Original Article

‘Two for joy’: Towards a better understanding of free associative methods as sites of transference in empirical social research

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Abstract

This paper explores the relation between transference and free association in the production of data in sociological and social research. Drawing on Laplanche’s notion of the analyst as a provocation for the transference and Lacan’s understanding of the analyst as cause of desire, we map transference as a condition for free association and theorise an ‘enigma of participation’ in research. We develop these ideas through a discussion of two astonishing moments in recent research interviews. We propose that free associative interviews can be understood as sites of transference that help us to glimpse the unconscious in social and political discourse and offer insights into the (im)possibilities of subjective change.

Keywords: transference; free association; Laplanche; Lacan; object cause of desire; enigma of the analyst

Introduction: the relation between free association and transference

In contrast to recent debates exploring the use of psychoanalytic concepts in the process of analysis, our focus is on the *production* of data for social and sociological research: specifically, the production of data using free associative methods. While there has been considerable discussion of the use of transference and countertransference in empirical research (e.g. Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Frosh and Baraitser, 2008; Parker, 2010; Lapping, 2013), the position of the researcher within the transference and the relation between transference and the production of free associative speech have not been fully elaborated. Such elaboration is necessary, we suggest, both to map current practice and as a basis for future experimentation. Using these ideas as a lens to look back at recent debate, the

opposition constructed between apparently conflicting approaches can be at least partially broken down. Those who disagree about the use of psychoanalytic concepts in the interpretation of research data may find points of agreement in the way that the production of free associative material provides glimpses of aspects of social and political processes that wouldn't otherwise be accessible, allowing us to explore something like the unconscious in social or sociological research (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 43).

Throughout the paper we explore the way the analyst's absorption in the discourse of the analysand is key to both transference and free association in psychoanalysis. We use these insights to interpret moments from our own broadly sociological research interviews; but our wider purpose is to suggest how they might inform practice in other fields. Parallels can be drawn between psychoanalytic conceptualisations of transference and Bourdieu's (1999) account of sociological research interviews, which he describes as 'a spiritual exercise' requiring a 'forgetfulness of self'. Bourdieu also foregrounds the importance of researchers' embeddedness in the context of research, via both lived experience and reading, to attain an appropriate position from which to listen to their participants (p. 614). This resonates with Freud's account of the 'evenly hovering attentiveness' that is necessary for psychoanalysis; and elaborates issues concerning social position that might have relevance for listening in psychoanalysis. The psychoanalytic conceptualisations of transference explored in this paper can also be understood as elaborations of the kinds of attentiveness required for listening to another subject. While the aims of listening may differ within and across contexts, the fundamental social and subjective resources explored by both sociological and psychoanalytic theorists can help us trace the mystery of our diverse practices of listening, so we hope our examination of transferential processes within our own research interviews might provide a basis for a more general understanding of the complexity and mess of attempting to engage with another subjectivity, even as we are limited by our particular institutional and disciplinary positions.

Our starting point for the paper is the insight that some minimal transference is necessary in order for a subject to follow the rule of free association; to speak their thoughts aloud in the presence of another subject. Freud (1921/1955) implies this when he describes the common experience of a patient claiming to have no thoughts:

> If the analyst insists, the patient is at last induced to admit that he is thinking of the view from the consulting room window, of the wall-paper that he sees before him, or of the gas lamp hanging from the ceiling. Then one knows at once that he has gone off into the transference and that he is engaged upon what are still unconscious thoughts relating to the physician; and one sees the stoppage in the patient's associations disappear, as soon as he has been given this explanation. (p. 97, n. 1)

This implies that the transference is a condition for the realisation and communication of thoughts in the clinic. Lacan (2015) renders the same point, abstracting the notion of speech from the clinical situation:

> The phenomenon of transference is itself positioned in such a way as to sustain the action of speech. In effect, at the same time at which transference was discovered, it

> was discovered that if speech hits home [*porte*] […] it is because transference is involved in it. (p. 173)

Transference, Lacan proposes, is more than simply, as it is commonly defined, a repetition of a past experience or relation in the present; it is also the condition for a particular kind of speech. He continues: 'the transference, no matter how much it is interpreted, retains within itself a kind of irreducible limit' (p. 173). This formulation emphasises the distinction between transference as the interpretable contents of one psyche transferred into a relation with another subject; and transference as the condition that produces speech that can be interpreted in this way. Methodologically, both Freud and Lacan suggest that clues that transference is at work will be found in speech; and perhaps particularly speech that is relatively spontaneous or uncensored: in moments, as Juan-David Nasio (1998) puts it, at 'the limits of speech' or where 'speech fails' (p. 16). These moments at the limit of speech, we might speculate, are more likely to 'hit home', and thus to be understood as an irreducible or uninterpretable signifier of the transference.

