On shame and voice-hearing

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ABSTRACT

Hearing voices in the absence of another speaker—what psychiatry terms an auditory verbal hallucination—is often associated with a wide range of negative emotions. Mainstream clinical research addressing the emotional dimensions of voice-hearing has tended to treat these as self-evident, undifferentiated and so effectively interchangeable. But what happens when a richer, more nuanced understanding of specific emotions is brought to bear on the analysis of distressing voices? This article draws findings from the ‘What is it like to hear voices’ study conducted as part of the interdisciplinary Hearing the Voice project into conversation with philosopher Dan Zahavi’s Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy and Shame to consider how a focus on shame can open up new questions about the experience of hearing voices. A higher-order emotion of social cognition, shame directs our attention to aspects of voice-hearing which are understudied and elusive, particularly as they concern the status of voices as other and the constitution and conceptualisation of the self.

Hearing a voice in the absence of an external stimulus—what psychiatry terms an auditory hallucination—is an experience which can take many forms and occur in a wide variety of clinical and non-clinical contexts. The heterogeneity of voice-hearing has given rise to formal taxonomies spanning 16th century theology, early 20th century psychiatry and 21st century psychology, as well as a myriad of interpretations advanced by individuals using the cultural, medical, spiritual and other hermeneutic frameworks available to them. While varieties of voice-hearing are unlikely to settle into universally accepted subtypes any time soon, the separation of distressing voices from those that might be regarded as benign or benevolent is made with clarity and consistency. So apparently self-evident is this distinction that the question of what exactly constitutes distress is seldom addressed. Yet, with only a moment’s reflection, we can recognise that ‘distress’ could be used to describe voices which are abusive, unrelenting, intrusive, belligerent, hostile, repetitive, violent or overwhelming (in their emotional tone or force and in the semantic content of the utterance); to refer to states of anger, fear, terror, despair, sadness, shame, anxiety, disgust, nausea or exhaustion associated with voice-hearing; and to imply relations of causality, consequence, correlation or coexistence between specific voices and emotions. Clinical and psychological research into the experience of hearing voices has tended to focus on auditory and linguistic processing, and/or the relationship between voices and thoughts; the study of emotions, by contrast, has been relatively neglected. With the importance of attending to the subjective qualities of voice-hearing already recognised in psychotherapeutic and Hearing Voices Movement approaches to working with voices, a fuller examination of the role of the emotions in the temporally dynamic experience of hearing voices is overdue and ripe for interdisciplinary investigation.

This article will focus on shame and voice-hearing, taking as its point of departure the testimony of two voice-hearers gathered by the Hearing the Voice project (http://hearingthevoice.org) in collaboration with the Lived Experience Research Network. Quotations from the ‘What is it like to hear voices?’ study have been anonymised; demographic information is reported as it was submitted:

Starting when I was about 20 years old, I heard the voices of demons screaming at me, telling me that I was damned, that God hated me, and that I was going to hell. I heard them constantly, even in my sleep. The voices were so frightening and disruptive that much of the time I was unable to focus or concentrate on anything else. [...] The voices I heard reflected all the judgmental attitudes I had heard from my family and church about LGBT identities. I internalized that shame and stigma and my own self-loathing brain turned inward and began persecuting itself.

- Shane (white male, queer, late 40s, atheist formerly Catholic, reports having been diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder)

I was under the assumption that the total destruction of my mental faculties was imminent because I had never heard of someone hearing voices and being ok afterwards. I was bewildered and horrified at the foreign sensation and kept thinking I must be making it up and then becoming terrified all over again when the voices persisted in their obtrusiveness. I was very afraid and disoriented and I didn’t feel as though I could tell anyone. An immediate sense that this experience was clandestine and something to be ashamed of was present.

- Joelle (white female, bisexual, early 20s, believes in a Judeo-Christian God but not Christianity, reports having been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)

Shame appears frequently in the first-person accounts of voice-hearers; it is a focus of research investigating the now well-established links between voice-hearing, trauma and childhood sexual abuse; and within a clinical context, cognitive–behavioural and compassion-focused therapies explicitly address and seek to reduce voice-hearers’ feelings of shame. Rather than attempt to survey and synthesise these literatures, I want here more modestly to return to first
principles and consider how the experience of shame might relate to and reciprocally illuminate some experiences of hearing voices. I say ‘some’ advisedly—in no way do I wish to imply that shame is a meaningful or essential feature of all voice-hearing experiences or that hearing voices is or should be a source of shame. Shame is fascinating because it described so powerfully as being central to people’s experience of themselves; it raises questions about temporality, memory, identity and the structure of the self; and it reaches beyond the individual to the other, to their families and communities, past as well as present. By exploring the contention that shame can also help us understand the contents and the structure of some voice-hearing experiences, this article seeks to identify key directions for further research into the nexus between them.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SHAME**

