Psychical contexts of subjectivity and performative practices of remuneration: the movement of desire in teaching assistants' narratives of work

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Abstract

A range of sociological work has theorized neoliberal regulative regimes, suggesting the contradictions contained in the enactment of policy and foregrounding the painful effects of these processes on subjectivities produced within performative school cultures. This paper contributes to this body of work by tracing the movement of desire in teaching assistants' subjective relations to workplace practices of remuneration. We do this through an analysis of a series of group and individual free associative interviews with teaching assistants working in primary schools. Drawing on a Lacanian account of the way processes of identification channel affect, as desire, through signifying chains within a discursive field, we explore the associative chains of meaning that overdetermine the subjectivities produced within performative practices of remuneration. We suggest that the complex and contradictory chains of signification embodied in the school environment constitute a space where fragile teaching assistant subjectivities reiterate previous relations to an ambiguous Other.

Introduction: theorizing the production of remunerative practices and relations to work

Debate about pay and remuneration in the media is often sensationalised in relation to the high pay of executives, sports stars, and celebrities on the one hand, in relation to those receiving below minimum wage on the other, or, alternatively, in polarized responses to workers striking in a variety of private and public sector organisations. It is perhaps tempting to dismiss out of hand the sensationalized, truncated, and often inconsistent stances on pay and remuneration circulating in the popular media and in our everyday discourse; and the extent to which these debates affect policy or practice is difficult to determine. However, popular narratives of justification, as well as common deliberative dynamics, and the terms of specific political debates re-emerge in the everyday interactions that constitute relations to pay and remuneration. The appearance or disappearance of these discursive elements can contain important clues about how regimes of remuneration are sustained and how they might be

transformed. This paper foregrounds one approach to interpreting these clues: an approach that enables us to examine the unconscious processes that tie individual subjects into the remuneration regime of a particular sector, and to trace moments of potential fissure. We do this through an analysis of a series of group and individual free associative interviews with teaching assistants working in primary schools.

Contemporary developments in the neoliberal and financialised political economy have been identified with contradictory moments in our beliefs and practices about wealth (Davies 2014; Peck 2009; Langley 2008). Political discourse provides an illustration of these contradictory articulations. A moment of economic prosperity in 1998 made credible the widely reported claim that Peter Mandelson, a senior UK Labour politician, had said that he was 'intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich'. If nothing else, this demonstrates in a rather brazen manner how regimes of pay and remuneration come to be taken for granted when other economic indicators provide an opportunity for complacency and wishful thinking. This complacency might be understood as a form of exuberance, an idealizing affective response that ignores complexities elided by narrowly defined indicators. In contrast, in a post-2008 financial crisis context pay and remuneration have moved onto the political agenda, as a point around which to unify public outrage, and also, increasingly, as the focus for specific policy proposals to regulate, for example, executive pay or zero hours contracts (Resolution Foundation 2013). There is thus clear evidence of a shift in political relations to existing regimes of pay and remuneration within what might be thought of as the same 'neoliberal' political economy. One interpretation of this shift might be that the sense of precarity following the crisis created a need for an alternative object of moral condemnation. A question remains, though, about whether and under what conditions this kind of shift might be mobilized as a resource to unsettle or 'reactivate' the fundamental economic assumptions upon which the legitimacy of these regimes is grounded.

Moments of exuberance and precarity can also be traced within the education system, and, for the purposes of this paper, in the figure of the teaching assistant. Teaching assistants traditionally supported teachers with a range of tasks to ensure the smooth running of the classroom, but have increasingly taken on roles directly related to curriculum delivery. Often their work is aligned with dedicated funding streams targeting individual or small groups of children identified as suitable for additional support. Under New Labour a series of reforms diverted proCeéds of prosperity into the school system to regulate and optimize the working time of teachers. One initiative was the introduction of a statutory right for teachers to be allocated ring-fenced time for 'planning, preparation and assessment' (PPA) (Times Education Supplement, 2005). The diverted funds, and additional regulatory changes, allowed schools to pay appropriately trained

'Higher Level Teaching Assistants' (HLTAs) to cover classes, to enable teachers to take up their PPA time. New Labour also supported the introduction of work based 'Foundation Degrees': programmes of undergraduate level study that enabled students who might not otherwise access higher education to build on skills and knowledge developed in the workplace. Foundation Degrees for teaching assistants enabled many who had found employment in schools despite lack of qualifications, frequently women who hadn't had opportunities to study earlier in life, to return to education. This could in turn lead to a full degree and, ultimately, qualification as a teacher. While offering new opportunities for progression for a significantly marginalized sector of the workforce, these reforms added to the complexity of the categorizing system within the work place, which now graded teaching assistants from NVQs level 1-3 through to HLTA and potentially autonomous classroom practitioner; and at the same time provoked opposition from teaching unions, who felt that the promotion of teaching assistants to cover PPA time undermined the professional status of teachers. Nevertheless, there was a certain exuberance both about the recognition of teachers' need for planning time and about the development of new routes for equity in access to educational and professional opportunities. Under the austerity regime that followed the 2008 financial crash, the more exuberant elements of this scenario have themselves been revealed as fragile and precarious.

Changes in teachers' conditions of pay provide one illustration of the precarious aspect of exuberant remunerative reforms. During the period of austerity a variety of longstanding mechanisms for ensuring transparency within a national pay system were revoked as schools were given more autonomy in practices of remuneration (National Union of Teachers, 2013). At the same time, intensified mechanisms of accountability, in the form of performance related pay linked to pupil achievement, replaced attempts made in the period of prosperity to offer scales of progression that recognized the value of classroom practice (ibid). Thus an exuberant moment of apparent universalism and recognition of professional knowledge quickly evaporated. The NUT action in opposition to these changes was one element of the context of the project reported in this paper.