How, then, might we recognise speech that 'hits home'? Nasio suggests that, in some instances at least, we will know such speech through our own response to it:

> The only reaction which would attest to the signifying impact of the symptom is surprise. The psychoanalyst who is struck by the signifier remains speechless, indeed, without a thought; silenced, startled. If you want to know when you have understood a symptom as a signifier rather than a sign, there is but one indicator, the astonishment that has taken you. (p. 62)

We can make sense of this, perhaps, if we think about free association. When we follow the rule of saying aloud whatever comes to mind, certain things that we say will be incomprehensible and incoherent, evoking astonishment and confusion. While in everyday conversation we might ignore such moments, finding ways to return to the safety of coherence and order, the very point of Freud's (1900/1953) method is to accept every association as relevant to what has preceded it (p. 279). In line with this, Nasio's suggestion is that it is precisely moments that confound us that are indicative of speech that has 'hit home'. He introduces a vocabulary for this distinction between associations that seem to have a meaning, *signs*, and associations that hit us as pure *signifiers* with no meaning, producing astonishment. The significance of this distinction in psychoanalysis is the insight it can offer into the patient's symptom: the repetitious patterns that brought them into analysis. In relation to more sociological questions, the same distinction can offer insights into the ways in which we invest in certain social practices – our symptomatic social relations – and the possibility of change.

This paper explores two moments of astonishment during our interviews to suggest how the use of free association in the research process might help us understand relations to repeated elements in our own and participants' subjectivities. The first moment offers insights into the intransigence of such relations, suggesting the danger posed when the flow of associations pulls away from an established subjectivity or a symptomatic social relation. We introduce contrasting theorisations of transference to explore different ways of understanding the role

of the researcher in the production of the flow of associations. We then move on to elaborate how transference might be understood to constitute a distinctive site of possibility for change. We develop this idea through our analysis of a second moment from our interviews.

'I've seen him twice, so I'll say he's two for joy': free association as a signifier of the unconscious in a research interview

The project

One aim of our project was to experiment with ways of constructing free associative research drawing on Lacanian methodology, as a way of potentially bringing about shifts in discourse or subjectivity. Our focus in planning our approach to the interviews was explicitly on the use of signifiers and we attempted to avoid responding to the material except at the level of language. The Lacanian stance, in contrast to other guides to free associative interviewing (e.g. Hollway and Jefferson, 2000), supports interruption of the analysand's/participant's speech. Fink (1997) advises: '*The analyst must not be afraid to stress the material he or she considers important.* Not necessarily to the exclusion of all else, of course, since the analyst cannot know what lies behind each element; but by stressing the unconscious, the analyst manifests "the analyst's desire" to hear about *this*' (p. 16, emphasis in original). We interpreted this injunction in a variety of ways in planning and carrying out the interviews, with the aim of opening up meanings and facilitating free association.

Our participants were four teaching assistants, working at different schools in the UK, but all in the final year of a part-time BA in Education Studies, with whom we planned a series of group and individual interviews. The topic we were exploring was pay and remuneration, and we were interested in the unconscious mechanisms that sustain engagement in poorly remunerated professional practice. 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 from the prior group interview to prompt further associations. In the second group interview, we experimented with a range of prompts for further free associative writing and speaking; and similarly in the final individual interviews, we explored a range of approaches to elicit additional professional and biographical material. The final interviews also included a question which invited participants to reflect on the experience of participating in the project. At the beginning of the first group interview, and again in each subsequent interview, we explained our use of free association, that we were interested to hear whatever came into their minds, that our approach meant that they should not expect 'normal' conversational responses, and that they might find this uncomfortable.

From signifier to sign to signifier; and from metonymy to metaphor

We are going to look closely at an association that arose in one of the individual interviews. It was a striking association that seemed at the time incomprehensible to CL, the interviewer. In fact, when we were first analysing the moment around it, this particular association was not

included in the analysis (Lapping, 2016). It was only when considering how to conceptualise the production of free associations that CL again remembered the words that had struck her and, looking back to the transcript, now noticed how they had previously been omitted.

The association arose in the participant's first interview, in the moments following her introduction of a signifier, 'vocation', which she had used in the first group interview. The meaning of 'vocation' was now elaborated via the metonymically connected signifier, 'nun'. She said: 'You care about those children or I would say it's like a sort of vocation, like a nun'. The interviewer, CL, repeated this second signifier, and attempted several times to re-open, or destabilise, the sign established by the participant, saying: 'A nun'; 'You made a comparison with a nun'; 'What comes into your mind around a nun?'; 'As a Catholic, what do nuns mean to you?'. While the first three prompts produced relatively abstracted, normative definitions, the fourth prompt produced two more specific but apparently unconnected associations:

> What do I want to say? Nuns mean, to me it means giving up their life but according to them it's fantastic. There was even a big piece in the *Evening Standard* – I do read the *Evening Standard*, I think it might have been last night or, no, it might have been Friday; I can't remember – I actually read their daily timetable and I wanted to scream. I can't think when that was now; it might have been Sunday's paper, in the last three or four days anyway. The nuns of somewhere, I've forgotten where it was now, it didn't even say, but they were in some sort of order. Look, there's a magpie up at the window, he wants the foil; but I've seen him twice so I'll say he's two for joy. Well their timetable is get up at four thirty and have breakfast, no, I'm sorry, nuns don't paint a good picture for me. I wouldn't want to be a nun. (Interview 1: 29:51 minutes)

The first association is to the *Evening Standard* article and links metonymically to the previous interventions, introducing additional material and attaching further meanings to the signifier, 'nun'. The second association, referring to the magpie at the window, was spoken as the participant turned her head, briefly indicating where a bird had just flown into sight. CL was startled by the interjection and by the change in tone introduced as the participant quoted from the traditional rhyme for seeing magpies ('One for sorrow/Two for joy…'). What might we be able to say about this astonishing association in the context of the interview?

First, we should note a parallel between the association to the magpie and other moments in the interview, where the participant had distanced herself from bad experiences, claimed her own experience was 'lucky' (28:37) and stated 'every job I've ever done, I've loved it' (32:27). In a similar way, when she quotes the rhyme, she skips over the relevant section, 'one for sorrow', and claims her sighting of the magpie as 'two for joy'. Secondly, it is worth noting the way CL's interventions pick up on a signifier, 'vocation', from the previous group interview, but follow it via the more concrete metonymic link of 'nun'. The participant's responses begin to destabilise the initial sign, which bound together 'care', 'children', 'vocation' and 'nun'; and attach new meanings 'giving up their life' and 'I wanted to scream'. It is at this point that the second association introduces a metaphorical break into the stream of metonymic signifiers.

Nasio (1997) describes the movement from the metonymic plane to that of metaphor as an activation of the unconscious, or a re-occupation of what he calls 'the place of the *One*': the particular opening in discourse that is constitutive of the subject. The place of the *One* has its own temporality, its emergence is unpredictable, but it can be understood as a function of the repetition compulsion or transference. What is important is not the metaphor's meaning but its function, i.e. to return the subject to their being as a subject, to the *One* (p. 52). The role of the psychoanalyst is not to interpret the *One*, but rather to replace it:

> Ultimately it is the analyst's task to provide for the replacement of the signifier that occupies the place of the *One*. Because even if the unconscious is automatically alive, even if the repetition compulsion remains inevitable, it can run into the obstacle of seeing a signifier get stuck in the place of the *One* […] In other words, the analyst keeps the fluidity of signifying repetition alive, as well as desire. (p. 63)

Nasio's point is that the place of the *One* is both the place of the unconscious and the place where the subject comes into being. Signifying repetition is a necessity of being, but the necessary repetition relates to the *One*, not to a particular signifier/symptom. The subject comes to psychoanalysis with a complaint about their symptom, but their symptom is what defines their subjectivity, thus the analyst's task is not to remove the symptom, but to replace the signifier in the position of the *One* (cf. Burgoyne, 2000).

In the extract here, we see the re-occupation of the place of the *One* by a new signifier, 'I'll say he's two for joy', that hits home and disorients CL. At first the signifier appears meaningless in the flow of associations. However, understood as a repetition of previous signifiers, 'I'm so lucky' and 'every job I've ever done, I've loved it', it tells us something about the persistence or stuck-ness of the symptom, and perhaps also a symptomatic relation to the practices of the workplace. Within a *different* interview, we might speculate, a space might have been opened for an alternative signifier to take the position of the *One*: one that acknowledged the pain of 'giving up your life' and 'wanting to scream'. Instead, there was a return to a signifier that reiterated what seemed to be a more stable mode of existence.

The position of the analyst/researcher in the production of transference and free association

To extend our exploration of the position of the researcher in the production of these associations, it is helpful to set out some contrasting conceptualisations of transference. By comparing the ways in which Klein (1952/1986) and Laplanche (1999) have theorised transference, we develop an interpretation of CL's interventions in the interview. We then go on to set out in more detail two distinct ways of understanding the transference as produced *between* two subjects, juxtaposing Laplanche's account of the analyst as the one who provokes the transference (Laplanche, 1999) with a Lacanian conceptualisation of the analyst as cause of the analysand's symptom in language (Nasio, 1998).

