

Whose Voice Should You Listen To?

by Jane Taylor

Hearing voices is a complicated experience. Traversing the mire of the voices is difficult enough, working out what causes them and whose explanation to accept as to why you are hearing them is virtually impossible. I should know, I heard voices for about 4 years. As a result I was given the almost obligatory diagnosis of psychosis and/or schizophrenia, high doses of medication and months of being sectioned on our lovely psychiatric wards.

I no longer hear voices or have to take any medication – I haven't done either for eleven years now. During that time, not only did I hear voices, I also, on occasions, would see visual hallucinations. I have been so intrigued and affected by the experience of those four years and by the success that I have had in keeping the voices away, that I have been compelled to try and unravel what happened.

This has taken me on quite a journey on which I have met with many others who have heard voices; spent time with them finding out what they think happened to them and where they think their voices come from. On the way I have completed an MA in Psychotherapy, during which I explored the psychotherapeutic perspective of hearing voices. As part of this course I was able to conduct research in Cambodia, where I met with traditional healers who hear voices and who use them as a positive tool of their trade. While I was there I also interviewed individuals from the psychiatric clinic who heard voices and, consequently, had been given the diagnosis of psychosis or schizophrenia.

So what have I found out along the way?

I have found that there are no unified theories from the world of

science, psychology or theology regarding the hearing of voices. Also, there are a variety of ways to interpret the experience of hearing voices, from both an individual and a cultural perspective.

I have found that in Cambodia, as their cultural belief system is based on Buddhist and Shamanic practices, it is essential for society to have traditional healers who DO hear voices. These traditional healers undertake years of rigorous training where they are taught techniques to control or manage the experience of hearing voices. When I spoke to the traditional healers in Cambodia, they all said that they would have gone mad if they had not been shown how to manage their ability to hear voices.

In Britain, over the centuries, the cultural opinion towards the phenomenon of hearing voices has ranged from regarding hearing voices as a divine gift to symptoms of an illness. As de Bruijn (1993:40) discusses, 'the originators of the monotheistic religions, Moses, Jesus and Mohamed, all heard voices not apparent to others.'

So if the current predominant religions are based upon messages that were received through the experience of hearing voices, how have we come to perceive hearing voices as pathology?

Throughout history in Europe, the ability to hear voices was firstly considered the domain of the divine. You would have been revered for your ability. However, by the time of the Inquisition launched by the Church, the ability to hear voices meant that you risked being killed and, consequently, hearing voices became taboo. Fatefully, in 1908, with the advent of psychiatry and a desire to associate hearing

voices with a genetic or biological origin, the term schizophrenia was born and psychiatry assigned the experience of hearing voices a prized position in psychopathology.

So where are we now?

Although psychiatry is still trying to keep 'hearing voices' to itself, its hold is slipping. There are many mental health professionals and service users who are pushing for the abandonment of psychiatric labels and, as summarised by Knight (2004), the recognition that 'hearing voices is a normal, though unusual, variation in human behaviour.' This body of people is gaining credence and their collective voice is creeping into scientific and psychological theories. There is also a large group of professionals raising the issue that there is no scientific evidence that can actually prove that schizophrenia or psychosis exist.

From a psychotherapeutic or psychological perspective, voices are often triggered by an external emotional or social trauma and are considered to be a tool or mechanism to cope with the traumatic situation. It is thought that the events of the trauma will often be found in the content of the voices, sometimes hidden within metaphors and messages.

I have also gone on to discover that 2% of the population hear voices, whilst only a third of that percentage seeks psychiatric help. So, with all these different theories, where should we turn? Ah, finally someone worked out that we should talk to the experts – those who hear voices!

Experts by Experience

A few years ago I came across the Hearing Voices Network. This was set up by Professor Romme and Sandra Escher (1993:250), who had spent many years in Holland

working with and interviewing people who hear voices, both psychiatric patients and non patients. During the interviews they discovered that 'most voice hearers were convinced that their voices came from outside themselves.' Many of the interviewees described their voices as having either a mystical nature being part of a spiritual awakening, or as 'evidence of communication with energies outside or beyond our world of sensory perception' or physical reality. Romme and Escher (1993:250) identify this as Extra Sensory Perception (ESP). ESP is considered to be beyond normal perception or communication that occurs via the five senses, i.e. hearing, vision, touch, taste, smell.

Working together with the voice hearers, Romme and Escher (1999) created a talking therapy that attempts to meet and manage the most common experiences and problems that were described by the voice hearers. This talking therapy includes elements of psychotherapy, psychology, various mystical concepts and therapies, reincarnation, parapsychology and exploration of the use of alternative therapies.

