Reframing voices and visions using a spiritual model. An interpretative phenomenological analysis of anomalous experiences in mediumship

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Throughout different civilisations and historical epochs, anthropological and religious texts have been replete with accounts of persons who have reported anomalous experiences in the form of visions or voices. In these contexts, such experiences are considered to be a "gift" that can be spiritually enriching or life enhancing. One such group of individuals are mediums who claim to receive information from spirits of the deceased in the form of auditory or visual perceptions. This study explores how mediums come to interpret their experiences as mediumistic and how they describe their relationship with spirit voices. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 Spiritualist mediums using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Three themes were identified: "Childhood anomalous experiences", "A search for meaning: Normalisation of mediumship", and "relationship with spirit". These themes illuminated aspects of the mediumistic experience that have therapeutic implications for individuals who have similar experiences but become distressed by them.

Keywords: anomalous experiences; hearing voices; interpretative phenomenological analysis; mediumship; Spiritualism

A number of recent studies have demonstrated that anomalous experiences, such as voice hearing and visions, are phenomena that lie within the normal range of human experience (see e.g., Bentall, 2000; McCarthy-Jones, 2012; Romme & Escher, 2000). Pechey and Halligan (2012), for example, found that in a British sample of 1000 individuals 75% reported anomalous experiences, with 15.3% reporting hearing voices and 13.8% seeing things that other people could not. In accounting for such experiences, there is now evidence to suggest that the onset of voice hearing is often due to traumatic experiences, such as abuse, poverty or stigma (Bentall, 2003; Morrison, Frame, & Larkin, 2003; Read, Agar, Argyle, & Aderhold, 2003), and that people may be pre-disposed to attribute the voice to an external source rather than their own inner speech due to errors in source monitoring (Morrison & Haddock, 1997). In addition, cognitive models suggest that beliefs about a voice's power and intention determine how it is perceived and whether the person will be distressed (Chadwick & Birchwood, 1994).

Vaughan and Fowler (2004) conducted a questionnaire study with 30 people who hear voices and found that the perceived dominant style of the voices and the way in which the voice is perceived to use its power is more strongly linked to distress than beliefs about voice malevolence. Findings also suggest that voice hearers who distanced themselves from the voice were more likely to be distressed by the experience than

those who communicated with it, implying that a less resisting relationship with the voices is better for psychological well-being. Indeed, clinical approaches to recovery emphasise that directly engaging with voices can promote a more positive relationship between voice hearers and their voices (Corstens, Longden, & May, 2012) and some voice hearers have reported a sense of companionship with their voices (Romme & Escher, 2000) or have sought guidance from them (Nayani & David, 1996). This suggestion is supported by findings from Sorrell, Hayward, and Meddings' (2010) study that compared the voice-hearing experience of clinical and non-clinical voice hearers, in which the latter were found to distance themselves less from their voices and were more likely to perceive them as benevolent.

The above studies have all been quantitative in their approach to data collection and analysis, which has enabled researchers to identify some of the general features of voice hearing, and to explore gross differences between psychiatric and non-psychiatric voice hearers. However, such studies are unable to furnish us with particular and detailed first-hand accounts of how individuals make sense of their anomalous experiences, what meaning they assign to their voices or how this shapes their explanatory framework concerning the ontology of the voices they hear. Given these limitations, some studies have attempted to elucidate anomalous experiences such as hearing voices using qualitative approaches in which "the analytic goal is not to explain away or corroborate participants' claims or experiences but to understand in more detail their significance as psychological, social, and cultural events" (Murray & Wooffitt, 2010, p. 2). For instance, Chin, Hayward, and Drinnan (2009) conducted interviews with 10 service users and per- formed an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) on transcripts to explore how voice hearers relate to their voice. They found that whilst some participants believed their voices maintained a position of power over them, others described the relationship with their voice in terms of an intimate engagement or alliance. Some participants had developed strategies for coping with the voices, such as setting boundaries as to when the voice would be listened to and communicated with. In another study using IPA with 10 service users, participants were less likely to require coping strategies if they had a positive relationship with their voices (Mawson, Berry, Murray, & Hayward, 2011). When they did use strategies, participants adopted methods such as rejecting the voices' comments so as to regain control over the voices and not let them interfere with activities. Similarly, Jackson, Hayward, and Cooke (2011) conducted interviews with both service users and non-service users who had positive experiences of hearing voices. Findings highlighted the importance of imposing boundaries upon the voice relationship (for example, by telling the voices to go away or calling on divine entities for protection) and actively engaging and dialoguing with the voice, which increased trust and closeness. Participants personified their voices and felt that they could be classified into different categories: "lower beings" were described in terms of demonic energies; "ordinary beings" as sub-personalities or relatives; and "divine beings" as spirit guides, the latter providing protection and warning the participants of danger. They also discussed important factors that contribute to a positive relationship with their voices, such as developing a personally meaningful narrative or framework of understanding and connecting with others who had similar beliefs. Studies such as these highlight that the likelihood that voice hearing will be accompanied by distress is at least partially determined by factors such as whether the hearer accepts the voices, is

