

Where does the meaning of abusive voices come from?

Jacqueline Hayes, Ivan Leudar and Juliet King

School of Psychological Sciences
The University of Manchester

1. Voices and meaning

This paper provides an in depth analysis of abusive voices experienced by a female visual artist. Our aim is to document her understanding of the voices, but not just that. In analysing her narratives about voices we foreground sources of their meaning in their linguistic character, in her immediate settings and in her biography. The case contributes towards understanding abusive voices and dealing with them.

Hearing voices is an experience noted throughout history and in shifting cultural contexts, but its significance has always been a matter of controversy. In the Enlightenment, voices became ‘hallucinations’ (Schmidt, 2000) and in psychiatry hallucinations came to be viewed as symptoms of psychoses. As such they are cast to the realm of the “un-understandable” - arising from psychological illness and without relation to ordinary personal or social happenings (Jaspers, 1963). In a medical-psychiatric framework, voices are only meaningful in a technical sense – their presence is a sign of an underlying mental illness and this way of looking at them can become a part of vernacular. Yet, even though ‘voices as symptoms’ has become the dominant social representation of voices in contemporary Western society, there are alternatives. These include, for instance, understanding them as a calling from God (or the devil) (Watkins, 1998, Leudar, 2001; Leudar and Sharrock, 2002); as experiences that bring someone who has died ‘back to life’ (Parkes, 1972, Conant, 1996) and as re-enactments of traumas (Honig et al, 1998; Siegel, 1984). In these alternative frames – religion, bereavement and trauma studies - although still recognisable as voices, the experiences acquire a very different significance than when understood through psychiatry.

Empirical research has for the most part examined voices as ‘symptoms’ and as ‘hallucinations’, and, following Jaspers, psychologists sought to establish their causes rather than procedures endowing them with meaning. In cognitive psychology voices are hallucinations that are said to arise from deficiencies in reality-testing, with the hearer taking their own inner speech (or a memory, or an imagination) to be perception of an event in the environment. The exact nature and origin of reality testing mistakes varies from theory to theory (compare, for example, Frith, 1987; Hoffman, 1986; Bentall, 2003), but the point to note is that permeating these studies is a persistent search for causality at the expense of meaning. Yet meaningfulness of voices is crucial. Several studies have shown consistently that meanings are in fact the aspects of the experience that determine levels of distress in patients (Birchwood and Chadwick, 1997; Close and Garety, 1998; van der Gaag et al, 2003; Jones et al,

2003), influence whether patients act compulsively on the commands of voices (Beck-Sander et al, 1997), and perhaps most vitally, separate patients who hear voices from non-patients who hear voices (Romme et al 1992, Honig et al, 1998; Pennings and Romme, 1996). For example, non-patients who are coping with their experiences, are more likely to see themselves as stronger than their voices (Romme et al 1992, Honig et al, 1998, Pennings and Romme, 1996), less likely to be frightened of them (Jones et al, 2003), but more likely to consider the worth of what their voices say (Leudar et al, 1997). By restricting the meaning of voices to a symptom, or ignoring it altogether, we fail to capture crucial practical and theoretical aspects of the experience.

In this paper we are therefore concerned with working out how voices become meaningful and socially shareable experiences. Our aim in this empirical investigation is to determine the meaning, and the sources of meaning of abusive voices, for a particular person. Yet, one can think in advance where to look for such sources. The first place to look might be language. Voices involve language, and language is meaningful. Leudar et al (1997) examined the pragmatic meanings of voices, and found that ‘voice-talk’ consisted mainly of (beginning with the most frequent) directives, evaluatives and informatives, and that these were commonly focused on the hearer’s current concerns and activities (see also Leudar and Thomas, 2000, chapter 9). These studies of ‘what voices do with words’ showed that they had many of the features of ordinary talk and related to rather mundane matters rather than the spectacular or violent deeds that are commonly associated with voices in the media (Leudar and Thomas, 2000, chapter 8). So voices, considered as language, can have intrinsic meanings. But, like any talk, voices acquire their specific meanings in a context and it is the procedures by which voice hearers situate voices that the current study aims to elucidate.

This paper extends our previous exploration of meaning of voices (see Leudar and Thomas, 2000). It is concerned with the language constituting abusive voices, and the way voice-hearers make sense of this language with the help of situational, biographical and semiotic resources – those concepts and practices in religion and culture which purport to tell us what voices *really* are. Our aim is to provide a useful example of how voices may be analysed – by looking at the meaning of voices, and its sources. Elsewhere, we have investigated the procedures through which ‘members’ endow actions with meaning. Leudar et al (2008a, 2008b) showed how children’s play was transformed by psychotherapists through changing the settings of the play. This was achieved by therapists making aspects of their therapeutic background relevant and consequential in their interactions with the children. Through this process, the meaning of the children’s activities was altered – from simply playing, to being both that *and* an expression of therapy-relevant emotions.