As many others have noted, these instances of shifting discourses and regulative practices of pay and remuneration can be theorized in a variety of ways. Walkerdine and Bansel (2010) point to the opposition between Giddens' understanding of late modernity as offering opportunities for a 'reflexive project of the self' and Rose's suggestion that this imperative to choose is itself a construction, an obligation to be free that is demanded of subjects of neoliberal technologies (p. 495). McGimpsey (2017) notes that liberal and neoliberal policy shifts have been described as exemplifying successive formations of 'the state', and that this kind of analysis projects an idea of the state as 'a comprehensive and

comprehendible unity' (p. 67). The coherence this implies is questioned in analyses that view policy initiatives as constitutive of, rather than responsive to, a cause or a problem: McGimpsey suggests that 'austerity functioned discursively to shift the locus of the crisis from private debt and reckless governance in the financial sector to levels of public spending' (ibid, p. 72); while Thompson and Cook argue that across shifts in education policy the figure of 'the unaccountable teacher' or 'teacher as the problem' is produced as a justification for neoliberal technologies of accountability (2014). All these authors suggest that Deleuze's conception of 'assemblage' offers a more productive way to understand the politics of 'neoliberalism'.

One feature of Deleuzian analyses is a resistance to an understanding of 'neoliberalism' as a temporal or spatial unity, or as a hegemonic structure with unitary or predictable subjectivating effects. Rather than seeking to identify coherence, an 'assemblage' anti-methodology suggests we map social formations as contingent but productive conjunctions of parts (McGimpsey, 2017; Deleuze and Guattari, 1984). For example McGimpsey maps the conjunction of localism, austerity, and mechanisms for calculating the value of returns on social investments as the distinctive 'late neoliberal' public service assemblage that emerged in the UK after the financial crash (2017:72). Walkerdine and Bansel (2010) compare communities in Sydney and in the South Wales valleys experiencing similar challenges of a globalized labour market that demands individualized 'entrepreneurial' worker identities. They argue that a recognizable vocabulary of entrepreneurial aspiration was evident in Sydney workers' narratives of solitary experiences of redundancy and restructuring. In contrast the established presence of trade unions and sensitive interventions to support workers' planning post-redundancy in the South Wales community enabled ex-steel workers to experience creative new career possibilities 'less as aspiration than revelation' (503). They conclude: 'neo or advanced liberalism and globalisation are not monolithic forces that trample upon lives in such a way as to completely predict and specify the outcome' (506).

This use of 'assemblage' to explore re-orderings of partial elements of diverse contexts is consistent with policy enactment research (Ball et al, 2011; Braun et al, 2011; Bradbury, 2014; Santori, 2014), which uses ethnographic-type approaches to trace the way juxtapositions of different elements of context (e.g. geography, knowledge or professional values, material infrastructure, external relations, see Braun et al 2011:588) produce diverse practices and subjects of education policy. So, for example, Bradbury observes the way the assessment profiles required in UK early years settings involve teachers' professional judgment, but then ask teachers to transform that judgment into a numerical record for purposes of accountability, simultaneously acknowledging and then undermining teachers' expert knowledge and status (2012; 2014). At the level of

the teacher, Ball has described this as 'a kind of values schizophrenia' or 'splitting' (2003: 221; see also Rogers 2012; Bernstein, 2000), connoting the way that psychical processes are implicated in the formation of the policy subject. A Deleuzian perspective might describe this as a fusing of contradictory parts – partial elements of expert knowledge juxtaposed with partial elements of an accountability system – and a redirection of flows of affect within an early years' education assemblage.

A further space of articulation between Deleuzian assemblage theory and policy enactment research can be traced in the theorization of politics, agency and the new. Deleuze's theorisation of the assemblage is also a theorisation of the possibility of the new, and a displacement of the 'self' as the subject of action. In this view, the possibility of the new requires a creative, political re-ordering of assemblage, difference as opposed to repetition (Thompson and Cook, 2014:712), and this creativity is associated with the affective capacities of desire (Bignall, 2010). In contrast, some of the more traditionally Foucauldian aspects of policy enactment research can seem to view contemporary disciplinary technologies as uni-directional in their effects, squeezing the breath out of pockets of resistance. Ball's classic 2003 paper, 'The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity', for example, concludes: 'The policy technologies of market, management and performativity leave no space of an autonomous or collective ethical self' (226). This recourse to a notion of autonomy or collectivity as a unified, though thwarted, subject of ethics, appears to create a political impasse. Similarly, in recent work foregrounding the significance of micro-processes in the production of contingent 'versions of professionalism' (Perryman et al, 2017), the subject appears as politically inert, 'compliant in their domination' (ibid:2). However, other research in the field has explicitly explored possibilities for teacher agency and theorized moments of resistance (Ball et al. 2011; Braun et al. 2010; Bradbury 2012, 2014; Wright 2013). Bradbury's study of the early years' classroom, for example, develops Ball's notion of 'cynical compliance' as a painful mode of agency that appears in contexts that are tightly monitored by multiple technologies of accountability (2012). Her analysis points to the affective cost this entails, arguing: "we need to deromanticise the idea of teachers' resistance to dominant neo-liberal discourses and consider the emotional costs of their exercise of agency." (ibid:183).

This body of work raises a series of questions. One set of questions relates to the way particular subjects take up positions of compliance/resistance: How might we better understand the appearance and dispersal of compliant/resistant subject positions within the field of education? What constitutes a subjectivity as a particular mode of agency/resistance? There are also questions we might pose about the interpretation of psychical and affective processes in the production of these subjectivities: How might we better understand the 'emotional costs'

associated with compliance/resistance? Is it possible to trace a relationship between affect, or desire, and the production of a subjectivity as a particular kind of compliant/resistant subject? Psychoanalytic understandings of both the unconscious and desire can help us to explore these questions about subjectivity and affect.

Following from the insights into the significance of both affect and subjectivity developed in previous research, this paper explores these questions by tracing the movement of desire in teaching assistants' subjective relations to workplace practices of remuneration. Drawing on a Lacanian account of the way processes of identification channel affect, as desire, through signifying chains within a discursive field, we explore the associative chains of meaning that overdetermine the subjectivities produced within performative practices of remuneration. We suggest that the contradictory chains of signification embodied in the school environment constitute a space where fragile teaching assistant subjectivities reiterate relations to an ambiguous Other. This theorization of the movement of desire, foregrounding the role of unconscious, symbolic associations, provides insights into complex dynamics of stasis and change, and adds detail and nuance to existing accounts of agency and enactment in education policy research.