In her paper 'The Origins of Transference', Klein (1952/1986) maps her theory of infant development, the move from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position, onto the experience and interpretation of transference in the clinic:

> We can fully appreciate the interconnection between positive and negative transference only if we explore the early interplay between love and hate, and the vicious circle of aggression, anxieties, feelings of guilt and increased aggression, as well as the various aspects of the objects towards whom these conflicting anxieties are directed. (p. 207)

In psychoanalysis, she suggests, transferences of these early experiences can be traced both in direct reference to the analyst and in reports of everyday life, where defences 'stirred up' in the analytic relationship may be deflected. The aim of interpretation is to 'discover the past both in its realistic and phantastic aspects' (p. 208), so it is necessary to interpret the transferences: 'It is only by linking again and again […] later experiences with earlier ones and vice versa […] that present and past can come together in the patient's mind' (p. 210). Klein's account thus specifies in detail how we might understand contrasting elements of clinical material as repetitions of early infant development, and proposes interpretation as a way of 'correcting' (Bollas, 1999, p. 61) or diminishing the effects of that originary process. As Bollas points out (p. 188), this understanding requires the analyst to intervene frequently to interpret the transferences.

If we were adopting a Kleinian stance, CL's interventions might have been intended to make an interpretation linking to earlier moments in the interview, where the participant had evoked images of a colleague seriously disabled and receiving little recognition after many years of work. Certainly, after the more negative associations to 'nun' emerged, this image was in CL's mind, and a later intervention, following the account of the article in the *Evening Standard*, picked up on this: 'Did you say "giving their lives away"?' (see Lapping, 2016). However, the initial four interventions were less directive, probably prompted by the memory of 'vocation' from the first group interview. We would suggest, then, that CL's initial interventions weren't offering an interpretation, but rather aiming to open up unknown meanings that the signifier might contain.

Like Klein, Laplanche makes a distinction between transferences of later and more originary relations, and relates these to the progress of an analysis. However, rather than knowable positions or developmental stages, for Laplanche (1999) the originary relation is an unknowable enigma that initiates subjectivity. 'Filled-in' transferences are repetitions of meanings and behaviours from significant past experiences and relationships. 'Hollowed-out' transference, in contrast, is empty of specific meaning; it is, rather, the enigma of the subject's own originary situation (p. 229): the enigmatic, unknowable element in the child's relationship to an adult; an experience of sexuality that is incomprehensible to the child. Laplanche suggests that 'filled-in' transferences must be returned to repeatedly during an analysis before the 'hollowed-out' transference might emerge (see also Fletcher, 1999, p. 50). Even more importantly, perhaps, it is the active hollow, the enigma of the analyst, that provokes transference in the analytic relation. Thus, rather than the knowable relation between separate monads presented by Klein – in which, he suggests, 'someone burdened with instincts and objects […] brings them along to analysis' (p. 225) – for Laplanche, transference is brought into being in the unknowable relation between subjectivities. In psychoanalysis, the analyst offers their own enigma as a hollow in which to receive that of

the analysand. This act requires, he suggests, ‘a radical refusal to know the good of its patient’ (p. 228).

This account of the unknowability of the relation between two subjects, each in some way enigmatic to themselves, may be helpful in understanding speech in the context of our interviews. We emphasised to participants throughout the process that we didn’t know what we were looking for. We also reflected together on the unfathomable meanings of ‘pay’ and ‘remuneration’ for us and for our participants. In practice, what is significant is the creation of a space for the participants’ associations, and the refusal to know in advance what these associations might be or what they might mean. As noted, within Lacanian technique this refusal to know does not require silence, but sometimes the opposite: a genuine interest in the participant’s associations might entail persistent interruption to open up disguised meanings (Fink, 1997). CL’s questioning in the interview might be interpreted in this way, as a curiosity founded on an awareness of her own ignorance.

Laplanche’s account of transference as provoked by the analyst’s offer of the hollow of their own enigma is also useful as a starting point for reconsidering the place of transference within empirical research relationships. This has sometimes been questioned on the basis that in analysis it is the analysand who initiates the process by bringing their question or demand and by paying a fee (Parker, 2010, p. 21). Laplanche’s insight into the analyst’s offer of the site of their enigma as prior to the demand of the patient opens up this unidirectional understanding of the relationship. In a similar way, a Lacanian understanding of the production of the unconscious in language and of the analyst as cause of the sign of the patient’s symptom disrupts the monadistic, or dualistic, understanding of this relation.