The current investigation applies this research strategy to voices but extends it through detailed examination of how one voice-hearer establishes links from her voices to various settings in her life. In the selection of this method we follow from Davies et al (1999), who took a dialogical approach to investigating the voices of ‘Peg’. The investigation showed that the dialogical relationships between voices and voice-hearer are important with respect to the meaning of the experience. The Davies et al (1999) study demonstrated quite how significant meaning is - as the research progressed, ‘Peg’ reported the emergence of a new voice, which would be commonly viewed as a sign of deterioration from a psychiatric view-point. However for ‘Peg’ it

served an integrative function and helped her to cope with the other voices. The case study method allowed the authors to access these nuances in meaning, the changes over time and the consequences for the voice hearer and her life.

The current study is not alone in its concern with the meaning of voices. For example; Legg and Gilbert (2006) studied gender and voices using a semi-structured interview method; Chin et al (2009) and Hayward (2003) examined interpersonal relating and voice-hearing; and Jones et al (2003) studied the beliefs of voice-hearers about voices. These studies produced useful findings and marked interesting routes for further study, however we choose a different methodology in the present study, the narrative biographic interview (Rapley, 2001). This choice was made as it allows the participant to narrate their story of voices on their own terms - drawing on the concepts and meaning resources that they deem relevant to their experience. From a research perspective, this avoids confining the findings to parameters imposed by structured interview schedules, and minimises the remoulding of the experience to the terms of the researcher.

A final note before Violet and her story are introduced. Abuse is not the only, or even the most common form that voices take (see Leudar et al, 1997; Leudar et al, in preparation). However, abusive voices are naturally those that create the most distress and are most often associated with psychiatric problems. Violet's story is not intended to be representative of all voices. Rather, the question we ask is whether the methods for making her voices meaningful may be generalised to further cases.

2. Background

Participant: Violet is a practicing visual artist. She is a woman in her late twenties, who was put in touch with us by her colleague at a community arts project in Birmingham, where she works as a designer. At the time of our first meeting, she had heard voices for 7 years. Her quality-of-life had improved considerably over time. Nevertheless, at the time of the investigation Violet was experiencing many problems because of her voices.

Interviews: The interviewer (JH) met with Violet on 5 occasions over a period of two and a half years. The first four interviews were 3-6 months apart, and the final interview was 18 months later. The interviews followed a Narrative Biographic format, in which the researcher provides an initial theme, (in this case, experiences of hearing voices), and the participant is free to relate their personal story in relation to this theme. The interviewer listens attentively and avoids any leading or closed questions. For a full discussion of this methodology please see Nekvapil (2003), and Rapley (2001). Here we just say that the five interviews yielded a detailed narrative about hearing voices which has not been confined by the terms or theories imposed by the researcher.

Analysis: There were altogether 393 minutes of recorded interviews. These were transcribed verbatim using somewhat simplified conversation analytic conventions. The interviews were analysed with the aid of Conversation Analysis (CA) combined with other techniques such as Membership Categorisation Analysis (Sacks, 1992). CA examines the way that language is used to accomplish action in situ (see Sacks, 1992).

It is a tool for examining the language of voices, and also facilitates a reflexive analysis of how the voice-narrative is achieved in local circumstances; in the context of the research interview, and in collaboration with the interviewer who is treated as another 'member'.

Textual analysis by the researchers was followed by Joint Analysis (cf. Leudar et al 2008a). This is a process of checking with participants the pertinence of the analysts' (JH and IL) understandings. In Violet's case, this process occurred over three further meetings.

3. Violet's story

In Violet's account of her voices she brought into play important aspects of her life from the past to make sense of her voices in the present – we shall see very quickly that Violet's voices were much more than symptoms to her. Her voice-experiences were rich with meaning and have important consequences in her life. The following analysis aims to highlight the ways in which Violet makes sense of her remarkable experiences, as well as the sources of this meaning.

Violet's voices had pragmatics: her voices did things with words and we start with a brief summary of these (see Leudar et al, 1997).

- They could abuse and criticise Violet
- They could order Violet not to do something
- They could address other voices
- They could comment on other voices to Violet
- They could comment on the actions of people other than Violet, and evaluate these
- They could comment on their own actions

These linguistic forms, however, only acquire their full sense within a context – most of the meaning is indexical to Violet's account and the settings she provides, and we need to look at this in detail to understand the significance of Violet's voices.

Let's first take a look at how the interviews began – how were they structured by the interviewer and Violet, and how did the occasion take its shape?

