Respecting Voices: A Report on a Co-research Project Concerning Voice Hearing.

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This paper is part an attempt to suggest a knowledge concerning voices, and part an exploration of ways of perceiving and relating to voices. A sort of knowledge-building-on-the-go, one might say. This draws principally on explorations of ways of relating with voices in collaboration with people who live with them, and in the context of discovering better ways of living with them. The empirical background of the present knowledge-building-on-the-go consists of the discoveries made by Victoria, Max, Alice, Rose, Trish, Ava and Laura, which have been previously published. These accounts are the point of departure and main reference for this paper. There is a huge literature of psychosis, schizophrenia and hallucinations that, for the purposes of the present exploration, I do not expect to engage with. I will take the phenomenon with which this exploration is concerned to be unknown to me, and take the accounts of a number of people who are able to hear voices as my empirical base. My reason for doing so lies principally in those same accounts, namely the fact that the people in question have not found the usual understandings of auditory hallucinations, or the psychiatric and psychotherapeutic practices connected to them, to be particularly helpful. Problematic relationships with these auditory hallucinations, to the point of being life-threatening, have not been improved by the psychiatric treatments they received, and so a journey of discovery to arrive at different knowledges was necessary to improve their situation. It is very much in honor of this fact and the life journeys of these specific people, that I attempt to follow in their footsteps and make some explorations outside of my own profession and the knowledges and practices of medical psychiatry and dominant psychotherapeutic models. This might lead to reproducing what is already known, of course. But there is also a chance that it leads to some new perspective, and I think that would be worth it, for at least in some cases, the dominant frameworks for understanding and dealing with auditory hallucinations are not helpful. It is in honor of those people

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that I invite the reader to venture into the forest with me, knowing that there is certainly an established road that one may also take.

In taking such an approach, I see myself as aligned perhaps with the ideas of scientific knowledge of Andrew Pickering (2013, 2017). Pickering departs from practices of thinking with theory and models and suggests an approach to knowledge that takes the phenomenon of interest to be a sort of partner in a dance of agency. In his case, he uses the examples of the bubble chamber and also rivers. I like to view the approach I shall attempt as taking the voices themselves to be the partners in such a dance of agency, rather than casting them as an inert and uninvolved object of observation, experimentation, and theorizing. In addition, in the spirit of narrative therapy's co-research approach, I will take the people who live with voices, and who are therefore closer to voices than anyone else, to be the principal authority in terms of what voices are like, rather than attributing such authority to professionals such as myself (Epston, 1999, 2011; Haugaard, 2016, 2019; Maisel, Epston, & Borden, 2004).

I invite the reader to join with me in exploring a possible knowledge of voices in relation to three domains: 1) A preliminary sketch of a theory of voices, an ontology of sorts, based on direct interaction with voices. 2) A know-how of sorts, sketching a preliminary knowledge of how to interact well with voices. 3) An exploration of possible relations between such a knowledge as might emerge from the previous explorations to academic or scientific knowledges that share some essential features with it or may extend this small piece of local knowledge in some way.

For the sake of clarity, the phenomenon of interest is the ability of some people to hear voices speaking to them and/or about them. What is sometimes referred to as auditory hallucinations. Specifically, people who are able to hear voices that others cannot hear, who are regarded as suffering from a mental illness, and are for that reason patients within medical psychiatry, usually receiving diagnoses of some variety of schizophrenia.

Part one: Characterizing voices.

This phenomenon is usually named 'voices', although formally psychiatry and diagnostic language speak of auditory hallucinations. The latter would in principle

include hearing all sorts of sounds that others cannot hear. Nonetheless, 'hearing voices' is the usual term even within psychiatric contexts. The people I have encountered who have this ability to hear voices, have usually also called them voices. This may be obvious enough, as indeed they appear as exactly that. Victoria describes how, when she first experienced this phenomenon, she immediately assumed that there must be someone talking somewhere and began to search her apartment for the source of the speaking. This would indicate that those voices were not immediately distinguishable from the sound of another human being talking to you. They turned out to be voices without bodies, however, and indeed voices only perceptible to Victoria herself. The explorations of Alice and Rose, however, point to a phenomenon that may be more than hearing disembodied speaking. Alice describes The Others as seeming like something that exists on a different dimension to those of common perception. Although she describes their ability to make themselves heard to her in a literal way, comparable to Victoria's description, she adds that they do not always communicate in a literal speaking voice. They also make themselves known to her through intuitions or sensations, as well as by inserting mental images into her consciousness. They even have the ability to induce the sensation of being strangled. Indeed, Alice does not prefer the term 'voices' for these reasons, and proposed alternatives such as 'negative energies' or 'magical beings'. Rose describes a very similar phenomena. Although using the term voices for them, she describes their ability to communicate through intuitions, insertion of mental images, and inflicting uncomfortable and even painful bodily sensations on her. Perhaps hearing someone speak in the literal sense is not necessarily the whole of this phenomenon, but only one modality of interaction or communication? Rose has continued to consider the nature of voices beyond her contributions to the paper "Rose & The Whispering Voices" and shared this with me in communication in late 2020 and early 2021. Rose explained to me that she was increasingly dissatisfied with the label 'voices' and had considered alternatives. She had come to favor calling them 'consciousnesses'[2] and proposed this to the entities with whom she co-exists. They liked to be referred to in this way and preferred it to 'voices'.

[2] This is my attempt to translate as literally as possible the Danish word 'bevidsthed', which Rose uses in the plural to refer to these entities.

Another aspect of voices, according to these explorations, is their personalities. They would seem to have some kind of identity or personality. The voices that Victoria was able to hear ultimately had the same agenda of persuading her to harm herself, but took different routes to achieving it. One took a direct and brutal approach of commanding her, while the other made itself appear to be a friend looking out for her own best interest. Two of Max's voices may have somewhat similar characteristics of one being very harsh and controlling, while another took a more observational stance and made comments. Alice's Others seemed fascinated with violence, supported aggression and tough justice, and had what to me and Alice was a morbid sense of humor. At the same time, they did enjoy being treated respectfully and getting cigarettes was very important to them. Although they were embarrassed about it, they also took an interest in learning about kindness and came to desire friendship. This gives me the impression of beings with a perspective of their own and something like a personality, with likes and dislikes. They even suffered from the frustration of not being able to express themselves through Alice, which seemed to motivate at least some of their desire for control over Alice. Similarly, Trish's voice seemed frustrated or angry due to psychiatric treatment that required Trish to renounce their friendship and even suppress the voice by means of medication. We even witnessed a case of this voice having explicit opinions and feelings in relation to Trish when she lost hope, and the voice was frustrated with her for that reason.

Rose's discovery of living with four different groups of voices seems to make this fact, of some kind of subjectivity or identity, very explicit. The four groups of voices had very different perspectives on Rose's life and wanted different things. This also required Rose to communicate with them in different ways. Two groups seemed to have in common a moral agenda for Rose. One of them being focused on the importance of assertiveness and matters of justice, while the other was focused on being of service to others, even at the expense of one's own feelings and desires. A third group seemed to be in a flight-or-fight state, lashing out in despair, while the fourth group seemed completely fixated on control over Rose at any cost, with no apparent end other than power itself. In addition, she had previously lived with two voices who appeared with complete, nuanced personalities and personal histories.

Some voices seem to have a more distinct individuality than others, and some seem to have complex perspectives on life, whereas others seem to have a narrower view, focused perhaps mostly or only on one particular aspect of life. But all these voices seem very clearly to possess some form of personality or a way of being, associated with some particular perspective on life. This way of being seems to generally be dissimilar to the personality and preferences of the person who can hear them. In other words, they do not seem to reflect to a high degree the personality of the person who hears them. Alice, for example, did not share the fascination with violence of The Others at all, and was not at all interested in the gory movies that The Others liked to watch.