In addition we argue, speculatively and playfully, for an understanding of psychical objects and unconscious processes as a context for, or as partial objects within, a remuneration assemblage. Where, for example, Walkerdine and Bansel foreground contexts of time and place in their comparison across settings, the psyche might be seen as a displacement of historical and geographical contexts, condensing norms and principles across space-time. From the perspective of those who foreground the opposition between Lacanian and Deleuzian philosophies (e.g. O'Sullivan, 2009) the juxtaposition of Lacanian and Deleuzian approaches might be considered problematic. However, Deleuze's acknowledgement of his debt to Lacan suggests that the juxtaposition of the two is not illegitimate, even though we are deploying some of the terms – 'signifier', 'symbolic,' 'Oedipus' – that he explicitly renounced (Deleuze, 1995:13-4; Smith, 2005:642-3). We hope that it might perhaps be possible to mitigate the traditional psychoanalytic reification of Oedipal or familial relations within the psyche. We need to put this rider up front, as our analysis most certainly reiterates aspects of Oedipus. The question is whether we can avoid, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari: 'taking part in the work of bourgeois repression at its most far-reaching level [..] keeping European humanity harnessed to the yoke of daddy-mommy' (1984:50). We hope that, rather than shouting 'daddy-mommy', although that is a risk, our analysis inflects the oedipal relation to a parental Other with Lacan's mobius strip, or even, though less directly, Deleuze & Guattari's mycelium-style rhizome metaphors, to disturb essentialising conceptions of inner and outer, or of the psychic and the social.

Before moving on to the project and analysis of the material, we briefly review the way psychoanalytic conceptions of repetition and resistance have been deployed in previous psychosocial analyses of relations to work.

Repetition and resistance in relations to work: a space for the unconscious?

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) Freud traced the relation between resistance and repetition. This forms the basis for the conceptualization of transference and also for Freud's understanding of the distinctive nature of the clinical space. Within psychoanalytic practice it had initially been thought that a symptom might be overcome by explaining its meaning directly to the patient. Analysts discovered, however, that there was a resistance to this kind of direct interpretation. Freud then theorized this resistance as itself an aspect of the symptom: a clue that might shed light on repetitious patterns of behaviour that impede satisfaction. The concept of the transference suggests that such patterns might be understood as repetitions of previous significant relationships within a new context, such as the clinical situation. Clinically, the transference is a distinctive situation in which the patient can both repeat previous patterns, and come to recognise and thus shift the unconscious desire that limited their relations in this way (ibid:289). Psychosocial work that draws on psychoanalysis has used these ideas both to interpret repetitious patterns in interview narratives, and to interpret relations within the research process itself.

Alex Moore's (2006) analysis of teachers' responses to policy directives uses the concept of repetition to trace conflicting position articulated in interview accounts. He distinguishes between more sociological interpretations, which focus on explicit statements of ideological affiliations, and psychoanalytic interpretations of reiterated desire. Where contradictions emerge in interview narratives, Moore suggests, it is productive to explore both these levels of analysis. He illustrates this with the case of one participant whose need to avoid conflict and to be seen as likable had won out over his political convictions when policy changes were introduced in his school: 'Bill seems to have been compelled to subordinate one set of feelings – to do with educational and political ideology – to another set, to do with not wanting to lose popularity'. Moore describes this as 'the triumph of desire over ideology' (2006:497). Layton, a psychoanalyst, has traced similar dynamics in her analysis of class relations to the 'entrepreneurial' subjectivity demanded by neoliberal labour market. She identifies repetitious transferential patterns imbued with class related expectations, and relates these both to her patients experiences at work, and to their relation with her in the clinic (2016). It is also worth noting that Thompson and Cook (2014) cite Moore's work on repetition and transference in their Deleuzian analysis of the

failure of education policy making to constitute difference. Their analysis posits the policy making assemblage as needing to break out of the habit of 'teacher as problem' (712). Their argument is positioned within Deleuze's complex theorization of repetition as the imaginary product of contemplation (Deleuze, 2004), which, while not directly psychoanalytic, has clear resonances with both Freudian and Lacanian ideas.

A number of researchers influenced by Lacanian ideas have been experimenting with what they describe as a psychoanalytically informed activist approach. These approaches have two defining objectives. Firstly they aim to disrupt and/or re-signify dominant discourses of economic development and the way these discourses position disadvantaged communities as lacking independent discursive or political resources. Secondly they aim to collaborate with, identify, name and support existing and frequently unrecognized localized identities or groups (Ozselcuk, 2006:232; Healy, 2010:498). In order to do this, they set up focus groups, interviews, conversations and workshops that explicitly aim to introduce ideas about, for example, cooperative or worker takeovers as a response to the adoption of capitalist values in state organizations (Ozselcuk, ibid), or the recognition and development of alternative forms of economic value (Gibson-Graham, 2002). These authors draw on psychoanalysis to analyse resistances that emerge in the encounters between researchers and participants: to understand, for example, Turkish workers' identifications with a position as 'state employee', despite the ambivalence of their relation to the term under 'state capitalism' (Ozselcuk, ibid). A psychoanalytic understanding of the significance of ambiguity is also explicitly deployed: collaborative workshops draw attention to the ambiguity or emptiness of naturalized terms such as 'the economy' (Healy, 2010; Healy and Graham, 2008); and researchers also reflect on the effects of their own position as an enigmatic other within the research process (Healy, 2010:499-500; see also Charalambous, 2014).

The centrality and complexity of resistance and ambiguity in these projects is significant, as the level of direction in the activities the researchers initiate could be interpreted as impositions onto participants, from a position of authority. It is also noteworthy that while Healy and Graham, for example, report on their more productive encounters, in which they were able to trace developments in their own and participants' discourse (Healy 2010), they also record that this was not the norm. They explain that their interventions were more usually met with a variety of objections: arguments that alternatives to the existing 'economy' were exceptions, not reproducible, or liable to co-optation in support of capitalism (Healy and Graham, 2008). In response to this Healy argues: 'The psychoanalytic concept of fantasy allowed us to understand the expression of a passionate attachment to capitalocentric conceptions of economic space, even when this attachment is painful or paralyzing' (2010:504). While, as noted by Ozselcuk

(ibid:234), it is risky to explain away objections as irrational or unconscious attachments, a careful reading of emphases and contradictions within the data can support such interpretations.