willing to engage with them and has developed strategies to cope with the intrusion, such as by setting boundaries for when the voices will be acknowledged and accommodated.

Further evidence to suggest that this phenomenon can be managed in a manner that does not lead to distress or pathology comes from work with members of the general public (see e.g., Lawrence, Jones, & Cooper, 2010; Posey & Losch, 1983; Romme & Escher, 1989), some of whom would not classify themselves as voice hearers. One group of particular interest are mediums who claim to receive information from spirits of the deceased in the form of auditory or visual perceptions that are not available to others and which therefore share at least a superficial resemblance to the voice-hearing phenomenon. Some mediums also claim to have a spirit control or guide that helps them to relay messages from spirits to their loved ones (Gauld, 1983), which is reminiscent of Jackson et al.'s (2011) "divine beings" category. In a study investigating the person- ality and psychological well-being of mediums (Roxburgh & Roe, 2011), we found that, although mediums do report a range of anomalous experiences which could be interpreted as indicative of mental illness according to the medical model (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), they scored better than matched groups on a measure of well-being and reported lower psychological distress. Similarly, Andrew, Gray, and Snowden (2008) compared psychiatric voice hearers with mediums and found that the latter viewed their voices as more benevolent and engaged more with them. This suggests that mediums present as an ideal group to explore how voices might be managed in a way that has therapeutic implications for voice hearers more generally.

Few studies have explored the hearing voices phenomenon from the perspective of mediums and we know relatively little about how some individuals who hear voices come to label these experiences as instances of mediumistic communication. However, Taylor and Murray (2012) did find that mediums tended to choose when to engage with voices rather than attempting to block them and it was important for them to share their experiences with others and normalise them as "part of the journey" towards becoming a medium. Likewise, Temple and Harper (2009) found that in order to manage negative or overwhelming experiences neophyte mediums had attended development circles where their experiences were given meaning and were culturally sanctioned and at which they learnt techniques for controlling communication with spirits, such as invoking protection from spirit guides. In summary, what seems to be important is that the experience of voice hearing is validated and normalised, so that cultural resources are made available that provide a means of understanding and managing the experience. The medium community provides a potentially fruitful source of insights into how that process of appropriating voices is achieved and so the current study was intended to add to the limited literature that explores how mediums make sense of their experiences. We therefore proposed not only to explore the phenomenology of mediumship, focusing on how mediums come to interpret their experiences as mediumistic and how they describe their relationship with spirit voices or guides,[1] but also to identify the pathways along which respondents had journeyed to arrive at a mediumship attribution.

