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# **Suspended liminality: Vacillating affects in cyberbullying/research**

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## **Abstract**

This paper develops a concept of liminal hotspots in the context of i) a secondary analysis of a cyberbullying case involving a group of school children from a Danish school, and ii) an altered auto-ethnography in which the authors ‘entangle’ their own experiences with the case analysis. These two sources are used to build an account of a liminal hotspot conceived as an occasion of troubled and suspended transformative transition in which a liminal phase is extended and remains unresolved. The altered auto-ethnography is used to explore the affectivity at play in liminal hotspots, and this liminal affectivity is characterised in terms of volatility, vacillation, suggestibility and paradox.

## **Introduction**

### *Peeking in*

Following a European Science Foundation Workshop we committed ourselves to exploring the nature of liminal hotspots by undertaking a secondary analysis of a cyberbullying case<sup>1</sup>. The case has a number of features and raises a number of issues that make it a good candidate for

consideration as a liminal hotspot. A liminal hotspot is an occasion of troubled or suspended transformative transition in which what would be the liminal phase is extended or otherwise unresolved (see Greco and Stenner, this volume). We wanted to know how a liminal hotspot might feel from the ‘inside’ perspective of those who are caught up in it. But, borrowing a phrase from Karen Barad, how is it possible to *peek inside* (Barad, 2007, p. 345) such a lived phenomenon when “we have no ‘outside’ view of the phenomenon itself”?

Since we had no access to the feelings and emotions of the people involved in our case (we had access to transcripts of interviews, with no possibility of conducting further research), we opted to explore our own affective responses to the events at play, and to reflect on how these resonate with experiences of our own in research fields related to the case in question. In this we follow Urwin et al (2013) and Hollway & Jefferson (2013) although our vocabulary is not psychoanalytic and our approach is informed by a sensitivity to what Wetherell (2012) calls “affective practices”. Through several months of correspondence and mutual interviews about the case and its resonances, we felt our way into a collaborative affective methodology that we came to call an *altered auto-ethnography* (AAE for short). We do not use the word *altered* merely to evoke the fact that we have modified the standard auto-ethnographic procedure of using the researcher’s own experience as data by including two researchers reflecting upon a third case (see Ellis & Rawicki, 2013). More fundamentally, we use it to indicate how this alteration troubles the very distinction between self (‘auto’) and other (‘alter’) that is presupposed in the name *auto-ethnography*.

Throughout this dialogical process we encountered the unsettling sense of a certain zone of indistinction between experiences of self and other, and it often became unclear to whom a given experience under consideration ‘belonged’, and whether it ‘belonged’ to any pre-existing individual at all. Indeed, we came to realize that precisely this *undoing* of a clear distinction between self and other is a characteristic feature of liminal hotspots. As we shall see, this feature reflects the fact that

liminality more generally entails a “peaking in transfiguring moments of sublimity” (Thomassen 2014, p.1) during which distinctions that feel all important one moment, melt into insignificance the next (Szakolczai, 2009).

This first part of the paper presents our reanalysis of the cyberbullying episode as a liminal hotspot. As mentioned the case comes from a project on school bullying which also explored ‘cyberbullying’(Jette Kofoed & Søndergaard, 2009, 2013; Schott & Søndergaard, 2013). It is based on ethnographic work the methodology of which is more fully discussed elsewhere (Jette Kofoed, 2009, 2013). Although it builds upon this prior work, our re-analysis was conducted after the AAE and indeed was possible thanks to the insights gleaned through it. The second part of the paper reflects upon how the altered autoethnographic process contributed to the goal of ‘peeking into’ the case. We reflect on the extent to which our mutually probing personal reflections functioned to deepen our insights into the otherwise inaccessible existential aspects that are foregrounded by a focus on liminal hotspots.

### *Cyberbullying research and its core truism*

Cyberbullying refers to processes of inclusion and exclusion that take place in the context of a medium of communication made possible by digital devices like smart phones, tablets and computers. It includes hostile, unwelcome or unpleasant audio and text messages and images posted on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, on apps such as Instagram and Snapchat, or exchanged as text messages. We will address a case of cyberbullying as a liminal hotspot. Our intention is not to suggest that cyberbullying *as such* is to be understood through the concept of a liminal hotspot. Cyberbullying itself is not our proximal concern, and indeed our case is ambiguous and difficult to classify in these terms: it contains both ‘cyber’ and ‘face to face’ elements, and it is not possible to draw a clear line between ‘being bullied’ and ‘being a bully’. The case has the