Nasio’s (1998) account of Lacanian theory elaborates this aspect of the role of the analyst in the production of the transference. The unconscious appears, he suggests, where language fails: ‘when the patient is not sure and says, “I don’t know … I cannot remember any more … perhaps … maybe”’ (p. 16). Such instances of speech going astray are not restricted to the context of analysis or to the practice of free association, and might include bodily gestures and events as well as speech; but impromptu or unexpected speech, understood as an open signifier, is the prime instance of the production of the unconscious. The role of the analyst comes when an impromptu act or speech is given a meaning, or turned into a sign: the patient offers an explanation for the act, and in doing so attributes a meaning to the signifier, turning it into a sign; the analyst, as recipient of the explanation, is positioned as the cause of this meaning (p. 19). This process of navigating (non-) meaning between two subjects in psychoanalysis, Nasio explains, supports the development of the transference. Put more simply, perhaps, it is the presence of the analyst that creates the conditions in which the patient accounts for their unconscious by naming their symptom; and the enacting or naming of the symptom is the repetition that defines the transference (Freud, 1920/1955). We might speculate, then, that our presence as researchers, in a similar way, creates the conditions for navigating non-meaning in the speech produced in the interview: we are active recipients, for example, of the definitions and stories that disguise and elaborate the meaning of ‘nun’ as a sign within the particular discourse of the interview.

There is a further stage in this process, which is perhaps quite close to Laplanche's understanding of the analyst's offer of a hollow in which to receive the transferences. From a Lacanian perspective, when the analyst occupies the position of the cause, they also take on the signifier of the patient's symptom. The signifier is part of a shared discourse, and can be repeated by the analyst. Nasio (1998) gives the example of a gesture he himself makes, touching his cheek, when referring to a patient who could not prevent himself from blushing. He elaborates:

> What does the fact that the gesture would have signifying value mean? That means that outside of me, beyond me and my patient, the gesture of my hands and the anguished reddening of his face are associated in a bond that is apart from either of us. In other words, I am not sure and my patient is equally unsure, about how his or her unconscious desire is repeated through me. (p. 42)

What this suggests, in radical contrast to the Kleinian framework, is a process in which signifiers are articulated, attributed meaning as signs by their position in a signifying chain, and then reiterated as signifiers, again emptied of meaning. The patient may explain the signifier, or offer an interpretation; the analyst does not interpret in this way, but simply puts the signifier back into play, foregrounding its uncertainty: like saying, for example, 'nun' or 'what comes into your mind around a nun'. Where Laplanche foregrounds the enigma within each subject, the Lacanian framework foregrounds the uncertainty of language suspended between subjects. Both require a radical refusal of the analyst to claim to know on behalf of the patient.

Three issues seem significant for exploring transferences in empirical research. First, the possibility of understanding the enigma of the researcher as the provocation for the research encounter. Second, the role of the analyst/researcher in supporting the production of spontaneous or free associative speech. Third, the potentially limiting conceptual framing imposed when you define and interpret transferences according to a pre-existing question or model of the ego.

How might these issues pertain to the situation of research? As a preliminary answer to this question, perhaps, let us just assume that the participant responds to the invitation of the researcher for a reason, and that that reason may not be apparent either to the subject or to the researcher. We might consider this unspoken reason as a placeholder for the participant's symptom. The researcher is of course similarly unknowing; their reason for posing the invitation is also enigmatic to themselves. However, it may be relevant to note the political aspect of our project, and our initial rationale, which was our interest in the unconscious dimension that sustains engagement in poorly remunerated professional practice. How might this political question bear on our participant's symptom, or on our own? How might it bear on her presentation of a sign of sorrow as a sign of joy? There is a risk that we might be tempted to interpret the signifier as if it were a sign, to suggest its pertinence to our own political question, rather than sitting with the confounding moment in the process of the research. Rather than rushing to answer our original question – which we might understand as a symptom of our own researcher subjectivity – we might instead try to use this particular

unknowable space between subjectivities to reformulate that subjectivity, to re-signify our symptom. Is there potential for such transformations in the process of research?

Research as a site of transference

For Freud (1920/1955), arguably, the key distinction between the repetitions by which we are compelled throughout our lives and repetitions in the transference is that the transferential space creates a distinctive relation to the repetition, 'some degree of aloofness' (pp. 288–9), that opens up possibilities for change. The question for us is whether similar spaces to shift unconscious relations to repetitious elements can be created outside the clinic; and the contribution free associative approaches might make to the creation of such sites of transference in research.

In the field of economic geography, researchers influenced by Lacanian ideas have been experimenting with what they describe as a psychoanalytically informed activist approach, with an aim of disrupting or re-signifying dominant discourses of economic development. They set up focus groups and workshops in collaboration with community groups to critique the emptiness of naturalised signifiers of capitalist discourse (e.g. Ozselcuk, 2006; Healy, 2010). Their aim is explicitly political, but they also analyse resistances that emerged in the encounters between researchers and participants. This work raises questions about the imposition of knowledge and the authority of the researchers; but also provides a model for drawing on psychoanalytic ideas to create spaces for political change.