The work of these researchers opens up a conceptual and a methodological space. Firstly, might it be possible to develop a more nuanced understanding of the unconscious structure of resistances identified in their analyses? And, following from this, might a more explicit use of free associative methodologies help us to explore the nature of these unconscious processes in the constitution of relations between participants and the remunerative practices of the workplace? We elaborate on these questions in turn in the following sections. First we set out the conceptualisations of overdetermination, identification and desire that we will go on to use in the analysis of our project data; following that we explain the free associative approach we adopted in our interviews with teaching assistants.

Overdetermination, identification and desire
In conceptualizing our data we draw on the concept of overdetermination. In the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1958) Freud used this term to describe the multiple symbolic connections between the elements of a dream and the unconscious dream thoughts:

> Not only are the elements of a dream determined by the dream thoughts many times over, but the individual dream-thoughts are represented in the dream by several elements. (1958:389)

Crucially, Freud argues, it is the fact that the manifest elements of a dream, like words, 'are predestined to ambiguity' (ibid: 456) that allows meanings to be disguised and expressed in this way, through processes of condensation. In addition, Freud suggests, the concept of overdetermination can also explain the production of affect within a dream, so that elements or signifiers can be seen as a channel for the expression and transformation of affective intensities (ibid:618). These fundamental insights about the articulation and disguise of meaning and affect through a linguistically structured process of signification provides the basis for our conceptualization of the interview material. However, whereas Freud' account suggests a complex network of dream thoughts that is the excessive material that determines the content of a dream, we draw on Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) conceptualization of a field of discursivity as the excessive material from which discourse is articulated. Our analysis traces elements of discourse that are temporarily fixed to constitute a space for subjectivity, and foregrounds open or ambiguous aspect of these elements. We

do this by identifying relatively stable chains of meaning within the chaotic mass of signifying elements that constitute the interview data.

A Lacanian understanding of the relation between subject and other can help us to trace the movement of desire in processes of overdetermination. In Lacanian theory subjectivity comes into being when the infant identifies with a signifier that represents an Other who confers a sense of being on the subject (Fink, 1995; Lacan, 2010). For Lacan, as for Freud, this process is always simultaneously symbolic and affective. The infant hangs onto the (m)Other's words and actions in an effect to discern both her meaning and her desire; and to dispel the intense precariousness associated with overwhelming experience of ambiguity. It is thus through the questioning of the desire of the (m)Other that the subject's affect is channeled, as desire, through the appropriation of meaningful signifiers. Throughout life, the subject continues to guess at the meaning and desire of an ambiguous Other, represented by a variety of signifiers embodied in/as individuals and institutions. The question: 'What does the Other desire of me?' and the identification with a signifier that might represent the desire of the Other, are central to the ongoing production of subjectivity. It is thus possible to trace the movement of desire by asking the question: Which Other constitutes the desire of the subject? To which Other do they address their being?

In Lacanian theory a further refinement in the mapping of desire is constituted in the distinction between identification in the Symbolic and identification in the Imaginary (Lacan, 2006[1966]; Evans, 1996). Symbolic identification is a relation to the Other, as represented by a signifier recognized as belonging to an open signifying system. The subject relates to the signifier as one element of a symbolically articulated set of norms or principles. These norms or principles constitute a position from which we can work out if we are good or bad, likeable or not likable. When we identify with a Symbolic Other we are thus able to stabilize a sense of our identity in relation to an open but meaningful symbolic structure. Imaginary identification is a relation to the other, as represented by a signifier that is understood as if it is unified or whole, a self-evident value that does not require justification in relation to norms or principles. When we identify with an Imaginary other, it is as if our whole identity depends on similarity or difference with one ideal or signifier. Symbolic and Imaginary identifications are contrasting stances in relation to the same set of signifying elements; and any one signifying element can stand in for, or represent, a variety of o/Others. The different modes of identification are, however, associated with different affective investments: more intense feelings of rivalry or competition, for example, might be indicative of an Imaginary identification; in Symbolic identification, in contrast, affect is more dispersed, able to move across elements in the network of signifiers. These modes of identification thus differ, significantly, in the extent to which the signifying structure permits the

movement of desire. The 'aim', in psychoanalytic terms, is identification in the Real: an overwhelming and unsustainable encounter with radical contingency and uncertainty, from which it might be possible for the subject to radically reformulate intransigent desire.

In relation to our project, the aim is to attempt to map desire, the channeling of affect, within relations to practices of remuneration at work. Our interest is in what sustains practices of remuneration (or what organizes the partial elements of a remuneration assemblage); and we speculate that desire has a part to play in the ongoing process of production of these practices. So, put another way, we are interested in the way the fragility of teaching assistants' unconscious – Symbolic, Imaginary or Real – identifications might intersect with the fragility of practices of remuneration in the workplace. Politically, there is a question about how successfully subjective identifications within workplace practices can contain affect and articulate desire. Methodologically, there is a question about how it might be possible to interpret instances within our interview data as Symbolic or Imaginary identifications. Frequently relations oscillate between the two modes. In the analysis section, we have decided to use 'o/Other', throughout, to foreground both the unpredictable movement of desire and the oscillation between identificatory modes.

A Lacanian inspired free associative methodology

Our project experimented with a range of techniques for producing and exploring free associative material with our interview participants. Bollas (1999) has described the contrasting modes of listening to or receiving a patient's speech in different schools of psychoanalysis. He contrasts Freud's technique, which uses the analyst's silence to allow the gradual emergence of material, with Kleinian technique, which recommends frequent intervention to interpret projections (188). Pure free association is impossible to achieve, so these approaches are not mutually exclusive or incompatible, they simply provoke or facilitate different trajectories in the associations (ibid:63). Free associative approaches to interviews within psychosocial research have tended to recommend minimal intervention by the researcher, both to guard against potentially sensitive clinical type interventions, and to avoid directing the material (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Miller et al 2008). While paying attention to both these considerations, we developed a slightly different approach, inspired by the work of Lacan. In planning the interviews our focus was explicitly on the use of signifiers, and on ways in which we might potentially draw our participants' attention to equivocation and ambiguities in their speech (see Fink, 1997:15). We also attempted to avoid responding to the material except at the level of language, or signifier; although, of course, we directed the narratives through our initial question, and additionally

when we selected signifiers to use a prompts for further associations within the interviews.