Extract 1, Violet¹

1. **JH**: I'm doing a study about everyday experiences
2. of hearing voices (.) and I'm talking to people
3. who hear voices about (.) what they think about
4. their voices, the sorts of situations they happen,
5. how they feel about it, just to explore a little
6. bit more what it's like, what the experience is
7. like (.) um so I won't really be asking you any
8. direct questions today (.) um:: (.) whatever you

¹ The transcripts used in this report are verbatim versions of the recordings and their notation follows simplified Conversation Analytic conventions (Jefferson, 2004).

9. raise will be your choice to raise, and I'm going
10. to be interested in anything you have to tell me
11. about your experiences of hearing voices (.)
12. u:h:m:: feel free to ask me any questions as well
13. at any point today (.) and=um (.) so=um (.) I'd
14. love to hear anything about yourself and your life
15. (.) and how your voices fit into that as well.
16. **Violet:** okay. What I'll start off by saying is my
17. background. My family are West Indian
18. **JH:** yeah
19. **Violet:** I was brought up with my Auntie because my
20. Mum left me at the age of twelve and went to
21. America
22. **JH:** right
23. **Violet:** went to America- my Dad isn't here but
24. he's always, in and out of the country. He's
25. retired now and he's gone back to Jamaica. Er::m::
26. (.) So my Auntie who lives in [place] brought me
27. up.
28. **JH:** okay
29. **Violet:** well, that's who I lived with when my Mum
30. left me and went to America. So (.) about 1998, I
31. worked at a factory in [place] called [company
32. name], and from there, when I left there around
33. '98, in December, in the year 2000 I developed
34. this thing about hearing voices.

The interviewer constructed the occasion as not simply a conversation but as research – Violet is positioned as a narrator, among other informants that JH has also spoken to. JH introduced the theme of the current occasion as hearing voices, and the aim was characterised as “to explore a little bit morewhat the experience is like” (lines 5-6). JH implied that the following topics are relevant to hearing voices; 1. Thoughts and feelings about them, 2. The rest of a person's life - their biography.

This, the initial background that JH gave Violet for her narration, set-up a preferred response (Sacks, 1992). So what use did Violet make of this? She gave a relevant response in her next turn. In setting the scene for her voices she made two broad aspects of her biography relevant; her family has a West Indian background, and she has had experiences of parental abandonment or absence - her mother “left her” (line 20) when she was a child in the care of her aunt and her father is not around consistently.

Violet followed this by introducing a particular phase in her life where she worked in a factory, which she tacitly indicated as the beginning of her life with voices. She did not say at this stage what kind of experience this was for her but this became a very significant part of her account. Note the immediacy with which Violet related to these topics - straight away introducing several ties between voices and her personal life story.

Extract 2, Violet1

35. **Violet:** And I hear seven voices, I hear the
36. management, at the factory, I hear my Auntie, and
37. I hear three friends that I went to school with,
38. **JH:** oh:: okay
39. **Violet:** and I find it quite disturbing you see
40. **JH:** right
41. **Violet:** and my voices come, my voices talk to me,
42. (.) not every night, but every other night
43. basically. They come back and they are present
44. with me (.) in my surroundings (.) and I find it
45. quite disturbing

The voices were not just language, they had identities and these were aligned to characters she introduced in her biography. Her voice experiences were not ambiguous or anonymous (cf. Leudar et al, 1997). They had solid identities;

- A manager at her old workplace
- A second manager at the workplace
- A supervisor at the workplace
- Three friends she went to school with
- Her auntie.

The voices achieved their identities by alignment with persons in her past life. However, some of the voice-analogues were not confined to her past but continued to be parts of her everyday life (her Aunt and her school friends).

This is how Violet introduced her voices, and in the subsequent 4 interviews Violet elaborated on this. Already, we see that Violet's description of her voices differed markedly from a psychiatric account – her voices did not “spring up on their own as something quite new” (Jaspers, 1963) but had clear and immediate relevance to people and events in her life. In this analysis, particular attention will be paid to how Violet structured her life narrative and how the meaning of her voices interweaved with different aspects of this. Violet already introduced a phase in her life where she worked in a factory and so the analysis will start by looking at what Violet said about this and the voices.

3.a. Echoes of the factory

Violet narrated her first experience of voices as follows;

Extract 3, Violet1

337. **Violet:** When they first came to me I was wondering
338. what on earth, what on earth is going on. Because
339. obviously, the manager that I'm hearing, he
340. actually came in through the bedroom ceiling (.)
341. when I was asleep in bed. That was the image that
342. I saw the first time
343. **JH:** so you saw him come through the ceiling.

