

## **The Stressed Subject: Lack, Empowerment and Liberation**

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### **Abstract**

The study develops a psychoanalytic perspective on the stressed subject at work. Its focus is on how this subject is continually reconstructed at the interstice of a lack of having and a lack of being. Drawing on the analysis of empirical material consisting of 52 narratives of stress, it examines how individuals construct selves by drawing on stress discourse in both alienating and liberating ways. Specifically, it examines how stress is an imaginary construction of the self and how this subjugates individuals to the power of the imaginary. It also examines how such constructions are invariably disrupted by unconscious desire and how narrating one's stress provides opportunities to experience empowerment and liberation. Implications of this perspective for our understanding of the stressed subject are discussed.

**Key Words:** Stress, Discourse, Psychoanalysis, Lacan, Lack, Empowerment

## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to examine how individuals talk about their stress and what this might tell us about their struggles with unconscious desire and lack. Specifically, I examine how individuals draw on the ever-present and almost ordinary discourse of stress not merely to construct their identities (Newton, 1995; Wainwright and Calnan, 2002) but importantly to experience themselves as powerful and free. The contribution I hope to make, with what I will describe below as a psychoanalytic perspective on the stressed subject, is to build on but also radically redirect current debates in stress research today. While such debates are interesting, they seem to miss an important underlying dynamic that this study hopes to shed light on.

Let me briefly review these debates to at least provide the reader with its basic tenets. One that may be the jumping off point for this study is the idea that stress has reached pandemic proportions and has become such a common discourse that we define our identities, at least in part, in how we experience and narrate stress (Newton, 1995; Wainwright and Calnan, 2002). Other tenets in this debate are more tangential but serve to define what I refer to as the common discourse of stress. For example, widely accepted research on stress suggests that it may be conceptualized as the alignment between person and environment (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Moreover, stress has been found to be caused by demands that exceed individuals' resources (Van Vegchel, De Jong and Landsbergis, 2005). As a consequence a large body of this research is devoted to investigating specific causes such as work overload and pressure to perform, abusive supervision, difficult working conditions, and lack of fairness or voice (Bamberger and Bacharach, 2006; Cooper and Dewe, 2004; Kolvereid, 1983; McHugh, 1997; Mackie,

Holahan and Gottlieb, 2001; Menzies and Newson, 2008; Randall, Cox and Griffiths, 2007; Schabracq and Cooper, 1998). Finally, there is research on the effects of stress with some suggesting it has positive effects (Cooper and Dewe, 2004: 28) and many others investigating its negative effects such as physical and mental health problems and whether this calls for individual and/or collective action to prevent or countermand such effects (Cooper and Dewe, 2004; Hepburn and Brown, 2001; Pedersen, 2008; Sulsky and Smith, 2005; Wainwright and Calnan, 2002; Williams and Cooper, 2002). In short, what we might refer to as the common discourse of stress consists of the idea that stress is an ongoing struggle for everyone to find the proper environmental alignment, to be aware of an ever-growing list of causes for misalignment and to be weary of its negative outcomes or learn to thrive on stress in some way.

My aim here is not to debate whether such views are correct or even desirable. Rather my aim is to heed the call for more complex approaches to conceptualizing and empirically researching stress that do justice to the subjective experience of stress (Cooper and Dewe, 2004; Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll, 2001). I do this by suggesting that a more fruitful approach to such debates may be to simply suggest that they are commonly accepted by now and then build on the idea that they have come to be part of how we define our identity today (Newton, 1995; Wainwright and Calnan, 2002). In doing so we can examine more closely how identity is narrated through stress discourse and perhaps gain new insights about how stress is subjectively experienced. Put simply, we could examine how people narrate their stress not in order to find out how it may be objectively defined, what may cause it or what effects it may have, but rather just to listen

carefully to how it is experienced. I wish to do just that but extend the exploration to include unconscious dynamics.

Specifically, by building on prior psychoanalytical, specifically Lacanian, research on stress (Bicknell and Liefoghe, 2006; 2010; Vanheule and Verhaeghe, 2004), my aim is to examine not just how stress discourse may be drawn on to construct a conscious self, one that subjugates the self to the power of the imaginary (Roberts, 2005). Rather my aim is also to examine how this discourse is drawn on to disrupt such constructions and become temporarily liberated from the imaginary. Put differently, my aim is to explore how all the difficulties we describe with regard to work stress not only have become integral to how we consciously construct the self, but may also be experienced as an empowering struggle with unconscious desire and lack of being.

