Voices: Explanations and interpretations

What are the reasons for people hearing voices? Essentially, we do not know why people hear voices. There are many different kinds of voice-hearing experiences, and there is no clear consensus on their causes. Many of the reasons or our voices may be due to voice-hearing experiences. For example, if the voices are derogatory, it may be because the person is feeling bad about themselves. In some cases, people may distinguish voices from their own thoughts by means of the context. For example, if the voices are derogatory, they might say, “I would never think that!” and attribute the experience to an external source. Interestingly, it is not clear that voices are always distinguished from thoughts by virtue of their perceived location, whether or not they are experienced as coming from “inside” or “outside” the head. Some people experience voices that sound as if they are coming from the external environment, but many voices are experienced as internal in the same way that our own inner voice is. (Equally, loudness and clarity are not generally things that people use to distinguish voices from their own thoughts.)

Do we know what happens in the brain when someone is hearing a voice? Unlike instances of our own inner voice which clearly belong to us, most people report that hearing a voice in the absence of any speaker has an ‘alien’ quality to it, so that it doesn’t belong to us. Unlike instances of our own inner voice which clearly belong to us, most people report that hearing a voice in the absence of any speaker has an ‘alien’ quality to it, so that it doesn’t belong to us.

What is the difference between someone hearing their own inner voice and hearing a different voice? What is the difference between someone hearing their own inner voice and hearing a different voice? What is the difference between someone hearing their own inner voice and hearing a different voice? What is the difference between someone hearing their own inner voice and hearing a different voice?

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Looking for support?

Voice hearing experiences are fairly common and are not in themselves necessarily a cause for concern. It does not mean that the person continues to cause significant distress or interfere with your relationships or daily activities. Anything you do about your experience? You should speak to the advice of your GP or family doctor and seek other sources of psychological support.

What is the role of medication in helping people cope with distressing voices? What is the role of medication in helping people cope with distressing voices? What is the role of medication in helping people cope with distressing voices? What is the role of medication in helping people cope with distressing voices? What is the role of medication in helping people cope with distressing voices? What is the role of medication in helping people cope with distressing voices? What is the role of medication in helping people cope with distressing voices? What is the role of medication in helping people cope with distressing voices? What is the role of medication in helping people cope with distressing voices? What is the role of medication in helping people cope with distressing voices? What is the role of medication in helping people cope with distressing voices? What is the role of medication in helping people cope with distressing voices? 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Voices aren't just a symptom of psychosis

Why is it important to carry out this research?

Who funds us?

What is voice-hearing in historical, cultural, and religious contexts?

Can hearing voices be a positive thing?

What notable figures in history heard voices?

How many people are involved?

Hearing the Voice is a large interdisciplinary research project that aims to develop a better understanding of the experience of hearing voices. Our core research team, based at Durham University and discrimination, and ultimately be of benefit to people among the public and health professionals, reduce stigma some people hear voices without the need for psychiatric other psychiatric conditions also experience voices, and we are investigating what happens to the information-processing mechanisms in the brain when someone has voices. We are also exploring the ways in which voice-hearing has been interpreted and represented in different cultures, religious and historical periods. In the long term, we hope to use the results of these three areas of research to inform mental health policy and improve therapeutic practice in cases where people do find their voices distressing and clinical help is sought.

Voices are experienced by the majority of people with a diagnosis of schizophrenia, a distressing and disorientating condition that is much maligned and poorly understood. Many people who have been diagnosed with other psychiatric conditions also experience voices, and some people hear voices without the need for psychiatric support. Some people report hearing single words or phrases on an occasional basis, while others hear multiple voices that talk, joke or argue with each other almost constantly. Voices can also differ in terms of auditory qualities like loudness and clarity. That is, they can be shouty, whisper, be heard clearly, or sound muffled and be difficult to distinguish. People who hear voices may hear other sounds too, including ringing, tinnitus, coughing, snoring or music.

Do people actually hear voices or is it a hallucination?