Voices may, at times, seem like they are a tape recording on repeat. I guess that contributes to the idea within cognitive behavioral therapy that voices can be regarded as dissociated negative automatic thinking. Voices do perhaps sometimes seem to be a constant repetition of the same messages or basic ideas. It does appear to be the case that Trish and Alice, for example, would hear these voices repeating the same negative messages almost like a broken record. Could voices be dissociated thinking patterns? My participation in these explorations so far have given me very serious doubts about that. I must admit that prior to the discovery that Max's voices appreciated respect, I was inclined to consider those voices to be reflections of some of Max's life experiences. It was something like impressions of particular life circumstances or relationships that had sort of stuck in his head and were on repeat. I suspect Max had a similar view. He certainly did not expect my idea of trying to talk to the voices to work. Except it did. This fact seriously challenged my own idea of voices as dissociated thoughts or memories running on repeat, like some kind of automaton in the brain. The voices responded to the respect. They appreciated it, but were also annoyed with it because they found it impossible to continue to act as usual due to the plain kindness of my appeal and the truth of what I said. This changed their behavior. They were even touched and perceived by Max to be weeping at one point. In the time since the events described in Max's story, these same voices have also expressed their respect for me and even showed concern for my health at a time when they and Max visited my office while I had a slight cold. That does not sound like a cognitive automaton or a broken mechanism in the brain. Not to me, at least. Similarly, Rose's voices have changed their behavior in relation to my extension of hospitality to them, and Rose's continued effort to engage them

respectfully and get to know them. Alice's Others also responded surprisingly and consistently to the offer of cigarettes and coffee, and were enraged when I withdrew this hospitality, only calming down when I sincerely apologized and returned all their privileges in my office. For me, this indicates rather clearly that voices are responsive and can change their behavior, perhaps even learn. Perhaps the appearance of being a broken record on eternal repeat is only an appearance, and perhaps it has something to do with how the voices are treated, or perhaps it is due to not being engaged in a way that appeals to them.

On some occasions, we have observed voices to have surprising relations with spatiality. The usual assumption, I guess, is to regard voices as residing in the head of the person who can hear them. I guess I assumed that myself, which perhaps explains my surprise when Alice spoke of wanting The Others to get out of her head and into the corner of my office. I made an on-the-spot decision to understand this very literally, and offered them a chair, although I confess to having no idea what was going on and what exactly Alice meant by this. Can voices move in space and inhabit different locations? As may be gleaned from the conversations with Alice, The Others did seem to predominantly reside in her head, but they increasingly seemed to inhabit locations external to her head – at least, as far as her experience of them is concerned. They began to regularly inhabit the chair in the corner of my office at our meetings, something that initially took some effort from Alice, and some persuasion from me, to achieve. Since these observations, I have encountered other examples of voices that their hearer experienced as inhabiting locations outside the body, and even as being absent at times because they were in other locations, such as being in another room, for example. Interestingly, Alice expressed a preference for The Others being out of her head rather than inside it. Outside her head, she could deal with them.

This leads me to wonder what the essential features of voices may be, if literal speaking is sometimes only part of the experience of them. Could it be worth it to consider voices in relation to perspective, personality, responsiveness and feelings? Perhaps to speak of voices being in possession of agency? They would appear to possess these qualities, and if they do, might we get some sense of what voices are by considering them in relation to personhood? Could voices be regarded as persons of sorts? Could 'voices as persons,' in some sense of

personhood, make some helpful contributions to our understanding of them that are not made by understanding them as dissociated thinking patterns, cognitive errors, misattributions, or neurobiological disfunctions? From a phenomenological perspective, this would be very much in accordance with how voices are in fact experienced, despite what we may regard as being more or less rational to believe about them.

Alice explicitly described The Others as being someone other than herself. Someone she could not recognize as connected to herself and who was exercising a will that was other than her own. Max's voices also seemed to quite clearly desire something for him that was contrary to his own desires. Although those voices had complete access to everything he thought, knew, or felt, he did not have the same access to them and was unable to control or manipulate them. Rose's two old voices, who had complete personalities and life histories, seemed quite distinct from Rose and hard to consider expressions of Rose's own identity or her own will.

In addition to considering whether voices can be regarded as persons, there may be some benefit in this idea in regard to how to deal with voices. If voices are persons, this may open up some different ideas about what to do about them (or with them) than what is afforded by the perception of them as cognitive errors or neural disfunction. This last, more pragmatic, consideration will be explored in Part Two.

Species.

My impressions of voices having distinct personalities and being different from each other may not be enough to fully characterize them. Might there be something deeper to their differences than the quirks of personality or agendas? Might we speak of species of voices? Perhaps voices are not just voices, but a group of phenomena or entities spanning several types? For example, Rose's older male and female voices were distinctly human with a sense of self and a history. One was a Vietnam veteran with memories of his life, and the other had lived a chaotic life in the Danish capital city. On the other hand, there was a whispering crowd that turned out to consist of groups of voices associated with particular emotions or particular moral agendas. They did not have life histories and were focused on some particular aspect of life. Attempting to convey what

these voices are like, she likened them to the mythical creature Cerberus – a dog with many heads. The difference between these Cerberus-like voices and the Vietnam veteran can hardly be accounted for only in terms of differences in personality or interests. They seem, to me, to be different kinds of entities. The same goes for the superdimensional Others described by Alice. There also seems to be quite a difference between Trish's voice, which used to be a friend but became frustrated with her, despite ultimately wanting to help, and the Lunatics/Brats, who show no regard for Rose and are determined to tear her life apart, telling her whatever lies are necessary to gain her complete submission. To me, this pulls me towards considerations of differences of kind between some voices.

In Rose's case, she had the experience of interacting with what seemed to be several species of voices: Individual human-like voices, moral-agenda-focused voice collectives, a voice collective born of emotions relating to trauma, and an inhuman virus-like voice collective. Something that seemed very significant to her explorations of co-existing with what would seem to be not only a great number of voices, but perhaps also different species of voices, is the fact that she needed to interact with them in different ways. Perhaps the difference between the Fighters Against Injustice and the Moralizers is mostly a difference in their focus or personality, but the Angry and Despairing Ones could be a different species to some degree. The Fighters Against Injustice and the Moralizers were both receptive to rational argument, although the specific concerns that needed to be addressed differed between them. But the Angry and Despairing Ones required something different. In their case, Rose needed to soothe them and take care of them.

Whereas Rose's two old voices understood human feelings and relationships, Alice's Others would appear to possess little understanding of human interactions. Friendship and kindness appeared to be exotic and difficult to comprehend for them, and it seemed they had to learn about this from instruction, but perhaps especially by receiving kindness through hospitality. Like Rose's whispering voices, The Others seemed to be a kind of unified collective, with a focus on some specific aspects of life. Particularly anger, aggression, and violence.

Voices may also differ in kind with respect to their relation to the person hearing them. Rose's two old voices seemed to be complete individuals in their own right, with no perceivable connection to Rose's personality or life history at all. The Angry and Despairing Ones, on the other hand, Rose found to be closely connected to her feelings, and she came to strongly suspect that they had been born out of particular traumatic events in her life. The Fighters Against Injustice and the Moralizers seemed less closely connected to Rose, and perhaps related to more general moral positions in our culture. She wondered if they might have appeared to her to give her moral guidance. The Lunatics/Brats appeared completely alien to Rose. Alice also experienced her Others as alien to her. She had no idea where they came from or why they were there. They had just always been attached to her, although her awareness of them increased over the course of her life. Max recalled his voices appearing in his childhood and that their role in his life was to take care of him and guide him under traumatic circumstances. At the time, when Max and I discovered the effects of acknowledging the perspective of the voices, Max regarded them as an illness beyond interaction. Perhaps similarly, Trish's voice made its appearance in the context of traumatic events and took it upon herself to help Trish. Perhaps some voices are alien to the person who hears them and have unknown origins, whereas other voices are closely associated with particular events or circumstances, or even have their origin in the person who hears them in some way. Some voices seem to have an identifiable agenda, which may or may not be welcomed by the person hearing them, whereas other voices are just there or have always been there.

(Frustrated) helpers.