Therefore, I want to explore specifically unconscious aspects of the stressed subject when I analyze the empirical material consisting of narratives of 52 individuals who describe their experiences with stress at work. In doing so I do not wish to disregard what the narrators consciously express about, what are to them, very real and often painful consequences of work stress. On the contrary, I very much hope to highlight the narratives as providing rich insights into the subjective (conscious) experience of stress in organizations today (Cooper and Dewe, 2004; Cooper et al., 2001). As we will see, the narratives I explore paint a detailed picture of instances of inadequate working conditions, abusive supervision, lack of fairness and support, and, importantly, intensely-felt negative reactions to these with emotions ranging from anger, frustration, and worry to feeling sick, used, depressed and destroyed. Indeed many of them are remarkable stories as when we meet the narrator who becomes a bounty-hunter and without training

goes on an armed chase of a fugitive, the factory worker who gets pelted with fish bellies, the barista whose boss throws a can of soda at him, the veterinarian assistant whose co-worker dumps a pile of excrement on the surgery floor for her to clean up and the store manager whose owner misappropriates payroll money for private use and she then uses her own money to pay the other employees.

When I explore how such narratives can also be understood as a creative struggle with unconscious desire and examine the emancipatory potential of this process, I am not endorsing the call for eustress, or the notion that stress can also be good for us (Cooper and Dewe, 2004: 28). Nor is my aim to focus on how stress may be unconsciously enjoyed (Bicknell and Liefoghe, 2006; 2010) or to offer advice for how an understanding of unconscious dynamics of stress can lead to a healthier engagement with stress that may prevent negative consequences such as burnout (Vanheule and Verhaeghe, 2004).

Rather my aim is to take seriously how complex stress, and especially the subjective experience of stress, may be (Cooper and Dewe, 2004; Cooper et al., 2001) and therefore to offer a more fine-grained analysis with a view toward the agency of the ethical subject (Roberts, 2005) in organizations today. As I will explain from a psychoanalytic, particularly a Lacanian, perspective, human subjectivity is defined by a fundamental lack of being (Lacan, 1977b: 214). Whenever we narrate our subjective experience and thereby consciously attempt to say who we are and what we want, our rhetorical constructions also reflect disruptions, discontinuities and breaking points. These discontinuities surface unconscious desire that is not satisfied by whatever “it” is that we thereby pursue.

Consequently, when narrators describe their “its” as all that stresses them out at work, what I am looking for are the disruptions in their narratives that point to a more fundamental lack. I hope to underline that what stresses them out consciously is a lack of having but that when we look deeper we can also uncover a lack of being. Facing this lack of being may also offer opportunities for liberation and empowerment. In short, my aim is to go in search of the stressed subject at the interstice of subjugation to all that stresses us out and the empowering struggle with this stress as a mere placeholder for all that we want from work, self and organization (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007) but luckily will never find (Lacan, 1977b: 268).

The paper proceeds as follows. An overview of key Lacanian ideas is followed by an introduction of the empirical material. I then analyze the narratives with regard to how the imaginary self is constructed in and through stress discourse but also how such constructions invariably reiterate lack of being. The study concludes with a discussion of the contributions of this perspective for our understanding of the stressed subject and its political as well as psychological struggles at work.

### **Lacanian Subjectivity**

In this section I introduce Lacanian psychoanalytic theorizing on subjectivity. In my review I draw on Lacan’s works (1977a;b; 1988a;b; 1991; 2001), secondary readings (i.e. Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986; Elliott and Frosh, 1995; Fink, 1995; 2004; Muller and Richardson, 1982) and recent Lacanian organizational studies. The latter have introduced Lacanian ideas to enhance our understanding of, for example, subjectivity in organizations, identity, employability, spirituality, learning, creativity, resistance, power, change and coaching to name a few (Arnaud, 2002; 2003a; b; Arnaud and Vanheule,

2007; Contu, Driver and Campbell, 2010; Cremin, 2009; Driver, 2005; 2008; 2009a;b;c; 2010; Fotaki, 2009; Harding, 2007; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Roberts, 2005; Stavrakakis, 2008; Vanheule, and Verhaeghe, 2004).

It should be noted that the presentation of Lacan's ideas is not an easy task due to their complexity and Lacan's writing, which was intentionally left open to interpretation (Fink, 2004: 65). Moreover, while Lacan's oeuvre is large, the presentation here is limited to concepts appropriate for the focus of the study such as the imaginary, the symbolic, the real, desire, objet a, jouissance and lack.

One idea central to understanding subjectivity is that the self is constructed in ordinary speech (Lacan, 1977b: 245). That is, we draw on discourse to construct our identity in everyday conversations. The self we so construct is a fundamentally alienated one (Lacan, 1988b: 210) because when we draw on discourse we always draw on a symbolic order, the linguistic conventions handed down through generations (Fink, 95:5), that is not of our own making. To fulfill our desires we have to express ourselves in the symbolic and the symbolic is the order of others, or as Lacan put it, the order of a generic otherness also called the big Other (Lacan, 1977b: 206). In the symbolic, there is always something missing.

What is missing is what we really want to express, a reflection of our true selves and our true desires (Lacan, 1988b: 210). This is lost from the symbolic as the real that we can never get back, as that which we gave up when we were born into the social order of the symbolic (Verhaeghe, 2001: 24). We try to cover up this lack by constructing an imaginary order (Lacan, 1988b: 177), our illusion of the real, where we pretend the symbolic is the real and we can say what we want, know who we are and therefore get

what we want (Muller and Richardson, 1982: 22). Unfortunately, this imaginary construction is routinely disrupted whenever fundamental lack surfaces (Lacan, 1977b: 276).