Method

Study design

The study was approved by the authors' University Research Ethics Committee and followed ethical guidelines outlined by the British Psychological Society (2006). IPA (Smith, 1996) was used to capture the quality and texture of mediums' experiences. IPA involves the analysis of subjective experience (how phenomena are perceived regardless of whether what is experienced is objectively real) but recognises its interpretative nature with the researcher as the "primary analytical instrument" (Fade, 2004, p. 2), who makes sense of participants' experiences. In this study we were interested in seeking an insider's perspective by giving mediums a voice, recognising them as experts on their experiences and acknowledging these experiences within a cultural context.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain meaningful information on mediums' experiences as they have the advantage over survey methods in that they provide an opportunity to facilitate empathy and rapport and allow for unexpected issues to be followed up in "real-time" (Kvale, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2003). A semi-structured interview schedule was designed using guidelines recommended by Smith and Eatough (2006). Questions were framed in an open, neutral manner and followed a "funnelling" format whereby the first broad question ("Can you tell me how you became a medium?") gave mediums the opportunity to express their own views before probing more specific queries and prompting questions. Face-to-face interviews were conducted by the first author at a time and place convenient to participants (either the authors' university, participant's home or participant's local spiritualist church). Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and lasted between 30 and 75 minutes.

Participants

IPA research seeks to explore in-depth the lived experience of individuals who are a homogeneous group rather than making generalisations that are applicable to all (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Thus, fewer participants examined in greater depth is considered better than a descriptive analysis of many individuals (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). Participants consisted of 10 spiritualist mental mediums who had taken part in a previous survey by the authors (Roxburgh & Roe, 2011) and had expressed an interest in taking part in more in-depth follow- up interviews. The sample consisted of five males and five females, with ages ranging between 6 and 76 years, who had practised as a medium for between 9 and 55 years (see Table 1). All were Spiritualist National Union (SNU) registered mediums who had gained either certificate (CSNU) or diploma (DSNU) awards from the SNU for demonstrating mediumship at spiritualist churches.

Data analysis

The guidelines to IPA analysis (e.g., Smith & Eatough, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Willig, 2001) were followed. Each interview was transcribed verbatim using standard transcription principles (Willig, 2001, p. 25). Participants' identities were protected by assigning a pseudonym and by changing any potential identifying information within the transcript. The analysis consisted of close textual readings of participants' transcripts and a critical understanding based on interpretative activity, keeping mindful of how participants' accounts converged and diverged when identifying and constructing themes.

Table 1. Demographic features of participants.

Participant pseudonyms	Age (years)	Gender	Length of time practising as a medium (years)	Length of time as a spiritualist (years)
Christopher	46	Male	9	1
Graham	61	Male	1	1
James	46	Male	1	3
Mary	59	Female	1	2
Melissa	46	Female	2	3
Penny	60	Female	2	3
Rachel	76	Female	5	7
Sarah	54	Female	1	Not stated
Samuel	50	Male	1	2
Tom	62	Male	4	5
			0	0

Validity and quality

Guidelines for conducting qualitative research recommended by Smith (2011) were adhered to, for example, by grounding themes with detailed extracts from participant transcripts and by having a dialogue with other IPA researchers in order to assess the validity of themes that emerged. This dialogue consisted of regular research supervision meetings where both authors discussed their analysis of the transcripts. In an attempt to ensure that interpretations of the data remained valid and credible, a directory of extracts that supported the emerging themes was also reviewed in research supervision and by an independent researcher familiar with the IPA process.

Reflexivity

Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie (1999) suggest that it is a good practice when conducting qualitative research to disclose theoretical orientations, beliefs or personal anticipations prior to the analysis stage. We therefore offer a brief reflective account of our perspective so the reader has an opportunity to gauge whether our prior experiences could have biased data collection or analysis. Neither author was a medium or spiritualist, nor did they have experience of hearing voices. However, both were aware of previous research that tested the claim that mediums are able to communicate with deceased spirits. The first author, who conducted the interviews, had previously worked as an assistant clinical psychologist with individuals who had

mental health issues and was aware of the tendency for anomalous experiences to be pathologised as symptoms of a mental disorder and for individuals who reported such experiences to feel disempowered within the mental health system. Given this, we felt it was important to use an approach that considered mediums as experts on their experiences and acknowledged these within a cultural context. We also attended a mediumship training course in order to gain an insider perspective on the topic of interest (Roxburgh, 2006), keeping in mind how important it was to be open and non-judgemental when interacting with others on the course in order to gain a true picture of what is involved, and this attitude remained throughout the interview and analytical process. It is possible that researchers with different backgrounds and experiences could have probed at other points of interest during interviews or interpreted participants' accounts differently.