Some voices seem to have the original intention of being helpers, and I wonder if some may have the potential to become helpers, even if they do not immediately seem to have such a role. Max's voices and Trish's voice arrived in the lives of their respective hosts with an explicit agenda of help and guidance. Rose's Fighters Against Injustice and the Moralizers were not immediately identifiable as being helpers, but in hindsight they may have tried to be. Alice's Others have not functioned as helpers, but I wonder if they could be if their aggressive energy was channeled differently. They did seem to support Alice when she experienced anger or moral outrage. I wonder if this idea that at least some voices may have intentions of being helpful, or become able to be helpful, may be important to

consider. With some voices, this proved to be the case, even if it was not at all immediately obvious. When I met Max, he hated the voices, and Trish expressed a similar sentiment. And no wonder! The voices were acting like bullies and even encouraging suicide! Uncovering the lost history of the relationship with these voices and considering the perspective of the voices without assuming evil intention on their part seemed to matter a great deal to the voices. Should we be prepared to consider the possibility of at least some voices being helpers or guides that are trying to assist the person who hears them?

If some, or perhaps even many (although very probably not all), voices are helpers, how do we account for the cases of horrible behavior towards the person they want to help? Trish's history of relations with her voice and Rose's explorations of the history of her relations with the whisperers may give us a clue: Maybe these helping voices are deeply frustrated because of the reception they are getting. Trish was friends with her voice until a psychiatrist told her it was an illness and tried to make it go away. Maybe the voice did not appreciate this at all? Rose also came to consider what may have been attempts at moral guidance, from some of her voices, to have resulted in powerful frustration on their part when Rose rejected them. Were these voices simply struck, and hurt, and suffering from rejection and isolation, thus becoming aggressive and demeaning, much like we might expect humans to do under similar circumstances? Although it may seem less clear if Alice's Others understood themselves to be helpers, they do seem to have similarly experienced being frustrated and aggressive towards Alice due to her strong resistance to their aggressive energy. I wonder if Max's voices were also deeply frustrated when we tried to find a way for Max to deal with them. In his case, I wonder if the source of the frustration may have been those profound life and personality changes that Max was going through as he put his past life behind him. These changes seemed unbelievable and perhaps even incomprehensible to the voices, who seemed to have been adapted to survival in a world of violence.

Does this indicate that perhaps distinguishing between voices, not only by their interests and personalities, but also by their species, may be quite significant to finding the best way to interact with them? For example, we may reasonably expect some voices to appreciate and respect human feelings, while other kinds of voices may not be expected to comprehend that. Some voices may appreciate

and respect rational argument, whereas other voices may regard such arguments as quite irrelevant or even incomprehensible. Some kinds of voices may be quite flexible in their behavioral repertoire, whereas other kinds may be rather restricted in terms of behavior and perspective.

Tentative summary.

These explorations and considerations in relation to the general impressions that arise for me, from these examples, lead me to consider voices in a certain way. Voices seem to display perspective, feelings, personality, differences in kind, and responsiveness to their hearers as well as other people, a capacity to change their behavior and perhaps even to learn, and a will of their own. Perhaps they may be distinguished as species according to degrees of human-likeness, individuality, alienness, broadness or narrowness of perspective, friendliness versus hostility, and external or internal origin in relation to the person who hears them. These differences in kind may be important to consider in understanding how best to interact with the voices, whether their presence is fundamentally a threat to the person or not, as well as the capacity of the voices to understand human feelings and their capacity to change their behavior under the right circumstances.

In trying to think along the lines of those observations and interactions with voices that are contained in the accounts of Victoria, Max, Alice, Rose, Trish, and Laura, I find myself arriving at ideas about voices that may initially feel somewhat uncomfortable in the cultural climate of 21st century modern psychiatry: Can we regard voices as persons? Phenomenologically and relationally, they display a lot of things that we would normally regard as closely associated with personhood: Feelings, perspective, a will of their own, personality, responsiveness to how they are being treated, opinions, and desires. If this is the phenomenology of voices, and if voices live up to some significant degree of personhood in how they interact with their hearers, as well as me as an outsider, should we consider extending our understanding of personhood to include them? In contrast to insisting that they are something other than what they appear to be and act like, such as ‘really’ just dissociated cognitive patterns or neurobiological abnormalities. I cannot avoid thinking of Max in particular. Very much in accordance with established psychiatric understandings, Max regarded his voices as being an illness and, therefore, considered the idea of speaking to them and making a moral appeal to them as being impossible. Crazy, in fact. Despite Max’s

belief and expectation of impossibility of interacting with these voices as if they were persons, the voices did respond to it in a very person-like way. They did so immediately and consistently. I will return to the matter of personhood and the possibility of extending our notions of what it is to be a person to include voices in Part Three. However, I suspect that Part Two below may also shed some light on this matter, although from the more pragmatic perspective of how to interact with voices *as if* they are persons.

Part two: Engaging voices.

How do we engage with voices? What happens when their presence becomes known? The usual psychiatric response is to diagnose the people who are able to hear voices as being mentally ill, striving to explain to people or convince them that the voices are not real, and to attempt to suppress the experience of them by means of antipsychotic medication. In a more psychological vein, voices often become the object of interpretations. They are interpreted as really being something other than how they appear to the person. For example, as 'really' being dissociated thinking patterns (what is referred to in cognitive behavioral therapy as automatic negative thoughts or schemata), misattributed inner speech or perhaps suppressed parts of the self (such as the psychoanalytic concept of an intolerant, punishing superego). Either way, these responses tend towards some version of the idea that voices are really just yourself – your own thoughts, your own subconscious or some part of yourself that you cannot accept, and that the immediate experience of them as something other than yourself is erroneous. What that means, practically speaking, is that voices are subjected to interpretations on the premise that they are not what they appear to be. Victoria specifically describes being met with attempts to persuade her that the voices are not real, and states how unhelpful this was for her. Rose also mentions, several times, her continued experience of psychiatric professionals being dismissive of her voices and their attempts to persuade her of their unreality. Something Rose stated clearly that she did not appreciate. In Trish's case, the idea that her voice was an illness seems to have resulted in a conflict between her and her voice. For Victoria, Max, Alice, Trish and Laura, antipsychotic medication had not been effective in suppressing their ability to hear voices, despite years of continued treatment. In Rose's case, she completely rejected medication after a short trial. This means that the co-researchers whose examples form the basis of this paper

have not found the usual way of dealing with voices in our society to be helpful. In some cases, it would even seem to have made matters worse for them.

For clarity, I cannot say, and am not attempting to say, what is the case for all people with the ability to hear voices. My interest here is to follow the trail of these specific people for whom the usual psychiatric and psychotherapeutic approaches had not proven helpful, hoping to make some discoveries that may benefit people who are in similar circumstances. I am aware that there are people who find these usual psychiatric treatments helpful and adequate to their needs, but my area of interest here is for those whom this is not the case.

Respectful engagement.

Although I have come across some hints of the significance of taking voices' perspective seriously prior to learning about Victoria's practice of sitting through it with voices and her mention of having conversations with them, it only really dawned on me that we were somehow onto something when Max and I made our discovery. After having exhausted all ideas about coping with the voices or tricking them or battling them out, Max mentioned this idea that maybe they were originally trying to help him. Somehow, then and there, this gave birth to the strange idea that maybe the voices were having a hard time coping with the changes in Max's life. In my view, what that consideration effectively led to was a practice of acting as if the voices were in possession of their own perspective and opinions, and would be receptive to being acknowledged for having certain intentions. In other words, I ended up acting as if the voices were in fact persons! Persons deserving of some measure of respect from Max and myself. In other words, not only persons, but also, at least potential, members of a moral community. Although it all happened rather spontaneously and was not prepared or thought through in advance, I do believe that the implication of what I did was in fact to act in accordance with the recognition that the voices were their own persons: they had the capacity to care for Max, a sense of right and wrong, and the ability to listen.