From a Lacanian perspective listening to such disruptions is crucial. By listening to ambiguities, tangents, omissions, contradictions and other failed rhetorical constructions (Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986: 13), we hear how subjects are experiencing fundamental lack as a presence they continue to circle in their own unique and creative fashion (Verhaeghe, 1999: 247). That is, we hear how subjects continue to experience that whoever they thought they were and whatever they thought they wanted, turns out, again and again, not to be “it” (Lacan, 1977b: 268). Whatever we think this “it” is always eludes us as “an inarticulable remainder of the unsaid” (Vanheule, 2011: 99). It is in every symbol as that which we want but somehow cannot get, the surplus value of all we articulate, what Lacan referred to as *objet a* (Lacan, 1977b: 239).

Unfortunately, according to Lacan, there is no cure for this condition. Rather lack of being is constitutive of human subjectivity (Lacan, 1977b: 214). However, in circling our lack, we do find some connection to the real (Ragland, 1996: 200). That is, while we can never uncover who we really are, what we really want, or obtain what we really want, because all of this is part of the real which is submerged forever in our unconscious, we can connect to something of the real, a tiny part of the real in the symbolic (Ragland, 1996: 200). We can do so by listening to how our conscious constructions, our imaginary selves are routinely disrupted and unsettled. It is at those moments that our unconscious desire makes an appearance.

It makes an appearance as an absence made present, a lack of being we cannot cover up, as the “it” that has failed to fulfill what we think we want again. It is at those moments that we are freed momentarily from our illusions and the imaginary constructions that alienate us (Lacan, 1977b: 216). As we encounter lack, we obtain some “sense of self” (Lacan, 1988b: 223) and importantly some pleasure, what Lacan called *jouissance* (1988b: 223). *Jouissance* is a bittersweet libidinal pleasure (Fink, 2004: 157) that comes not from fulfilling desire but from preserving desire. Put differently, *jouissance* is how we relate to that which we cannot articulate, an enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle and always also an articulation of dissatisfaction (Vanheule, 2011: 99), and therefore the energy that drives us to desire and articulate what we cannot obtain. As such our conscious desire for nothing (Lacan, 1988b: 211) empowers us to continue to desire desire itself (Lacan, 1977b: 243) and thus connect to the real as a lack made present (Lacan, 1988b: 210).

In short, what is crucial to understand for purposes of this study is that individuals construct imaginary selves in conscious, ordinary speech. These constructions are routinely and inevitably disrupted by the lack of being that they were meant to suture. In looking closely at these disruptions, we can uncover how whatever we say we are or want is only an alienated representation, one that our unconscious desire inevitably unsettles and that we are always already liberated from.

### **Empirical Material**

In examining narratives of stress, I followed the call of prior research suggesting that a discursive perspective in general and a closer examination of individual narratives of stress in particular might offer not only better insights into the complexities of stress

but also be more appropriate for understanding the subjective experience of stress (Bicknell and Liefoghe, 2006; 2010; Hepburn and Brown, 2001; Lazarus, 1999; Newton, 1995; Pedersen, 2008; Vanheule and Verhaeghe, 2004; Wainwright and Calnan, 2002). Additionally, I followed a process loosely based on reflexive methodology (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). That is, I examined the narratives iteratively by first reading all of them once and numbering them line by line.

I then inquired further into the meaning of the narratives (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) by examining how narrators drew on stress discourse to construct selves and specifically to explore the construction and disruptions of the imaginary. As we all commonly construct the self in ordinary speech (Lacan, 1977b: 245) and listening for the imaginary and its discontinuities is a task important for everyone (Glynos and Stravakakis, 2002: 73) beyond the confines of the analytic situation (Arnaud, 2002: 708), the narratives were purposefully collected and examined as ordinary communications rather than an investigation of individuals undertaking psychoanalysis.

It should also be noted that my interpretations of the narratives from this perspective are not intended as valid proof of a particular finding but rather as an interesting argument in an ongoing debate (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000: 276). The story of stress I hope to tell through this research (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) is co-constructed by many voices (Hardy, 2001) including the narrators and readers of this study, which continue to perform it (Boje et al., 1999). Moreover, it is constructed within the constraints of the master and/or university discourse that is drawn on in any scientific writing (Lacan, 1991). As such, it invites the pretense of overcoming lack but is itself

another imaginary endeavor to suture the subjective experience of lack with claims to objectivity to which I make none here.

The narratives were collected from 52 different participants in courses I taught in the spring and fall semesters of 2010. Participants held a variety of jobs from frontline employees to middle management across a range of industries including the public sector, higher education, banking, healthcare, automotive, transportation, cosmetics, childcare, hospitality, construction, landscaping, geology, recreation, retail, law enforcement, steel, computing, pyrotechnics, legal services, entertainment, agriculture and not-for-profit. Participation was voluntary.