quality of ‘both / and’ *and* ‘neither / nor’ that we have found to be a chief characteristic of liminal hotspots. This quality of both-and and neither-nor as intrinsic to cyberbullying is recently being recognized within the research field (Ellwood & Davies, 2010; Horton, 2011; Jette Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012; Ringrose & Renold, 2011). Hitherto research has relied on developmental psychological theoretical frameworks which stress firm positions of ‘bully’ (or perpetrator) and ‘victim’ as relevant (Olweus, 1992; Slonje & Smith, 2008). The unambiguity of these basic tenets of the research field, however, leaves aside the messiness of cyberbullying. A focus on liminal hotspots encourages us to attend to disorderly occasions where there is precisely a lack of fixed positions, and where new positions may gestate.

## **Part 1: Sana in transition between schools**

Although irreducible to individual actors, our case congeals around a main figure: Sana, a 13 year old female attending school in Denmark. In this section we unfold a series of five scenes (reconstructed from interviews) involving Sana and a number of her classmates, Alma, Hjalte, Caroline, etc (all are pseudonyms). The scenes share features of what Turner (1982) would call a “social drama”. There is gossip, scandal and exposure, but these do not follow Turner’s sequence of phases beginning with a “breach” which moves from “crisis” to “redress” before resolution in the form of “reintegration”, “recognition” or “schism”. Things do not begin with a clear breach, there is no open and unambiguous crisis or definitive resolution, and events assume paradoxical qualities which seem to paralyze conduct into the indistinct state of suspension that we identify with a liminal hotspot.

Liminal hotspots involve scenes of transformative transition that are troubled in some way. For example, the transition might be blocked, held in suspense or bodged such that the liminal phase is extended or otherwise unresolved. It is therefore important to begin by recognizing that our five

scenes took place in a significantly liminal phase of Sana's life and school career. She was the 'new girl' in a school she had recently joined after a troubled experience in her former school. Sana, in short, was negotiating what can broadly be called a form of 'initiation' into a new school.

In using the word 'initiation' we allude, of course, to the classic rites of passage discussed by van Genep (1908), and developed by Turner (1969). In a synthesis of existing anthropological data, van Genep identified a typical pattern of rites of passage. The pattern begins with rites of separation and ends with rites of incorporation, the latter following a middle and *liminal* phase of transition (van Genep, 1960 (1908)). The pre-liminal rites of separation ceremonialize the dismantling of a prior institutional identity, and the post-liminal rites of incorporation do the same with respect to establishing and socially recognizing a new identity and/or status. Turner became fascinated with van Genep's middle, liminal or threshold phase and he fruitfully extended its notion of liminality to many domains of cultural activity beyond traditional ritual. For Turner, the decisive feature of the liminal phase is that structural rules and norms are suspended. The sense of the 'unlimited' ritualistically created by this deliberate erasure of cultural limits creates a highly unusual and affectively charged situation that is conducive to genuine personal transformation.

Rites, rituals and ceremonies are longstanding ways of facilitating mutual 'attunement' by creating and channeling liminality. Liminality *as such*, however, is not restricted to such rites. In fact, what we call *liminal affectivity* (a transformed and heightened condition of potentiality for being affected and affecting events) can be generated and channeled in many ways (see Greco and Stenner, this volume). These range from 'unstaged' encounters with existential change and social collapse, to the use of arts, sports and cultural forms more generally (Jette Kofoed, 2008; Stenner, 2015; Thomassen, 2014; Turner, 1982).

In referring to Sana's situation of transition between schools as liminal, we thus evoke this extended

concept of liminality. Any significant shift in the taken-for-granted order of things can provoke the heightened emotionality and transformed consciousness typical of a liminal event (see Stenner and Moreno, 2012). This background of issues around inclusion/exclusion is important for grasping how any liminal affectivity associated with the experience of initiation into a new school setting remained, in Sana's case, unresolved and, as it were, suspended and extended. This *passage*, as we shall see, will become a *hotspot*. Sana's situation is, importantly, compounded by racism.

Comments from her classmates allude to the fact that Sana is dark skinned compared to the majority of her new Danish classmates, and this *difference* amplifies exclusionary processes (this important issue is further analysed by Kofoed, 2013).

Sana thus starts school with a disharmonious history of 'not feeling good' at her former school. According to her classmates Hjalte and Alma she is quiet and unobtrusive during her first few months in the class, attending lessons and then returning directly home. However, they report that certain discordant aspects of her conduct became an object of shared gossip during a class party held in the loft of one of the pupils. Sana was not present, but her habit of smoking with older boys attracted comments like "She is sooo stupid", "she is idiotic", and so forth. We will call this *the loft scene*.

