



ALTERING THE BALANCE OF POWER: WORKING WITH VOICES

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Through sharing stories of therapeutic work, this paper describes how issues of abuse and power are vital considerations when working with voice hearers. Not only is voice hearing often the result of abuse, but voice hearing itself can be an experience of abuse.

Peter Bullimore describes how he is interested in ensuring that abusive voices are challenged and their influence reduced, and how positive voices can be acknowledged and cherished. The paper also tells stories of how a recently established group for people experiencing paranoia that is having surprising success, and identifies significant factors that influence the process of recovery. The author also shares some of his own experiences of psychosis and how these influence his work in this area.

Those who are referred to me are often those who no-one else will see, who have fallen through cracks and who don't have access to conversations anymore. People stopped listening to them long ago, or alternatively, they stopped talking. Sometimes not talking makes sense, especially if everything you're likely to say is going to be pathologised and taken as another reason to increase your medication. These are the people with whom I most wish to work, because I know what life is like when hostile voices are raging.

For me, the first step in therapy is to befriend the person I am talking to. I don't mean patronizing them, I think there is a big difference. Often, especially when meeting with people who are not talking themselves, I share stories from my own experience. I speak about how I went through a period of abuse and that I heard voices and that I spent the best part of ten years in the psychiatric system. I try to highlight the theme that the person I am seeing is not the only one. I think it often makes a real difference that they know I have stood in the place they are now.

In meeting with someone who is hearing voices I am really interested in asking the question, 'What do you want with your life?' We explore what the person has done in their life, what they haven't done and what they want to do. We also create a profile of the voices.

Case study: Andy

I worked with a lad, **Andy**, in a drugs rehabilitation centre who was only 21 and affected by drug induced psychosis. Andy was into anything and everything that he could get his hands on. When I went to see him, I asked him some questions so that he could tell me about his life. I wanted to know about him and what he'd been through. Andy told me that he had begun to smoke cannabis and drink beer when he was ten years old. This seemed pretty young to me, so I was keen to hear what was happening for him at that time. Andy told me that he'd been significantly bullied at school until one day he hit one of these bullies over the head with a rounders bat and put him in intensive care. This had terrified Andy. He had thought this other young man would kill him when he got out of hospital, and this was when his smoking and drinking began. When I asked Andy what had happened when the other young man had recovered, he told me that nothing had happened. The other young man had not retaliated.

I was at a bit of a loss to see how this had then led to heroin and crack use, until Andy said that while this other young man didn't do anything to him, from that moment on it was like he was always around. Initially I thought that Andy meant that he stalked and watched him, but then he said, 'no I don't mean that, he was always in my head. I could hear him all the time saying what he was going to do to me.' Andy had started hearing this voice at age ten and because of it he began to take drugs to cope. Whenever Andy was clean the voice came back, and when I first saw him, he was hearing many different voices.

In my experience, whenever someone is hearing a lot of voices, maybe even up to thirty or forty, the best thing to do is identify the most dominant voice and work with this to begin with. Andy's dominant voice was the voice of an older man who would scream at him throughout the night, keeping him awake. So, we began to work with this dominant voice. I asked Andy if he would be interested in looking at the content of what this voice was saying. Apparently, this voice was screaming, 'Stay sat on your arse where you are and die, or go out into the world and take a shot and die'. This voice had convinced Andy that he was going to die, that there was no point in going on.

There are two ways in which I work with voices. Either a voice can become a friend, someone to work with in reclaiming a life; or a voice maybe a foe, an opponent whose influence needs to be reduced. Because I have my own experiences of voices, I try to work out what may be possible with a particular person's relationship with their voices. And, of course, we talk about this together. In this instance, I thought a lot about the voice that Andy was hearing. In considering its content, I believed that, with some work, this could become a positive voice.