I used an approximation of storytelling as a research method (Gabriel, 1998; 2000) inviting them to share any story of work-related stress that they wished to share with me. I suggested that the resulting narratives of stress (Lazarus, 1999) should be stories in the sense that I was looking for them to express the meaning of the events they described and how all this made them feel. I emphasized that I was exploring the subjective experience of stress in organizations and that for purposes of this project they should consider me a “fellow traveler” (Gabriel, 1998: 137) who would simply listen to their stories.

52 narratives were provided and analyzed containing a total of 1496 lines for an average of about 29 lines per narrative. Narratives are referred to by narrative number (1 through 52) and line number. A citation labeled (12/35-37) would refer to narrative number 12 and lines 35 through 37. Identifying information has been removed.

## **The Imaginary Stressed Self**

I now examine the narratives with regard to how the imaginary self may be constructed by drawing on common stress discourse (Mackie et al., 2001; McHugh, 1997; Schabracq and Cooper, 1998). The narrators describe themselves, for example, in how they experience simultaneous and often conflicting demands at work, how this adds to pressure to do their best while being rushed or put in a difficult situation. The following narrative describing working in a fishery illustrates this:

The job they gave me was cutting fish bellies as they came down a conveyor belt. After I cut the bellies, the fish would be processed further as they went down the production line. Because it was my first time doing this job, I could not cut the fish bellies fast enough, and people further down the line couldn't do anything with the fish. After about two minutes, the other workers began throwing fish at me. I got flustered and tried to work even faster, but I couldn't because my hands started shaking. The fish began hitting me in the face and people were yelling at me in a variety of different languages (20/4-10).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, we can see how an imaginary self may be constructed here in relation to the pressure to perform and difficult working conditions. Who the narrator is and what he wants is described relative to the task he is given and how well he performs it. Even if he is frustrated, his dissatisfaction, or the lack that might surface here, may be attributed to a problem that can be solved. For example, if only he were more experienced or more efficient at this job, he might feel better and get what he wishes for, perhaps a friendlier reception by coworkers, more self-assurance or the satisfaction of a job well done.

In this way, the self may be fixed by drawing on stress discourse and stress may become an expression of a conscious lack of having, a problem to be fixed rather than a structural impossibility. That is, any lack the narrator might encounter is a lack of

something specific, a lack that can be filled by processing fish and not getting yelled at or having fish thrown in one's face.

We also see this dynamic in the next narrative. Here stress discourse is drawn on as another common cause of stress is described, namely abusive or incompetent supervision (Bamberger and Bacharach, 2006). In the following excerpt, the narrator describes working as a barista at a coffee house:

Every week I would be asked, by my boss, to the backroom where I would sit at a table and get yelled at. Literally once every week, the boss and his wife would sit across from me and put me down. I always felt like dirt after those "evaluations"...At one point one of these evaluations got way out of control. The boss actually threw his soda can at the wall and it exploded everywhere. The wife ran out of the room crying and the boss told me to clean up the soda mess. No apology, just clean up the mess the boss made and get back to work after I was just put down and trampled (25/3-19).

We get a vivid sense of the narrator's stress here. To even refer to such a situation as a performance evaluation only underlines how absurd it is. Yet, despite or even because of its absurdity, we can see how the self may also be constructed, from a psychoanalytic perspective, in imaginary ways. By referring to it as an evaluation and as feeling put down, the narrator draws on stress discourse to define the self as an imaginary object in relation to the supervisor and work. Again the lack that is surfaced is given a name and identified as a problem to be solved.

This is illustrated as well in the next narrative where the narrator draws on the common discourse of stress in which lack of resources features prominently (Van Vegchel et al., 2005). The narrator describes working at the front desk in a resort:

I was having to deal with the annoyed guests and talking to the housekeepers to make sure the rooms were being cleaned. I was checking in guests, handing out gift certificates to make up for the rooms not being done, and keeping on top of the housekeepers... I felt like I was a chicken running around with its head cut

off... The whole situation made me feel overwhelmed and like there were gaps in my training. I wish there had been a manager there for help as well (44/10-20).

Again, we get a vivid sense of stress here and the panic this narrator feels at having to deal with multiple and conflicting demands. We also get a sense of how the narrator may construct an imaginary self and importantly desire as wishing to be and feel competent and to have better training and support from management. That is, the self is not constructed as fundamentally lacking but rather as literally lacking something, resources, training, or support for example, which can be desired and obtained.

The following narrative also illustrates this. Here stress discourse is drawn on to construct an imaginary self in the context of dealing with difficult co-workers (Schabracq and Cooper, 1998). The narrator describes working at an animal hospital where a co-worker accuses her of allowing a dog to leave excrement outside of a designated area:

[She] walked in with a bag of dog poop she had found... and dumped it on the floor in the middle of the surgery prep room. She told me that it was my responsibility to clean up after the dogs... and then proceeded to make me clean up the poop from the floor while everyone watched. Not only was it unprofessional to criticize me in front of everyone, but making me get on my hands and knees to clean up animal waste from the floor was beyond degrading (28/8-13).