### *The loft scene*

In interviews conducted some months after the event, Alma and Hjalte describe this party in a loft in terms of an escalating sense of shared outrage at Sana's inappropriate conduct, an outrage that extends to her appearance and her family. As Alma reports: "Well, Caroline was making some really rude assessments, kind of like 'she is really gross' and starts talking of her family and her younger sister and stuff like 'no, she would never ever touch Sana' and 'she is just too gross'. And then people kind of bought that and started finding it entertaining and stuff. And you didn't really

consider it, you kind of thought Sana is a person who really does not care what we think of her, she has her own friends and she does not care about us so we can just as well talk about her behind her back, right”.

During the loft scene, Sana’s classmates bond together at her expense around the shared theme that she is “out of order”. Sana’s status as problematic and out of tune with the group is collectively felt and *established*, or at least *prepared*. Sana is positioned in her absence as the gross and untouchable one whom the others are eager to identify as what they are *not*. We can recognize a classic many-on-one pattern of scapegoating in which many hostile judgements, feelings and acts are concentrated on one focal point of attention: the one that will become the scapegoat (Girard, 1986). This scapegoating pattern entails the generation, management and channeling of liminal affectivity. In this case, the liminal affectivity, rather than being provoked by a clear breach, is self-generated by the group in a playful process of self-enjoyment. The emotions, desires and affectivity at play are liminal in several senses. They are *about* liminality in the sense that they respond to feelings questioning the threshold of group inclusion / exclusion, and this response in turn consolidates the sense of *communitas* (Turner, 1969; 1995). But they are also *excited* by the very fact that ordinary limits are being exceeded, and normal boundaries erased, creating a new de-differentiated socio-semantic space ripe with new possibilities. Furthermore, these desires are mimetic in the sense that they are inflamed and ‘suggested’ by the sheer fact that others present are expressing them. This process entails a certain de-differentiation of individual desires in the face of the emergence of a collective form of desire.

The liminal affectivity of this playfully shared condemnation is almost palpable. A sort of extreme *hostile standard* is set by Caroline’s “she is just too gross”. According to Alma’s account at first the other students hesitate, recognizing its extreme tone as a “really rude assessment” which violates certain limits of decency. Sana, however, is not present (and hence nobody is ‘really’ being hurt)



and the group is having fun. As Alma put it, *buying into* it is “entertaining and stuff”. Overcoming this hesitant awareness that the group is going beyond certain unspoken limits, the condemnation quickly blazes up as it passes from enthusiastic mouth to enthusiastic mouth, uniting the circle with a shared passion. Sana is identified as someone “who really does not care what we think of her, she has her own friends and she does not care about us”. In this proposition we find the seeds of the familiar argument that the scapegoat is not an innocent victim but an aggressor guilty of threatening the good community. This creates a certain indistinction between the positions of bullied and bully. Sana is rejectable by the group because she (is perceived to have) rejected the group, or at least to have *irritated* it with her seeming reluctance to belong. The proposition that Sana “does not care about us” expresses a disturbance to the harmony of the group which serves to warrant a suspension of the normal obligations to ethical conduct. From Sana’s point of view, however, her way of “not caring” might express the disharmony of her ongoing predicament. The liminal affectivity that Sana, as it were, carries into the peer group from a troubled transition from her old school is thus transformed and amplified as it is taken up into and by the group in the loft.

The loft scene illustrates the sense in which liminal affectivity operates beyond the category of the individual, undoing the very idea of individual desire and emotion in the flow of complex collective dynamics. Since she wasn’t invited, Sana was present in the loft scene only in the form of an abstract object in the discourse of others. And yet the image or communicable *gestalt* (see Greco and Stenner, this volume) of Sana that was created and enthusiastically ‘passed around’ in that crucible can be taken as a decisive phase in the consolidation of the liminal hotspot we are considering.

## *The quiet scandal of the mobile phone*

According to Alma and Hjalte, during lessons and breaks Sana sits holding her mobile phone. She is perceived as never letting go of it. This figure of Sana sitting with her phone emits numerous discursive-affective potentials whose significance we must briefly explore. Having this phone as a seemingly permanent fixture obviously expresses the idea of communication with unspecified others who are not present. In expressing the importance of activity outside of the here and now, it also raises the question of a relatively diminished value given by Sana to what is going on in the here and now of the face-to-face world at school. Whatever the reason, she prefers to be communicating with others via the phone than being-there with her spatio-temporal contemporaries. For those of Sana's peers observing and inclined to read things this way, the 'constant' presence of the mobile phone itself seems to send out a message: "she does not care about us" – she has better things to do: more important people to communicate with and nicer groups to belong to.

