

THE EXPERIENCE OF HEARING VOICES: AN INTERPRETATIVE
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: This article presents an analysis of two case studies of people who hear voices. In accordance with a phenomenological approach, the meanings which the participants attribute to their voices are highlighted in the analysis (specifically in relation to the nature and origin of the voices) and the influence which these interpretations have on their efforts at managing and reducing their disruptive effects is explored. It is concluded that if this analysis has accessed general processes in voice hearers' experiences, therapeutic practitioners may need to work with voice hearers in promoting psychologically satisfying meaning-making around their experiences, from which contextualised responses to managing the voices can be developed.

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Introduction

Much research has been undertaken to investigate the coping strategies of people who experience auditory hallucinations (see Knudson and Coyle, 1999, for a review).

However, most of this work has paid inadequate attention to participants' interpretative frameworks and the ways in which they attempt to understand their experiences and explain their coping efforts (for an exception, see Romme and Escher, 1989).

The paucity of studies which have examined voice hearers' interpretations of their experiences represents a limitation in the coping literature, as one would expect the nature of voice-hearers' interpretative and explanatory frameworks to bear directly on their coping efforts. Indirect evidence for this link is provided by the commonly-reported finding that although instruction in behavioural coping methods can have clinically significant effects, many patients do not continue to use these methods following instruction (Allen et al., 1985; Erickson and Gustafson, 1968; Nelson et al., 1991). Fowler et al. (1995) have suggested that the reason for this is that the individuals' conceptualisations of their voices were not consistent with the use of the particular coping strategies in which they were instructed. For example, distraction techniques, although effective in reducing the intensity of hallucinations, are unlikely to be used if someone believes that their voices will punish any failure to attend to them.

At a more general level, the subjective meaning of hallucinations (in various sense modalities) has been relatively ignored in the psychological literature (although see du Plock, 1995; Hulme, 1996; Jung, 1908/1914; Leudar and Thomas, 2000; and Romme and Escher, 1993, for notable exceptions). Boyle (1990) has suggested that the main reason for this is that a content-free analysis of hallucinations - and therefore an emphasis on form rather than content - is considered more likely to meet the criteria of an 'objective' science. However, this conceptualisation of the scientific method has been criticised as being too narrow. For example, from an existential-phenomenological viewpoint, Giorgi (1995) has argued that for knowledge to be considered scientific, it must be (i) systematic, (ii) methodical, (iii) critical and (iv) general. However, he points out that *how* one conducts an inquiry which is systematic, methodical, critical and general is very different depending on whether or not the object of study possesses consciousness. While psychology has traditionally modelled itself on the natural sciences, phenomenological psychologists would argue that the subject matter of psychology (i.e., conscious beings) requires a different theoretical and methodological approach, and one which allows psychology to establish itself specifically as a *human* science rather than a natural science. Accordingly, the priorities of the phenomenological approach to psychological research shift from a concern with objectivity, measurement and causation to a greater emphasis on personal subjectivities, meaning and interpretation (see Smith et al., 1995a).

Consonant with the aims and priorities of phenomenological psychology, the present study attempts to explore in some depth the personal experience of two individuals who hear voices, describe the meaning which they attribute to their experience and

consider how these meanings might influence their personal coping styles. The approach which is adopted in this study, then, is idiographic in that the concern was to capture the detailed, particular and complex processes in these individuals' accounts of their voices, in contrast to the nomothetic approach of most psychological inquiry which is based on statistical comparisons of group means (see Harré, 1979, Smith et al., 1995b, and Yin, 1994, for more on the idiographic approach).

Method

Potential participants for the study were contacted from the case-load of a consultant psychiatrist working in the NHS in the south east of England. Patients were considered eligible for the study if they were aged between 18 and 65; did not suffer from any organic condition which was likely to cause auditory hallucinations; reported having the experience of 'hearing noises or voices which other people cannot hear'; were willing to talk about these experiences; and were able to consent to participate in a fully informed way. Patients who met these criteria and who – in the psychiatrist's opinion – would not find it overly distressing to talk about their experiences were invited to participate in the research.