Like the narrative about being treated like dirt, we see this narrator describing her stress vividly as feeling degraded by having to clean up excrement on her hands and knees. An imaginary self is constructed around obtainable things such as respectful and professional treatment and a feeling of competence and dignity with lack of having suturing lack of being.

This is illustrated further by the same narrator describing an event that shows a conflict between her values as “an animal lover” (28/32) and the way this clinic operates:

The last straw for me came when the vet was putting an IV in a puppy, and the dog wasn't held tight enough, and he snapped at her. I watched the doctor punch the animal a couple times, and I was absolutely appalled. After that, I felt that every animal that came through those doors had the potential to be abused by the people who are suppose to be taking care of them...Being an animal lover, the anxiety it caused me made me unable to function at work (28/28-33).

Again here an imaginary self may be constructed from common stress discourse, namely stress due to a lack of value fit between employee and organization (Schabracq and Cooper, 1998). We can see how painful the experience is for the narrator and how debilitating the resulting anxiety becomes as who she is as an animal lover is under threat. We also see therefore how the imaginary self may be constructed here as "an animal lover" and how lack is fixed as resulting from a lack of care from supervisors and generally from a lack of an acceptable work environment. In spite or because of the stress experienced, the self and desire can be defined and, importantly, lack of being can be sutured through imaginary constructions.

### **Discontinuities in the Imaginary**

I now want to explore how such imaginary constructions are interrupted when lack of being surfaces. That is, I explore how stress discourse not only provides resources (Hardy, 2001) to construct an imaginary order in which subjects are trapped because they are always attracted to this "mirror" (Roberts, 2005) and wish to validate and maintain it at any cost. I also want to explore how the attraction of this mirror is always already undermined by the many fissures that become noticeable when we look more closely.

As we zoom in to the narratives further, we notice that the imaginary self is not consistently or coherently defined, not even by all it lacks, i.e. by all the lack that is consciously defined as a lack of having. For example, the following narrator draws on

stress discourse in which difficult and even dangerous working conditions are described as common causes of work stress (Schabracq and Cooper, 1998). The narrator describes himself as a stressed out bounty hunter, someone who tracks down people wanted by the police:

This job came with absolutely no training. My company only required that...I carry a pair of hand cuffs and a handgun while working. The manager... gave me a box of files with about 20 fugitives and wished me luck. The bounties ranged from \$500 to a high of \$2500...I bought a bounty hunter hand book and set off on my first recovery effort... Despite actual knee knocking I found myself in the worst neighborhood...walking into an apartment complex that reeked of urine. I knocked on the door and heard a bang, in one big adrenaline rush I kicked the door in only to see legs falling out a small window. I ran out the door...and caught up with my fugitive as she ran down the street...I pulled her down by the shirt...put my foot on the back of her neck and pushed her face into the snow...At the jail they...told me... my fugitive had H.I.V. and advanced stages of cancer and they could not book her without a doctor's approval. My fugitive walked home from jail, wig in her hand, in shorts and shoeless, in a snow storm. I never really thought about the \$500.00 I almost earned. I could only think about how much this person needed help and how the system refused to help her (33/29-62).

At first glance it seems that the imaginary self is constructed relative to lack that is successfully overcome, such as the lack of training for the job, which was overcome through the narrator's resourcefulness in pursuit of the fugitive, and then a lack of success at getting the fugitive arrested, which was overcome by redefining success as no longer caring for the reward and instead empathizing with the fugitive as a victim. Importantly, what we see here therefore is how the imaginary construction shifts as corrections are made and turns are taken to repair what seem to be inconsistencies.

For example, we see how the narrator wants to make an arrest and uses his resources to this end despite all the difficult conditions. Then we see a shift from resourceful bounty-hunter, someone who has overcome adversity, to someone wanting to help a fugitive that is now identified and empathized with as the victim of an irrational or

even unjust system. We see a shift from someone with his boot on the neck of a fugitive, to someone feeling sadness and caringly describing the details of a sick and helpless person in the snow without shoes.

What I want to underline here is not what mistakes this narrator may have made and what problems he or the system may have that need correcting. Stress discourse often involves the surfacing of structures of power to which we are routinely subjugated and very real material concerns that may require very real action (Wainwright and Calnan, 2002). However, my concern here is with less conscious and much more internal struggles. I wish to underline not how the narrator may mistakenly follow one line of reasoning or another. Rather I wish to highlight that the turns in his narrative represent disruptions of the imaginary and therefore moments when lack of being surfaces. What is happening as this narrator shifts from one construction to another is that unconscious desire surfaces, a desire that is not fulfilled by whatever he says about who he is and what he wants.

Consequently, when the imaginary construction around being a resourceful bounty-hunter fails around the realization that the hunted person is not a bounty but a victim in need of help, it is not that the latter is more authentic than the former. Rather the turning to the latter construction indicates an important fissure in the mirror, an unsettling of the imaginary and a surfacing of lack of being. An unconscious desire not to be this bounty hunter may have surfaced at this very instance. And as soon as it did, the rupture was covered up with yet another imaginary construction, namely the self that now recognizes the victim and wishes to help, or at least wishes the system would help.