I asked Andy about the age of the voice, and he said, 'I think it's about sixty, it sounds like an old man.' So, I said, 'Right, who is an old man you trust and you like?' Andy thought about this for a while and said, 'Well perhaps my next door neighbour, my pal's granddad. He used to roll us cigarettes and offer us cans of beer. He was a nice bloke.' So I said, 'Could the voice be his?' And Andy said, 'No, I couldn't make the voice his, because he wouldn't say these things to me. I like him and trust him.' And I said, 'But the things he is saying, do you think they could be warnings? Do you think they could be well intentioned?' We tried to look and analyse the content. 'Right, stay sat on your arse where you are and die'- what could this mean? What's the eventuality if you keep doing what you have been doing? If you stick with the drugs you're going to die, you're going to be a junkie. That sounds like a warning to me. He's telling you to get your shit together and get out of here. Finish the rehab and get on with your life. What do you think? Could that be true? Could that be a positive? And Andy thought about this and agreed. Then we spoke about the second phrase: 'Or go out into the world and take a shot and die'. When we talked about this, we realized that 'take a shot' could refer to taking a shot of heroin, or getting a shot in relation to a drugs deal gone wrong. We agreed that there wasn't much hope in either of these paths and that again the voice could be a well-intentioned voice of warning. What then, were other options for action? When I asked Andy what he wanted to do with his life, he said, 'I wanted to

be a carpenter, I loved it, I'm fantastic at woodwork.' So, I went to the local College and explained the situation and they said I could enroll him in a carpentry course as long as he was clean of drugs.

Andy and I kept working together and writing out our discoveries. We established that this voice was a warning: that he needed to get his act together and get out into the world. When I told him about the carpentry course, Andy realized there was another possible meaning to the phrase 'take a shot and die'. Perhaps it meant that Andy was going to go out into the world and give it his best shot even if it kills him the word die was a metaphor. He enrolled at the College and became a qualified carpenter. I still have contact with his mother and she tells me that he now has a job. Andy still hears voices but sometimes he now hears a woman's voice that he can trust. He works hard at figuring out and changing the meanings of the content of the other voices. It may take him hours but he says it's worth it because he no longer fears them.

Reclaiming control

The experience of hearing voices is all about power, but I never tell people to try to get rid of the voices. If someone is being tyrannised by a particular voice then it is the experience of tyranny that needs addressing. Over the last fifteen years, it has been recognized that sexual abuse and physical abuse are all about power. If you're sexually abused, you're offered counseling. If you're physically abused, you're offered counseling. But if you're verbally abused by voices you are given medication and there is rarely any consideration given to relations of power. So often, the voices that people hear are the voices of those who have physically or sexually abused them. These matters need addressing. Ways must be found for people to reclaim control over their own lives.

Case study: Francine

Let me offer another example. **Francine** is a young woman who was severely physically abused by her father. He broke her arm, her leg and her ribs. At fourteen, her father left and her mother would then ring him up and get Francine to pass messages to him - they insulted each other with Francine in the middle. Francine overdosed at fourteen and stayed in an adolescent unit for two years before being moved into an adult unit. The drugs weren't working and she wasn't complying so she was labeled as having a personality disorder. Her mother asked me to go and see her, so I did.

Again, to begin with, I simply asked Francine some questions so that I could get to know about her life, and she told me the history of what had happened to her. At that time, Francine was hearing two voices. One was what she believed to be the voice of God and the other she believed was the voice of the devil saying, 'God's only keeping you alive to be tormented.' She was hearing this statement over and over again and had got to a point where she believed there was no point in living.

As Francine told me the story of her life, it seemed to me there were a few key themes. Firstly, she was involved in a cult that told her she was possessed and in which she would talk in tongues. And secondly, she visited her dad every Friday night through loyalty, but he was always drunk on that particular night of the week and he frightened her. First of all, we looked at the cult. Francine said she went to their meetings on Sunday nights because she was bored and had nothing else to do. So, I asked her if she liked to drink and she said 'yes', so I suggested that we went for a drink on Sunday nights instead. We started having a drink socially on Sunday nights and I'd invite other group members along so if I wasn't there, she'd still be able to go out. After some time, when I'd gained her trust, I asked Francine, 'why don't you go visit your dad on another night?' and she decided to go on a Tuesday when he'd be sober and more receptive. This took away two major stressors from Francine's life.

We also needed to look at the issue of self-harm. Francine, like many other people who hear negative voices, was harming herself when the voices were ordering her to do so. Francine is very attractive, and had never cut her face. I was interested in this, particularly as I have a scar on my face, so I asked her about this. I asked her if the voices ever told her to cut her face and she said 'Yes, quite regularly.' When I asked her why she never obeyed them, Francine replied 'Well, I like my looks.' We discovered that whenever the voices told her to cut her face, she would cut her arms instead. In talking together, we realized that the particular type of cutting she was doing was actually making a stand against the voices. They were not being able to dictate her life to the same extent that she had thought. These are important distinctions - particularly for people who are hearing voices that overwhelm them. If we can find the examples of the ways in which they are able to make their own choices, no matter how small, then these can be openings for new sorts of lives.