Alice and I had not been able to make any progress in dealing with her Others. Coping with them didn't help, trying to resist them didn't help, and trying to develop a sense of self apart from them did not help. Neither did antipsychotics. I was writing up Max's and Victoria's discoveries at the time and decided to share

these knowledges with Alice. We accidentally made the discovery that The Others appreciated a smoking break, and then took that discovery completely seriously, finding that such respectful hospitality and concern for the wellbeing of The Others actually made a difference. This seemed to confirm the significance of acting as if voices are real persons with feelings, desires, and a perspective of their own. Persons who appreciate respect, just like humans do. Victoria made her discoveries before our collaboration began, and in the case of both Max and Alice, we had collaborated for quite some time before making these game-changing discoveries. When I met Rose, it was the first time that there was an opportunity to share this idea, of treating voices as real persons deserving of respect, from the very beginning with someone I did not already know. Once again, this understanding of voices as real persons deserving of respect seemed to change the game. Rose's voices responded to this, and she immediately put the idea into practice in her daily interactions with them. In her words, this approach had a greater effect over two months than the previous two years of intensive psychiatric treatment, during which she tried antipsychotics with no positive effect and had regular conversations with a psychologist. Trish's voice similarly appreciated this respectful interest in her perspective and intentions and returned to friendship with Trish quite quickly.

If respectful engagement with voices, acknowledging them as persons, may be helpful, how is it done? I shall endeavor to suggest some practices that seem to accomplish this, or that may at least be places to start. In saying that it may be places to start, I also want to emphasize that I do not believe that this amounts to 'a method' or 'a technique'. I believe that for several reasons. First of all, a technique is an established procedure that a person performs upon some object. This already works against the essential point of treating voices as persons. If we treat them as though they were mere material to be subjected to a procedure for a particular result, we are, in fact, not treating them as persons in their own right at all. We are more or less doing the opposite. I truly encourage you to banish all ideas about learning some technique, method, or procedure that you hope will affect voices in some predictable way. Thinking and acting that way effectively amounts to relating to voices as if they are a kind of thing that you are trying to manipulate according to your desires. It may be helpful to try to take the idea of voices as persons quite seriously, and literally, to avoid depersonalizing them. I know this will very likely seem very odd. Especially to anyone trained in the fields

of psychology and psychiatry (probably less so for people who hear voices). I suspect some kind of theoretical or scientific rationale might ease any such discomfort or oddness, and I hope that Part Three of this paper will make some way towards just that. A second reason for not taking this to be a technique, is that technique implies some kind of rule-bound set of actions that may be implemented across contexts. But people are different and so are voices. And so are the kinds of relationships that people have with voices. If we try to perform in accordance with a method, we risk acting as if different people and different voices are essentially the same thing. But they are in fact not. This leads me to a third reason; the professional/helper, the person with the ability to hear voices, and the voices themselves must embark on a journey of discovery. The task is not to do what you think this paper told you to do, but to go into the woods and find out what is there. You need to discover who the voices are and how to relate with them. This is not accomplished by using techniques or following methods. It is accomplished by engaging, interacting, and listening. What I want to share with you here are some starting points and some basic advice for how to engage voices in such explorations, based on the explorations by Victoria, Max, Alice, Rose, Trish and Laura so far. How to invite them and show you respect them. Please remember this! You might want to think of such conversations with and about voices as a kind of couples' therapy or group therapy, only that some of the members are invisible. Please remember that in such conversations, you always have invisible company, even if they are taking the role of a silent audience (which they sometimes do, and sometimes it may be a good sign).

Invitations and suggestions for engaging voices respectfully.

In the abovementioned spirit of 'not being a technique', this chapter consists of a collection of examples and suggestions for how to act respectfully in relation to voices, conceived of as real persons, with the intention of inviting them into a journey of discovery.

Acknowledgement of presence.

Remember the invisible company! Consider acknowledging the presence of the voices as soon as you know that they are there. If you become aware that a person consulting you tells you that he or she is in fact able to hear voices, then consider saying some words of acknowledgment at first opportunity in the

conversation. In cases where I have already been informed that the person I will be meeting with for therapeutic conversations is able to hear voices, I will strive to say that I am aware of it and then acknowledge the presence of the voices. The initial acknowledgement could be of a somewhat formal character as you still don't know the voices or their host human, and also as a basic display of respect. For example:

> *Hello X, I am pleased to meet you. I am Christoffer and I am a psychologist, as I assume you are aware. I have been told that you are able to hear a number of voices – is that correct? May I assume that they are with you here today and that they are in the room with us now? May I just say a few words of welcome to them also? In that case, I just want to welcome you here, voices. As I was just telling X, I am Christoffer and this is my office. I hope you are okay and that you will be able to feel at ease here.*

Then, I may return to speak with the person consulting me in a more usual manner to get to know each other a bit and arrive at some idea of what it is he or she wishes to consult me about. While I address the voices, I never look at the person who can hear them. Coming to think of it, this may be rather significant in itself as a way of demonstrating that I regard the voices as someone other than the person who hears them. Instead, I simply look into the air to the side of us somewhere, or gaze across the room. In one case, I was corrected by the person consulting me that I was looking in the wrong direction, as in fact the voices were occupying some other part of my office. I apologized for the mistake, admitting I cannot sense them myself, and proceeded to gaze instead towards the location I was directed to. This is a simple little thing that communicates respect and shows your willingness to engage the voices. Voices can be quite surprised by this, and often they have never been greeted like that before. They tend to appreciate it, although many voices are skeptical of psychiatric professionals (and I guess they have reasons for that).

Ps and Qs and asking permission.

I strongly advise being very kind and sweet in the way you speak to and with voices. There may be several reasons why this would be wise; voices may expect you to be against them and out to get rid of them. Therefore, you may have to prove yourself to be worthy of trust and show them very clearly that you respect

their existence. Some voices are very possessive or protective of the person who can hear them and poised to see you as a threat to their influence, so you mustn't give the impression that you are trying to compete with them for power. Some voices are very aggressive by nature and easily provoked, but if you are very sweet and humble, you might avoid it. Many voices are accustomed to being disregarded, rejected, and ignored. Being treated with great respect and concern for their feelings and dignity can be a very significant and positive experience for them – finally after so many years!

So, remember to say please and thank you and so on. Do it a lot. More than normal. It is a privilege to come to know someone's voices and to have their attention. Be appreciative of this. I strive to make a habit of asking permission to speak directly with the voices when I would like to do that. I ask the person who hears them for permission. That person should have a say in it, because if the voices do not take well to it or do not want it at that time, the person who hears them may be paying the price for their dissatisfaction. I also ask the person who hears them if the voices themselves will allow me to say something to them or ask them a question. If I get a no from anyone, I respect it. The fact that I ask and accept it if I get a 'no', is in itself a display of respect. This in itself may communicate something very important to the voices. These things are particularly important early on. When you all get to know each other better, it may not be necessary to constantly ask permission, but it is a good way to start off.

Introductions.

The above already contained a short introduction in that I just told the voices my name and what place we are in. Further introductions may be meaningful at times. For example, Rose told me that the voices had been talking about me before she came into my office, and that they thought Rose shouldn't speak to me as they suspected I only wanted to learn about voices for my own gain. This gave me a desire to introduce myself to them with some more detail:

> *Okay, voices. I see. I think you are concerned about my intentions. That is a fair concern. I would like to try to reply to that. My experience with this kind of approach we are taking, is that it does help the people concerned. With Max, it made significant changes in his life and in his words, it gave him a*

> *life. With Alice, we are still exploring this, and she says that because of this work we are doing, she is feeling MUCH better. So, I believe it does help the people who consult me. It is true that I gain something from this, but my main concern is that the person consulting me gains the most and should do so. But by sharing such knowledge as we discover, others also gain from it, and so there is a gain for more people. And the insight and knowledge I gain, I use to help others, so that others gain from it. Just as I am now drawing on the knowledge that has come from collaborating with Max and Victoria. I certainly expect Rose to gain from this collaboration. What matters to me, is the fact that people get in that other chair and invite me into their lives. That is a great privilege by which I am honored, and I strive to repay that trust by doing something that contributes to that person's life. I feel an obligation to do that. Is this reply adequate?* (Haugaard, Rose & Epston, 2021)

Being willing to say something about yourself, and being able to speak for yourself to make yourself transparent may be important at times.