Of course none of this need be true. There are other possibilities. Sana may not in fact have better things to do and may not have more important interlocutors. Or, she may in fact care very much about what her classmates think of her, and she may even care so much that she tries hard to conceal this by creating the opposite impression. This communicative option of *creating the impression that she does not care* would certainly have been available to Sana if indeed she did care and wasn't genuinely texting.

Whatever Sana was or was not doing with her mobile phone, those that observed her with her phone responded (or 'replied' to what they took to be her communicative intent) by circulating the rumour that this was merely a fraudulent effort to display her popularity and look 'smart'. Although it was doubtless carefully concealed from Sana, the distinction between the established group and the outsider thickens and intensifies through these processes. One might say that it congeals into an

interface capable of reversing, inverting and turning inside-out the intended effects of each message Sana expresses. One might think that *nothing happens* during this quiet scandal of the mobile phone, and yet something crucially important to Sana's future and to the future of the class is acquiring form and potency.

*Cyberbullying: a group for all of us who believe that Sana is a ....*

Unlike in the loft scene and the scandal of the mobile phone, in the next scene something 'rude' is indeed communicated to Sana, but this is done in relative anonymity from the safe space of a virtual environment. Sana and her classmates use the social networking site *Facebook* to communicate and share information.

A group is set up called "all of us who believe that Sana is a princess". According to Alma the group was set up by Sana herself, although very few (and perhaps no one) opted to join it. If Sana did indeed set up this group, then this was an ambiguously provocative communicative act, since it directly invites an explicit and collective judgement about Sana's value. Sana's expression, however, is immediately refracted through precisely the hostile communicative medium whose progressive coherence we have traced in the sections above. This time the reply it receives is not concealed in traceless gossip but in the form of the establishment of three alternative groups. The first is "for all of those who do *not* think that Sana is a princess"; the second is "for all of those who find it funny when Noah tortures Sana" (this refers to an alleged off-line event about which we have no information); and the third is: "for all of us who hate Sana".

It is unclear who is responsible for the latter group, invitations to which have been accepted and 'liked' by several friends (a fact that Sana was able to observe). As Alma and Hjalte report, Facebook users can receive a lot of invitations to join groups, and one need only click 'accept' to become a member (or click 'like' to approve of it) – an action which can be lightly undertaken

“without considering how the entire world can see”. The group is opened in the name of Tilde, but Tilde denies authorship. Sisse is thought to know who did it but won’t tell anyone. Alma believes Caroline set it up. Irrespective of who set up the alternative groups, we can see that, despite being ‘cyber’, they lend permanent and visible structure (in the virtual architecture of Facebook) to the divisive semantic interface that was established in the loft scene and that thickened through the scandal of the mobile phone.

But in addition to the establishment of these hategroups there is further hostile activity directed against Sana by the group. On Facebook, Sana receives a message saying “you are too fat” and the photos of herself she has posted are ‘tagged’ with comments such as “please pull up your shirt [to not expose too much cleavage]” Sana responds with the statement “I am an icecold bitch” – a statement which perfectly creates the image of someone who does not care about the judgement of others, whilst simultaneously offering a somewhat damning self-judgement.

### *The loud scandal of Sophie, the fake Facebook profile*

We have emphasized the dialogical and processual nature of our case by stressing at each point how the meanings at play develop through patterns of response to prior communications which were themselves responses to prior communications. We have seen how Sana’s responses have tended at each stage to compound the basic issue of troubled belonging, often ‘backfiring’ and provoking further exclusionary responses whilst making clear communication unlikely. This pattern reaches a zenith in Sana’s next response of creating a ‘fake’ Facebook profile using the invented name ‘Sophie Hansen’. Faced with an existence in suspended transition which has left her in the permanent liminality (Szakolczai 2009) of both belonging and not belonging to her school class, this solution of simply *becoming someone else* is as elegant as it is flawed. To embellish ‘her’/Sophie’s profile, Sana uploads photos of what Alma thinks of as a cool and attractive looking