Following this screening procedure, five patients were contacted and interviewed. However, data from only two participants are reported here because of the need to balance a desire to convey the detail and complexity of individual accounts with the space constraints imposed by writing for publication. These accounts were provided by Lucy and Neil, both of whom had a diagnosis of schizophrenia according to DSM-IV criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and were receiving psychiatric

treatment on an outpatient basis at the time of the interview. The participants' names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

Each participant was interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Transcripts of the interviews were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) – a method which offers a way of analysing qualitative data in an idiographic and systematic manner and which aims to explore participants' experiences, cognitions and meaning-making (Smith, 1996a; Smith et al., 1997, 1999). IPA recognises that the outcome of any qualitative analysis represents an interaction between participants' accounts and the researchers' interpretative frameworks; hence, the analysis is both phenomenological and interpretative. For a detailed account of the nature of the analytic process, see Smith et al. (1999).

In interpretative analysis such as this, traditional criteria for evaluating research quality (such as reliability) – which are based on an assumption of researcher objectivity and disengagement from the analytic process – are inappropriate (Henwood and Pidgeon, 1992). Among the alternative criteria which qualitative researchers have suggested is the criterion of persuasiveness by 'grounding in examples', which is applied through an inspection of interpretations and data (Elliott et al., 1999; Smith, 1996b). In this article, interpretations are illustrated by data extracts to allow readers to assess the persuasiveness of the analysis for themselves. In the quotations, empty square brackets indicate where material has been omitted, material within square brackets is provided for clarification and ellipsis points (...) indicate a pause in the flow of participants' speech; in quotations involving dialogue between the interviewer and the participants, the interviewer is referred to as 'Ben'.

Analysis

1. Lucy

Lucy was a 31-year-old woman who had been hearing voices for the last ten years. She had had a number of hospitalisations during that time; at the time of the interview, she was seeing a psychiatrist and a community psychiatric nurse on an outpatient basis. She was taking a number of anti-psychotic and other psychiatric drugs (Clozapine, Procyclidine, Amitriptyline and Droperidol), but continued to hear voices almost continuously. She lived at home with her mother and worked part-time in a hair-dressing salon.

Identity and content of the voices

Lucy reported that currently she hears two main voices, although she used to hear as many as 12 separate voices when she was first admitted to hospital ten years ago. In her account she represented these two voices as having clearly differentiated identities and personality characteristics as the following extract demonstrates:

I mean, there are two voices – Simon and Jeremy. Simon’s...um...like a demon really. He’s very demonic and he...um...[] he says people read my mind and they know I’m evil...um...I’ve got a year to live, that if I don’t do as I’m told the horrible horseman of the Apocalypse will come and get me and kill me and Armageddon will come and the world will be destroyed. And then Jeremy – he’s just a little boy, he’s just full of fun, you know, he’ll tell me things like – um – ‘Move the food from the cupboard and put it in mum’s chest of

drawers' [] Just stupid things like that. It's funny but it's – it is annoying really.

Benjamin (1989) has shown that psychiatric patients experiencing auditory hallucinations have integrated, interpersonally coherent relationships with their voices and Lucy's account illustrated this. During the interview, the different 'personalities' of 'Simon' and 'Jeremy' became more apparent, as did Lucy's emotional reactions towards them. Although both voices were generally experienced as persecutory, Simon was constructed as more obviously harmful and was described as 'evil', whereas Jeremy was simply described as 'mischievous' - consistent with the 'little boy' identity ascribed to him.

The construction of meaning

Taylor (1983) proposed a theory of cognitive adaptation to threatening events, in which the search for meaning in the experience and an attempt to regain mastery following the event are central components of the adjustment process. This section examines Lucy's search for meaning in her experience of hearing voices, while the following section focuses on the theme of regaining mastery by considering her reported responses to the voices.

Romme and Escher (1989) have discussed the importance of constructing meaning during the early stages of learning to cope with voices, as this can help to reduce anxiety in the face of what is often a rather frightening experience. In her account, Lucy's search for meaning was said to have been initiated immediately following the onset of her voices. This was an experience which she found difficult to understand

and so the need for an explanation was of paramount importance. In the following passage, she described her reaction to the onset of the voices as well as the importance of finding a suitable explanation for this experience:

Lucy: And then all of a sudden I was just listening to my Walkman and I heard a voice that's on it, talking to me. [] I thought 'My walkman's picked up the radio' when I was playing the tape. There was this disbelief. I couldn't believe it []

Ben: So at first you thought it was the radio that was playing instead of your tape?

