



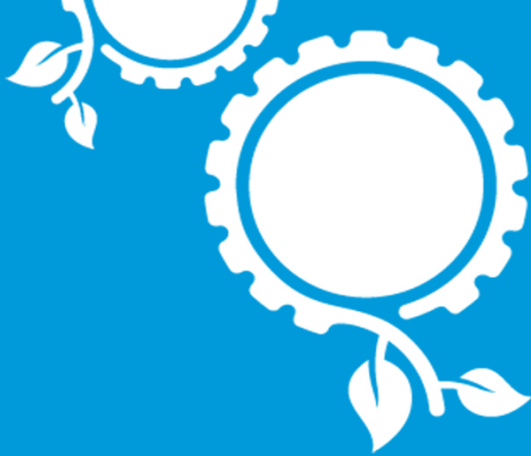
Working Knowledge

Engaging Others

So, what do you believe then?

by
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'So, what do you believe then?'
A Project Short by Ben Alderson-Day and Adam Powell

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So, what do you believe then?

Hearing the Voice is an interdisciplinary project studying the experience of hearing voices that others cannot hear (also known as “auditory verbal hallucinations”). In deliberately going beyond the traditional modes of investigation for this topic – the methods and epistemologies of psychiatry and psychology – the project as a whole endorses a plurality of views on what it is to experience voices and unusual experiences. But this means the project, individual researchers, and the people they interact with, can all end up in some ostensibly unusual places as a result.

One example from my own research in psychology came from conducting an interview with a “non-clinical” voice-hearer about her experiences. A small minority of the general population describe hearing voices on a daily basis without seeking support from mental health services. There are many different reasons why such people do not seek clinical help. Some people have unpleasant experiences but have reasons to be suspicious of how the mental health system will understand and treat them. Some hear positive and benign voices that they would not wish to change. Others describe voices which for them have a specific spiritual or religious basis. Within clinical and psychological research, the designation of ‘non-clinical’ or ‘healthy’ voice-hearer could apply to individuals with all of these viewpoints and experiences; ‘healthy’ in this context means never having received and not meeting criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis. **Beyond the voices, though, they may share very little in terms of belief and interpretation.**

In my interview, the participant “Sarah” described a range of experiences that many people would find very strange. Primarily, she talked of being visited by the dead – hearing and seeing those that had passed away – and being asked to convey messages back to living people. She did not use her experiences professionally in any way (such as working as a medium) and described many periods of uncertainty about what exactly was happening to her. She heard voices frequently enough to rate highly on some

of the standard questionnaires used in research on hallucinations, but during the interview it was hard to gauge how real the experiences felt for her, and how literal I should understand her descriptions of experiencing voices and visions to be. Sarah’s manner was very “matter of fact” about the unusual things that were occurring to her daily. By the end of my questions, I was still puzzled – and that probably came across to her. Because after the interview had finished, over a cup of tea, she asked me a question: **“so, what do you believe then?”**

For some interviewers, this invitation to share something of their own experience or worldview would not come as a surprise. Some qualitative researchers embrace this kind of conversation as a way of building rapport and establishing trust between the interviewer and interviewee.

“ *I didn’t know what to say in response, but I didn’t know what the project would say either.”*

Clinicians who are experienced in talking to people with unusual beliefs are often invited to share, reflect, or support strange ideas; in responding, they must convey their respect for the reality of the person’s experience, while avoiding an endorsement of a potentially problematic or paranoid viewpoint. But for me – a researcher whose main experience is in designing laboratory experiments, not asking about spirits – Sarah’s question posed a challenge; not just for how to respond ‘in the moment’, but also for the kind of covenant made between researcher and participant on a project of this kind; a project made up of loose, implicit, and fragile commitments between researchers in an interdisciplinary space.

In short – I didn’t know what to say in response, but I didn’t know what the project would say either. In that instance, what I didn’t want to say is exactly what I was thinking – that my interviewee can’t be experiencing the dead, because I don’t think that’s possible. Saying that also would not fairly reflect the purpose and focus of the

interview in the first place, which was to establish an understanding of the phenomenology of her experiences (irrespective of their causal basis). But at the same time, I recruited her into this study on the logic that her experiences exist on some kind of continuum with other voice-hearing experiences, including those of people diagnosed with psychosis. I did not want to reduce her experiences to being signs of “sub-clinical” psychotic phenomena, but I also wanted to say that they are similar enough to clinical experiences for them to act as an informative and relevant comparison. In other words, I wanted to respect the reality of her experiences for her, while still maintaining the theoretical assumptions of my research.

In recruiting for studies like the one Sarah was taking part in, we are explicit that **one of the purposes of this research is ultimately to try to better support people who are in distress.** Here the suggestion that her experiences are comparable in some way to psychosis is overt: a view often shared by many of our participants, who are keen to help in whatever way they can.