blonde Caucasian girl (hence Sophie fits the hegemonic Western norms of whiteness and beauty). As Alma, puts it: “Sophie didn’t look like a girl who would want to hang out with Sana”. According to Alma, Sana is “dark-haired and kind of dark-skinned. [...] Her father lives in Africa or somewhere, but I’m not sure if she is African herself. She doesn’t even know which country she comes from”. Sana is not wrong about the desirability to her new classmates of one who looks like Sophie, since Anders, a popular classmate, not only ‘friends’ Sophie on Facebook, but also begins a phase of SNS and text-message communication with ‘her’ (i.e. with Sana answering ‘in the name’ and ‘with the face’ of Sophie) that results in Anders becoming ‘her’/Sophie’s online boyfriend. After a week or so of virtual communication, the new couple initiate a real-time phone conversation in which Sana pretends to be Sophie. The pretense is punctured, however, and Anders quickly realises that he is in fact talking to Sana. As Alma puts it, Sana gets “busted”. Anders ensures that Sana’s fraud is exposed to the entire social group. In exposing Sana as a trickster, this scandal further escalates the antagonism and gossip about her. It drives her into a situation of further exclusion, this time in an open and public manner that is far from being hidden from her.

### *The quiet despair of self-hatred*

We do not know if Sana wanted to be like Sophie, if she intended to disrupt or embarrass Anders or the group, if this was an experiment to test out other desires, or if she wanted to feel something of what it is like to be desired within the norms of whiteness. Nonetheless, the outcome was an intensified scene in which the unanimous hostility of the many was publically visited upon the lone figure of Sana. Sana thus witnessed a virtually instantaneous shift from the positive affect directed towards the cool and blond Sophie to the negativity directed at the real Sana, forced from her hiding place behind Sophie. Liva (who is another girl from the same class) learns that Sana has visited a website for suicidal youth and posted a message to the effect that it has occurred to her to take her own life. This alarming information makes Alma pause and reflect with new empathy towards Sana

(we do not know if this knowledge circulates more widely within the peer group). Alma's reflections are telling and poignant: "if she did it [killed herself] then it would kind of be like they had killed her or at least contributed to it, right?"<sup>ii</sup>

## **Part 2: Entanglements of a liminal hotspot in/through an altered auto-ethnography**

The five scenes of part 1 were produced as part of a process of, on the one hand, *exemplifying* the concept of liminal hotspots by working through what we take to be a concrete case and, on the other hand, of exploring and modifying the character of that concept in the light of the concrete details of the case. Before summarizing our key insights, we will briefly discuss how we came to 'entangle' our case within the process of our altered auto-ethnography (AAE).

We adopt a 'deep empiricism' which gives a radical centrality to *experience* and which takes seriously the idea that any insight and grasp we may have of the broader world in which we participate comes to us through concepts grounded in experience and articulated in discourse with others (Stenner, 2008, 2011). We do not 'find' liminal hotspots in the world, rather we *work up the concept* in order better to grasp and articulate relevant experiences. This articulation should then enhance our capacity to grasp what we experience of the world, whilst keeping us aware that our grasping is a performative *part of* that world. We thus assume a certain zone of indistinction between what is proper to us as researchers and what belongs to the world we research. Lather (2004, 2007) refers to this as a "non-innocent arena". Understanding data as always entangled with researcher's subjectivity is far from new (see Barad 2007). Hence, our AAE is consistent with the various *affective performative methodologies* which concern themselves directly with the subjectivity of the researcher and her inseparability from the field in question (Lather, 2007; Nissen, Vitus, Jefferson, Houborg, & Ingholt, 2015), and advocate "using researchers' affective responses

as instruments of understanding” (Urwin et al., 2013 ). Such methodologies address the ways in which “social scientists are themselves entangled within the assemblages they seek to study” (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013, p. 6) and acknowledge how research constitutes and re/shapes its field of inquiry (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013; Staunæs & Kofoed, 2014).

The AAE we undertook was a response to such calls to examine and rethink our assumptions about the nature of our research subject and practices (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Lury & Wakeford, 2012; MacLure, 2013; Sedgwick, 2003; Wetherell, 2012). In our initial discussions and correspondence we explored and gave voice, not just to our understanding of what was going on between Sana and her classmates, but also to our feelings and hunches, and to the way the data resonated or clashed with experiences in our own academic lives. The fast growing word-processor file through which we documented this process was passed back-and-forth between us, and this enabled us to probe each others’ experiences, teasing apart superficial resonances from deeper insights, and pursuing the latter, sometimes in the form of semi-formal interviews (on line, and face to face in Copenhagen and Brighton).