Our participants were four teaching assistants, working at different schools, but all in the final year of a part time BA in Education Studies. They took part in series of group and individual interviews. In the first group interview we invited participants to say anything that came to mind in relation to 'pay and remuneration'. We then interviewed each participant individually, using words and phrases we selected from the prior group interview (e.g. 'lucky girl', 'breadwinner', 'behind closed doors') to prompt further associations. In the second group interview we used three newspaper headlines as prompts for free associative writing and speaking ('Britain's bank bosses to get millions in share payments in bonus cap dodge'; 'Wayne Rooney signs up for Manchester United until June 2019 for £85m'; 'Parents will struggle to understand teachers' strike action'). In the final individual interviews with two of the participants, we again used words and phrases from our prior meetings as prompts; with the other two participants, we borrowed from the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method and began with the request: Please tell me the story of your life (Wengraf and Chamberlayne, 2006). In the final interviews we also invited participants to reflect on the experience of participating in the project. We met with participants jointly a few months after the final interviews to feedback initial findings, and this generated further material.

The ethics form stipulated that participants could withdraw at any time or ask us not to use any sensitive material, and there were instances where participants specified material in this way. In addition, at the beginning of the first group interview, and again in each subsequent interview, we explained the idea of free association: that this approach meant that they should not expect 'normal' conversational responses, and that this might make them anxious. Within the interviews we invited them to let us know if it became too uncomfortable at any point. In this way, we gained consent for a certain level of anxiety in relation to participation in the project.

Mapping and Layering the Field of Discursivity

We begin our analysis by mapping signifiers of remuneration within the data, tracing the way their more ambiguous aspects relate to the Symbolic order, or the field of the Other, in our case the field of primary education as embodied in the school environments experienced by our participants. We then explore contrasting chains of meanings attached to one signifier, 'sell yourself', an injunction offered to promote successful progression, but also a point of fissure within the group. In doing this, we trace clues that shed light on the o/Other to

whom, we might say, participants were addressing their being. The o/Other appears frequently in our data in the concrete figure of the headteacher; but is also represented by professional ideals, political ideologies and family based moral values. As we saw earlier, such concrete figures or signifiers, like the elements of a dream, can serve as a portal through which any number of symbolic orders are transmitted, overdetermining the subject's relation to workplace norms. While our analysis reads these symbolic orders in terms of our participants' biographically-inflected psychic investments, it is worth noting that biographical elements also transmit wider cultural and social norms. The same material might thus be interpreted to explore dimensions of, for example, gender, class, sexuality or ethnicity, which resonate within the unconscious relations that are the focus of our discussion here.

Our initial analysis of the field of discursivity attempts to map signifiers both through frequency of appearance within the data and also in relation to level of fixity of meaning and relations to other signifiers. The frequency and discursive positioning of signifiers alone, however, does not fully capture their significance in relation to the production of subjectivity. Drawing inferences about whether signifying repetitions indicate interesting aspects of an identification processes, a repetition compulsion, or mere coincidence requires further investigation. The final section of our analysis, therefore, traces in more detail repetitious patterns in the associative chains of signifiers of two of our participants, showing how they overdetermine contrasting identificatory positions. Through this we develop new insights into the apparent fissures and fixities in participants' constitution of a teaching assistant subjectivity.

Ambiguities: spaces of fissure or fixing of meaning
Our initial request, 'say anything that comes to mind about pay or remuneration', elicited a range of signifiers to represent mechanisms and objects of exchange in processes of remuneration. The first group interview began with a series of interventions about contracts, qualifications, courses and pay scales (02:08-16:00 and on); 'money' (first at 05:28) was also mentioned, and relations to this signifier seemed particularly sensitive or affectively loaded; there were also references to hours, weeks and years. In opposition to these relatively straightforward processes and objects of exchange, 'experience' (first at 05:28) was referred to, both as something to be gained through work, and something that work might look for in an employee. Other processes and objects of exchange that emerged as the interview progressed included: 'performance related pay' (first at 17:00) 'holidays' (first at 28:01) i-pads (first at 28:10), and a range of other small gifts or bonuses. Later on in the interview less concrete types of remuneration were discussed: 'being appreciated', 'being recognised', 'being valued', 'seeing children progress', 'making a difference' (70:38). So, while

the i-pads and other examples of one off gifts or bonuses had relatively fixed referents, other signifiers of objects of exchange were more ambiguous.

The ambiguous aspects it is possible to trace in signifiers of remuneration can be related to the position of an o/Other able to fix or destabilize meanings within a particular context. A contract, for example, might appear to specify clear and stable expectations with respect to employment and remuneration. However, this is not always how it is experienced. Aie reported that: 'Since September the headteacher changed my contract to unqualified teacher status, so my salary has gone up' (GI1, 2:08), suggesting that terms are dependent on the whim of authority. In a similar way, although with the opposite outcome, Bee said when she qualified as an HLTA, and expected her contract to change, she was told: 'sorry, I can't pay that' (GI1, 02:58). Ceé also reported difficulties in confirming her assignment to the appropriate pay grade. When new contracts came in and staff had to apply for a new grading, she said: 'I thought: they know what I can do, so I don't have to write all this down' (GI1, 14:41), and consequently was assigned to the lower grade. The indeterminate relation between 'contract', 'qualification' and role fulfilled, in this context, creates an ambiguity in each signifier. Although a range of possible meanings are in play, in most instances subjects turn to the head teacher – a stand in for the o/Other – as a way to resolve the ambiguity of the relation between 'contract' and 'qualification'.