It was not simple though, because people whose trust has been regularly betrayed often need to know that you are going to hang around. Francine rang me at 3 o'clock one Sunday morning and said she was going to kill herself. I had to get to the other side of Sheffield to see her. But I made it there and I sat on the settee with her until half past five. But she never spoke, but at half past five she said, 'You can go now, I feel better.' This was a turning point between us. She realized I wasn't just a worker who would be there from nine to five.

Up until this time we had not talked in detail about Francine's voices, but now we did. At first, I didn't really know what to do with the God/Devil thing. I started by asking Francine about her religious beliefs and she said she didn't really know what she believed. So I said, 'Well, bearing in mind you've been involved in a cult, would it be okay if we just took God out of the equation? Or are you a true Christian who says God rules?' And Francine said, 'Well I'm not bothered, we can take God out of the equation.' And so we scribbled God off the sheet of paper we were working with. Then I said, 'Well if you're happy to take God out of the picture, the Devil's supposedly a fallen angel, so how about we remove the Devil too?' Francine said she was happy to look beyond the religious aspects, but the statement itself really mattered to her – was she only being kept alive to be tormented?

In my experience, it's really vitally important for people to be able to give their voice an identity. So I asked Francine, 'This voice that says these things, it needs a name. Give me a man's name.' And like lightning, before I even finished the sentence, she said 'David'. When I asked her who David was, she said 'I don't know.' And that's what everyone says when you first ask them that question. So I asked again, 'Come on, who's David?' This then went on for a while because I was determined to find the story that related to the name David. Who was this David that meant she would give the voice his name? Eventually, I learned that David was a lad at school who Francine had known when she was fourteen. David had wanted to have sex with her, and when she wouldn't he would beat her. I heard that Francine was beaten by her dad and beaten by David. Eventually David tried to rape her, but didn't succeed.

So I said, 'Okay, what we're going to do is make the voice David's.' And she said, 'No, no I'm too scared of David.' She'd made peace with her dad over the years but she was still frightened of David. So I said, 'I'll tell you what we'll do. We're going to challenge David. We're going to challenge the content of everything he says. I'll tell you what to say to David and we'll see what he says.' But she wasn't happy about this either. She said she simply couldn't speak to him. So, we took a different tack. I said, 'I've got another idea. I'll give you the things to say to David, but you tell him I've said these things. You tell him, "Pete's told me to say this".'

So, we started having a conversation in which Francine would tell me the things David was saying, and I would give her the responses to relay to him. Gradually in this conversation I would give her the answers a bit quicker until eventually she got to the point where she just gave the answers to David herself, without mentioning they were coming from me. When this has happened a few times, we stopped and I pointed out what had happened. I asked Francine, 'Just a minute ago, what happened when you gave that other answer?' She said 'Nothing.' So I said, 'How did you feel?' She said, 'I felt alright.' I said, 'Do you realize what this means? You've now challenged David and nothing terrible had happened. We can do more of this.' This was the beginning of

Francine developing a different sort of relationship with her voices. One in which she could speak back to them, one in which the balance of power was changing.

Once this had occurred, we could then take steps in life-building. Francine wanted to do a humanities course in English, Law and History. So, I travelled to the local College again and enrolled her. As she took up this new life, her self-harming became much less frequent. Some time down the track I asked her about this and she told me that the only day which she was self-harming was on Tuesdays. I had never heard of such scheduled self-harming so I asked her more about this, and she said, 'Well, every other day of my week is now busy. But on Tuesdays I've got all day to myself and I just listen to David and just do what he says.' Her cutting was quite serious on her arms and her legs, so what I suggested to her was that I could set her homework to do on Tuesdays. I was quite strict about this and I set it up so that she would bring me each week the homework that she had completed on Tuesday. This hasn't completely stopped the self-harming but it's now only happening about 30% of the time. Like Alan, Francine hasn't got rid of the voices, but her relationship with them has changed. The balance of power has been altered and she is living a completely different life.

Case Study: Gavin

Gavin was a 30 year old white male, who lived in the Pitsmoor area of Sheffield which is a predominantly black area. He wants to move home to an area which he describes as safer.