In traditional psychiatry, the individual is actively discouraged from talking about the content or given much freedom to explore different ways of managing their voices, other than purely with medication. The philosophy behind Romme and Escher's approach is to encourage the individual to find their own frame of reference for their experience of hearing voices, and to create their own way of managing them. The individual is assisted to find their own interpretation of their voices and then to explore where or from whom they think the voices are coming. At the same time, the individual is helped to explore the content of the voices and reflect on any connections between the content and the individuals' life experiences.

Coping

It has generally been thought that it is the content of the voices that leads the voice-hearer to feel overwhelmed by the experience. However, research now indicates that it is more the nature of the relationship and the explanatory model that the individual uses to describe the origin of the voices, that affect whether the individual copes with the experience or not.

The Mental Health Foundation (2007) 'suggests that if the individual believes that the voices are in control, the individual cannot cope – if the individual believes that he or she is stronger than the voices, the individual finds ways to cope with them.'

In light of these insights when trying to identify the best kinds of therapy for people who hear voices, the therapist, Tamsin Knight (2005:38), concludes that surely it would make sense to provide assistance *'that increases a person's ability to cope with the experiences' rather than providing them with therapy that offers belief modification.*

Romme and Escher (1993:20) interviewees identified many coping strategies to be useful. These include ignoring the voices, entering into consensual dialogue with the voices and only talking to the voices at designated times.

Personal Recovery

As I commented at the beginning, hearing voices is a complicated experience and I've always thought that I heard voices due to multiple and separate causes, and each cause or origin triggered different types of voices.

Firstly, I think some of the voices were literally a result of my brain or mind malfunctioning, which, according to psychiatry, happens because of a chemical imbalance. Other voices were due to emotional traumas that I had experienced over the course of my life and a particular trauma that happened just before the voices started. Lastly, like Romme and Escher's interviewees, I too thought that many of my voices came from outside of myself and were coming from entities that were from beyond this physical reality. I sometimes wondered if I had ability similar to a medium or traditional healer or shaman.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly what led me to stop hearing voices – again, I think it was a combination of factors that also reflected my hypothesis that the voices originated from a variety of causes.

The first three years that I was hearing voices were spent in a cycle of heavy doses of medication and months of being sectioned. Every time I left hospital after being sectioned, the auditory and visual hallucinations had increased in frequency and, as a result, I had to take higher

doses of medication which did not ever completely eradicate them. It would then take several months for the voices to calm down. I would begin to slowly reduce the medication, get my emotional life back in order, then have an appointment with a psychiatrist who had never met me - and oh, then I'd be sectioned again...

A major turning point was when I was assigned one psychiatrist whom I met with fairly regularly and he assured me that he would never section me. He stated that he would leave it to me to tell him if I needed to come to hospital and, within reason, I could dictate how long I stayed for. He also gave me much more modern medication.

The medication helped, and I think calmed down the voices that were just 'pure madness'. But, as always with me, the medication never completely stopped the voices. The stability that came with the removal of being sectioned was enormous. Having this trauma removed enabled my emotional state to become more stable. Consequently, as a result of being more emotionally stable, I heard less voices.

The voices that I was left with I began to tackle in a completely different way. It is difficult to say whether this is because I'd been given some level of control over a part of my life (I was then encouraged to take control of the voices that were left – I definitely wasn't going to let them or psychiatry win), or whether because, once I was able to stop fighting the field of psychiatry, I was able to start fighting the voices. However, the voices that I was left with were the ones that I thought were coming from outside of myself and coming from outside entities.

I had always thought that some of the voices that I heard were coming from entities and I finally had a solid base from which to fight them. I did this by literally answering them back or telling them that I was not listening to them anymore. I found swearing at them particularly successful! I mainly spoke to them inside my head but on occasions, if alone and I felt it was a particularly strong voice, I would speak out loud. I began to see that I could have some power or control over the voices, as they diminished when I pushed them away.



I still today have a very clear image of the last 'person' or hallucination that was speaking to me. It was a little old lady. She wasn't threatening at all, but I didn't want her hanging round my flat and I told her this in no uncertain terms! It seemed to work as she never returned!