Recent work in the field of education has used reflective and free associative approaches to explore experiences of unfathomable repetitions in pedagogic encounters. This includes experiments with reflective and creative writing (Garrett, 2013; Charalambous, 2014; Walsh, 2014) and the use of ambiguous prompts for free association (Charalambous, 2014; Brock, 2015) to create spaces that might shift unconscious blockages in engagements with difficult material. While these experiments produced moments of articulation of new ways of being, they also frequently encountered stuck-ness and repetition. The use of these approaches offers insights into both the intractability of transferential repetitions and the potential of research as a space for loosening their grip on subjects who respond to the invitation to participate.

Outside the clinical context, there are several reasons we might be interested in this kind of approach. Importantly, the creation of transferential sites to explore particular aspects of political and professional subjectivity may also provide a basis for reconceptualising the originary situation and for developing new categories of transference relating to political, educational or institutional, rather than familial, contexts. While the use of free association in psychoanalysis is often associated with a distinctive exploration of childhood and sexuality (cf. Parker, 2010), it is possible to construct free associative interviews to avoid this prioritisation of a developmental trajectory originating in family relations. Transferential relations might then be traced through social and institutional processes and histories, to provide an alternative theorisation of transference no less significant to the constitution of subjectivity than familial relations. Such a tracing might intersect with or echo psychoanalytic understandings of an originary enigmatic relation. We might, for example, re-cast the enigma of parental sexuality as the enigma of an employer's interest in profit.

Perhaps this might be considered a betrayal of Laplanche's account of the enigma as the particular confounding effects of sexual desire on the infant; but it might also constitute a productive rupturing of the boundary that constitutes sexuality and profit as distinct objects of knowledge.

In our study, the combination of the theme of 'pay and remuneration' with a commitment to following participants' associations produced material that merged financial and parental positions, suggesting an economic trajectory of transferential repetition (Lapping and Glynos, 2017). Equally importantly, though, material was produced that suggested the way our participants' engagement in our study couldn't be understood on our terms – reminding us that we, as researchers, must be careful not to close down potential directions of exploration. We have already noted the enigma of participation in research for both participant and researcher, and in the final section we draw again on our joint project to examine what might be understood as the vanishing point of this enigma, articulated as a moment of transformation for one of our participants, and a moment of astonishment and disbelief for the researcher.

'I can't believe it's a bit uncomfortable': the effects of an encounter with an unconscious limit

To explore the enigma of one participant's engagement in our project, we are drawing from both of her individual interviews. At the beginning of the first individual interview, she explained why she had wanted to take part. Later moments in the same interview offered additional insights about her motivation – indicated, perhaps, in repeated stories involving shame, and in an awareness or concern about issues of confidentiality. At the end of the second interview reflecting on her experience of the interviews, she described her complex feelings about the necessity of speaking, and introduced a final explanation of what her participation in the project had meant to her. The story she told astonished CL, and made us wonder whether it might be understood either as a shift in a repetitious pattern, or as a signifier of the enigma of her participation.

To begin, then, we will look in a little more detail at the account the participant gave, in response to CL's opening prompt in her first individual interview with A. CL asks about A's 'understanding' and 'experience' of the project', which she, A, elaborates in terms of reasons for participation:

CL: And perhaps, if you start, if that's okay, by just thinking about any thoughts or feelings or associations that come to your mind when you think about your understanding of this project, and your experience of the project so far.

A: Okay. What I understood from the last session was, like, what I think pay means, and how do people get – I think the word used, remuneration, like, kind of how do we ourselves. Are we well-paid, are we underpaid? And how do people look at your job description and then pay you accordingly. That's what I think it is. And maybe I'm wrong, but I'm thinking, because I'm thinking about my role, and I wanted to be part

> of this research just to show the really inside of what we do. I wanted to have this question of, are we getting paid accordingly. So, yeah, that's what I think about the research. I also wanted to be part of something concrete, because that's my final year at university, I'm doing a degree, and, you know, this year we have our own practice, and also I've never participated in research. I've read about research, I've read about what theories say, what research say, is it right or it's not, but I'm wondering where would that be, and I wanted to see, you know, that final product of it, and see what you guys, as professionals, come up. Yeah, that's it. I think that's pretty much that was in my mind. Is there anything you want to ask me? Because, yes, you are right, it's a little bit uncomfortable [03:05]

A seems to give three reasons for participation: wanting to 'show the really inside of what we do'; wanting to be 'part of something concrete'; and wanting to find out more about research. Taken together, these seem, on the surface, like a reasonable motivation, and so it may not be reasonable of us to question any further. However two of her reasons – the first and the third – might easily apply to other students who didn't take part, and so don't explain her decision to make this commitment. The middle explanation, 'I wanted to be part of something concrete' is more obscure, and might perhaps occupy the place of a more enigmatic desire. It is also worth noting the way A comes to a halt or interrupts herself to ask 'Is there anything you want to ask me?', apparently seeking guidance or reassurance.