Shame is increasingly an object of interest across disciplines as diverse as postcolonial literary studies, neuroscience and development economics. Given my focus here on a comparative analysis between the experience of shame and contemporary individuals’ experiences of hearing voices, I want to start with social psychological accounts of shame and then go on to show how these are complicated by philosophers working in the existential and phenomenological traditions. While I share the concerns voiced recently by Peter Stearns—that the burgeoning scholarship on shame has largely ignored the historical shift from social to psychological shame and that scholars within the social and human sciences have for the most part ‘proceeded on their merry way without much concern for [this] lack of historical ballast’—I hope by the end of this paper to have shown why bringing multiple and historically informed disciplinary perspectives to bear in analysing the experience of shame will be vital to understanding its role in and relationship to voice-hearing.

One of the most widely cited definitions of shame comes from Michael Lewis’ book *Shame: The Exposed Self*. Shame, he writes, is ‘the feeling we have when we evaluate our actions, feelings, or behaviour, and conclude that we have done wrong. It encompasses the whole of our selves; it generates a wish to hide, to disappear, or even to die’. Alongside guilt, embarrassment and humiliation, shame has been historically understood as a negative emotion, although one that can serve positive social functions. It is distinguished from so-called basic emotions such as anger and fear by virtue of its structural complexity: shame is a self-conscious emotion, which requires, or at least implies, a high-order awareness of the self; indeed, it reveals, in Lewis’ formulation, ‘a self exposed to itself’. In this sense, shame is a self-reflective emotion but it is also considered a social one: as well as depending, in a basic sense, on a sophisticated awareness of others’ mental states, the sense of exposure, which, for many, is at the core of shame strongly implies the presence of an interlocutor, whether in the form of specific individuals or society and social norms more broadly. If feelings of guilt often prompt us to seek out others for the purposes of atonement, absolution or repairation, shame by contrast has ‘self-oriented action tendencies’, meaning that it typically results in social withdrawal or retreat. While guilt and shame may share the same stimuli and even co-occur, feelings of guilt pertain to specific actions, behaviours, thoughts or responses, whereas in shame, the entire self, the core of one’s subjectivity and identity, is felt to be devalued, diminished or otherwise degraded. Shame’s effects, therefore, can be potentially devastating:

Psychology researchers have tended to focus attention on specific moments of shame which are comparatively easy to imagine, identify, recall, compare, and measure. These discrete episodes of ‘acute’ shame, which can help individuals adjust to social norms and expectations, ought to be distinguished from the ‘chronic’ forms of shame, which can come to structure a person’s self and situation in often highly negative and damaging ways. Shame can be chronic in a temporal sense, where negative self-evaluations are sustained and intensified through repeated incidences or exposure to a shaming environment. Particularly when examining experiences that are frequently labelled as pathological and aetiolologically linked to trauma, it can also be helpful to understand as chronic, in the sense of severe, shame that takes the form of self-stigma. The stigma associated with mental disorders in general, and with the diagnosis of schizophrenia or psychosis specifically, has been extensively analysed and is, for some people, an inextricable part of the distress of hearing voices.

Before pursuing in more depth the relationship between shame and voice-hearing, I want first to turn to the work of the philosopher Dan Zahavi, whose analysis of shame is addressed to two fundamental questions: ‘What does the fact that we feel shame tell us about the nature of self?’ and ‘What kind of self is it that is affected in shame?’ In his critical engagement with the mainstream psychological view of shame that I have just sketched, Zahavi focuses on the role of others and the centrality of self-reflection. Can we feel shame by ourselves, or is the presence of an audience—actual or imagined—essential to the experience? Related to this, is shame best understood as the outcome of an evaluative process, of assessing, comparing and judging the status of the self in relation to our ideals, values and aspirations?

As we have already seen, the experience of shame for Lewis hinges on a process of reflection, analysis and negative self-evaluation: ‘It is not possible’, he writes, ‘to feel shame without comparing one’s action against one’s standards or beliefs’. Philosophers Deonna and Téroni place an even greater emphasis on the analytic dimension of shame by defining it as ‘the subject’s awareness that the way he is or acts is so much at odds with the values he cares to exemplify that it appears to disqualify him from his very commitment to the value, that is he perceives himself as unable to exemplify it even at a minimal level’. Zahavi, correctly in my view, cautions against definitions which seem so ‘cognitively demanding’ they pertain only to ‘highly elaborate, self-directed judgemental forms of shame’. There are, he suggests, more primal and prototypical forms of shame in which it is not reflection but the presence of the other which is critical to and constitutive of the experience.