Lucy: Yeah. Yeah, but I didn't have a radio on my walkman.

Ben: Right, right. And then what did you think after that, after...

Lucy: That I was going mad. So I went to see a doctor and I told him [] 'Look I'm hearing things' and he told me it was...well, he referred me to a psychiatrist. []

Ben: And then what happened?

Lucy: Um...put me in hospital for a while. And I still didn't know what was going on. [] But I did try...I did do my very best to try and find a purpose and meaning to it all cos it really did shake me up.

Because of the distressing and bizarre nature of Lucy's experience, the need for an explanation was particularly insistent. Her search for meaning seemed to have consisted of an attempt to understand why the voices were occurring as well as the significance of the voices. In relation to both issues, a multiplicity of meanings emerged in her account, perhaps because of the inadequacy of a unitary or

reductionist explanation in accounting for the complexity of her experience. For example, with regard to her conceptualisation of the nature of the voices, she sometimes referred to them as ‘spirit guides’ and at other times as ‘hallucinations’. Thus, she appeared to vary in her belief about the ‘reality’ of the voices, sometimes invoking a personal experiential framework for determining ‘reality’:

You see, sometimes I know that they’re talking to me and it’s rubbish and sometimes I get carried away and I can’t tell reality from what’s what. [] Cos I know this is – this is just a voice, it’s not really there but um... He [Simon] is real to me because I hear it and it’s disturbing.

One way around this dilemma concerning the ‘reality’ of the voices is to extend this personal framework idea and consider them as aspects of the self. This conceptualisation of the voices seems to represent a compromise position in which the illusory nature of the voices is acknowledged and yet they retain their meaningfulness and can be interpreted as representing different aspects of one’s personality. This theory about the voices is reminiscent of certain psychodynamic accounts of psychotic phenomena (for example, see Bion, 1957; Spillius, 1988) and is an idea which Lucy briefly and tentatively touched upon in the following passage:

[Simon] is like a demonic voice. He’s my bad – he’s like my bad half of me – anything that I want to do but it’s not allowed []. I mean it must be something to do with my personality because...um...why do I hear it? It must be something to do with me that’s...[] It must be some part of your personality coming out. I don’t know. I get a bit confused.

The last part of this passage indicates that this is not a theory which has been fully worked out and accepted as the most persuasive interpretation concerning the nature of the voices. Rather than insisting on a unitary or internally coherent interpretation, Lucy seemed to be creatively drawing upon a rich explanatory repertoire. Such variability may indicate the experience is so unusual that maximum explanatory investment is required to make sense of it to herself and others. Similarly, with regard to the causal attributions which Lucy made concerning the onset of her voices, a number of explanations were put forward:

I had two jobs – I was a disc-jockey and I was a cook. But I was getting depressed and...um...my flat-mates asked me to leave []. But I...I lost my jobs that week. I lost my home. It was just a bit too much and it just all...it – it worked on me, it wore me down. And I think – I believe that started it. But also, you know, I just had lots of drugs, mixture of psychotic drugs. I used to do...take a lot of acid, about three or four tabs a night, three times a week. And that didn't help.

Later on in the interview she returned to the theme that her drug use might have been a precipitating factor in the onset of the voices, and added another possible explanation:

I don't know to this day whether I would've got...I would've been schizophrenic if I hadn't taken drugs and whether it's just drug induced []. It certainly didn't help. But then, like... like, um, in all my school reports when I

was younger, all my teachers said I was mentally...I'd – I'd be mentally ill when I was older if I didn't get help. So it's, um, I was...not highly strung, just...um... disturbed. You know, troubled. Because I was so sensitive. I still am sensitive. And that doesn't help.

Two further possible explanations were put forward in the next passage:

Ben: Why do you think you first began to hear voices, looking back on it now?

Lucy: It could be...um, penance. For taking drugs. You know, God punishing me. Or it could be that it's just in my family genes []. So it could be that. But I think it's just probably God punishing me for taking all those drugs.