Therefore, as we examine the narrative a little more closely what comes into view is that the imaginary is not a smooth surface, a monolithic power of the imaginary to which we are hopelessly subjugated. And while we can never shed the imaginary order (Lacan, 1988: 177), we can nonetheless recognize that it is not an imaginary self we construct but a series of imaginary partial constructions, a self that moves in and out of the imaginary, and that, as it does so, we are always already powerful and free.

This also comes into view when we explore more closely the following narrative. Looking from above the imaginary self, or mirror image, here constructed by drawing on the discourse of stress may be of an individual having to deal with the common causes of stress of lack of appreciation, lack of fairness and lack of voice in the workplace (Schabracq and Cooper, 1998). In the mirror we see a stressed-out car salesperson who is not paid and stuck without alternatives:

Many times I was owed thousands and received no pay at all for that pay period...I dug through my records, compared it to my pay and faxed a note off to HR (Personnel department). The next day I would call her and was always met in a hostile manner. Do you know I have 350 employees on my payroll she yelled at me more than once? She then promised it would be taken care of which meant it would be on the next pay period. By now I had wasted half a week trying to solve old pay issues, what I called earning my money twice, and now I am behind on my new business. I am now depressed as well stressed. If I don't get going there won't be any money to argue for. So I would bust ass only to arrive at a new pay period that was even more confusing. I stressed over not getting paid simply what I was owed. I wanted my long hours and hard work to get me what I had earned... But I can't leave because they owe me so much money, I will never get paid if I leave. Where would I go? What would I do?...I can't go on like this. (12/7-25).

However, we can also see myriad twists and turns in this imaginary construction.

The narrator is perhaps angry at being owed back pay, he then faxes records to and calls someone in the appropriate back office who delivers only hostility and empty promises. Rather than continue to stay angry he now worries that he is spending too much

time on this. He suggests that he is now depressed and seems to worry about working for new business, which he may not get paid for again. He even refers to this as earning his money twice and we sense some feelings of futility in his account. As he validates that indeed he was not getting paid again, he does not seem to be even angrier, rather he expresses that he merely wishes to get compensated for his hard work, to be treated fairly and to be recognized. Then, he turns from what seems to be frustration over this to anxiety or perhaps despair that he is stuck in this situation, that his desire for compensation will also be frustrated when he leaves and that he does not have alternatives but cannot go on in his present situation either.

What I want to underline here is again not that the narrator may have inconsistencies or problems that could be solved in one manner or another or even that he has many and perhaps contradictory ideas and feelings about this. Rather what I want to illustrate here is that the imaginary construction of this narrator's self is in motion. It is shifting from one partial construction to another, almost frantically turning, constructing, repairing and turning again. And what becomes noticeable when this happens is that in between the constructions of the lack of having, lack of being surfaces again and again. That is, what becomes noticeable is how this narrator continues to circle the real as an absence made present by unconscious desire that cannot be fulfilled.

This unconscious desire may surface at the very instances when the narrator shifts away from the angry self (for whatever reasons or to whatever other construction), when the imaginary angry self that wants to get paid is disrupted, when the want itself, for pay for example, is unsettled as not being the "it" that is unconsciously desired. This may happen when the worried self that does not want to spend too much time on this is

disrupted, when the defeated self that just accepts the inevitable is unsettled, or when the reasonable self that just wants fair pay for hard work and even the frantic self that is stuck in an untenable situation are all disrupted and discontinued. It is at those moments that the “it” that is pursued can be experienced as the illusory desire of an alienated self and that the freedom and power of the desire to desire not this but anything else may be enjoyed.

We may see this dynamic also in the next narrative. The narrator draws on stress discourse and constructs an imaginary self around the common causes of stress of difficult working conditions, lack of resources and lack of fairness (Schabracq and Cooper, 1998). In particular the narrator recounts her time working as a manager in a retail shipping outlet for an owner who routinely abused the businesses’ funds and then blamed her for any shortfalls. After one such occurrence she writes a personal check for 4,000 (U.S.) Dollars to cover what she believes is her own mistake that later turns out to be the owner’s. She recounts:

I was always frustrated with my boss for taking the checkbook and paying his bills when I was trying to keep the business alive. When we had the big mix up I felt horribly guilty for a mistake I thought I had made. There were a few sleepless nights and a lot of tears...The guilt drove me crazy. Once I realized the entire situation was not my fault I was horribly angry. I was also very hurt when the boss never even thanked me for putting money into the store account to cover the checks he shouldn’t have written...He and I were close for a long time when I managed his business, and after the bank situation I felt not only betrayed but like I had lost a good friend (35/27-35).

What comes into view when we look closely at this narrative is that first the narrator constructs an imaginary heroic self that tries to save her business despite the owner’s lack of care. This seems to turn into the frustrated self that had to deal with this repeatedly, which turns into the guilty self that took the blame for it until there is the realization that

the owner is really at fault and then becomes the angry self. This angry self then also becomes the sad and betrayed self, the self that is sad to have lost the owner as a friend and is betrayed by his actions.