344. **Violet:** yeah, that's right. And this has been the
 345. development ever since I've just had people, in my
 346. flat (.) talking to me. And things like that it's
 347. really quite upsetting.
 348. **JH:** so what happened that first time when you saw
 349. your manager come in?
 350. **Violet:** when I saw him come in I was in bed and at
 351. that time I was seeing somebody (.) I'm not with
 352. anybody at the moment I'm single. And at that time
 353. I was seeing somebody
 354. **JH:** yeah
 355. **Violet:** and he came through the bedroom ceiling
 356. and I ducked down like that and I looked up and he
 357. was just standing there I just saw this- I saw
 358. this image of a man
 359. **JH:** right
 360. **Violet:** and that's been the development ever since
 5 lines omitted
 366. **JH:** what kinds of things did that? - on that
 367. occasion when erm: (.) the manager came through
 368. the ceiling and came into your room and there was
 369. (.) his presence there in the room with you (.)
 370. what did he say?
 371. **Violet:** he just went "oh shit". Like that. And he
 372. ducked down, and that's been the development ever
 373. since (.) he's always been there

Violet described a terrifying experience where she saw her ex-manager enter the bedroom through the ceiling. The remarkableness of this experience was fixed by JH in her response on line 343, through her repetition of what Violet said. This marked this fact as notable and as requiring further elaboration, and she then encouraged Violet to describe it in detail (line 348-349). This provided a space for Violet to tell the settings of the experience, and her reactions to it. Her account interweaved mundane happenings – such as lying in bed next to her partner – with the bizarre and the remarkable. These were followed by quite ordinary responses from her – she wondered “what on earth is going on” (line 338) and finds her experiences “really quite upsetting” (line 347). Violet and JH then started in the interview setting as two ordinary people, investigating Violet’s extraordinary experiences.

The ‘manager’ had a strange status in her account, in some respects his presence was person-like: Violet said “*he* actually came in” (line 339-340) and “*he* came through” (line 355), but in other respects it was just an “image” (line 341) of a man, rather than simply “a man”. Violet suggested then that the experience had some elements of being a person in the room, and some elements of being *just an image* or *just a voice*. The important thing to note though is that *there are hints of the actual manager’s agency and personhood*.

Violet identified the character of these experiences as deeply upsetting. This seems hardly surprising, especially as this voice was not simply a consequence of some current and transient mental state (cf. Jaspers, 1963), but an agency with a history –

and we shall see that this was a history coloured by powerful memories. The agent was both a person in her past and a voice in her present.

Violet marked this as her first experience of voices, significant as a point from which her voices “developed” (line 372). So to recap, the experience was out of Violet’s control, frightening, and had elements of agency that she didn’t experience as her own. It was an experience that mixed the ordinary, with extraordinary events that defied the laws of physics – her ex-manager, an everyday person, came through her ceiling, *not* an everyday phenomenon. There was a tension here between the everyday and her extraordinary experiences which recurred throughout Violet’s account. There was also a merging of the past and present – and of *here* with *elsewhere* – the manager was in *her space* in both senses.

So Violet’s first voice experience was meaningful to her – and this meaning only derived very partially from the words (“oh shit”, line 371) the voice used. Most of the meaning instead came from the visual identity of the voice in Violet’s past – it was her ex-manager who in the past had a particular relationship to her – and the present here-and-now setting – what was he doing in her room now? It is clear that the experience was distressing in character, and this response in the present partly came from who the manager was in the past.

So who was he to Violet? The experience pointed to a situation where the manager in question “set the factory up against me” (Violet 1, 384-385). She narrated an experience of bullying and harassment in a former workplace that had sexual and racial elements. Violet made sense of her voices in light of this harassment. She did not have to work at this meaning as there was an immediate reference brought by the identity of the voice - the manager. However unlike the voices, the bullies in the factory never verbalised anything to Violet - she called it an “internal” kind of abuse;

Extract 4, Violet2

1500. **Violet:** and I remember when I was there,
1501. working away at my machine he used to always
1502. stare at me through his window. All the time,
1503. he used to focus on me through his window
1504. **JH:** mm
1505. **Violet:** all the time, and I found it quite (.)
1506. quite nervous, nerve-wracking.
1507. **JH:** being watched, all the time.
1508. **Violet:** yeah, it just made me feel as though I
1509. had done something, that’s the way I, how I
1510. interpreted it. According to him, he likes me.
1511. But I don’t see, I don’t see that at all. I
1512. found it, I find it quite nerve-wracking?

The gaze of the manager was disturbing. Violet described feeling constantly scrutinised. The power of this 'watching' was immense – it was from her ‘superior’, who was separated from her by a glass screen, and happened to her daily while she was working – Violet emphasised the relentlessness of this gaze by repeating “all the time” (lines 1502, 1505). Violet suspected a sexual aspect to this staring. She implied

this when she shared something the voice said to her; “According to him (the manager-voice), he likes me.” (Line 1510).²

There was a panoptican-like set-up to the factory (c.f. Foucault, 1991, on the architectural design of the panoptica as an analogy for the modern self) and the acute self-consciousness that this generated in Violet is reproduced through her voices – she often felt that they were with her, watching her every move. Foucault’s idea is that the panoptica generates internalised control, as for those that are in the structure there is *always the possibility* of being observed, without the knowledge of whether one is *actually being observed at any one moment*. It is almost as if Violet had internalised the gaze - she had such similar feelings of scrutiny and exposure at the time of the interviews that she avoided sexual relationships and could feel watched even when in the bath.