Offers of hospitality and mutual obligations.

Hospitality is a most basic and universal virtue and community building practice. In the acknowledgement above, I already expressed some level of hospitality by letting the voices know that they were in my office and that I hope they will be able to be at ease here. This can be elaborated early on by explicit offers of hospitality. For example:

> *Voices, I am not sure if you feel comfortable here or not, but I would like you to know that I regard you as my guests and that it means a lot to me to be a good host. If there is anything you'd like or something that will make you feel more comfortable here, please let me know by allowing X here to pass it on to me.*

I might make some specific offers, as voices don't often immediately reply to this and may have no idea what to ask for. For example:

> *I am not sure where you are exactly, whether you are close to X or whether you are in some particular location in my office, but would you perhaps like*

to have some space somewhere? I can pull out a chair for you? Or you are welcome to occupy one of the corners, if you like.

Is there anything I might do that you would appreciate, voices? I have come across voices that appreciated being served tea or coffee. Would you like that?

If they want coffee or tea, I literally pour them a cup and put it on the table (not the one between me and the person consulting me, but somewhere else in my office), saying "This is for you. You are welcome. I hope you enjoy". I leave it for the whole meeting, and afterwards pour it in the sink.

According to Alice, what her Others appreciated about receiving cigarettes, coffee and being offered a chair, was the gesture of kindness. Alice told me repeatedly that they were happy that I was kind to them. The roles of host and guest, and being a receiver of a gift of some kind may also create a basic moral universe for the voices, their hearer and the professional helper to navigate in. Receiving a gift of some kind creates a basic moral obligation to reciprocate in some way. Voices might be able to sense this. It may also involve an element of teaching kindness to voices who may not be very familiar with it. Receiving hospitality may allow them to experience it for themselves, and perhaps learn how to interact in kind ways over time. It may also provide both the person hearing the voices and the professional helper a particular style of relating with the voices as an alternative to engaging in antagonistic ways. Alice noted that taking kindness as her style of responding to her Others was also preferable for her, even if The Others did not change their behavior, because it allowed her to remain calm and not spend all her time being angry and engaged in a struggle.

Attention, positive regard, and respecting how the voices feel.

Try to take note of anything and everything the voices do (or refrain from doing) that is preferable or commendable in some way. Even little things. Remember that you always have this invisible audience. Keep this in mind and remember to ask how the voices are doing. Express your appreciation for how they are acting or feeling. If they are angry about something, acknowledge their anger. Try to understand why they are angry. Apologize if you are the cause of that anger, even if it is unintentional. Some examples:

How are the voices doing as we are talking about this matter? Angry? Wow, okay. I guess something about this topic unsettles them or gives them some concern. May I just say a few things to them about this? They do not have to reply, if they don't want to. Voices? I understand that you are angry at this time. I guess it concerns the topic we are talking about here. I am not entirely sure what it is exactly that you are responding to, but I just want you to know that I am aware that something is making you angry here. I apologize if I have somehow overstepped my bounds or been offensive to you. I would like to say that it is certainly not my intention to offend you, even though I acknowledge that I may have done so unintentionally and that you therefore have cause for your anger. What do you think X? Should we respect the voices here by not discussing this topic for now and talking about something else? We can return to this at another time, perhaps.

Are the voices becoming agitated by what we are saying now? Okay. May I just say something to the voices about this? Okay. Voices? I hear that you are not comfortable with the conversation now. I assume that something about it is not okay with you. Thank you for expressing to us this concern. I have no desire to offend you or make you uncomfortable. Perhaps we can work it out somehow? If you would like, do tell us what your concern is. I would really appreciate that. It is okay if you don't want to.

How are the voices doing, X? Quiet? Are they not saying anything? But do you suspect they are listening nonetheless? Okay. I would like to thank the voices for just listening to us. I really appreciate that. I hope that their silence means they are feeling okay and calm. I really hope so. Thank you voices, for being calm and listening while X and I are having this conversation.

Me: Are the voices saying anything about these things we are discussing? Do they have an opinion about it?

The person hearing the voices: They say you are an idiot, and they want to kill you.

Me: Oh dear! I gather they are not too happy about it then. I am sorry to hear that. I really hope we might find a way to talk about these things that

the voices would feel comfortable with. I would like to just thank the voices for responding, however. I really appreciate their opinion and it means a lot to me to know if there is something that is not acceptable to them. I try to do my best, but I may not always succeed. I appreciate the fact that the voices are listening to this conversation nonetheless and agree to share their opinion. Do you have any idea what I am doing wrong here, X?

Getting to know the voices as direct interaction.

At some point, after having acknowledged the presence of the voices and having invited them to be your guests and introducing yourself, you might want to engage directly with the voices. It is a good idea to not do this immediately, but only after having given the voices some opportunity to get an impression of you and experience your acknowledgement and good intentions. It is also a good idea to first have a conversation in some detail with the person hearing the voices about those voices. To develop an initial characterization of them from the knowledge that the hearer has so far:

- How many are there?
- Who are they?
- How do they behave?
- What do they say?
- What do they seem to want?
- What is their history?

During the course of characterizing the voices together with the person who is able to hear them, it would be polite to ask every now and then if the voices are responding to this exploration. Are they anxious about it? Angry? Or just silent? Remember to make this characterization with attention to the fact that the voices are present. Be respectful in how you talk about them. Even if they do very horrible things or terrorize the person who hears them, make an effort to act like a diplomat rather than contributing to a potential ongoing war. We are looking for peace. Don't badmouth the voices, even if they do horrible things. Not because you should accept such behavior, but because you are exploring the possibility of establishing peace. Dignity must be preserved for both parties to stop a war. Do express compassion for the person who may be subject to violence from voices,

and do express your moral position of being against such mistreatment and violence. But to establish respectful relations, you have to practice respect.

After having a certain sense of what kind of beings the voices are, you may attempt to invite them to interact with you directly—or as directly as possible. I make no secret of the fact that I cannot perceive the voices and that I depend on the person who hears them to pass their responses on to me. Ask permission to talk to the voices. Both from the person who can hear them and from the voices:

> *I would like to ask a few questions about all this to the voices themselves. I wonder what they think about this and what they might know that we do not. Would that be alright with you, X? And would it be alright with the voices? Are they saying it is okay?*

Questions to the voices may concern elements of our initial characterization of them, like asking if they might confirm our impressions of them and their intentions. And I might ask them for information about things we don't know about them or find ourselves unable to make a qualified guess about. In the case of Rose, she had the impression that there were several groups of voices, but not how many they were or how they related to each other. I then asked the voices themselves to shed some light on this. After beginning to have conversations with her Others, Alice asked them directly about something we were wondering about. We found it hard to comprehend why they seemed to want Alice to die, and they then told her that they weren't feeling well and hoped to be relieved of their suffering by her death. Be sure to thank the voices very explicitly for any responses and information that they give you. Bear in mind that it is very likely to be highly unusual (even unique) for the voices to have a conversation with someone other than the person who hears them. The voices may be quite nervous or confused about the whole situation and may lash out for that simple reason. So, do be very considerate of them and step back if they express any frustration with this communication. Try again some other time. No rush. No pressure. Maybe they need more time to figure you out. Maybe they prefer to just listen.

With regards to the practicalities, I always look away from the person who is able to hear the voices when I speak directly to the voices. I just look into the air in front of me. If I am aware that the voices occupy a particular location, I look

towards that location. I ask the person who can hear them to pass on any replies, and then respond to that by addressing the voices. Remember to ask the person who hears them how the voices seem to be feeling about it, so that you can get a sense of whether they are calm, agitated, annoyed or appreciative of the interaction. And say thank you a lot. The paper "Rose and the Whispering Voices" (Haugaard, Rose & Epston, 2021) contains an example of such getting-to-know the voices through the impressions and observations of the person who hears them, as well as by means of direct questions to the voices.