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But the suggestion made by that comparison – that her experiences may actually be psychotic in some way – is undercut by an emphasis on the broader plurality of Hearing the Voice as a whole. This was just one piece of research among many under the project banner: while I was doing the interview, one of my colleagues may be analysing the voices of Virginia Woolf, studying shamanic rituals, or designing a medieval board game – and Sarah knew that when she signed up. By approaching the topic from a range of disciplines, the project overtly displays an openness to multiple viewpoints. Here the specific mention that our project also includes theologians often has the greatest impact, as it highlights a recognition of spiritual interpretations of voices without placing them as secondary to underlying medical or psychiatric theories.

Such an approach could therefore be seen as being all things to all men (and women) – an

interpretive framework open to all comers. But it does not, however, necessarily lend itself to a coherent academic project by conventional standards. A **grab-bag of concepts, frameworks, and disciplines** does not readily translate into a theory, a finding, or a narrative about “what’s going on”. For the psychologists and neuroscientists, a commitment to an underlying scientific realism would seem to be an unquestioned prerequisite: the notion of an experiment becomes impossible if there is no shared underlying reality that continues from one case to the next, and new findings and theories are expected to fit in to a scientific (and non-spiritual) world view. For the religious studies scholar, though, interpreting accounts of revelation and mystical experience across different belief systems is a minefield of ontological claims (in the sense of what does or doesn’t exist, or what is or isn’t happening to a person). For the philosopher it may not be an issue to make an unusual metaphysical claim, but it will still be important to be very precise about what kind of claim is being made; for the literary studies scholar, by contrast, multiple readings of a text may be made without purporting to explain “what’s actually going on” in a book, for a character, or in the author’s mind.

The point here is not simply to highlight that different disciplines make different theoretical commitments, but that they may also differ in the extent to which they are expected to make a claim about a shared, independent reality. Some

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are comfortable in the ambiguity – it may even be why they are part of something interdisciplinary, because they wish to probe and push at the boundaries of their own disciplinary commitments and training. Others will not be so comfortable; they may be thinking about hallucinations in one way and merely entertaining the possibility of other interpretations for the sake of playing nice with their colleagues. Sarah’s question had come from a participant to a researcher, but it could also have come from one colleague to another on

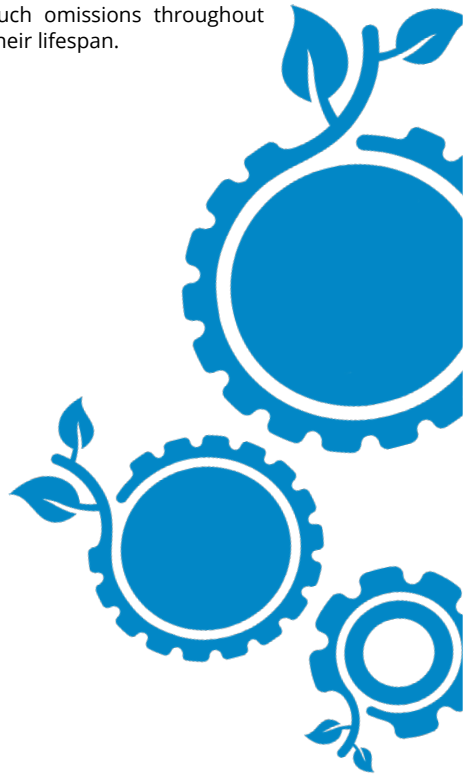
a project of this kind.

In this context, a question like “what do you believe then?” is not necessarily a problem for an interdisciplinary project: the answer, in truth, is “lots of things”. A trickier challenge is to answer “**what have you found out?**” or possibly, “**what’s your key question?**”, as both imply a core or linear narrative to a multi-dimensional portmanteau of ideas and activity. But at the same time, this does not have to imply a formless relativism about the work a project can do together. To provide one example: a number of researchers from the project have conducted work on the agentic properties of voices: from a simple claim about experience – that people who hear voices often describe voices with characters – a whole range of different kinds of work can follow, within and across disciplines. We can understand voices as agents from within a philosophical framework, via psychological theories of social cognition, linguistic ideas about pragmatics, or narrative approaches to character representation. Each cache out the experience in different ways, but they come back to a core, shared claim: that this is an important part of the experience of hearing voices that needs to be understood better. Importantly, it is also a concept that many members of the project came to be interested in or recognise at roughly the same time, via witnessing the same accounts, conversations and presentations: is a shared claim from a shared experience. Just as fuzzy understandings of concepts may proliferate between scholars in interdisciplinary conversation, a fuzzy “concept space” or shared belief framework could be said to develop within a team like Hearing the Voice after sufficient time –allowing it to progress and make understandable claims without recourse to prioritising one discipline’s concepts, beliefs or wider worldview. In essence, what the project believes will be its own social construction.