Here Zahavi turns to Jean Paul Sartre, whose account, in *Being and Nothingness*, emphasises the physiological primacy of shame. Shame is not, first and foremost, the outcome of a deliberative process, but ‘an immediate shudder which runs through me from head to foot without any discursive preparation’. Sartre continues:

> I am ashamed of what I am. Shame therefore realizes an intimate relation of myself to myself. Through shame I have discovered an
aspect of my being. Yet although certain complex forms derived from shame can appear on the reflective plane, shame is not originally a phenomenon of reflection. In fact no matter what results one can obtain in solitude by the religious practice of shame, it is its primary structure shame before somebody.47

On this view, the other is not simply a staging post in the process of becoming ashamed, a means to the end of negative self-evaluation. Rather, for Sartre as for Zahavi, the object of one’s feeling of shame is the self it is experienced for, through and in the presence of the other. As an emotion which ‘reveals our relationality, our being-for-others’ shame, somewhat unnervingly, ‘makes me aware of not being in control and of having my foundation outside myself’.36

For Zahavi, then, it is important to distinguish phenomenologically between a mode of shame which arises from sitting in judgement on ourselves and what he thinks of as the more prototypical experience of shame in the presence of others. Here is a vignette representative of the scenes of ‘disgrace shame’ which are his focus: ‘You have started a new romantic relationship. After a while, in a moment of intimacy, you reveal...’

Shame clearly at the level of content: Shane is repeatedly spoiled identity of being a voice-hearer whose mental faculties are by definition destroyed. Via Zahavi’s analysis, in other words, falls short of investigating what others have called chronic shame, shame that is generated by...
actually or potentially shame-productive and manifest such symp- toms as withdrawal, self-contempt, inferiority, and gaze aversion as a matter of course throughout their everyday lives, shame has become pathological and chronic.38

Notwithstanding several very vivid examples of voice-hearing arising in the context of episodes of acute shame,44 it is more often the case that voices speak of distress that is better understood as cumulative, structural, enduring or all-encompassing. Indeed, recent research on the relationship between childhood adversity and psychosis has confirmed earlier evidence of a dose–response relationship (ie, that the total number of adverse experiences such as physical or sexual abuse significantly predicts the appearance and severity of voice-hearing), while also showing that ‘two adversities showing the largest number of associations with psychotic symptoms were poverty and being fostered/adopted’.38 So while Zahavi’s account of shame can help illuminate the ‘now’ of hearing voices (the phenomenology and affective dynamics of the instance in which the voice is heard), experiences of voice-hearing, particularly those that are linked to adversity, might prove particularly fertile for exploring the distinctive phenomenology of chronic shame and for highlighting the importance of sociological analysis to that endeavour.

Voices as other

The second set of questions Zahavi’s account of shame might prompt us to ask about voices concerns their status or ontology: (how) are voices others? For some biomedically oriented hallucinations researchers, the proposition that voices might be best understood in terms of the representation of social agents,33 rather than as symptoms of aberrant auditory processing, is already radical. However, within other clinical and psychotherapeutic settings, relational frameworks are routinely used to support voice-hearers to develop more positive relationships with their voices11 52 in the way that approaches voices as though they were family members or close acquaintances. Assigning the voice the same status as a person may have practical benefits in a therapeutic context but struggles to account for or attend to the phenomenological heterogeneity of voices. Highly ‘personified’ voices should not be treated as self-evident: for example, while a majority of participants in the ‘What is it like to hear voices?’ study reported that they heard ‘characterful’ voices, one third of respondents indicated that there was nothing person-like about the experience. Of those who did report ‘characterful’ voices, descriptions suggested:

a range of person-like qualities, from amorphous enitativity (an undefined disembodied personality), to stereotypical person-like presentations (an angry man, an old woman), spiritual entities with anthropomorphic traits, specifically recognisable individuals, and voices that are subjectively experienced as representing all or part of the person’s own self.14

If we are to develop richer accounts of the dynamics of shame and other emotions in voice-hearing experiences, then we must attend more closely to the particular qualities of the agents and entities they most intimately involve. It will also be important not to limit analysis to voices which are bullying or abusive in language and tone, but consider the variety of perhaps more subtle ways in which voices might contribute, positively and negatively, to voice-hearers’ experience of shame.