As we can see – as with her explanations about the nature of the voices – Lucy expressed considerable uncertainty about the possible causes of this experience. Nevertheless she offered a number of possible explanations, including attributions to adverse life events, the consumption of hallucinogenic drugs, an underlying sensitivity or genetic vulnerability, and divine retribution. The diversity of causal explanations offered by Lucy may reflect the uncertainty in medical and scientific communities about the origins of auditory hallucinations and of schizophrenia more generally (Lemma, 1996; Parker et al., 1995). Similarly, Taylor et al. (1984) found that many of the women with breast cancer (another condition the causes of which are relatively uncertain, especially to the non-medical person) whom they interviewed listed several possible causes of their cancer (although others have found less explanatory diversity among people with cancer: see Jacobsen et al., 2000). By

holding multiple theories about the cause of their condition, people such as Lucy might be doing the best they can in attempting to find meaning in the face of causal uncertainty.

Strategies for reducing the voices' disruptive effects

The diversity evident in Lucy's explanations of her voices was also evident in her discussion of strategies for reducing the voices' disruptive effects. While a wide variety of coping strategies was described, her efforts seemed to centre around three main strategies: (i) sensory stimulation, in an attempt to block out the voices; (ii) social contact, serving the dual purpose of providing emotional support as well as obtaining insight about the nature of the voices; and (iii) release of tension, by going for a brisk walk and shouting back at the voices.

Many studies which have investigated voice-hearers' coping strategies have found that increasing levels of sensory stimulation is a widely used method for coping with voices (Carr, 1988; Carr and Katsikitis, 1987; Falloon and Talbot, 1981; Frederick and Cotanch, 1995; TARRIER, 1987). For Lucy, this consisted of listening to her Walkman or, if the voices were particularly intrusive, switching on the radio and the television at the same time in order to 'drown out' the voices:

Lucy: I put my telly and put my radio on at the same time. And it's confusion.
[] It's just organised chaos. [] There's so much going on – it's just like you've shouted a big 'Shut up'.

Social contact is another common strategy in dealing with hallucinations which has been widely reported in the literature (Carr, 1988; Carr and Katsikitis, 1987; Cohen and Berk, 1985; Falloon and Talbot, 1981; O'Sullivan, 1994; Tarrier, 1987). Lucy's discussion of this coping method emphasised the importance of social support and the possibility of achieving insight into the nature of her experience through discussion with others. However, she reported that she is selective about those with whom she shares her experiences as she feels that some people, such as her mother, might find it distressing. Instead, she said that she prefers to talk to mental health professionals or other voice-hearers, perhaps because of their greater potential for understanding her experience:

Lucy: I never talk to my mum about it.

Ben: Why is that?

Lucy: Well – cos she's – um...you see, she's very depressive herself. But – um – I just don't want to burden her and make her feel worse and, you know, put a strain on her. So there's one of my key-workers that...I talk to him about it. But not to my mum. []

Ben: Right. So what is it like to talk with your nurse?

Lucy: Alright. He – he helps a lot. He explains it. []

Ben: What is it that's helpful about...?

Lucy: Well, it's just talking. It's like...a problem shared is a problem halved sort of thing. Just talking. Especially when you can get answers about as to why it happens. And the more insight you get, the better you can control it. I find, anyway.

The importance of 'insight' (in the form of a causal explanation) is emphasised here as a means of coping with the voices. Lucy's concern with achieving insight and getting 'answers about as to why it happens' seemed to be linked to the themes discussed in the previous section, namely her relative uncertainty about the nature and causes of her experience of hearing voices.

The third coping strategy which Lucy described consisted of going for a brisk walk and shouting back at the voices:

I used to - I used to enjoy going for a long walk because that way I could talk to the voices. I used to go across the Downs and talk...answer the voices – tell them...I'd shout at them, cos I was the only person on the Downs – tell them to leave me alone and go away - bugger off, you know? [] It releases a lot of pent-up emotions and tension.

Later, she described this process of releasing tension in greater detail:

It gets rid of the tension. Like I say - when I go for walks I look quite violent, walking at a real pace and, you know, really letting out the energy. [] There's like - there's the blood pumping and the adrenalin's going and you can really get out some aggression. You see, I'm not the sort of person that would be aggressive towards other people. You know, if they were in the same room I could keep it in. I could pull my feelings in and that's - that's why it's so dangerous. You know, I just - like - explode.