Results

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data that are of relevance to how individuals come to define anomalous experiences, such as voice hearing, in terms of mediumship; Childhood anomalous experiences, A search for meaning: Normalisation of mediumship; and relationship with spirit. Three further themes reflect transpersonal understandings of mediumship and are reported elsewhere (see Roxburgh & Roe, 2013).

Childhood anomalous experiences

All of the participants, except one (Sarah), described anomalous experiences in childhood as influential in their later becoming a medium. Reflecting on these experiences later in life and interpreting them as signalling sensitivity to the mediumistic or spiritual, in a search for subjective meaning, could explain how participants came to consider themselves as mediums. For example, James remembered being able to see auras as a child and Tom mentioned seeing and playing with spirit children, which he interpreted as a natural experience: "I mean I used to see spirit, and as a child play with people and when I fell asleep they were the people I played with, and that was quite natural, so it was always quite natural to me." In contrast, Mary described anomalous childhood experiences that she found distressing:

> As a child I was always aware there was something there but I never knew what it was, I was very afraid of the dark – as most mediums are surprisingly, you know for people who talk to the dead – I'd hide under the pillows, so as a child I was a little bit negative because I could feel things behind me, turn round and look and there was nothing there, I could see shadows, you know in the room and not understand why it was there.

Likewise, Christopher described experiencing apparitions of animals, which he found difficult to explain at the time, and was distressed by not being able to understand:

> I had some experiences when I was a child, I remember really vivid dreams, you know, I can remember even as small as, I must have been in a cot, because I can remember standing up in my cot and screaming because I could see animals, you know I could

see animals in my bedroom walking through the wall, and I can remember banging, I must have only been a few years old.

Reflecting on these extracts, it is possible that participants sought an explanation for their childhood anomalous experiences that was found in mediumship and Spiritualism. Sarah differed from the majority of participants in that she did not report having a family background that was embedded in mediumistic experiences. Consequently, she was initially disturbed and confused by her experience and it was not until she familiarised herself with a spiritual model that she then interpreted her experiences as mediumship. In addition, Sarah did not have any childhood anomalous experiences that might have desensitised her to mediumship phenomena in the way that it seems to have done for others in the sample. Perhaps as a consequence she did not immediately construe her experiences as mediumistic, in contrast to Tom who grew up in an environment in which such childhood experiences had a ready explanation. Therefore, the sociocultural context in which individuals have mediumistic experiences seems to be an important factor in whether these experiences result in psychological distress.

A search for meaning: Normalisation of mediumship

When asked to talk about how they became a medium, the majority of participants reported experiences that had normalised mediumship for them. Explanations focused on how mediumship had always been an ordinary occurrence in their lives or how mediumship and Spiritualism helped to construct a personal experiential framework for making sense of reality as they experienced it, whereby unusual or distressing experiences, such as voice hearing, were interpreted as "normal".

Several participants spoke about initially having distressing experiences, such as hearing voices, after traumatic events. They talked about having an overwhelming fear that what they were experiencing was mental illness. These experiences were then later normalised within a spiritual framework and no support was sought from mental health services. For example, Graham recalls how he felt like he was "going mad" when he had a sudden influx of mediumistic experiences for the first time following a back injury:

> I know it's a long story but that was like bang one day that was the beginning of it all. I thought I was going mad by the way, Elizabeth, I thought I had lost the plot, I really did.[2]

His experiences were later interpreted as mediumistic ability by a girl who was taking a psychic studies course at a local college and then by other mediums when he attended a Spiritualist church.