The ambiguous connotations of the signifier 'money' seemed to evoke particularly strong feelings of ambivalence: simultaneous recognition of its existential significance and denial of its role as a motivating factor in relation to promotion at work. Bee said: 'although I need the money, desperately, I am really looking for experience of teaching [...] it's not really about the pay' (GI1, 05:28). When Aie challenged this claim, Bee reiterated: 'Do you know what? It's not the money, trust me' (06:00). At the same time Aie said that she too would have accepted more responsibility 'even if [my headteacher] didn't give me any money' (05:54), and later emphasized: 'when [my headteacher] said to me [about a pay rise], I said "really?" I was shocked. I said, "look, I'm not doing this for the money"' (GI1, 08:21). Both participants thus distance themselves from suggestions that they might be working 'for the money'. So, while the literal referent of the signifier 'money' may be more stable than the relation between 'contract' and 'qualification', its ambiguous affective and moral connotations mean that it is unstable as a point of identification for participants in the group interview. There is no obvious position from which an o/Other might confer judgment on an appropriate relation between the subject and 'money'.

The momentary unity, in which both Bee and Aie articulated an identification with 'not doing it for the money', was undone in the individual interviews. In her first individual interview, Bee reiterated that, although undeniably important,

'money is not my aim' (BInt 1, p. 6). In contrast, associating to the prompt 'too much' in her second individual interview, Aie said 'I don't think you can ever have too much money' (AInt 2, p. 2). She elaborated a relation between money, salary and worth: 'People associate the more money they earn the better worth they are.'; 'I think it's a way of, your salary, the way you see yourself as well, how you're valued and it does something for your self-esteem as well, I think.' (AInt2, p. 3). It seems possible that the strong association between 'money' and 'self-esteem' constructed here put Aie in a position of relative vulnerability within the group interview, where other participants identified 'experience' and 'passion' as more important values in their relation to work.

In the first group interview, 'experience' appeared 29 times, but without any apparent fixing of a shared meaning. For example, at certain points 'experience' was opposed to 'qualifications' and it was pointed out that sometimes teachers might have less relevant 'experience' than TAs (GI1, 67:36). However, in talking about differences between the nursery nurse qualification (NNEB) and the NVQ for teaching assistants, participant Ceé opposed 'experience' to 'theory', suggesting that the emphasis on placements in the NNEB was more valuable than the theory based writing in the NVQ (GI1, 16:30). Here experience was associated both with a specific qualification, and with activities directly related to work in the classroom. Ceé concluded:

Ceé: I think, at the end of the day, there isn't anything that can compare with experience. [Group interview 1, 17:00]

The exchange that followed might be interpreted as a struggle over the meaning of 'experience'. Aie makes an association from 'experience' to the introduction of 'performance related pay' and to experiences outside education, 'banking' and 'being a mother'. She thus uses the openness of 'experience' as a signifier to expand the more limited definition that Ceé's intervention had implied:

Aie: Of course. That's why they're bringing in this new structure -
Ceé: And I still think –
Aie: - with the performance related pay, and then the Headteacher has got more power, you've got more . . . Because I've come from a banking background, I've only been in school for three years, but all the experiences that I bring in, of being a mother, from banking, doesn't mean that I'm going to be less capable because someone's got twenty years' experience and I've only got three years. [Ceé: that's true] I've still got life experiences that I can bring in to the job, it doesn't matter if you're in banking or teaching or whatever, that's what they're going to be able to take into consideration and give you your pay.
[Group interview 1, 18:08]

The openness of the term 'experience' enables differences to be covered over, but at the same time leaves uncertainty about what might be recognized as deserving remuneration. The exchange immediately following Aie's intervention here re-exploded the discursive terrain of value in relation to the work of a teaching assistant. It opened up both discursive fissures and explicit oppositions within the group. Here Aie asserts the need to 'sell yourself', and this seems to have significant affective valence within the group. Bee echoes Aie's words, while Ceé introduces a new vocabulary that stands in contradiction to the vocabulary of 'performance' and 'selling':

Bee: Oh, so now I can see where I am.
Aie: Yes.
Ceé: But not everyone will have it, not everyone that comes in from banking will have it
Aie: But it's down to you to sell yourself.
Ceé: Oh it's down to you yes
Bee: You have to sell yourself.
Aie: But everyone does. Even a teacher, you could be two teachers, if you go to an interview, you've still got to sell yourself, you're both qualified teachers, who are they going to take on? Whichever one promotes themselves better. That's how it works in any job you do. I've had a lot of ex...
Ceé: Well, I think teaching's a vocation.
[Group interview 1, 18:38]

Ceé's use of 'it' here – 'not everyone will have it' – is open to interpretation. It initially seems to connote the 'experience' required to be a teaching assistant; however her final intervention points to something more specific. It seems that while Aie is constructing an identification between teaching and work in commercial fields, Ceé's intervention creates a different point of identification via the signifier 'vocation'.

The question a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework directs us to explore is: To which o/Other are these subjects addressing themselves as they construct these identifications? Or how is the subject interpreting the ambiguous desire of an o/Other in articulating identifications with these contrasting discursive positions?

Tracing associative chains of signification around the injunction to 'sell yourself'
Our initial account of ambiguities in the discursive terrain of the interviews indicates the way a series of associated signifying chains emerged that

structured the space of teaching assistant subjectivity. It is possible to delineate two organizing chains: one included 'experience', 'passion', 'vocation' and 'care', resonating with analyses of professional identity (e.g. Bradbury 2014); the other included 'performance', 'targets', 'selling yourself', 'being vocal' and 'speaking up', and has clear continuities with other analyses of entrepreneurial and performative discourse within neoliberalism (Walkerdine and Bansel, 2010; Ball et al, 2011; Layton, 2016). In this section we trace the complex way positions in these signifying chains were both articulated and resisted in the interviews.

The signifier 'sell yourself' appeared twelve times in the first group interview and, as already noted, seemed to carry a significant affective charge. Six times it appeared in interventions from Aie, who was most clearly identified with the 'selling yourself' position. It was also Aie who, in covering PPA time and being given an unqualified teacher's contract, appeared to have made most progress towards the aim of becoming a teacher . Aie also used the signifier 'vocal' seven times, four times in the imperative, as an explicit injunction to her peers: 'You've got to sell yourself and be vocal' (09:29); 'you should be more vocal' (36:18); 'you've got to be vocal' (60:00); 'you need to be vocal' (90:10). The injunction to 'sell yourself' and 'be vocal', articulated by Aie, seems to be associated with the need to assert yourself in order to make progress at work, and Aie refers to her own recent promotion as evidence of the 'truth' of this injunction.