So what happened to her in the factory gave meaning to her voice experience, but these links were not arbitrary – they are on the basis of clear commonalities. In the factory, Violet experienced unwanted attention from her manager with sexual undertones. In her room, she had a feeling of being observed at a time of intimacy.

It is clear that Violet’s voice was rich with meaning, and acquired this sense from events in her past as well as her present. The manager-voice did not say anything explicitly abusive – the ‘manager-voice’ was oppressive because the manager was oppressive in the past, and even more so because she now experienced him observing her in her private space all that time later. Violet’s narrative showed a strong meaning-link between the manager voice and the manager’s person. So far, what is the basis for this meaning-link? To summarise, here are some aspects of it;

1. **Emotions** – these are very similar in her experience of bullying in the past and her experience of the voice. In her story, it's almost like Violet was saying “the feelings I feel now are the same as when I was bullied. I feel the same fear, the same hurt. I feel the same lack of control, and the same painful self-consciousness”.
2. **Visual aspects** – the 'image of a man' in her room looked the same as the bullying manager.
2. **Voice aspects** – the voice sounded the same as the bullying manager.
3. **Feeling-of-presence aspects** – Violet had a very strong feeling of another person's presence in the room.
4. **Agency** – as mentioned, Violet's voices can comment on their own actions. This gives a voice an added sense of person-hood, as the language suggests a will/intention. In Violet's case this is in the context of the other aspects listed (emotional, visual, voice and presence) which lend her experience of the voice features of the actual manager's will.

The result is that Violet presented this voice as 'nearly a person' – which prompts an immediate question;

² Violet stated at several points in the interviews that the voice of this manager has said he ‘likes her’ (implying a sexual attraction) and this is something that this voice and the Audrey-voice argue over.

Is the experience equivalent to the events in her past? And more precisely, is the harassment by the manager and the ‘manager-voice’ the same?

The answer is ‘no’, as the voice-experience had fantastical qualities – the manager who should be in the past and encountered at work instead entered her bedroom *through the ceiling* in the present. His temporal and spatial presence *transformed a private intimate space into a public space like the one where she had been harassed*. In this sense, the harassment is worse, as even her home did not provide a sanctuary.

That was Violet's first experience of hearing voices, and at the time of the interviews, Violet reported that her typical experience of the voices was of the manager voice shouting at her to “F-off” and the other voices joining in. The linguistic form of this was more clearly abusive, but the meaning was also indexical as it is provided from the past experience of harassment and the present setting of her flat. The result is that the voices crystallised in words the abuse that was implicit all those years ago. Both the words themselves and the context combined to provide the experiences with an abusive meaning, and the context is both immediate (in her room), and remote, in time and space - in her past in this case.

3.b. A kind voice

What, then, was Violet’s attitude to the manager voice? Well there was another voice that expressed this;

Extract 5, Violet3

803. **Violet:** Audrey’s Audrey is definitely a positive
804. voice
805. **JH:** mm
806. **Violet:** very very positive, and if there’s one
807. thing I can say about Audrey is that she looks at
808. the situation, looks at reality as well, an’ she
809. also said to the voices “if you were decent
810. people you would have tried to make some sort of
811. connection with her and you’ve not even seen
812. her”, they are the sort of things that Audrey
813. says
814. **JH:** mm
815. **Violet:** she says things very much on the spot,
816. that is one thing that I can say
817. **JH:** mm
818. **Violet:** everything that she said makes sense to
819. me, it is accurate, it definitely is accurate,
820. all those people in London, when they come
821. together in ma flat, everything she says to the
822. one’s in London are tru- are right, “you
823. shouldn’t even be with Violet”

Violet's presents herself as outraged at the actions of the 'manager' and the Audrey-voice reflects this. This voice certainly has a clear meaning – 'Audrey' talks to the other voices, comments on their actions and for Violet what is said is "very very positive" (line 806), and "right" (line 822)³.

