaries</li> <li>• Personal Attributes</li> <li>• It's Okay to Say No</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Intrinsic Needs</b>   | <b>Relational Tensions</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fulfillment from Undergraduate Experience</li> <li>• Intrinsic Forensic Benefits</li> <li>• Investment in Forensics as a Career</li> <li>• Needing a Creative Outlet</li> <li>• Guilt</li> <li>• Not Done with Forensics</li> <li>• Knowing What is Given Up</li> <li>• Nebulous Forensic Future</li> <li>• Validation through Student Competition</li> <li>• Behind the Competitive Curtain</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coaches as a Given</li> <li>• Tensions with Fellow Coaches</li> <li>• Developing Relationships with Superiors</li> <li>• Tensions with Students</li> <li>• Forensics Hinders Outside Relationships</li> <li>• From Competitive Peer to Judge</li> <li>• Building From Forensic Connections</li> <li>• Personal and Forensic Tensions</li> <li>• Breaking into the Coaching Circle</li> </ul>   |