Matters to explore both with the person who can hear voices and the voices themselves may be concerned with developing an idea of who the voices are, what kind of entity or species they are, how to tell them apart if there are many, what agendas or interests they have, what their perspective on the person they have as well as their perspective on life in general, what intentions they have in relation to what they do and say, why they are there and why they have the intentions they have. The details of this will always emerge within these explorations, and these conversations will always be much more specific than the general categories of exploration that I am suggesting here. This is what you will have to discover together. Despite my suggestions here being abstract, you'll need to be specific. You are probably more likely to engage the voices in dialogue with quite specific questions that grow out of the conversation, rather than ask why they are there out of the blue.

Translating their language.

The things that the voices say or do may have a meaning that is not obvious. Sometimes you might need to think about the things they say in a non-literal way, or in light of a wider context. For example, Max's voices would sometimes overwhelm him with very negative, devastating messages and verbal abuse. It is easy to get the impression that this is just pure malice on the part of the voices. However, Max was able to make the observation that in those situations where the voices behaved this way and caused him to be hospitalized, this actually saved him. It seemed clear to him that had he not been 'shut down' by the voices like this, he would almost certainly have hurt himself or even other people. As harsh as it seemed, it was consistent with the impression of the voices having acted as protectors. Similarly, Trish discovered that her voice was trying to get her to make room for her feelings, but this was not immediately obvious. The voice was very

harsh and demeaning in these situations, but this changed when Trish discovered the true meaning of this behavior from the voice. In Rose's case, the voices also required some 'translation' at times, because they did not only communicate through actual words, but also images and sensations. What this may amount to is that the meaning of the things voices say or do may not be obvious and may mean something other than the literal meaning of what they are saying.

A very important area to consider non-literal or non-obvious meanings of what voices say may be regarding self-harm and suicide. Some voices advocate self-harm and suicide. They may mean exactly what they say, but it should not be assumed to be the case at face value. It may be important to inquire about what reasons the voices have for wanting these things. Have the voices lost hope that life can improve for the person they are attached to, and try to enforce suicide because they hope it will stop the suffering? In that case, the demand for suicide may be concern in disguise. They may also recommend suicide out of sheer frustration and anger about something. Some voices may have very harsh and crude ways of expressing themselves that should not be taken too literally. In some cases, I have gotten the very clear impression that certain voices wanted to have the person they were attached to kill me simply as an expression of being angry with me. When they made such statements, we could simply translate it into "we are angry with you". It may also be worth it to consider if some things that voices say are metaphorical, symbolic, or poetic. Death may be metaphorical or symbolical, and in that case a message such as "you must kill yourself" could have the meaning of the voices having a desire for the person to undergo personal or spiritual transformation, or to leave behind old patterns or attachments. I have encountered an example of voices requiring a person to burn himself, which initially seemed to be literal. It turned out to be symbolic, however, and what the voices wanted was for the person to 'burn' with the fire of his anger to energize him and give him direction in order to transform himself and his situation. I really wonder if some voices might speak in the language of dreams? This may be worth considering in the case of unacceptable requirements like death and killing. At times, voices may tell us quite literally and plainly what they desire, but they just might speak in metaphor or a kind of symbolism at times, and I think that is worth keeping in mind (Romme, 2009).

When a person other than the hearer is conversing with voices, it requires the hearer to function as a sort of intermediary or translator. This may involve some effort and strain. The person hearing the voices must then attend to both the therapist and the voices. Some co-researchers have made me aware that this may require some effort and be rather tiring. Perhaps especially at initial contact. This is worth bearing in mind. The therapist should take care not to be too eager to speak too much with the voices all at once. Stick to a few questions. Otherwise it may wear out the translator. In these explorations, we have not spent the whole meetings conversing with the voices, nor have we had direct interactions with the voices at every meeting. At this point, I would imagine that focusing too much on direct interaction and striving to speak with the voices at every meeting would be excessive and might cause a strain for the hearer. I encourage paying close attention to the demands this may put on the voices as well as the hearer, and to give the voices the opportunity to just listen and witness interaction between the hearer and the therapist.

Voices learning through observation and interaction.

Voices seem to have the capacity to change their behavior. They just might be able to learn, and it may be connected to how we interact with them. Alice's Others used to fill her head with images and orders to do dangerous things, harm herself, harm other people, or even kill herself. They would regularly interfere with our conversations in my office. During all our efforts to resist this prior to our discovery of hospitality towards them, our efforts were futile. Change seemed to begin when Alice and I began to engage with The Others in a kind and understanding way, without rejection, and they consistently had a positive response to my gestures of hospitality. Over time, as we consistently practiced these elements, The Others became calm, ceased to interfere, expressed contentment, and Alice ceased to be afraid of them. I wonder if the fact that The Others came to be in a position as receivers of kindness, respect, and certain privileges in my office allowed them to have a new relational experience that they were actually able to learn from over time. Apparently, by means of our direct interactions with them, and perhaps also by observing Alice and me. Max's and Trish's voices also seem to have been receptive to an appreciation of their intentions and perspective, and to have changed their behavior as a consequence. Rose also considered that, as a consequence of her respect for them, most of her

voices had grown to respect her more. Might an important element of interacting with voices in healing ways be establishing a situation where the voices A) get to observe respectful and kind interaction and B) come to experience being receivers of respect and kindness themselves?

The significance of relating to voices as 'persons' – speaking directly to them and with them.

What do the voices make of all this? What does it mean for them to be engaged like that, being acknowledged as persons with knowledge and a perspective of their own, being receivers of respect and hospitality?

Victoria stated that having daily conversations with her voices had a calming effect on them. She asked them questions about their motives, stated her own position and desires to them, and informed them about her plans and reasons for her decisions and activities. According to Victoria, this made them calmer during the course of the day. Eventually, they left her.

Max's voices listened to my appeal for their help with Max, as I spoke to them as beings with their own perspectives and reasons for their actions. Max reported that they listened and responded to this, and they felt recognized, respected, and held accountable. It made them reconsider their activities and intentions. They would tend to remain grumpy, but consistently accepted our appeal to them.

Alice's magical beings, called The Others, consistently appreciated receiving my hospitality and getting smoking breaks, despite all the aggressive energy they had and their prolonged distrust of me. They also appreciated being compared to Mr. No-Face from the Ghibli movie "Spirited Away". Over time, consistent hospitality and their observations of our enactment of kindness seemed to calm them down to the point of ceasing to be aggressive towards Alice. Offering them hospitality consistently calmed them down when they were agitated, and Alice informed me on many occasions that they really appreciated that I was kind to them.

Rose's voices had great appreciation for the diplomatic process that she initiated with them and ceased to act aggressively towards her after being recognized and known for who they are, and Rose appreciating their knowledge and input. They were initially skeptical when I addressed them, and somewhat confused by the

situation. However, this respectful engagement led them to no longer suffer like they did before, and according to the voices themselves, they are now feeling good, except for one group of voices that have not been responsive to this approach. The three other groups that Rose identified all appreciated Rose's efforts and became peaceful.

Trish's voice immediately responded with a change from agitation and attack to being calm and supportive when we tried to see and acknowledge her perspective and intentions. The voice told Trish that she appreciated the respectful words and that she was only trying to help. Trish stated that:

> This collaboration has also helped the voice to be at peace. She's not even present anymore! She only shows up when I fail to notice the need to relax or the need for love. Then she shows up, but in a much calmer way that I can deal with. Our present relationship has given her an extreme amount of peace and calm and the ability to say things in a different way. I am incredibly happy to have learned to use the voice in a positive way. (Haugaard & Trish, 2021)

These voices cannot speak for all voices, of course. Nor can I or Victoria, Max, Alice, Rose, Trish, or Laura speak for everyone who is able to hear voices. Nonetheless, these explorations make me wonder how many voices might appreciate being respectfully engaged as persons. It seems we have encountered more than one species of voices, and there may be more kinds out there than the ones we have engaged with here. Some may be more receptive to an approach like this than others, and for all I know, some voices may be unable to interact like this. It may be worth it to try, though. Especially in light of the fact that not all people experiencing phenomena like this find conventional medical and therapeutic practices to be sufficient or helpful. Similar practices have been advocated by researchers associated with the Hearing Voices Network (see Corstens, Longden & May, 2012; Corstens, May & Longden, 2012; Deamer & Hayward, 2018; Dellazizzo et al, 2022; Longden et al, 2021; Middleton, Cooke & May, 2022).