We are in general interested in where the meaning of voices comes from so let's look at what the Audrey-voice says in the first of Violet's examples here:

809. if you were decent people you would have tried
810. to make some sort of connection with her and
811. you've not even seen her

Violet presented this as a general formulation rather than a concrete instance – "they are the sort of things that Audrey says" (lines 812-813), and so we can regard this as Violet's formulation rather than necessarily a verbatim report. This voice-language is fairly complex – and like the manager-voice, some of the meaning comes from the linguistic form and another large part is indexical. The intrinsic meaning of the phrase is that of a moral redress, an outline of a correct course of action, and a judgement on the character of "people" who have fallen below such a standard. There are three positions; the speaker (making the judgment), the addressees (the judged), and "her" (who has been wronged). This is the general meaning of the phrase, but a large part of it is indexical – pointing to other settings, which give the positions sense as 'Audrey' (speaker), the voices/their person analogues (the judged) and Violet (who has been wronged). The relevant settings are;

1. **Violet's biography: the voice's identity in the past** - The Audrey-voice is also an agent with a history. The voice analogue was a supervisor in the factory who worked a different shift to Violet. Violet told me that for this reason, she had little interaction with Audrey at the workplace. Yet the Audrey voice is very involved in the voice-talk. It is unclear if there is the same kind of pragmatic tie between Audrey-person and the Audrey-voice, as there was with the manager – i.e. there is no indication that Audrey defended her in the past, as the manager harassed her in the past. Therefore the meaning that the voice brings from the past is of a *lack of mistreatment from a superior* at the factory. The supportive meaning comes from the words the voice uses now.
2. **The here-and-now environment** – The Audrey-voice is criticising someone, but not just anyone – and two things give shape to who the targets are; 1. Violet's current predicament of harassment by voices with certain identities; 2. the here-and-now situation of the Audrey-voice addressing other voices, which are together in her flat. Audrey does not only address the voices, but also refers to the "people" (line 808) that correspond to the voices i.e. the actual managers, school-friends and Aunt. That "her" (line 809-810) refers to Violet,

³ There are dialogical properties here to Violet's voices that have some similarities with the voices in another study (Davies et al, 1997). Peg was a voice-hearer experiencing troubles with two voices. In the course of the study she developed a voice that, like Audrey, was friendly, and made comments about the other voices. Like V's attitude to Audrey, Peg agreed with what this new voice said – it spoke 'for' her in a sense. This voice helped her to deal with the other voices.

is also given by these contexts where Violet is the victim – and pragmatically this voice acts on Violet’s behalf. So ‘Audrey’ *holds the persons responsible for their voices in the present, and in turn, holds the voice-analogues responsible for what the persons did in the past*. In other words, the Audrey-voice treats the voices and their analogues as continuous.

- 3. Violet’s ordinary life in the past and the present** – Violet emphasised in her narrative that in her ‘everyday’ life she has not received any contact from the managers since leaving the factory and this gives meaning to the criticism “you’ve not even seen her” (line 811)⁴.

3.c. Voice pragmatics and personal relationships

So far then we have seen that Violet made frequent references to her biography to make sense of her voices, and to convey the 'right' sense to the interviewer. These references to her former life were not only about the factory she worked in but also her relationship with her mother;

Extract 6, Violet3

693.**JH:** erm I wondered if you could tell me a bit
694.more about (.) erm about the way that she used to
695.talk to you and how that links erm (.)
696.**Violet:** the voices talk
697.**JH:** the way the voices talk to you
698.**Violet:** what ah can say about that is that (.)
699.when the voices come to me, they have a very very
700.harsh way of talking to me
701.**JH:** mm
702.**Violet:** an when I was growing up as a little
703.girl, that was how mah mum used to operate with
704.me, very up- abrupt
705.**JH:** oh okay
706.**Violet:** and very very strict
(19 lines omitted)
707.**Violet:** like he in charge of me, that’s where I
708.that’s where I say it links with my mum,
709.**JH:** ah kay
710.**Violet:** cause my mum was very much a bully
711.character,
712.**JH:** right
713.**Violet:** and that is how this manager was, he was
714.very much a bully in the factory, he didn’t know
715.how to treat anybody

⁴ Like Violet, the voice appears to be 'double-book-keeping', making a distinction between “the situation” and “reality” (line 807). This is in Violet’s voice, but also implied in ‘Audrey’s’ criticism (lines 808-810) – it is the lack of connection in the realm of “reality” that is morally accountable.

Violet talked of three different situations; 1) how she felt with her mother in the past 2) how she felt with the manager in the factory, and 3) how she feels now with the voices in the present – and the overlap between the three situations is striking. Her mum was “very very strict” with her (line 706) – the voices are “very very harsh” (line 699) and both her mum and the manager were “bully character(s)” (line 711).

There was no suggestion from Violet that her mother used the *same* words as the voices, but the *pragmatics* of her words were similar – the agents issued directives to Violet. In common with the factory-situation and voice-experiences, Violet’s mother was an active agent who scorned or intimidated Violet, but Violet did not have a voice of her own and experienced it silently. Her mother, and her manager-voice, talked as if they were “in charge” (line 707) of her. Both were powerful in relation to her – the dyads are mother-little girl, and manager-worker. So Violet’s voices took her back to two difficult ‘places’ in her past – they resonated the engagement with her mother at home as a child, and the unwanted attention from her manager in the factory as an adult. *They took her back in her personal history to a time when she was vulnerable and controlled.*

3.d. Resources for understanding voices

Violet’s experiences had remarkably vivid qualities – she heard the voices of people she knows or has known, with added elements of their personhood. Violet used aspects of her biography and everyday life to make sense of her experiences, but what cultural resources did she draw upon, if any? Many voice-hearers may explain their voices psychologically, emotionally or supernaturally, perhaps making use of some of the concepts we saw in the introduction to this paper. Some may take their psychiatrist’s view and see voices as a symptom of mental illness. Violet had several interpretative resources available to her, but which did she use, which did she accept, and why?