The essence of this theme is particularly evident in the account by Sarah who describes her experience in detail:

> The first memory that I actually have was hearing voices after my father died (...) one night I went to bed and I woke up and I'd had these voices talking to me saying that my dad was fine, he was living, there wasn't a problem, he wouldn't want me to be upset. And I thought I was dreaming, so I thought "pull yourself together", and as I turned

over to go back to sleep the voices were still there, so I thought "sit up in bed, sort myself out" because I really thought this was still all to do with a dream I was having. So I sat up and these voices were still there in my head, still talking to me, so I thought "I'm losing it, I'll go down and make a cup of tea." So I went down and all the while I was making this cup of tea these voices were still talking to me, so the next day I said to my husband, "You know, I really must be having a nervous breakdown, I need to go to the Doctor's." So I went to the Doctor's and I told him what had happened. I said I must be having a nervous break-down, so he gave me some pills – as they do – told me to go away for a few days and just try and chill and relax. So my husband at that stage worked away quite often, and he was going to Wales, so I said to him "I'll come with you and we'll have a few days." [I] never took the pills because I don't take tablets, I don't believe in that sort of thing, I never even got them but all the while that I was on holiday I'd still got these voices talking to me, so at that stage when I got back I thought, "Right this is me and now I need to cure myself to get better" so I just pulled myself together, blocked absolutely everything out, thought I've just really got to get back on track and I did that. I did that probably for about 6–7 years (...) I started to talk to [a Spiritualist she had met] about what happened with my dad and different things and her sister was a medium but not local and I went with her one day to meet her sister who was lovely. And we sat just chatting about things and that is when my interest started because they were explaining things to me because that was my first real knowledge that somebody was talking to me (…) Steph and her sister were starting to explain all these things to me and all the little things that had happened over the years which you just put down as "Oh that must be that and that must be that" so you know, things just started making sense.

Sarah experienced hearing voices after a bereavement, which she initially interpreted as symptoms of some form of mental illness, as indicated by her fear that she was having a "nervous breakdown" and that she needed to "cure herself". Rather than take the pills she was prescribed, Sarah attempted to cope with her experiences by "blocking everything out", but although she persisted with this for a considerable period she did not find it very satisfactory. It was only when she was introduced to Spiritualism that "things just started to make sense" by framing her experiences in terms of a spiritual model. The voices she experienced were then normalised as being spirits communicating with her via a mediumistic process.

In contrast, several participants who had grown up with mediumship as part of their family's history were able to place their own experiences (and abilities) in the context of normal family life. They talked about having relatives involved in mediumship or Spiritualism as an explanation for why these unusual experiences were occurring to them. This seemed to be most evident in Melissa's account:

I grew up in a home where Spiritualism and self-awareness was normal. My mother's mother was a spiritualist medium and a famous medium and my father's mother was also a spiritualist, so both my mum and dad had spiritualist mediums in the family. My mother was a natural healer, her sister was a healer in the Christian Scientist Church, I have various relatives who are involved with Spiritualism and allied religions, so when I was a kid seeing spirit people was normal and I was very lucky that it wasn't just me, I had spirit friends that my parents acknowledged as being real ... so actually I can't really say when I became a medium because I have always been one.

In this extract there is evidence of a strong normalising influence from Melissa's family. When Melissa states that she was "very lucky", she also appears to be reflecting

on how her experience of mediumship could have been viewed differently if her parents had not accepted, believed and named her experiences, thus validating her experience of seeing spirits as "reality".

Relationship with spirit

In this theme participants discussed the relationship they had with spirit voices and reflected on how important it was to regulate communication with them through having disciplined control over when communication took place. When discussing where the voices came from and their reaction to them, participants talked about spirit guides as though they were real people, as "entities" or "beings" with separate personalities and identities. For example, Penny stated:

> I do look upon them as people, and people who have gone into the next life, and it could be that they have had a lot of experience in physical lives in this world trying to teach people, they might actually have been teachers themselves, or they might have been healers, or therapists.

Not all respondents accepted that the voices they engaged with represent independent intelligent entities. Christopher wondered "whether spirit guides are a completely different entity to yourself or whether they are just an aspect of your own soul" and Mary considered her guides to be aspects of herself: "I know some of the helpers are aspects of my own mind and aspects of my higher mind." However, when participants did personify their guides as real people who had lived before, there was a sense that they served a protective function. For example, Sarah reflected on an experience where her guide intervened to prevent an accident:

> I have been aware at times that when I haven't been working he's been there, on one occasion I can remember my husband was driving down the road and I just heard my guide's voice say "Pull in" and my husband immediately pulled in and as he pulled in this big lorry came round the bend and if he hadn't had pulled in we would have been hurt.