From a perspective which begins with a clear separation between observer (researcher) and observed (subject matter), it is easy to dismiss this approach as self-indulgent. Is it not ego-centric to think always about yourself when dealing with others who have real problems? What can we possibly learn about the real and serious business of cyberbullying by dwelling on our own privileged experiences? And yet, as we went through the process we found that (despite important power differences that we dwelt upon at length), recognizing similar patterns in our own experience helped us to come to a firmer and more self-evident comprehension of what it can feel like to manage the volatile affectivity conjured in liminal circumstances. It is not simply that we mistake ourselves for Sana, but that we encounter a realm of experience in which the distinctions between self and other become more troublesome and less relevant just as the deeper and, as it were, ‘pre-

individual' commonalities become more salient. The aim was to study the patterns of inter(re)ference *between* our own experiences and those of our research participants, and hence to recognize and affirm our 'entanglement' with each other and with the data. Inspired by Patti Lather's idea of palimpsesting (Lather, 2007), we allowed our two sets of data (the participant interviews and our AAE) to collapse into one another, permitting the different layers of experience and understandings to merge in and through each other in relations of mutual suggestibility (Motzkau, 2009). We were no longer standing, as it were, in front of a liminal hotspot case, but found ourselves *part of* a broader case that transgressed neat disciplinary boundaries. The remaining sections show how this process of entanglement worked to raise questions and to yield three key insights.

### *Liminal hotspots are occasioned by lived paradoxes which paralyze conduct*

The analysis in part 1 showed how the difficulties encountered by Sana and her classmates relate fundamentally to certain dynamics of troubled belonging and becoming. These constituted the conditions of a liminal hotspot. Officially, she was a member of the class, but both unofficially and as it were *subjectively* her belonging was challenged and she was 'othered'. She thus lived the paradox of both belonging and not belonging to the class, 'stuck', as it were, in between. In the AAE we gained a better grasp of the *paradoxical occasioning of these experiences* by exploring comparable experiences of our own. These experiences both deepened our appreciation of the case, and allowed us to better understand our motivations for dealing with it in the first place.

The case led us to discuss concrete emotional experiences in which, as researchers, we felt simultaneously included and excluded from certain academic groups. Jette discussed her participation in an international research network related to the field from which the case was



drawn. This network participated, for the most part, in the process of perpetuating what we have referred to above as the core ‘truisms’ of the field (i.e. the model of perpetrator/victim and the desire for inclusion as an unquestionable driver).<sup>iii</sup> Jette described the “nausea” she felt in facing the repetitive un-interest displayed for “other perspectives”. She reflected on the difficulties involved in managing a situation in which one is pleased to be invited into a network, and yet gets a strong feeling that one’s research is not really acknowledged and does not truly belong. The “truisms” thus seemed to play parallel roles in the case of Sana and in Jette’s experiences as a cyberbullying researcher. Paul described a comparable but distinct experience. Some years back, he was pleased to have been invited to participate in a seminar by colleagues from another discipline whose work he admired. He was tempted to feel a genuine participant in their network, but found instead a frustrating sense of simultaneous acceptance and rejection: “...as I perceived it, the contributions I made were either ignored or taken the wrong way. It seemed then as if what I took to be essentially the same comments made by other speakers were, by contrast, enthusiastically embraced, and treated as if ‘owned’ by the group. My efforts to clarify or intervene again served only to worsen the situation and increase the sense of a barrier between what I took to be the ‘inside’ group and myself as an ‘outsider’.”

Our point is not that these situations are isomorphic (and we are under no illusion that they are comparably serious), but that they allowed us to get a firmer experiential grasp on the significance of what we call the *paradox of in/exclusion* in which one finds oneself simultaneously accepted and rejected, or perhaps included *as* excluded. Jette’s “nausea” and Paul’s perception of an invisible “barrier” express the sense in which the mutually contradictory injunctions at play in this paradox serve to block or paralyze the flow of one’s activity, causing conduct to turn in circles that risk becoming increasingly vicious. This sense of paralysis reminded us of Szacolzkai’s (this Special Issue) metaphor of an engine in neutral with the accelerator revving to no avail. One can neither

shift into the ‘gear’ of belonging (which would enable a centripetal (Thomassen, 2014, p. 1)] or ‘pivotal’ vector towards the inside of a circle of insiders) nor into the ‘gear’ of not-belonging (which at least would permit a centrifugal vector of escape from this circle and into another). Communication is also paralysed by its own paradox (Jackson, Watzlawick, & Menningers, 1967). As we saw in the second scene, Sana both cannot communicate (if she sits alone *not* talking to proximal interlocutors because she is busy *not* talking to distant interlocutors on her mobile phone) and at the same time cannot *not* communicate (since her classmates ‘read’ the significance of her actions and non-actions whatever she says or doesn’t say). Paradox invades not just the *form*, but also the *content* of communication, as when Sana’s expressions mutually unravel their own sense (to the extent that she displays ‘not caring’ about what the others think *because* she cares about what the others think), and it has the effect of *undoing* the subject. As noted in the comment from Paul above, the tendency is to try to solve this confusion and ambiguity with utterances and actions that are in fact prone to misfire and worsen the situation, further tightening and heating the circle of the hotspot. This sense in which solutions compound problems is a key feature of liminal hotspots.