Part three: Engaging science.

In Part One of this paper, I made an attempt to bring together some observations concerning voices, based on direct interactions with them by a number of people who live with voices, as well as my interactions with them through these people. This brought me to consider whether voices could meaningfully be understood as persons of some sort. At least, voices would seem to appear to people as persons, and in interactions with them, they seem to display characteristics of personhood. In Part Two, I attempted to bring together knowledges of a practical kind regarding ways of interacting with voices that seem to contribute to developing a more tolerable, acceptable and even positive state of co-existence with them. Here too, a theme of personhood seems to emerge. Voices seem to respond favorably to being treated as if they are persons. How are we to make sense of this as scientific and clinical professionals? Would not psychology tell us that regarding voices as persons is a mistake, a dissociation, or misattribution on the part of the people who hear them? At this point I remind myself of some initial observations that I mentioned in the beginning of this paper: Voices seem to respond to being treated like persons, and this has been helpful to people for whom conventional treatment approaches have not been effective. Furthermore, person-likeness does seem to be their phenomenology, regardless of how we prefer to explain the phenomenon. In addition to this phenomenology, it seems to be the case, with at least some people, that voices also display a range of person-like qualities and capacities in actual interaction with them, such as having a perspective and being responsive. In light of this, I will attempt to persist in tolerating the potential strangeness of this idea and persist in striving to honor the experiences of my co-researchers. What understandings of subjectivity and personhood might allow us to accept personhood for voices?

Rose has proposed that voices should perhaps be understood to be consciousnesses. A consciousness in a sense that entails a perspective, agency, and a capacity to feel and respond to the world. She has shared with me her considerations as to the nature of consciousness, proposing that consciousness may not be as fixed, interior to ourselves, and as unitary as we may be inclined to believe. Can we not conceive of consciousness as perhaps something elastic and multiple? Could one body not be inhabited by several consciousnesses, each being in the possession of a perspective and an agency of their own? Having kept

these ideas that Rose has proposed in mind, I was quite intrigued when Laura proposed a theory of voices and consciousness: What if we think of consciousness as something that is contained by a border or a fence. Like a square. The square contains consciousness and gives it a certain shape. Maybe this containment is what gives us the feeling of interiority? But maybe this container can break open or have a sort of leak that allows consciousness to move out of the container through a hole, and then it may wrap itself around the container and take on a life outside it, although still elastically connected to the remaining consciousness still inside the container. I was immediately struck by this image that she developed and how it seemed similar to Rose's observations and considerations. Could consciousness perhaps be a rather elastic, non-unitary phenomenon that may be contained, but also capable of moving out of containment, displaying a multiplicity of perspectives and agentic powers outside the interior (contained) perspective? This leads me to consider if such 'tentacles of consciousness,' or perhaps rhizomes of awareness, might associate with various aspects of the world – socialize with the world we live in, so to speak, to form complexes of exterior, relational perspectives, and agencies?

Can we imagine a psychology in which it is possible and meaningful to appreciate voices as persons that exercise agency and are in possession of perspective? Perhaps the Cartesian commitments of psychology and psychiatry are a bit of an obstacle to that, allowing us for little more than entertaining ideas about the realness of voices as a matter of 'as if'. But what if there were alternatives to Cartesian psychology? The so-called new animism in anthropology just might provide us with some ideas to help us consider possibilities for taking voices as persons seriously.

A relational mind.

Anthropology and cultural psychology have been aware for some time that modern culture has a very particular understanding of subjectivity. This is sometimes referred to as self-contained subjectivity or a bounded self. It is the idea that our minds exist inside our heads and are fundamentally distinct from the world. It posits humans as an individual gazer upon an outside world on which to reflect or to come to terms with, and onto which to project our minds. Many rivers run into this concept of subjectivity, but an early explicit statement of it in a Western philosophical context was Descartes' distinction between mind and

matter, the well-known subject-object distinctions of Western philosophy and science, and the derivative distinction between culture and nature. In psychology, failure to make a strong distinction between self and non-self, inner subjective reality and outer material reality, quickly became a sign of psychological immaturity or mental disturbance. Classical developmental psychology regards tendencies in children to relate to things as having feelings and intentions as being an immature stage in individual cognitive evolution, while psychoanalysis understood transgressions of the distinction between mind and world to be projections of various kinds. But this line of reasoning just might be a historically and culturally unusual way of understanding the mind. Such differences have given anthropology cause to seek to explain in terms of Western psychology how people in other cultures could possibly hold what would be regarded as erroneous and irrational beliefs. The ontological turn in anthropology seems to have been initiated at the point when some anthropologists stepped away from this line of reasoning and began to consider if the natives might be right. What if they are just as philosophically sophisticated as Western thinkers, but Western researchers have so far been unable to comprehend their ontology and epistemology? (Harvey, 2005; 2017)

Nurit Bird-David (1999) has tried to reconsider an old concept in anthropology in relation to new attempts to understand non-Western ways of knowing the world. That concept is animism. Quite similar to developmental psychology's view of the immature mind, animism was originally a concept to denote a category of primitive forms of religion, which is just another way of saying that it is immature or lacking in proper development (Harvey, 2017). However, Bird-David suggested that we look again at this category of cultural phenomena and see animism in a different light. Rather than seeing animism as the erroneous attribution of minds to non-humans or the irrational belief in non-empirical causal agents (i.e. spirits), she proposed understanding animism in terms of a relational epistemology and a relational understanding of personhood. These ideas, also developed by Viveiros de Castro (2004; 2015), Graham Harvey (2005; 2017) and others (see for example Abram, 2017; Hornborg, 2006; Ingold, 2006; Kimmerer, 2017; Morrison, 2013; Pickering, 2017; Rasmussen, 2019), see 'person' as something like an agentic perspective inhabiting a relation. It is connected to how subjectivity, the relations of 'I' and 'you', seem to be inherent to our perception of the world (Abram, 2017; Bird-David, 1999). As if personification is built into perception. But this may not

simply be an error of human cognition. Not simply an evolutionary hangover, but a quality of our perception that many non-modern societies not only accept, but explicitly cultivate and develop. Graham Harvey (2005) makes the point that animism in Western psychology is often viewed as something immature, something children do until they know better, but this contradicts what seems to be the case in animistic societies. In those societies where animistic relating to the world is prominent and valued, it is the elders who are the most animistic, not the children. Animistic perception and relating is not only a natural trait that is left undisturbed, but something that is picked up and developed into rich practices and philosophies, expressed in complex ritual and narrative. Bird-David wonders how Western societies have come to hold animistic forms of relating and knowing in such low regard:

> The most intriguing question is why and how the modernist project estranged itself from the tendency to animate things, if it is indeed universal. How and why did it stigmatize "animistic language" as a child's practice, against massive evidence […] to the contrary? (Bird-David, 1999, p. S79)

Might such ontologies and epistemologies provide a different receiving context for voice hearing? Might we take voices seriously as persons in a sense inspired by the new animism?

Subjectification as epistemology.