Whatever their ontology, if we nonetheless accept that voices are for a majority of people experienced as other (as being ‘not me’, as something over which the person has little or no control), then the notion of the interpersonal self, as revealed in Zahavi’s account of shame, offers new ways of conceptualising the self and other of voice-hearing. Whether psychiatric, psychological, neuroscientific, sociological or spiritual, most frameworks for understanding voices take up one of two positions—either (1) the ‘voice’ is fundamentally independent of the ‘self’ (a disruption in brain activity; the symptom of an underlying biomedical disease; a divine or other-worldly agency) or (2) the ‘voice’ is fundamentally of the ‘self’ (a misrecognised, disowned or dissociated part; a fragment that can be reintegrated into or at least recognised as belonging to the whole). Zahavi’s analysis of an interpersonal self which does not exist independently of or prior to the encounter with other, but is in fact constituted by it, troubles this dichotomy with the radical proposition that the voice might be productive of the self.

Voices beyond the self

In her powerful analysis of a cultural shift from guilt to shame, Ruth Leys notes that contemporary theorising of shame frequently ‘posits a rigid dichotomy and specular distance between the autonomous subject and the external other’.33 Voice-hearing clearly complicates this at every conceivable level, and the work of cultural and affect theorists Grace Cho and Lisa Blackman explicitly implicates shame in the permeability of boundaries between the self and other in voice-hearing. Cho draws on psychoanalytic theories of ‘transgenerational haunting’55 to explore the powerful but unspeakable legacies of the Korean War, particularly through the figure of the yanggongju (a term used to refer pejoratively to Korean women who have had sex with American men).55 The yanggongju, embodying a shame which cannot be spoken, haunts the Korean diaspora, posing the question: ‘When the subject cannot speak her own history, when history is unintelligible or made unintelligible, who or what speaks for her?’55 Cho invites us to read the hallucinated voices heard by contemporary Korean women not as symptoms of an underlying illness but as the ‘spectral voice of the diasporic unconscious, a voice that has seen things that the hearer has not and that bears witness to the other’s past and to the pasts she has inherited.55 The idea that ‘One’s mother’s voices could be one’s grandmother’s memories’55 shows, as Blackman argues, how voice-hearing experiences:

act on the boundary or threshold between the corporeal and incorporeal, material and immaterial, self and other, psychological and social, past and present, inside and outside, and open our theorizations of affect to the complex forms of mediation which necessarily distribute the psyche beyond a closed, singular, psychological subject.56

The work of Blackman and Cho opens up new ways of conceptualising the self and other of voice-hearing as testifying to the interpersonal and intergenerational dynamics of shame. In so doing, it also suggests that phenomenology is not simply coloured by but more fundamentally constituted through a network of social relations which cannot be abstracted from wider logics of race, class, gender, sexuality and history. 

CONCLUSION: DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The literatures on shame and on voice-hearing are extensive, interdisciplinary and deserving of a deeper analysis than has been possible here. Rather than seek to reconcile, synthesise or arbitrate between them, I hope instead to have shown that the intersections between these literatures demand analysis that is alive to competing models of shame (from social psychology, phenomenology, cultural theory and the history of emotion), to a variety of ways of understanding the phenomenology and
aetiology of hearing voices, and to the potential for there to be complex interactions between them at the level of testimony as well as theorisation. In its emphasis on the presence of other, Zahavi’s discussion of shame is, I have argued, particularly helpful in analysing the way self and other are conceptualised and constituted in experiences of voice-hearing. Specifically, Zahavi’s notion of the interpersonal and inherently other- constituted self might better equip us to attend to the complexity of voice-hearers’ self-constituting relationships with the other of their voices, which in turn could help nuance the models of shame that inform relational, compassionate mind and cognitive–behavioural therapy approaches. Finally, and with the testimony of Shane and Joelle firmly in mind, this analysis has shown that we need to understand and account for shame at multiple levels: to grasp how the shaming experience of abusive voices that no one else can hear relates to the public stigma of being a voice-hearer; how homophobia can manifest in and as an internal demonic drama and how voices might bear the traces of trauma experienced collectively as well as individually. A robust and critical medical humanities approach to these issues will call on a wide range of disciplinary and clinical expertise and, crucially, ensure that people who hear voices, and for whom shame is an intimate and painful aspect of experience, are at the forefront of future investigations.

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