He has been told by the local authority that he will have to wait six to twelve months for a move. Gavin's behaviour has become quite bizarre. He believes that he will be killed by a gang of Rastafarians. He also says he can hear four voices, one dominant, a black male age forty to fifty years old. He believes this to be the head of the gang of Rastafarians who are out to kill him. The voices tell him that if he eats or drinks, he will have a heart attack. The other voices laugh and belittle him. They get louder when he is at a dining table. Gavin is admitted to a secure psychiatric hospital. The reason for his admission to secure services was through the fact there was very little medical records on him and very little family history.

Through his sheer size, 6ft 6 and 25 stone, he was seen as high risk. He also states that when he doesn't do as the voices say, he feels a tightening in his chest and believes he is going to have a heart attack. The consequences of his behaviour are that he stays in his room where he draws a circle of talcum powder on the floor, which when he stands in it, he says the voices are quieter and he feels safe. He is placed on antipsychotic medication and the psychiatrist wants to give him a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. The ward manager, Valerie, is very forward thinking and persuades the psychiatrist not to give him a diagnosis until they have had time to work with him. Valerie asked me if I would be prepared to undertake the work with Gavin.

After talking to Gavin, we decided to break down what he was presenting into three categories.

1. How we would check his beliefs, are we working with fact or delusion?
2. How we could get him to eat a meal; and
3. How we could keep him safe upon discharge as he would have to go back to the Pitsmoor area before he got a move.

I decided to spend time going around the Pitsmoor area in bars pretending to be an old friend of Gavin's trying to find him. The feedback I got was that he had been acting bizarrely thinking people were out to hurt him when they were not and that he felt persecuted by the local authority by not letting him move to a new home. This way we established we were working with a delusion. Before Gavin gained discharge, I explained it was me that had been asking about him in the local area as to prevent him from further paranoia that a stranger had been asking about him.

We then decided to address his physical health. Because there was limited medical history about him, we wanted to eliminate the possibility that there could be heart problems in the family. So, we got him to undertake

an ECG to monitor his heart, and the results came back there were no heart defects. We then got him to attend anxiety management and also we showed him foods with a heart symbol on the box which meant it was food that was good for the heart. However, at this point he still refused to eat. We then decided to have conversations with him where he felt safe, which was within his circle of talcum powder. He sat in the circle and I sat outside the circle where we had continuous conversations about his beliefs.

I then decided to test his trust in me. I asked him if he would let me enter his circle with him to which he agreed. After a few more sessions I asked him if he would allow me to bring my lunch into the circle. At this point he said no I could not. After a couple more sessions I asked him again and he agreed. As I started to eat my sandwich in the circle, I saw him salivate. At this point I knew he was really hungry. I then said to him, 'you can't have any of this sandwich because you don't eat'. The next session I took a sandwich into the circle again. This time I asked him, 'would you try the sandwich? I will bite off a corner first, and if I collapse clutching my chest you know not to have any', to which he agreed. I bit off the corner first and it had no ill effects, he then bit off a very small piece from the opposite corner. At which point he never had a heart attack. Too many people had focused on getting him to eat a large meal, whereas we just wanted to introduce him to food to dispel his fears about the heart attack. He then gradually began to eat more, but he still had his fears about Rastafarians.

We then managed to find a Rastafarian psychiatric nurse who sat outside the circle while I sat inside the circle with Gavin to keep him safe. The nurse explained that Rastafarianism was a peaceful culture dispelling Gavin's fears even more. We then had to address his discharge. We made sure there was an appropriate care team in place because he would have to return to the Pitsmoor area before he was able to move house. I then asked him how he now felt about Rastafarians. He said that if there was just one of them, he would feel OK, but if there was a gang, he would feel intimidated. He explained that if he could get away from a gang quickly, he would feel safer when returning home. So, we spent £200 and we bought him a push bike. And if he saw a gang he could cycle home really quickly. Gavin then got his move across Sheffield and he has never been in the psychiatric system since.

His experiences were episodic. He now works as a scaffolder. Had he been given a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia he would not have got that job and could still be in the psychiatric system. The main features of working with Gavin was that we identified everything was about fear and the fear was driving the voices. Once we had dispelled his fears the voices lost their power and we didn't have to challenge the voices. At times we must identify which emotions are problematic to the person and work on the emotions rather than the voices.