Lucy seemed to be relating the efficacy of this cathartic technique to the fact that she is generally a person who keeps her aggressive emotions in check, thus leading to a build-up of aggressive energy. Going for an energetic walk was represented as an effective way of releasing this accumulated tension. The hydraulic theme of allowing aggressive energy to build up, creating a need for catharsis, was elaborated in greater detail by the other participant whose account is presented in this article.

2. Neil

Neil was a 26 year-old man who reported that he first began to hear voices about six years ago. He was admitted to an acute psychiatric ward two years ago for a period of five weeks but has since been living at home with his mother. He continues to see a psychiatrist every two months and takes 400 mg of Sulpiride daily to keep the voices under control.

Onset, nature and content of the voices

In response to the question of when he first began to hear voices, Neil expressed considerable uncertainty. This difficulty in establishing the exact date of onset seemed to be due to a difficulty in distinguishing between 'ordinary' thoughts and voices:

Ben: To begin with, I wonder if you can tell me when you first heard voices?

Neil: Um...when I first heard voices...that's quite a difficult one, actually...uh...probably about a year ago. [] I don't know - maybe it was a little bit before that because...um...I don't know. It's hard to say whether they're voices or thoughts you know. [] I don't know...My mum says that she

has thoughts pop into her head. But I don't know if that's a thought or an audible voice you know. I don't know what she means by that. You know - what is the thought, sort of thing? How can you tell you're thinking something?...Well, I mean, when you have a thought popping into your head, is it a voice talking to you?

Eventually, however, Neil became clearer about the date of onset and also elaborated the distinction, as he understood it, between voices and thoughts:

Neil: I mean I've been probably hearing voices for...since about...um...well, the earliest I can remember it back to was when I was about twenty, really. Yeah. Can't remember having them before that. Yeah - probably about twenty started hearing voices. Or a voice anyway.

Ben: A voice? Right. And does that voice identify itself?

Neil: Well, it's mostly just...uh - don't know - sounds like me. Well, it can't really...No it's not - you can't really hear it. Well you can hear it - you know it's happening but it's not like a voice that's got any tone to it. []

Ben: Right. What do you mean by that?

Neil: Well you know when you think a thought, yeah? It doesn't sound like you're saying it, does it?

Ben: Right.

Neil: It sounds like you're - um...It's - it's something that you recognise as your thought, isn't it? [] Uh - it's like a whisper, isn't it? It's more silent. You know, thoughts are kind of more silent - they don't have that kind of vocal tone to them.

Ben: Right.

Neil: That's mostly what these are like really. It's more like a thought out of control.

Neil seemed to be drawing a distinction here between internal 'sounds' (such as auditory hallucinations and thoughts) which do not have any 'vocal tone' and external sounds (such as other people's voices) which do. In phenomenological terminology this corresponds to the distinction between immanent and transcendent objects (see Giorgi, 1995). In his interpretative framework, then, the aural quality of hallucinations and thoughts was similar insofar as they were both characterised by an absence of 'vocal tone' and could be contrasted with sounds which originated from an external source and which possessed this quality. The distinction between thoughts and hallucinations (which are both immanent objects), however, was less clear cut in this account, although the element of control was an important discriminating factor here. Neil seemed to be saying that auditory hallucinations are characterised by a lack of control or volition ('It's more like a thought out of control'), which would explain his difficulty in distinguishing between a hallucination and 'a thought popping into your head'.

This reflects a strong contrast between Neil and Lucy in terms of the nature and intensity of their experience. Lucy was able to provide a definite account about the onset of her voices, presumably because this represented a clear departure from her normal experience, whereas Neil had difficulty in establishing the date of onset because of the similarity between his voices and ordinary thoughts. This difference in the nature of Lucy and Neil's experiences also seemed to have important implications

with regard to the ownership of the voices: while Lucy's voices were mostly conceptualised as separate from herself, Neil identified his voices in terms of himself ('sounds like me').

The reported content of Neil's voices, however, overlapped with Lucy's in terms of violent material, although there had also been a reported sexual content too:

Ben: What do the voices generally say?

Neil: Well, they're usually about killing people []

Ben: Do they say anything else?

Neil: Uh...I think they used to be quite sexual actually.

However, Neil also described a different process which consisted of an internal dialogue with himself about philosophical or practical matters:

Neil: I can have conversations with myself [] And they're not just about rubbish - they're about deep things, you know, and I'm actually like coming out with conclusions. [] I mean I'm just talking to the person and they're answering and - uh - I'm just having complete discussions and...uh...I come out with conclusions. And the weird thing about it is when I come out with a conclusion I feel better.