No. While many people say that the voices they hear are similar to hearing somebody speaking in the same room, some voice-hearers describe experiencing purely thought-generated voices or sounds. A recent study examining forty members of a Pentecostal church in North-East London sheds some light on this. In this community, as in many Evangelical Christian groups, voice-hearing is openly embraced as an important aspect of spirituality. Those who report hearing the voice of God recall having to learn to distinguish this voice from their own thoughts. Some of these people listen to God’s voice to a human voice, and many experience this voice as coming from an external location. God may issue commands, but in this community, most instances of divine communication are associated with a feeling of comfort, forgiveness or knowledge, rather than distress.

What is voice-hearing? How common is it?

Typically, what do people hear when they hear voices? How often do people hear voices?

Public perception is that only people who have psychosis, abuse, threat, and command them to do dangerous or unacceptable things. But voices are as diverse as the conversations that we have every day. Some voices are distressing and malicious; others are kind and encouraging, providing a person with an important source of comfort and support. Some people report hearing single words or phrases on an occasional basis, while others hear multiple voices that talk, joke or argue with each other almost constantly. Voices can also differ in terms of auditory qualities like loudness and clarity. That is, they can be shouty, whisper, be heard clearly, or sound muffled and be difficult to distinguish. People who hear voices may hear other sounds too, including ringing, tinnitus, coughing, snoring or music.

Do people actually hear voices or is it a hallucination?

People who hear voices may have a diagnosis of psychosis, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, PTSD, anorexia or severe depression. But it is a common misconception that all people who hear voices with a mental health problem. For example, auditory verbal hallucinations have been reported by a wide range of individuals across different cultures, religions and historical periods. In the long term, we hope to use the results of these three areas of research to inform mental health policy and improve therapeutic practice in cases where people do find their voices distressing and clinical help is sought.

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Hearing the Voice was funded by a Wellcome Trust Strategic Award from 2012-2015. We have now been awarded a Wellcome Trust Collaborative Award in Humanities, Sciences, and Collections, which will enable us to continue our research into voice-hearing until 2020.

What does schizophrenia have to do with voice-hearing?

People can have a range of different reactions to hearing voices in different situations, or sound muffled and be difficult to distinguish. People who hear voices may hear other sounds too, including ringing, tinnitus, coughing, snoring or music.

Which notable figures in history heard voices?

How many people are involved?

We have all heard of voices in the form of hallucinations in a clinical context. In this case, the voices are considered to be pathological. There is a growing body of evidence that people who hear voices experience their voices differently. The voices are often perceived as helpful and supportive rather than distressing. Hearing voices without a mental health diagnosis can also have a positive influence on a person’s life, providing them with the opportunity to learn more about themselves, develop resilience and cultivate coping strategies that can be useful in other situations. For example, a young person who has learned to cope with commanding or critical voices can use these skills to stand up to bullies and resist peer pressure.

How many people in Britain hear voices?

How many people in Britain hear voices?

This largely depends on how the experience of hearing voices is defined. Taking the results of different studies, a reasonable estimate is that 5–10% of people report hearing an occasional experience of hearing a voice when there was no one around. A smaller proportion, around 1%, have more regular voice-hearing experiences and do not meet the criteria for any psychiatric disorder. A separate 1% will have a diagnosis of schizophrenia, and the majority of these people will hear voices.

Voices aren't just a symptom of psychosis

What is the relationship between Hearing the Voice and the Hearing Voices Movement, which views voice-hearing as a meaningful human experience?

We had the privilege of working closely with many members of the Hearing Voices Movement (HVM) throughout the course of our project, and our research has benefitted greatly from their input and expertise. One of the key ideas behind our research, which we share with HVM, is the idea that we should move away from viewing voice-hearing as a meaningless symptom of pathology. We also obviously share their anti-stigma agenda, and their commitment to providing support for people who hear voices that is empowering and recovery focused.

We are open and inclusive and do not seek to align ourselves with any particular movement or approach. Our goal is to continue to examine different perspectives as possible in order to provide a better understanding of the experience of hearing voices, and to draw insights from the medical, scientific, literary, cultural and political spheres.

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What happens to people when they hear voices?

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Are the voices identifiable to them? Can they be people who are or were in their lives?

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