*Liminal hotspots entail a distinctive modality of liminal affectivity:*

*volatility, vacillation, suggestibility*

Liminal affectivity is proper to any situation of significant passage or transition between worlds, because if one is to pass it is necessary, at some point, to find oneself “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1969). Liminal affectivity in this general sense can be thrilling, but in our liminal hotspot negative affects are pervasive and where experiences are positive, there is always a sense of unstable volatility and vacillation to and from the negative. This negative volatility is so obvious and serious in Sana’s case that it does not need restating. In the experiences discussed in our AAE, volatility was also noted. Paul “became increasingly paranoid in a way that appeared to oscillate

between a sense of shame and a sense of anger” and he describes a peculiar feeling of “words functioning more like blows and strokes than like conveyers of rational meaning”. Jette remembers “a myriad of feelings... Resentment, tiredness... Hardly anyone listened”. Out of this she ambivalently hesitated in bringing her research perspectives to the fore. When she did, she “tended to be perceived as the naughty girl ... [and] ended up being disengaged, and disappointed”.

Much of this affective ambivalence was occasioned by the enduring situation of being formally invited in, but implicitly cast out. The volatility of the affectivity expresses the instability engendered by struggles to make sense of the paradox-ridden circumstances. That is to say, feelings vacillate as a function of their location at the sensitive threshold of in/exclusion. In this respect, our AAE described a sense of searching for intelligibility amidst the perplexity of vacillation between multiple named or unnamed affective intensities. We analysed this troubled intelligibility as a function of the fact of being betwixt and between the coordinates supplied by more established and familiar ‘forms of process’ (see Greco and Stenner, this volume). In more routinised circumstances the otherwise nameless, transient, multiple and ambivalent *affectivity* can cohere into the coordinates of nameable and shareable *emotions*, with their implicit normative subjective form (Massumi, 2002; Stenner & Moreno, 2013). Liminality as conventionally understood involves a more or less deliberate *suspension* of such coordinates, and during the liminal passage the usual normative expectations socially applicable to a person are bracketed. In a liminal hotspot one finds an unstable oscillation between the normative coordinates of distinct forms of process. The situation of a coexistence of myriads of feelings that resist reduction to any *one* feeling becomes an enduring and a troubled experience. If emotions can be likened to feelings that have been provided (by an established form-of-process) with a conventional ‘home’, then the affectivity that characterizes a liminal hotspot involves feelings that risk being made permanently homeless, as they vacillate unpredictably from dwelling to dwelling.

## *Liminal hotspots entail BOTH a both/and AND a neither/nor 'logic'*

In the process of writing the AAE we came to formulate this hotspot liminality as *both both/and and neither/nor*: Sana, for example, is neither the victim, nor the bullier, AND she is both the victim and the bullier. When Turner refers to the 'betwixt and between' character of liminal experiences, spaces, times and characters, the contrast at play is between the 'either / or' logic that he attributes to 'structure', and the 'both / and' logic of liminal transition. Crudely speaking, where 'structure' is at issue it is important to be able to make clear either/or distinctions (either you are a man or a woman, a child or an adult, a medic or a patient). This structural logic of 'either/or' is *suspended* and tolerated during liminal occasions, and this is what lends them their 'subjunctive' mood. In contrast to liminal rites where a 'both/and' ambivalence is tolerated and even facilitated, with liminal hotspots the conventional order of a form-of-process remains suspended under circumstances where liminal affectivity is not socially tolerated or expected. This has implications for the liminal affectivity involved in these scenarios, clarifying why it becomes pervasively troublesome in liminal hotspots. This focus on troubled transition leads us to ascribe as much relevance to the 'neither/nor' aspect as to the 'both/and' aspect. Thus, we arrive at the formula *both 'neither/nor' and 'both/and'*. The both 'both/and' and 'neither/nor' formulation has the advantage of capturing both the negative and the positive qualities at play in the "confusion of all the customary categories" (Turner, 1964; 1979). To modify a familiar saying, when liminality becomes troubled in a hotspot, the positive value of *both* having your cake *and* eating it can morph into the negative value of *neither* having it *nor* eating it.