In much of Western science, the world is taken to be independent of human consciousness. In fact, human consciousness is almost like a form of contamination and a distortion of the world. Hence, it must be removed. Science must be objective, which means removing as much of the subjectivity of our minds from our understanding of the object of interest. We must separate ourselves as much as possible from the object in order to know the object. In medical and psychological research, this is expressed in the practices of control groups, blinding, and placebos. Amazonian shamans would seem to take something like the opposite approach: To know a thing is to invest in it as much subjectivity, as much perspective, and intentionality, as possible. It is when the thing becomes a who, that it is really known:

> To know is to personify, to take on the point of view of that which must be known. […] it is necessary to personify them in order to know. […] Personification or subjectification implies that the "intentional stance" adopted with respect to the world has been in some way universalized. (Viveiros de Castro, 2004, pp. 468-9)

To know the forest is to see the perspectives of the beings of the forest and to understand their intentions, their agency, and the myriad relations among them and with humans. This also seems to involve differences in ontology. It is hard to spot a distinction between human and non-human here. Hard to see who is subject and what is object; what is culture and what is nature. Indeed, Viveiros de Castro (2004) suggests that in Amazonian understandings of reality, culture is universal, and all relations are social.

Andrew Pickering (2017) has suggested that science engage with animistic understandings. Based on his studies of the practicalities of scientific discovery and development, he points out the agency of the objects of scientific study. Despite Western commitments to human subjects that are separate from exterior, inanimate objects, he demonstrates how scientific research may meaningfully be read as a dance of agency between the scientist and some part of the world. The image of the scientist unilaterally manipulating his object to extract knowledge is perhaps a particular narrative that is mostly constructed after the fact. A convention of scientific storytelling. If things like bubble chambers and rivers (Pickering, 2013; 2017) might act as agents to scientists, then surely voices may be viewed similarly. After all, they very explicitly display characteristics of agency.

Would it be reasonable to suggest that psychiatric and psychological approaches to voices attempt to relate to the voice as a thing, like what Viveiros de Castro describes as the default epistemology of Western science? And might the discovery that voices respond to being treated as respected persons be meaningful as a form of enactment of an alternative epistemology? Are we investing as much agency and subjectivity in the voice as possible, thereby coming to know the voices, not as objects, but as subjects? In Max's case, I think it is fair to say that we did exactly what Viveiros de Castro calls 'taking on the point of view of that which must be known'. Might we characterize the practices developed by Victoria, Max, Alice, Rose, Trish, and Laura as being enactments of a

particular epistemology? One that may depart from a Cartesian understanding of subjectivity and objectivity, but that none the less has an implicit logic of its own? One that might fit very well with Viveiros de Castro's Amazonian epistemology. From a purely pragmatic perspective, this leads me to wonder if we might assess the effects of different epistemologies in relation to voices? Might one epistemology be preferable to another on pragmatic grounds related to how the voices respond to it? Might voices respond more favorably to animistic epistemology? It seems to me that, at least in some cases, seeking to detach from voices and rejecting them may cause conflict, whereas engaging with the perspective of the voice and acknowledging its agency – investing subjectivity in the voice – may change the behavior of the voice in positive ways. It seems to establish a different kind of relationship. Perhaps such an epistemology of subjectification might provide us with a rationale for engaging with voices in a way that embraces those characteristics of personhood that are part of their phenomenology?

Voices as personified, objectified relations?

Recall how scientific practice, in accordance with Cartesian distinctions, requires a disconnect between subject and object, where perspective, relationships, and engagement should be contained inside the human? A subject contained within herself, separate from a world of objects. Bird-David (1999) associates this way of dealing with the world with the term 'individual'. The animistic people that Bird-David studied built strong relationships with certain landscape formations and animals, and performed these relationships in rituals. Their sense of self is not separate from the world around them, but very mixed up with the world. Landscapes and animals would be enacted by humans as being human-like. To contrast this with Western individuals, she suggested the term 'dividual'. That is a divided subjectivity, shared between humans and particular aspects of the world, experienced and performed ritually as a person of its own. A subject inhabiting a relation, or to state in another way, an objectification and personification of a relation (Rasmussen, 2019). This means that rather than the psychology of human beings being contained within themselves, separate from others and the world, the mind is shared and invested in the world. A relational or distributed subjectivity, as opposed to a self-contained subjectivity. Personification is then something like a technology for handling this distribution of relational

subjectivity. This building of such relations and personifying the perspective and agency that comes to reside in this relation, may be called 'dividuation' (Bird-David, 1999). That is the work of building and handling a distributed mind through personification.

What might happen if a new animist conception of personhood and relational subjectivity is connected to the phenomenon of the voices that some psychiatric patients are able to hear? What kind of receiving context would this provide us with, and what possibilities for engaging with any suffering related to voices might this open up for us? Could this give us access to some 'islands of stability' (Pickering, 2017) other than those provided by psychiatry so far? Perhaps Luhrmann's work, which suggests that a non-self-contained understanding of the mind may be an advantage in living with voice-hearing, and that traditional training in becoming a spiritual healer seems beneficial to voice-hearing, lends some additional credibility to just that (Luhrmann et al, 2015; Luhrmann, Dulin & Dzokoto, 2023)[3].

If personhood can be understood as subjectivity or agentic perspective inhabiting a relation, might we be able to accept voices as persons and not feel too weird relating to them as such? Could we view voices as personified relations? If we take the perspective that subjectivity is something rather fluid and elastic, that attaches to the world around us, and that our minds really exist in such a distributed form, and not simply in our heads, then maybe the idea of more than one subject (more than one agentic perspective) connected to one human specimen is not so strange? This does not explain why some people hear voices and others do not, of course. But perhaps it makes it significantly less strange that it may be the case. Maybe we are not as naturally unified and self-contained as we like to assume? Perhaps any experience of being self-contained that we have is significantly a product of Cartesian socialization[4]? Maybe the phenomenon of voice hearing is inherent to our wiring, but we now live in a society that struggles

[3] For descriptions of traditional healing practices that Rasmussen (2019) argues operate within a relational subjectivity see for example Seligman (2010) or Wedel (2009). For considerations of how this may relate to concepts of mental health and dominant Western cultural norms, see Scrutton (2016). NiaNia, Busch & Epston (2017) describe a number of examples of direct collaborations between Western psychiatric practices and traditional spiritual healing practices in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

[4] For a comprehensive account of the perception and understanding of reality in an animistic society, I recommend The Falling Sky by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert.

to deal with such a transgression of our cultural norms? This reminds me of Graham Harvey (2005) wondering how to understand modernity in light of the apparent naturalness of animistic relating. He suggests that maybe modernity is not so much a fact of human functioning at this time in history, but more like a separatist movement, constantly at work to maintain a sense of self-containment that is not really natural to us at all. If voices are dividuals, then maybe the thing to do is to apply a new animist epistemology of personifying and developing the relation through respectful engagement. Maybe that is what my co-researchers somehow discovered? Maybe the favorable response of the voices to such respectful engagement with them as real persons is an expression of a deep human resonance with a non-self-contained way of being?

Closing remarks.

This paper is my attempt to summarize some preliminary discoveries and considerations about voices and to point in a possible direction for further exploration. In doing so, I hope to honor what my co-researchers have shared with me so far. I have only referred to or mentioned these discoveries along the way here, and I encourage readers to consult their individual papers for a fuller account and demonstration of these explorations and practices. Hopefully this knowledge and tentative ideas may be of use to others.

Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to Victoria, Max, Alice, Rose, Trish, Ava, Laura, and people who must remain unnamed. The knowledge I have attempted to summarize here comes from our collaborations and from their own discoveries. Thank you for your generosity in sharing your knowledge.

Thank you, David Epston, for persistently supporting, mentoring, and accompanying me in this work.

Thank you also to the voices who have listened to me and engaged in new ways with their hearers. I also hope this work honors you. Rose's voices have reviewed part of an early draft of this paper. I am proud that they liked it and appreciated what I wrote about their kind. Some of them kindly corrected me regarding some details, and I sincerely hope they are satisfied with the outcome.

Thank you, Rune Hjarnø Rasmussen, for introducing me to the ontological turn and the new animism, and for sharing examples of his research with me.

I would also like to acknowledge the great significance of learning about voice-hearing from 'the girl who found a dragon egg' – a person who shall remain anonymous here.

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Haugaard & Trish (2021). Trish and a frustrated voice. *Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy, Release 3*, 69-85

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