Back in the room, I didn’t say any of that (my tea would have gone cold). Instead, I tried to turn my answer back to Sarah’s own experience, and our project’s common interest in what it feels like for her. From memory, I said something like this:

I’ve never had the experiences you have described, and so I don’t think about the world in the same way. But, I honestly don’t know how I would react and what I would believe if something like that did happen. That’s why I just want to know more about what that experience is like for you.

Sarah seemed happy with this answer, and it was honestly meant. It does, however, omit any information about what I actually believe. And interdisciplinary projects – I believe, or suspect – likely require a number of such omissions throughout their lifespan.



Case Study

Mapping the Mindfield

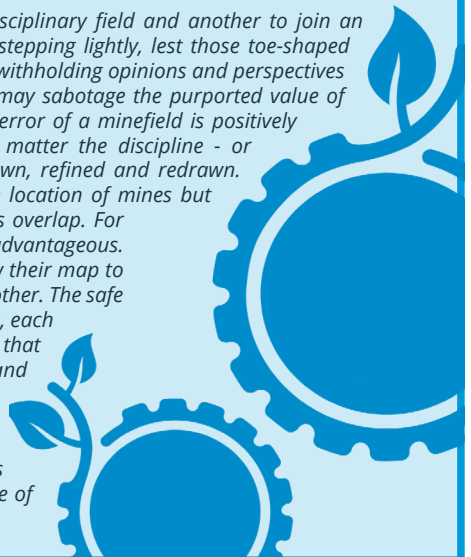
I'm a non-Mormon who studies Mormons, a non-Spiritualist who studies Spiritualism, a twenty-first-century academic taken with the nineteenth-century. I do not consider myself a historian, nor a sociologist, nor a psychologist, nor a theologian. I have written for, or spoken to, audiences comprised of all four. I am displaced and nearly always analytically infringing.



Many deem religious studies a 'field of study' rather than a singular academic 'discipline' for precisely this reason. In terms of the methodological and theoretical range within a single department, my own currently consists of scholars who identify as historians, sociologists, anthropologists, theologians (practical, pastoral, systematic, and historical), literary critics, and philosophers. As for analogues, consider the study of 'art' or 'language'. Although departments of art or art history certainly exist, it would be misguided to argue that the academic study of art is relegated to those institutional centres. Even more to the point, very few suggest that linguistics, philology, literature, public speaking, philosophy, foreign languages, classics, et cetera should all be combined into departments of 'language'. Yet, for a complex web of historical and political reasons, there are now departments of 'religion'.

This has its benefits, of course. Many academics in religious studies are trained in numerous languages and have exposure to, if not extensive experience with, a breadth of methods and theoretical approaches. A doctoral student of religion is as likely to read Moses as Malinowski, Freud as Foucault, Weber as Wittgenstein, Leibniz as Lacan. They will elucidate practices among ancient peoples one day to inform their theory of contemporary culture the next. As one literary scholar told me when hearing that my doctoral thesis involved a socio-cultural and theological comparison of two disparate communities, 'Most postgraduates have a mountain to climb before they finish. You have two or three!' However, along the way, if all is well in the best of cases, those of us in this broad field develop intellectual intuition. This is necessary, as much for fostering departmental congeniality as for surviving peer review. As we climb those mountains, we are mapping the terrain.

Yet, it is one thing to train in an inherently interdisciplinary field and another to join an interdisciplinary project. There will be moments of stepping lightly, lest those toe-shaped mines explode. This, indeed, may mean strategically withholding opinions and perspectives - aware that groupthink and so-called 'mind meld' may sabotage the purported value of interdisciplinary endeavour. At the same time, the terror of a minefield is positively correlated with the concealment of its mines. No matter the discipline - or the field - maps have been drafted and passed down, refined and redrawn. In my experience, these maps not only disclose the location of mines but can also be pieced together because their territories overlap. For interdisciplinary work, this 'super map' is highly advantageous. The psychologist or the anthropologist may not show their map to their participants, but they should share with one another. The safe passages and fatiguing topography of each discipline, each history, should be revealed when the project ventures that direction. This will mean speaking up, informing and asking. If the group is to explore the unexplored or question previous answers, it needs to know what has already been mapped. Religious studies has made me acutely aware of this, but we all have maps and mines. We have all invaded territories, and none of us want to die!



Working Knowledge is a collection of accessible and user-friendly resources dedicated to the practical ins and outs of interdisciplinary research.

Covering everything from managing a research project's social media presence to conducting experimental design 'hackathons', the series is a must-read for anyone considering funding or embarking on interdisciplinary research.

Series editors: *Charles Fernyhough, Angela Woods and Victoria Patton.*