Ben: Right.

Neil: I feel better in myself. I think 'Oh yeah. Well I'll do that then' and everything's alright. It's - it's almost as if like...um...I'm reflecting off my soul. You know? As if I'm talking to my soul.

Again, this passage indicates the extent to which Neil identified the voices with himself ('It's – it's almost as if like...um...I'm reflecting off my soul [] As if I'm talking to my soul'). It also points to a positive aspect of the voices, namely that they represent a means of facilitating decision-making processes (which is reminiscent of Jaynes', 1976, contention that the original function of hallucinations was to guide action). While in passages such as these Neil seemed open to accepting ownership of the voices, when the content was more disturbing, ownership was more likely to be denied:

Neil: And then I got a really loud voice, which was very scary [] It had quite an angry tone to it. Yeah... It was quite nasty.

Ben: Was that also your voice, or was it the voice of someone else?

Neil: Don't know...Could be the devil as far as I'm concerned.[]

Ben: What - what did it say?

Neil: [laughs] 'Kill Mum'. 'Kill your mother' ...Yeah.

Ben: What effect did that have on you?

Neil: I was just scared. I was just like freaked out. I was shocked. Like - oops - my mind's suddenly lost it, you know [] Yeah - I wish I didn't have these thoughts, I really do. But like I say I don't think it's my fault. I really don't.

One might speculate that, for Neil, the extent to which he was willing to accept responsibility for and ownership of the voices was a function of their content, with highly disturbing thoughts being more likely to be attributed to external sources, such

as the devil, rather than to himself. Generally, however, Neil's conceptualisation of the voices entailed a great deal of responsibility on his part, as we shall now see.

The construction of meaning and implications for coping

Neil's understanding of the nature of his experience was that the voices were primarily an expression of anger which was being denied or suppressed:

Neil: Um...I think it's like when I'm not in touch with my anger, anger comes out in these thoughts...

Ben: And why - why do you think that is?

Neil: Well, it needs a release. The energy needs to be released.

In the same way, when the voices were of a sexual nature, Neil tentatively attributed this to the suppression of his sexuality. This suppression of unacceptable feelings (sometimes sexual but more often aggressive) was represented in hydraulic terms as leading to a build-up of tension which then needs to be released. Neil seemed to be saying that if this tension or energy was not expressed directly (for example, by becoming angry), then it was manifested as voices:

Why they come as voices I don't know. I - that's it - I can't work out the bridge between why...um...a feeling should turn into a voice. Why should it? Why don't I just get into a complete rage to express the anger? That's the more natural - it seems it should come out like that. But it's maybe that I'm suppressing that anger and I'm saying 'No, you're not - you're not going to do that'. But it's got to find some sort of release.

While Neil said here that he ‘can’t work out the bridge between why [] a feeling should turn into a voice’, later in the interview he provided some insight into his understanding of why this transformation should take place:

Cos I’m quite a visual thinker and um...maybe demons represent negativity or something that I’m scared of, you know. [] I remember I used to wonder whether it [the voices] was coming from, you know, a spiritual source or somewhere – a dark force – or whether it was coming from me, you know. Well, it probably is coming from me. [] I just used to get confused in the...uh...the metaphors. Like saying ‘demons’ is probably...um...[] It’s kind of like...um...visualising what – what the feeling actually is.

Here Neil seemed to be saying that one reason for representing his feelings as demons or as evil voices is because he sees himself as a ‘visual thinker’ and he sometimes gets ‘confused in [] the metaphors’. This echoes Segal’s (1989) theory about the presumed ‘concrete thinking’ of psychosis, in which symbol and reality become confused, leading to what she called the ‘symbolic equation’. In these terms, Neil could be seen as symbolising his anger as a demon and then taking this symbolism literally so that he experienced his anger as a demonic voice.