What we can see here is not only how the imaginary self may be defined through the stress experienced but also how this is shifting all along. At first, the narrator may want to overcome a lack of funds and to keep the business going. Then she might wish to correct a mistake she felt she has made. Then she wishes perhaps to avenge her wrongful guilt but also to be thanked by her boss and recognized for her sacrifices. Finally, she may wish to be made whole again, for a restoration of her trust and a friendship that she felt existed between herself and the owner.

Again, what is important to underline here is not that the narrator has one problem or another, or feels mixed or changing emotions as she faces them. Rather what is important is that the imaginary construction of her as the stressed subject is not a monolithic and smooth whole but rather a shifting image whose many fissures unsettle the mirror. To be sure there are always attempts to cover up those fissures, which underlines the attraction of the mirror to which she is inevitably subjugated (Roberts, 2005).

However, in the fissures there are also moments of liberation and empowerment. Every shift in her narrative is also perhaps an indicator of unconscious desire that is not, and never will be, fulfilled by the wishes she constructs in the imaginary. Every turn from the angry to the guilty, to the sad self and from wanting to help the owner to wanting restitution for wrongs done or the restoration of a friendship is perhaps a surfacing of lack of being and therefore an opportunity to experience oneself released from the alienated

imaginary and empowered to reject it in order to continue the creative struggle with lack and desire.

## **Discussion**

At this point I would like to review what we may have learned so far about the stressed subject and the implications of this perspective for power and empowerment in organizations. As we have seen, common stress discourse is frequently drawn on for imaginary self-constructions. As I alluded to in my analysis of the narratives, this has implications for power in organizations. Prior research has underlined how our desire to maintain our imaginary selves subjugates us to the power of the imaginary (Roberts, 2005). And of course this follows from the perspective presented here as Lacan suggested individuals become alienated and trapped in the imaginary, an act of self-objectification and subjugation to the imaginary (Lacan, 1988b: 210). In other words, when we define who we are and what we want by narrating how and why we are stressed, we also impose order on the self and confine ourselves to alienation and objectification.

Moreover, to the extent that we wish others to validate our imaginary selves and wield the power of the imaginary over others (Roberts, 2005), this process also has implications for how we seek to impose power over those who somehow participate in or co-construct our imaginary stressed selves. Taken together then these ideas about the potential to subjugate ourselves and others to imaginary constructions add new insights to prior research suggesting that stress discourse is often used as a resource (Hardy, 2001) to, for example, normalize existing power structures and organizational inequities (Newton, 1995; Wainwright and Calnan, 2002).

From the perspective provided here, we can see how we collude with the possibility of this occurring as we draw on stress discourse to construct imaginary selves that already subjugate us to the power of the imaginary. We can also see how this is inevitably so as we can never leave the imaginary order behind (Lacan, 1988: 177) nor find the mirrors we create less attractive (Roberts, 2005). We notice this in an excerpt from a narrative cited above. The narrator, who described earlier how he was treated like dirt by his boss, reflects further on what this experience has meant to him:

I would day-dream of quitting my job in style. Something like throwing my apron in the bosses face and maybe kicking him in the dirt for once. I never quit which I have no idea why I never did. Maybe I wanted to see if I could handle a stressful job? Maybe I needed the money? Maybe I get a kick out of tormenting myself? I can think of one good thing that came out of this horrid experience of a job; I can safely say that I can handle a lot of stress in a workplace and not crack. I have not met my breaking point and if it was not reached at [name of coffee house], then I believe I can handle anything the world has to throw at me (25/38-44).

Even as this narrator fantasizes about avenging himself for how he has been treated by his boss and wonders why he did not act on this, suggesting that he may be aware of a fissure in the imaginary, we see the immediate turn to new imaginary constructions in progress.

Even as he reflects about that he does not seem to know who he is or what he wants, like why he did not kick his boss in the dirt, or whether he wanted the money or enjoyed the torment, he seems to repair the imaginary self by concluding that he is now, what stress discourse has defined as the “stress fit” individual (Cooper and Dewe, 2004: 28). That is, he now seems sure again who he is and what he wants: the stress-fit person who can handle anything. We might describe this as a conscious reflection on his lack of

being, which, as a conscious construction, is once again imaginary, a lack of having, that sutures lack of being.

However, as in all imaginary constructions, there is always already the potential for empowerment and liberation. As the narrator turns from one partial imaginary construction to another, it is also always already undermined by the power of unconscious desire. We can see therefore that whether he wishes to torment himself or become stress-fit, the narrator is always already free from such constructions and empowered to continue his struggle with the ever-felt absence of the real.