Violet is under a psychiatrist, but only very occasionally did she refer to “symptoms”;

Extract 7, Violet1

46. **Violet:** when they first came to me in the year
47. 2000, they abused me, they basically, they
48. basically was in control of my life actually
49. before I actually got onto taking medication
50. they basically took control of my life
51. **JH:** right
52. **Violet:** at the moment I’m on medication and it
53. doesn’t get rid of them completely, it just
54. helps the symptoms but it doesn’t drown
55. anything out completely
56. **JH:** yeah
57. **Violet:** um::

The way Violet talked about her voices at this point of the interview was more akin to psychiatric accounts. The presence/absence of voices is made relevant, but not their meaning beyond these dimensions. Note though that Violet referred to her voices as “them” (line 53), which are not erased through medication and distinguished these

from “symptoms” (line 54), which are helped by medication. The suggestion is that voices have symptoms, but that *voices are something more than symptoms*. This is the only time that Violet referred to psychiatric terms in constructing her own experiences.

Violet also related attending a self-help group for voice-hearers, but said that this did not help her answer questions about her voices. She liked to attend for social reasons, but struggled to identify with other people’s experiences of hearing voices. She said that many people at the group heard anonymous voices and she saw this as a very different kind of experience to her own.

So, Violet’s question - why are these voices in my life? - became a central theme to her narrative. She explained to JH that she did not have the answer, her voices gave no clues, and neither did the psychiatric and self-help services. The pastor at her local church is the only one who provided a confident answer to her question;

Extract 8, Violet2

117. **Violet:** but the pastor at church has given me a
118. book to read. I can’t remember the title of it,
119. but it, what the book contains is about the
120. devil, Satan, and things like that, and it’s
121. things, it might sound frightening but there’s
122. certain aspects of that that make sense to me,
123. it’s different different cases of what people
124. have experienced, and it’s written by, a
125. Nigerian, a Nigerian, man, or whatever. Cos the
126. church that I go to is basically, a lot of
127. Africans, and things like that, basic: but I’m
128. not, I’m West Indian, and there is a few West
129. Indian people that go there, but basically the
130. church is mainly made up of African origin, and
131. the book that he’s given me to read is very
132. very interesting, I’ve just been reading it a
133. chapter a night, because it’s quite, quite big
134. (0.5)
135. **JH:** mm
136. **Violet:** but I’ve been reading a chapter a night
137. and it does it does make sense and it does
138. relate to some of the things, that I’ve been
139. experiencing, I’m not saying that this=is, that
140. what I’m experiencing is the devil. I mean
141. people have got their different beliefs

Violet discussed being given a book by a religious figure in her life, the pastor, and implied that this had relevance to her voices. She constructed this interaction by reference to several cultural, religious and ethnic categories. In this extract, she made her West Indian background relevant, as she did at the beginning of the interviews and also when she discussed the harassment in the factory. Positioning herself as West Indian here ethnically distances her from the category “African” which is where this text originates. This tacitly positioned her as someone who is new to these concepts

(like the interviewer). This, in turn, allowed her to account for the ‘strangeness’ of these ideas. So the overall impression Violet gave is that the ideas may sound strange and scary, but are understandable within the cultural context of the church and the background of the writer; and furthermore have a merit beyond their original cultural setting.

Violet heard other stories about hearing voices on a weekly basis at a support group, but identified most closely with the accounts of possession she read in this book. But note that she did not passively accept this interpretation – it was only “certain aspects” (line 121-122) that made sense to her, she related to only “some” (line 138) of the ideas, suggesting that there was a large part that she was not convinced by. She specified this reservation at lines 139-140 – distancing herself from the idea that the devil could be involved in *her* voices whilst at the same time not dismissing this possibility entirely. The way she formulated this – “I’m not saying that this is..” (line 139) - suggested that affiliation with this view could be richly identity implicative, and she resisted a commitment to this as her own stance. After all, if she was to accept this explanation, this may imply that people she has known and still knows are interacting with the devil in some way.