Neil’s conceptualisation of his voices shared many features in common with the accounts of psychoanalytic theorists who have attempted to describe the psychological processes involved in psychosis. For example, Sullivan (1956) talked about how the schizophrenic individual banishes parts of the self which are anxiety-

provoking, dissociating them into what he termed the 'not-me'. Similarly, the Kleinian and object-relations schools have also emphasised this process of defensive disintegration in which the 'ego fragments and splits itself into little bits in order to avoid anxiety' (Segal, 1973:30). These fragmented parts of the self are then said to be projected as voices and are consequently experienced as less overwhelming than if they had not been externalised in this way. Neil often commented on this experience of fragmentation; for example:

I'm not a whole person. I'm just...there's little bits of me all over the place.

You know? All fighting. I need to be brought as one, I need to be aligned.

Neil's conceptualisation of his voices as dissociated aspects of the self has important implications for the management of the voices:

Neil: What I'm trying to say is that if I accept myself for who I am then these voices will just disappear. You know?

Ben: I mean, have you found that when you've...you know, at times when you have accepted yourself in a better way - that this has actually had a positive effect on the voices?

Neil: Yeah, yeah. It does, yeah. It [the voices] doesn't happen. I've become more of a whole person.

In more specific terms, this self-acceptance was said to involve recognising his anger and expressing it in appropriate ways, rather than suppressing it:

Like the other night I was sitting there and I was thinking ‘I’m pissed off’ and I felt a lot...more of a whole person. [] I should just accept my anger I think - learn how to channel it, you know. Maybe I would be better off letting out my anger there and then, you know, because it would probably come out and it wouldn’t be as bad as I’m – as when I suppress it and it comes out as these voices.

Here Neil suggested that accepting his anger and learning how to ‘channel it’ appropriately, would have a beneficial effect on the voices; he reported that on those occasions when he has recognised his anger, this has indeed been the case. He attributed the efficacy of this strategy to the fact that it helped to reduce his sense of fragmentation and allowed him to become a ‘whole person’ again.

Overview

The analysis presented here cannot claim to have accessed general themes and processes in the interpretation of and response to hearing voices because it has focused on only two participants whose ‘typicality’ cannot be ascertained. Its value lies in its exploration of these issues through participants’ own words and (mediated versions of their) phenomenological worlds.

Perhaps the most notable feature of the accounts provided by Lucy and Neil was the relationship that they forged between the meanings they attributed to their voices and the strategies they used to manage or cope with this experience. Neil’s explanatory framework primarily involved conceptualising the voices as dissociated aspects of the self and, more specifically, that the voices represented an expression of anger (and, to

a lesser extent, sexuality) which was being denied. His reported efforts at managing the voices stemmed directly from this conceptualisation: by accepting his anger and therefore reclaiming the dissociated parts of his self, the voices were less likely to manifest themselves. Lucy's account, on the other hand, revealed greater uncertainty about the causes and nature of the voices: she did not offer one unitary explanation but considered several possible interpretations about the meaning of the voices. This diversity was also reflected in her strategies for dealing with the voices. While Neil mentioned only one coping strategy – and one which was logically implied by his conceptualisation of the voices – Lucy's reported coping efforts were more diverse and were employed on a 'trial and error' basis. One might argue that the flexibility of Lucy's approach to coping was a consequence of the lack of persuasive power which any single interpretation about the meaning of the voices held for her.

This study stands in contrast to much of the research which has investigated voice hearers' coping strategies and which has examined these strategies in isolation, without reference to individuals' subjective understandings of their voices. Although the findings of this exploratory study are not generalisable, it would seem that the relationship between the meaning which individuals attribute to their voices and their coping efforts is one which merits further investigation.

If this link were to be more firmly ascertained, this would carry implications for psychotherapeutic professionals working with clients who hear voices. Others have already highlighted the need for individuals' perceptions of the 'reality' of their voices to be taken seriously in therapy and for hallucination as an experience to be separated from hallucination as a symptom of psychopathology (du Plock, 1995;

Parker et al., 1995). This study has further highlighted the potential importance of entering the client's meaning-making world and attending to the subjective understanding which clients develop in relation to their voices, particularly in terms of the explanations they construct. A focus on developing meaning-making could help to meet a client's need for persuasive explanations. This in turn could form a basis for developing appropriate responses to the voices which are congruent with the individual's interpretations of them - thereby addressing reservations about advocating phenomenologically decontextualised 'coping mechanisms' in response to life trauma (Jacobsen et al., 2000) – and which reduce their capacity to interfere with functioning and cause distress.

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