Nevertheless, the evidence in the interviews suggests her advice meets hesitation and a degree of skepticism from the other participants, each of whom appeared to both acknowledge and resist recommendations to speak up and ask for what they wanted. Ceé appeared to gently tease Aie, saying that she was not very good at selling herself, but she could 'get some tips off Aie' (GI1, 23:39). Bee initially appeared more open to change, referring to Aie as 'inspiring' (BI1, p. 2) but seemed resigned to not acting: 'I'm actually reprimanding myself that I should be doing it, and I'm still doing the reprimanding but not doing anything' (BI1, p. 2). Participant Dee, in a similar way, acknowledged that there were possibilities for seeking more recognition for the additional roles she took on at work, but said she would never go and ask for an increment: 'because it's such a, you kind of, for what you are, and then you have to put a price on it.' (DI1, p. 3). Her struggle for words here seems to mimic the problem she is describing: that of naming or 'putting a price' on 'who you are'.

In resisting the injunction to 'be more vocal', all three also described their work using terms that suggest an excess in their work that can't be named or recompensed. Ceé used the terms 'it' and 'vocation', Bee talked about her 'passion', and Dee, 'satisfaction'. We might think of these signifiers, articulated as alternatives to 'speaking up' and 'selling yourself', as place holders for a more complex, as yet unspoken chain of signification. It is also worth noting the way

that the contrasting signifying chains might be understood to sit somewhere between open Symbolic structure and more limited Imaginary points of identification: a level of movement of desire is possible within each chain, from 'experience' to 'vocation' or from 'performance' to 'selling yourself'; but movement across chains seems to be more restricted.

In the next section, we attempt to go further in exploring the overdetermination of these positions by examining the associative material that emerged across the interviews. We trace the more complex signifying chains that might contain the excess associated with articulations of 'passion', 'vocation' and 'satisfaction'. In doing this, we also explore the unconscious role of the o/Other, and the o/Other's desire, as constitutive elements of the subject's address.

Responding to ambiguity via the desire of an other

How do workers resolve ambiguities about what may be demanded of them in the workplace, what is expected of them, what they are remunerated for? They respond, perhaps, in patterns associated with another ambiguous demand, from an o/Other who is taken in some way as a guarantor of identity. Psychoanalysis suggests that these patterns of response are most frequently established in our earliest relationships, often with parents, within the family.

Two participants, Dee and Aie, talked about their fathers. To follow through our query about the way ambiguities about relations to practices of remuneration may resolved through unconscious relations to an o/Other, in the next section we explore the chains of associations in material from Dee and Aie's interviews. In both these cases there are references to strong affective responses associated with these chains of signification.

Participant D: 'you never ask for anything'

The repetition of the signifiers 'never.. ask' at two moments in Dee's first interview creates a link that might also be understood as a symbolic or unconscious relation. First, talking about the possibility of progressing at work, Dee commented: 'I would never go and ask for an increment' (Int. 1, 11:07). The categorical nature of this claim might already suggest a distinctive affective investment. Then, in her associations to the prompt 'breadwinner', Dee said 'you know, it was my father, it was the man of the house who brings the money and has got more power and authority' (Int. 1, 17:34). She also commented, 'I'm trying to think about me but no, it's him' (19:25). CL asked: 'Any other thoughts that come to your mind around your father?' and Dee responded:

> Authoritative and you can't mess around and you can't ask for more [...]
> You never ask for anything [...] We never asked for anything. (Int 1, 21:06).

'Never asking' at work can thus be symbolically linked to 'never asking' her father, a provider who was also a figure of power and authority.

Another repetition that brought an element of her father into her relations to asking at work can be traced across Dee's first and second individual interviews. Describing how she'd felt when she'd gone to ask her headteacher about doing the degree course, Dee said: 'I found it a little bit uncomfortable'. She then seemed surprised by this feeling:

> I can't believe it's a bit uncomfortable [...] It's a bit funny, I haven't thought about it like this, because, I'm really digging in myself and this is what comes to mind [..] I don't think I'll ever be going in to ask because maybe it's against my principles or something. I don't have big principles, but I don't feel comfortable. (Int. 1, 13:22)

Here there is an association between feeling 'uncomfortable', 'asking' and 'principles', and the same association came up in Dee's second interview. In her associations to the prompt 'debt' Dee talked about an experience from her childhood:

> When you have to go and ask for money, everybody knows about it. It is like a shame and a feeling of, you know, disgrace [...] I have seen people in the past, not people actually, it was my dad, who is a person who has got lots of principles and everything. However, he always lent money, but at some point in his life he needed some money, he asked someone, and he was in debt and he couldn't pay back [...] Oh my Lord, I've seen that in front of my eyes, the way that people behaved. They keep repeating that, you know, you've taken my money and all these things, and it was really disgrace for my dad, and for myself. (Int. 2, 07:05)

So here we have 'never asking' for more, an increment, at work; and 'never asking' for more, or for anything, when she was a child. We also have an 'uncomfortable' feeling associated with asking, when, it is suggested, asking is against her principles; and a more painful feeling, 'shame' or 'disgrace', when her father, a principled man, had to ask for a loan.

Taking this nexus of associations together, we might ask: To whom does Dee address her strong sense that it is wrong to ask? Or, alternatively, we might ask, on behalf of whom does Dee experience shame in relation to money? Bearing in mind Dee's comment that: 'I'm trying to think about me but no, it's him', it may perhaps be plausible to suggest that when faced with ambiguity in the workplace, her response can be understood as an attempt to live up to her

father's principles, to fulfill her father's desire. Dee's relation to articulated principles, as signifiers of the o/Other, might be interpreted as indicative of Symbolic rather than Imaginary identification. However, the merging suggested in 'I'm trying to think about me but no, it's him', might be interpreted as a more Imaginary feature. The powerful affective response suggests, perhaps, an opening into the Real.

Participant A: 'Is that a good thing? I don't know. But that's what we have to do'

It is also possible to trace a repeated associative pattern in participant Aie's account, which can similarly be associated with a parental relation. At several points Aie's account evoked a moral reference point which was at odds with her actions, which were justified by reference to a sense of inevitability or of forces beyond her control, and an affective association to a negative or frightening experience.