Violet’s story suggested a spiritual dimension to her experiences – her voices were constructed not just as voices but as *different modes of relating with the person they signify*. But she did not accept the form of interaction that her pastor suggested. The way Violet talked about her voices suggested they fit somewhere in her spiritual life, but this is where her understanding ended - and this lack of reason was a source of mystery and misery. This is consistent with findings from the Hearing Voices Network indicating that those voice-hearers that develop a satisfactory explanation for their voices enjoy greater well-being (May and Hayes, 2012; Romme et al, 2009). So spiritual ideas formed part of the context for Violet’s voice experiences, as did ideas from African churches, but she drew from them only those aspects that fitted her individual experience, and only those she found personally acceptable.

4. Sources of meaning for abusive voices

Violet experienced abusive voices on a regular basis that contributed to significant problems of living. However this abuse did not originate simply in what her voices said – it came from the voice-talk in the context of difficult circumstances in Violet’s past, as well as the intrusion into her life at the time of the interviews. The result was, her voices did not have to say anything explicitly abusive (although they mostly did) in order to be experienced as problematic, harassing and invasive. The relevant settings for understanding Violet’s voices were; her personal history; the here-and-now situation of the voices; her spiritual beliefs; the voice-talk. Violet did not find psychiatric concepts useful in explaining her voices, did not explain her experiences using psychological ideas, and was careful about which religious ideas she absorbed. Ultimately, Violet’s relationships with others were the most important source for understanding her experiences. These sources of meaning may be important for further cases of hearing voices.

Violet’s case highlights the problems that may arise when a person’s cultural surroundings fail to provide an explanation for their voices that they find takes into

account aspects of meaning that the voices have. Persons' such as the pastor may step into this vacuum and provide an explanation that may have harmful consequences for the voice-hearer and leave them vulnerable to the suggestions of powerful church leaders. The appeal of the pastor's explanation was that unlike the concept of symptom, it accounted for the abusive and destructive nature of most of the voices, and also accounted for the experience of agentic-continuity with people she had known. However this idea could not account for the 'kind voice', nor did it fit with Violet's moral compass. There are of course other explanations for the abusiveness and the person-like-aspects of the voices (such as the idea of 'continuing relationships', Klass, 2001) but these were not readily available to Violet.

Are Violet's voices signs of psychopathology? A close investigation of Violet's voices reveals that they were not arbitrary, meaningless symptoms. Instead, they had clear connections to emotionally harrowing and confusing situations in Violet's life. To reduce Violet's voices to the concept of symptoms would be to deny these immediate emotional and biographical meanings. It is certainly true that Violet's voices could create (and reflect) significant problems of living. But not all of the voices did. The Audrey voice did not cause Violet problems and even mitigated the destructiveness of the abusive voices: representing Violet and bolstering her confidence. Some voices can have destructive consequences, but not all voices do. Violet's case demonstrated this distinction, and the roots of this in meaning - the difference lies not only with the voice language but also with the biographic links to past figures (malevolent or benign).

Can Violet be accused of lacking insight in confusing voices with people? Does she have faulty reality testing? Violet's case questions such a simple explanation for voices. Firstly, Violet demonstrates 'double-book keeping' (see Leudar and Thomas, 2000, chapter 3, on Daniel Paul Schreber) of her experiences; in her story she assigns her voices to a separate modality of experiencing – what she terms the "situation", and she distinguishes this from "reality" (i.e. ordinary shared reality). There was no indication in her account that she ever confused her voices with somebody speaking.

Secondly, despite the fact that Violet endowed her voices with intentionality they did not have the same consequences in Violet's account that they would have as persons. Her experiences of voices did not inform her actions with the same conviction as her everyday mundane experiences. For example, she did not call the police when the manager entered her room late at night. Although Violet treated the voices as agentially-continuous with the person-analogue, this was not in the usual sense – she held the person accountable, but in a private way. Violet did not describe her voices as simply errors of judgment, or a mal-functioning of her brain, but rather as continued bullying, and as a form of rejection by her Aunt and friends; and it is *this* continuity that made her voices personally problematic. There was an emotional, psychological and social reality to Violet's experiences. This extends the idea of reality testing from a simple matching of a perception against a source, to the reality of its fit into a person's activities, life narrative and emotions.

A final concern is the relationship between Violet's voices and traumatic situations in her past - were these voices re-enactments of trauma? The experiences did function to repeat a past trauma, but they were not only repetitions. This is because the voices happened in new circumstances in several ways – 1) they were in her flat and not the

factory 2) they crystallised in words the feelings she had at the time of the harassment and were not a simple repetition. 3) Other characters in Violet's life were involved – not just factory-people but as we saw, other figures such as her aunt and school friends were implicated in the abusive voices. To say that the voices repeated the trauma is not false, but is too simplistic – it is a new experience that acquires part of its meaning from the factory.

When confronted with an account of voices, there are different kinds of questions we can choose to ask as practitioners and researchers; what is causing this?; how can we get rid of them?; what is the best diagnosis? This investigation proposes that we try asking a different set of questions; what is the personal significance of this voice? What are its consequences? What does a voice express about a person's life?

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