In this sense the power of the imaginary (Roberts, 2005) is never totalizing (Fotaki, 2009) and always already contains emancipatory potential. Importantly, therefore, stress discourse may also provide a significant opportunity to widen the subjective space in organizations (Gabriel, 1995) as a resource for enhancing the agency of the ethical subject (Roberts, 2005). One of the narrators in this study, the one who described his stressful bounty hunter job, may provide an illustration of this dynamic as his narrative inspires him to reflect further on lack and desire:

I wrote this story a while ago and delayed sending it off because I wasn't sure where the stress is...I originally wrote that carrying a gun was stressful...I think true stress would be not having a gun if you need one... No fear or stress exists during the apprehension (adrenaline rush)... I was rough but I think that I was gentle under the circumstances, so I can live with my actions in this regard... Thanks to pointers in the Bounty Hunters Handbook I had on latex gloves and safety glasses as a precaution. Still I worried about being exposed to A.I.D.S. from this person...Aha, is this stress? I think so (33/1-19).

What we see in this excerpt is not just an imaginary construction in the very process of reflecting on the imaginary construction of the narrator's self, we may also see a hint of what Lacan referred to as the amplification of lack (Lacan, 1988a: 284).

Lacan suggested that in analysis, the analyst should not consciously interpret what the analysand is lacking, i.e. reduce lack of being to lack of having, but rather provides a kind of echo of the lack of being that surfaced in any breaking points of the imaginary. In a way, this narrator is perhaps doing just that as he reflects on his own narrative. As he asks questions that have no answer and wonders about who he is in and through his descriptions, he perhaps simply underlines the fissures in the imaginary and amplifies lack of being. As he addresses me implicitly as the recipient of his narrative, we can see here how this may also signal an opportunity for more emancipation in interaction.

In a recent interview, Nancy Harding (2007) noted during the exchange how the imaginary was constructed both for her and the manager she interviewed and she pointed to how individuals in organizations can be thought of as not being this or that but rather how they are always engaged in acts of becoming. If we take this idea further, future research may follow Lacanian suggestions and examine how lack of being may not just be noted but rather amplified. For example, for the narrator above, as for all the narrators in this study, I have sought merely to surface and amplify such lack. Similarly, in an interview or any ordinary conversation, we could simply pause and allow the reflections he undertook to be amplified, to be heard. Rather than trying to respond by interpreting or answering such reflections, we could just allow them to be noticed and to stay at the surface. In other words, we could seek to enhance the emancipatory potential of stress narratives by exploring more closely the myriad tensions between the alienating and liberating constructions of the stressed subject.

As a consequence we may rethink the stress-fit individual who strives on stress (Cooper and Dewe, 2004: 28) not only to be someone who creates new imaginary selves

around embracing stress. Rather the stress-fit individual may be someone who uses stress discourse more effectively or excessively as a resource for empowerment. As stress is a modern pandemic (Newton, 1995; Wainwright and Calnan, 2002), this resource may be more widely available than ever. Moreover, like resisting culture management programs by taking them too far, attaching not just one but hundreds of company stickers to one's car and in effect believing too much (Fleming and Spicer, 2003), becoming stress-fit may simply involve talking more about our stress and so to create more opportunities for experiences of liberation and empowerment.

One narrator who may demonstrate this agency of the ethical subject draws on stress discourse and constructs an imaginary self by describing an excessive workload and unsupportive supervision (Schabracq and Cooper, 1998):

In these situations I used to get stressed out, him not listening or remembering used to make me crazy. After many years of dealing with situations like this I just have to laugh. There is no point in me getting frustrated or stressed out anymore, so I share the story with everyone in the office and we all just laugh about it!  
(36/43-46)

What we may easily miss in this excerpt is that the most liberating and empowering act described by the narrator is of course not her imaginary construction of the stress-fit self, nor that she and her co-workers now laugh about the situation.

Rather an emancipatory space is created and widened for the narrator and perhaps even her co-workers in the simple act of sharing the story more frequently. That is, the emancipatory project (Glynos and Stravakakis, 2002: 73) that the narrator and her co-workers now have available to them as ethical subjects is simply to participate in more conversations about stress. As we have seen, in such conversations the imaginary is

always already unsettled, and lack of being surfaces. Therefore, if they listen and notice long enough, they can also be enhanced as an emancipatory experience.

This underlines of course also what prior research has found, namely that stress discourse furnishes the experience of both pleasure and pain in unexpected ways such that bittersweet pleasure or *jouissance* may well come from stress and that, as such, we might speak of enjoying our stress and stressful enjoyment (Bicknell and Liefoghe, 2010). However, we miss an important dimension of this if we do not also, on the one hand, honor the very real negative emotions and suffering of those who experience stress as the narrators did in this study and, on the other hand, appreciate that affective attachments work both to subjugate but also, importantly, to liberate us from the imaginary.

As future research builds on the arguments advanced here and investigates further the complexities of stress while also trying to do more justice to the subjective experience of stress (Cooper and Dewe, 2004; Cooper et al., 2001), it may be worth building on the more fine-grained approach I have sought to take here. Both the enjoyment and power of stress may only be understood in relation to our lack of being. The power we have as stressed subjects is to enjoy and amplify the many fissures in our imaginary self-constructions. As such, stress discourse may set us free simply to roam the nothingness of work, self and organization (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007) but also to realize our agency as ethical subjects (Roberts, 2005) who can amplify their lack of being through all the lack of having that makes workplace stress such a common experience today.

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