### **Conclusion: Longing for belonging, leaping for freedom**

We were not in easy territory when conducting the AAE: we were surprised by how strong our feelings were, and how easy it was to fixate on particular qualities and features of the person we

took 'Sana' to be (all the time aware of a certain zone of indistinction between 'Sana' and 'us'). One key question recurred for us throughout the AAE: Are we at risk of purifying Sana as a subject with an unquestionable desire to belong? Do we somehow inscribe the need to belong into Sana as a foundational desire? It is well argued within new bullying research that subjects *long for belonging* (Hansen, 2011). This – along with the related theme of seeking 'secure attachment' (see Duchinsky, Greco and Solomon, 2015) - is unquestionably an important driver in processes of inclusion and exclusion. But the analysis of the AAE prompts us to dwell at this assumption and attend to other possibilities. In discussing the nausea she felt on involvement in the research network, for example, Paul asked Jette "but did you really want to become a member of that research field?" This question sparked the AAE off in a new direction. We started considering whether we (and, by extension, Sana) only at first glance desired to belong, and whether there was not also a desire precisely for standing at the threshold. Jette reflects: "perhaps I never really wanted it [to be a member], as you suggest, but I did not like to not-be-included.... Perhaps I preferred to live at the edge of the community".

This questioning raised the possibility that the assumption that subjects long for inclusion might overlook the desire to be *at* the threshold, and not *in* the community, and the desire to be able to move away from the strictures of particular group belonging. The value of any retrospective urge for foundations is surely that these provide a solid launch pad for forays into the future, with all its necessary risks. The latter possibility entails that living at the threshold is not merely an effect of not being accepted, but an active choice and desire, possibly driven by desires for thresholds and voids. Paul asked: "was not this sense of being an 'outsider' exactly the sort of experience I seem to routinely seek out, preferring not to commit to a stable community always operating on the fringes of several groups, 'hypothetically' belonging to all of them whilst concretely belonging to none?" Jette in turn recognized this desire for the threshold, and it is at least possible that Sana too was not

merely and entirely the vulnerable, scapegoated subject. Perhaps Sana too oscillates between wanting to be included and desiring the Otherness of freedom from inclusion? Before it is assumed that Sana's fraudulent Facebook event was the act of a lonely outsider desperate to belong and wishing to be a conventionally attractive white female, we should raise the contrasting possibility that it was *also* an act of exposing to the class the mechanism of its own cohesion and of creating new ways of being that can challenge existing realities, rather than merely adapt to them. Sana steps into new territories at the same time as she multiplies herself. She subtly but vigorously moves out of the positions that are so eagerly maintained and anchored in mainstream research on bullying. She also steps out of the positions assigned to her by her peers, and interacts in ways that are unintelligible to them. And somehow she also steps out of the foundational assumption that she was vulnerably driven by a desire to belong in this particular class.

Read this way, the liminal hotspot queers the perpetrator/victim model of analysis by transgressing its boundaries. This queer reading, of course, is also limited and also speaks as much about the desires of the one giving the reading as it does about the case itself. In truth, the liminal hotspot seems to hold both frailty and strength, both *stasia* and transformative potential, and both conservative tendencies and possibilities for creative change. But its 'neither/nor' AND 'both/and' dynamic also and equally frustrates both sets of possibility. It forces us to attend to the problem of how to 'go on' in the face of uncertainty, paradox and ambivalence, and in the real lives of cyberbullying and research subjectification, and in the methodologies we take up when scrutinizing these lives. If one is to extricate oneself from a liminal hotspot, one has no choice but to find another way and to *be inventive*, just as Sana invents a new way in setting up a fake profile and just as she finds ways to – possibly – expose the mechanism of cohesion of a school class.

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<sup>i</sup> The empirical data was produced as part of the eXbus research project (Exploring Bullying in Schools, [www.exbus.dk](http://www.exbus.dk)). The case has been analysed, within a different theoretical framing, in Danish, by Kofoed, (2013), and in Kofoed (forthcoming).

<sup>ii</sup> Let us here remind the reader that the account of what happened is narrated by Alma and Hjalte, and that we do not have access to Sana's perspective in this data sample. The interviews were conducted shortly after the last incident. Hence, we do not know what happens after the discovery of the alleged post on a suicide webpage, and we must allow the 'case' to end at this point. It was assured that the information of alleged suicide-considerations shared in the interview-situation was also accessible for the responsible professionals in school.