One instance of this associative pattern came in her account of both recent strikes in school, in which Aie had not participated, and her memory of the miner's strike in the 1980s:

> So when they strike, when the unions went on strike at school, I didn't strike, I went to school. I know that's probably not seen as the right thing to do, but I just don't think it's going to achieve anything. […] I was a kid, but I remember when all the people up North went on strike […] all the miners went on strike. It was horrendous. We had cut electricity for a few days a week and it was just horrendous. (Int 2, p. 4)

Here A both acknowledges that her decision not to go on strike might be seen as 'not the right thing to do', but also justifies it, articulating a slightly fatalistic sense that nothing can be achieved through this type of action. At the same time, in the account of the miners' strike, there is an enigmatic reference, in the repetition of 'horrendous', to a strong affective experience.

A similar fatalistic pattern can be discerned in Aie's response to one of the words we selected from the group interview to use as a prompt for associations in the individual interviews. In her response to the term 'changing children' she referred to a course she had attended, Childhood Studies, in which they had discussed different ways of conceptualizing children and the implications these had for teaching. She contrasted some of the more idealistic curriculum principles they had discussed with current requirements and practices in school, and commented: 'Is it a good thing? I don't know. But that's what we have to do […] Is it a good thing? I don't know. But this is the society we live in' (Int. 2, p. 7). Here, as in her comments about striking, Aie appears to point to a more moral or 'acceptable'

position, but suggests that this ideal is in conflict with an externally-imposed necessity. These might be understood as alternative sets of principles or symbolic chains in relation to which she might identify as 'good'.

It may be possible to associate this conflict with a reference to Aie's father in the second group interview. Participants were asked to respond first to the headline 'Britain's ban bosses to get millions in share payments in bonus cap dodge', and then to the word 'dodge'. There were associations to 'tricking', 'something false', 'avoiding', and 'something to do with tax'. Aie contributed:

> For example, I know people, my dad, years ago I know this is what he done. He had a business […] and to avoid paying the tax he went bankrupt and changed the company name. The factory is still there, but he changed the name to avoid paying taxes. So things like that do go on. It's dodgy. But I think it was easier to get away with it back in the seventies.

Aie's memory of her father is presented as a neutral example – 'things like that do go on' – but within the story there are traces of the pattern identified in the previous two instances: i.e. sometimes the more 'acceptable' moral position has to be rejected. In the case of strikes and pedagogy, Aie cites external forces that appear impossible to counter, as a justification for not 'doing the right thing'. In this instance, the inevitability is more enigmatic, perhaps hinted at in her speculation: 'I think it was easier to get away with it back in the seventies'.

One possible, speculative, interpretation of this collection of instances is that Aie's stance in the workplace, and her conflicted positioning in relation to both strikes and pedagogy, reveal how her relation to workplace norms resonate with an unconscious relation to her father. Her justifications of actions that don't conform to a recognized moral code might be interpreted as attempts to compensate in some way for her father's actions. Aie's more spontaneous occupation of a similar position to her father is suggestive of an Imaginary relation; while the articulation of a fatalistic principle of justification perhaps opens a space for a more Symbolic identification. These identifications might be understood as an unconscious glue that can help to account for Aie's stance in the workplace.

Finally, it is important to note that our analysis has suggested the way identifications are constructed both within signifying chains associated with the workplace *and* via associations beyond the immediate workplace, but with a similar structure or symbolic resonance. These repetitious identifications, within and across discursive fields, are channels for the articulation of desire.

Conclusion: Psychical contexts of practices of remuneration and the possibility of the new

We began with a question about what ties individual subjects into the remuneration regime of a particular sector of employment. We also wondered whether we might develop a more nuanced account of the repetitions and resistances identified in previous studies of subjects' relation to the workplace economy (Moore, 2006; Oszelcuk, 2006; Healy, 2010). Our analysis has explored the way such resistances can be traced through complex signifying chains and symbolic associations. They can thus be interpreted as responses to the ambiguous desire of an o/Other, suggesting the complex, powerfully affective and potentially painful relations that are embedded within workplace relations.

Based on this analysis it is possible to speculate two different points of potential fissure or fragility. In relation to the participants as subjects, we might point to moments of fragility in their identifications: moments where these identifications may fail to perform the function of resolving ambiguity and channeling potentially overwhelming affect. When we say identifications are fragile/fissured, we mean that this containing function of identification is at risk of breaking down. In relation to practices of remuneration, we understand fragility as a moment when the formation of the practice as such is put at risk. Various moments might constitute a shift in the formation of the practice: new regulatory policies, industrial action or workforce attrition. We speculate that such moments might emerge when *existing* practices exert pressure on the possibility of subjects maintaining a containing relation to the presumed desire of the o/Other. In other words, there needs to be space within the discursive field for both the discourse that enables the subject to resolve ambiguity *and* the discourses that make sense of existing practices of remuneration. When these can't be either brought into alignment or maintained at as separate, both are vulnerable. Perhaps, as Zizek and others have argued (Zizek, 2005:55; Straehler Pohl and Pais, 2014), it is precisely the space for *something else* that sustains the ideological landscape. However, simply tightening the grip of the performative regime, in the hope of forcing a leakage of affect, may not be a plausible political strategy.

Alternatively, we might attempt to position our analysis in relation to the notion of assemblage, and the politics of the new. Deleuzian approaches foreground the contingent conjunction of parts within an assemblage, and the role of desire in the articulation of the new. We might, then, very loosely suggest that the signifying elements mapped in our analysis can be interpreted as parts within a workplace remuneration assemblage, and that Symbolic and Imaginary modes of identification can be understood as forms of conjunctions between parts. Very loosely, we might argue that these partial elements and contingent conjunctions

might be thought of as one of the contexts, *a psychical context*, from which an assemblage is constituted. Additionally, from the perspective of politics, the idea of the new and its relation to desire can help us to indicate the space of politics in our analysis. While desire is trapped in the old oppositional circuits – performativity versus vocational values – there can be no novelty (c.f. Thompson and Cook, p. 712-3). If desire is able to break free – call that a Lacanian traversal of the Real, or a Deleuzian event – we might then glimpse a politics of difference.

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