A's observation, at the end of the extract, that 'it's a little bit uncomfortable' is also interesting. These were words CL had used introducing the project, explaining the method and how it might feel. A used 'uncomfortable' seven times during the course of the interview, seemingly as a placeholder for emotions that were difficult to describe. Describing a meeting with her headteacher to ask about support for her studies she said:

> we had kind of a negotiation, which, at that point, I was feeling *very, very* uncomfortable, because I'm never – I mean, maybe my background, my values, my identity, I would never go and ask for an increment, you know, I need to get more, or something, I can't do that. Because it's such a – you kind of – for what you are – and then you have to put a price on it, I found it *a little bit* uncomfortable. Some people can do it, and I value it, that people can do it, because they're very confident, maybe. I don't know, for me, it's about confidence, it's about – it's *a bit* uncomfortable. I can't believe it's *a bit* uncomfortable until I'm talking about it. (11:07)

The shift in qualifiers, from 'very very' to 'a little bit' to 'a bit' suggests that the affect she is describing is not one thing; and the ambiguity of the term 'uncomfortable' perhaps enables A to give a name to something that is hard for her to capture in words. Her final statement, 'I can't believe it's a bit uncomfortable until I'm talking about it', suggests something more than this; as if it is only in the act of narration that the affect becomes the focus of her attention, and that this is surprising to her. It is also significant, perhaps, that it was CL who introduced the term, so her usage might be indicative that she is doing as she has been asked; but at the same time the signifier she has been offered enables her to speak about her feelings in a way that seems new for her.

Reflecting back at the end of the first interview, A explained that it had been difficult not to worry about what she was saying, and that she had felt uncomfortable, but elaborated:

> It wasn't very easy, that part, and also maybe talking about these things – do you understand what I mean – like talking about it, although it's just words that you're saying that's maybe come up, because it's what I think about it. It's not about being uncomfortable and getting things wrong. (59:24)

This elaboration points towards something beyond discomfort and getting things wrong. It seems to be something to do with the act of talking, but the phrases she uses to describe this aspect of the interview seem to leave something unsaid: an undefined 'these things' or 'it'. We might understand these as instances where language fails, and the unconscious appears (cf. Nasio, 1998). It is also possible to juxtapose this reflection with the content of her speech in the interview: she told two stories that referred to experiences of shame associated with poverty; and she checked three times about the confidentiality of the interview, once when she had mentioned a family member, and twice as a more general enquiry. It is possible that 'these things' and 'it' refer to these repetitious moments in the interview. So, we might consider the juxtaposition of three things: A's ability to express what she thinks; shame; and responsibility towards other people.

Finally. we turn to the closing section of A's second interview, when CL asked her to reflect on what she might have got from taking part in the interviews. She repeated that she had found the process difficult, elaborating that she had said very personal things that she had partly wanted to hold back, and explaining that in the past her experience had been of feeling bad after saying too much. However, her experience of speaking in the interview, she said, had been different:

> I think you know once in a lifetime you're saying it, you're verbalising it you know. Because like I said, I live a lot in my head, so at least I can say it you know. I never thought by saying things it would make you feel good. Because sometimes in my experience, sometimes when you say too much, instead of feeling good you feel really bad, guilty and all these things. Do you understand? But here I don't feel I'm being judged. Nobody is judging me here. I loved to feeling emotional as well. (52:31)

CL asked, 'So talking brings emotions also?' and A paused before saying, 'Yes, is that alright?', and it seemed as if an end point had been reached; but A then continued to try to explain her experience of the interview. She talked about a sense of the interview as being about more than words, of being about opening herself, and said, apparently both in reference to us, the researchers, and to herself: 'you're looking for something but that's not what you found out' (54:46) and linked that to our initial instruction, 'whatever comes to mind, just say it' (55:43). She said that the experience of speaking her mind as she had in the interviews was very new for her, as she usually worried about offending people and finding the right words:

> You won't know how helpful it is […] being able to talk like that has helped me in terms of the future, not be careful, but you know, to say things that is as it is. Not in a rude way, but to say it. You know, to believe in what you say. Do you understand? (56:09)

It appeared at this moment that A was saying that the interview process had had an effect on her; and, perhaps because the implied effect seemed so central to A's being, i.e. about the possibility of saying what she believes, her statement astonished CL. This astonishment is perhaps indexed in CL's response: 'I don't know for sure if I understand, but I'm listening'. A then gave two examples of how she had expressed her feelings in family situations where previously she would have kept quiet, and concluded:

> I'm like wow, very clear, my goodness. I felt better (CL: mmm) Do you understand? It's not like, it's not a revolution, it's the way you put things, you say it. (1:02:02)

CL, taken aback, checked twice: 'And that relates to the interviews?', 'And you connect that a bit to the experience of the interview?' To which A responded 'It does yes, because you talk, isn't it?' and 'Yes. Yeah'.