It is hard to know how to describe these images or hallucinations, or to know what or who they were, but for want of better words or theories, I often thought that they belonged to spirits, entities, or ghosts. It was, and still is, difficult to know what to do with these kind of experiences as they don't just challenge psychiatry or our version of sanity, they challenge western societies' concept of reality. To be honest, they challenged my concept of reality and I still find it hard to write about for fear of being judged as mad - but if it makes you uncomfortable to read about, you should try experiencing it!

What I do know is that when I began to tackle the voices as if they were coming from spirits or entities, there were actual techniques that I could use to shut myself off from them (these included shutting myself down psychically and many of the techniques I used are described in the Romme and Escher book 'Accepting voices'.) These techniques gave me control over the voices and they began to go away. Within a year of approaching the voices in this way, I was free of voices and medication and have continued to be free of both.

What I have also come to discover is that my experiences share much in common with the descriptions given by the people interviewed as documented by Romme and Escher, and with the Cambodian concept of reality and the experiences of Cambodian traditional healers.

Cambodian version of reality
Cambodia has a completely

different concept of reality to western cultures. In Cambodia, due to a rich fusion of animism, Buddhist and Hindu philosophy human experience is influenced by a belief in the existence of multiple realities that are occupied by various entities, or spirits, including the spirits of ancestors. Society puts much importance on communicating with ancestor spirits and, consequently, has many traditional healers who use hearing voices as a positive tool to communicate with these ancestor spirits. These traditional healers undertake years of rigorous training during which they are taught techniques to control or manage the experience of hearing voices. When I spoke to the traditional healers in Cambodia they all said that they would have gone mad if they had not been shown how to manage their ability to hear voices.

Mental health problems in Cambodia are thought to be caused by a variety of reasons, including physical problems with the mind, as a result of thinking too much or due to angering the spirits.

Questions that I have been left with

I still to this day do not know if I believe in the skills of mediums and traditional healers, or if I believe in entities or spirits etc. I have no answers relating to what I heard and saw, all I've been left with are the following questions:

I don't know whether I stopped hearing voices due to changing my relationship or explanatory model with the voices which then enabled me to feel stronger or in control of them... Or did I have the ability to speak or communicate with entities that are beyond our physical reality? Or perhaps, more correctly, did outside entities have the ability to communicate with me?

If the voices were a result of the traditional psychiatric model, i.e. chemical imbalance, do mediums, shamans, traditional healers and clairvoyants hear voices because they have a so called 'chemical imbalance,' or perhaps, more correctly, a 'different' chemical balance?

Shamans regularly take drugs or use rhythmic music to change the balance of their minds to open them up to what they call 'other realities'. Is this any different to a 'chemical imbalance'?

If a shaman was taken into

psychiatric care, would they be considered to be delusional? Many shamans or traditional healers across the world state that their voices started after some kind of trauma. 100% of the people that I interviewed related the onset of their voices to a traumatic situation, as did many of Romme and Escher's interviewees. Can trauma open you up to psychic experiences?

Many clairvoyants and mediums state that if a human being is emotionally or mentally low, entities or spirits can psychically attack the individual. If this is true, are the results of psychic attacks what we in the west label symptoms of psychosis? Many of Romme and Escher's interviewees used the same techniques that I used to make the voices stop. They learnt these techniques from mediums etc.

I do not advocate that only mediums or traditional healers should treat people who hear voices, but can we learn anything from their techniques that they use to control their experiences?

Whose version of reality is correct?

Conclusion

The only reality that anyone has to work with is the voice hearers' interpretation of their experiences. What has become apparent to me is that these individual interpretations or descriptions of hearing voices seem to share many similarities, ranging from similar descriptions about the origin of the voices to different successful methods used to cope with the experience. These similarities are found across cultures. The descriptions provided by individuals in Holland seem to share much in common with the Cambodian cultural perception of reality and the underlying cultural concepts and classification of mental health.

Tamsin Knight, (2004) who has worked as a therapist with many people who hear voices and is at the forefront of pushing for the acceptance 'that hearing voices is an unusual yet normal human experience', concludes that: *"We cannot know all the answers. Perhaps we should be moving away from the idea that there is one reality; one set of beliefs that are acceptable and another that are delusional. Instead, we*

could accept that there is not one correct way of seeing the world; rather, we all have different versions. The challenge, then, is to accept individuals' differences and offer them help in coping both with their reality and with living in a wider society that may not share their beliefs."

Tamsin Knight's words are at the heart of what I am saying: *"Embracing that we cannot know all the answers and considering that there may not be only one correct way of seeing the world. I've come to discover that there are many different ways of viewing the world and consequently multiple ways of interpreting the experience of hearing voices."*

What's yours?

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