One way of thinking about this account is that the interview space created both a site of transference and an *impossible* site of transference for this participant. A's concerns about confidentiality when talking about poverty and shame might be understood as a repetition of past relations, suggesting that the interview enabled a re-encounter with this element of her subjectivity (cf. Lapping and Glynos, 2017). However, our request that she say whatever came to her mind, combined with her commitment to taking part, forced her to act in a way that was not repetitious, i.e. to speak about feelings that felt very personal. It is also worth noting again that CL had inadvertently provided her with a signifier, 'uncomfortable', for these previously unspeakable feelings.

We might, then, suggest that the free associative interview site brought about an encounter with the unconscious via a symbolic limit ('I can't believe it's a bit uncomfortable until I'm talking about it') that produced an effect. What we might claim, perhaps, is that a fantasy about the danger of speaking has been replaced, at least temporarily, by a fantasy that, if you choose your words with care, speaking makes you feel good: in Nasio's terms, a new signifier has been put in the place of the *One*, the place of A's existence or of her being as a subject. In a way, in simply making the request 'say whatever comes to your mind', we became the object cause of A's desire. The question repeated in the final three quoted extracts, 'Do you understand?', is further evidence, perhaps, that her explanation of what had transpired was both addressed to us and incorporated us. However, while we might recognise her explanation as a signifier of her symptom, the enigma of A's participation, or the question of her desire, remains.

Conclusion: 'two for joy'

To conclude, it is possible to play with our participant's construction of two from one: one magpie, seen twice, means two for joy. This formulation provided, we might speculate, a certain satisfaction, in that it enabled a return to the *One*, the signifying position of her existence as a subject. Our discussion has nudged at several 'twos': the 'two' of transference and free association; the 'twos' of Klein and Laplanche, and of Laplanche and Lacan; and the 'two' of the psychoanalytic clinic and the research interview. We might wonder about the satisfactions of these twos and how they might constitute symptoms in the often disputed relations between psychoanalysis and research. The aim is not to establish a particular

signifier in the position of the *One*; but rather to open up new possibilities of existence for the relation between theories and practices of psychoanalysis, sociology and empirical social research.

Our analysis of instances from our data demonstrates, we hope, the magical quality of free association in producing glimpses of the unconscious. In addition, these instances are suggestive of the contrasting modes of associative material that can be produced, and of contrasting ways of responding to such material. It is possible to distinguish between signifiers on the metaphoric plane that constitute a return to the *One*; and signifiers on the metonymic plane that can unsettle the established meaning of a sign, producing a new explanation, embellishment or inversion.

Our analysis has also suggested that, in order for free association to take place, it is necessary to establish a transference between the subject and an addressee. The transference might be established through something like an enigma, an active space of unknowing in the other that can receive associations in such a way that the subject can also receive them, as if from somewhere else. It is when the subject is able to hear or to read their own associations, as if from somewhere else, that there is a possibility of change. This possibility may be enhanced when the associations pass through an other and are returned in the form of a signifier that can act as an opening, or take up a position in the unconscious structure that underpins the being of the subject.

In proposing the possibility of constructing research as a site of transference that might bring about a shift in subjectivity, we have also suggested that it is important to consider the enigma of the participant's commitment: the unknowable question driving them to volunteer. More sociological debates about participatory methods are concerned with the social limits that maintain hierarchies within collaborative research, but do not question participants' conscious accounts of their desire for change. When we are working with an understanding of the unconscious, we recognise that the desire for change is not necessarily something that can be articulated in this way. This suggestion clearly brings certain risks and an ethical responsibility for the researcher to guard against responses that push too far in opening up potentially sensitive signifying material. However, a refusal to recognise the enigma of participation, the desire the participant brings to the encounter, might be seen as a form of resistance on the part of the researcher: a way of protecting our authority to define the research space. In exploring the possibility of research as a site of transference, we would suggest, it is important to maintain a radical refusal to claim to know on behalf of the other, and this includes a refusal to presume in advance what they might want from participation in the research.

Finally, we still wonder what it might mean to carry out research with the aim of producing glimpses of the unconscious in social and political discourse. On the basis of our analysis, it does not seem over-ambitious to suggest such research can contribute to shifts in subjectivity; and, further, that free associative research should be understood as a site of transference with the capacity to unsettle the discursive field. To conclude, then, we will playfully propose that research of this kind might aim for something like a point of no return in the field of

discursive politics, in the way that Burgoyne (2000) describes a point of no return as a defining feature of psychoanalytic work:

> Oedipus discovers something about who he is, and after that point of discovery he cannot go back. He can no longer be what he was. So in this point of no return, because of the development of the plot, because of the working of the plot, because of the working of the technique, one meets a point where one recognises who one is, and because of that one can no longer go back.

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