However, participants also spoke about spirit voices being able to influence individuals in a negative way and how important guides were in providing a buffer against this. For example, Tom described how his guide acted as a supervisor that coordinated the communication process and informed him of any difficult spirits:

> We've got supervisors, we've got staff up there, it's like a conveyor belt, and then we've got the super- visor at the end of the line saying "Yes, right, you're on now" or they might say "Yes, right, hang on a minute, you're on in a minute" I become aware of the communicator, but the helper might say "Right Tom, the next one is going to be difficult," "you're going to have trouble with them" or you know, and they only give me the nod if it's going to be like that.

Participants also reflected on their relationship with spirit guides in terms of who had control over when and how communication took place. Rachel commented: "I shut off spirit, for a time, because I felt as though I'd got to learn how to control the spirit and

not use it when it wasn't necessary." Sarah explains why it is essential to develop this control so as not to be overwhelmed by spirit voices communicating all the time:

> For me I am working or I am not, you know, so it would be absolutely no point spirit talking to me unless I'm working ... so I am not aware of spirit unless I want to be ... and that depends on the person, if you are an open book all of the time then you are going to feel spirit because our families are around us, so you are going to feel them but for me that feels unhealthy.

In using the term "open book" Sarah suggests that mediums are able to prevent or assist spirit communication. This belief was also reflected by Samuel who said: "The door is ajar, I know I've pulled it closed, but it's unlocked so if they [spirit voices] need to come through they can sort of knock on that door and push it open and say 'We're here'."

In listening to participants' accounts it felt as if they were describing some sort of controllable permeable boundary that existed between them and the spirit voices, as exemplified by Graham: "Although I do believe I'm receptive to spirit communication all the time you can't really let it interfere with your life, so there is like a barrier that says don't communicate now." Participants emphasised the importance of setting limits to when they would permit communication with spirits, for example, by only allowing spirit voices to be heard and communicated with when they were "working" (i.e., giving a demonstration of mediumship at a Spiritualist church) or drawing on their spirit guides to regulate communication.

Discussion

Themes generated from participants' accounts highlight a number of phenomenological aspects to the lived experience of mediums. A key issue that seems prominent in mediums' search for an explanation of their experiences is the importance of finding a personal experiential framework or explanatory model in which experiences are understood. This is consistent with the findings from Taylor and Murray's (2012) study of non-clinical voice hearing in mediums, which also emphasised how explanatory frameworks could serve to normalise the experience of hearing voices and potentially contribute to a sense of control over experiences. Findings support the therapeutic importance of considering the meaning of voices within the personal framework of the individual (Jackson et al., 2011; Romme & Escher, 1993).

Most participants linked the onset of mediumship to spontaneous anomalous experiences that often occurred in childhood, which they interpreted as signalling sensitivity to mediumistic phenomena. Additionally, participants mentioned the family context as being important in their identification with, and development of, the mediumship role. These elements combined to provide a normalising and validating function, giving meaning to their experiences and fostering further development. This familial environment in which anomalous experiences are acknowledged has also been observed by Wright (1999, 2002).

When participants in the current study did not have a family context in which anomalous experiences were explained in spiritual terms they were more likely to react in a distressed and confused manner, defaulting to a medical model of "illness". For these participants, initially distressing experiences were later normalised, validated and given meaning within a spiritual model, as in the case of Sarah. Romme and Escher's (1989) three-phase model of recovery provides a way of conceptualising the process that Sarah went through. Upon experiencing voices for the first time she was distressed by her experiences and thought she was having a mental breakdown (startling phase), she then tried to cope with the voices by blocking them out (organisation phase), but it was only when she interpreted the voices as spirits, adopted the mediumship role and made contact with a supportive community that she made sense of her experiences (stabilisation phase). Of relevance to these findings is the work by Seligman (2005) who argues that distress experienced by individuals prior to their involvement with Candomblé mediumship is given a new positive meaning by their initiation into mediumship. Seligman suggests that the process of redefining one's identity and the status and social support associated with the mediumship role serves a therapeutic function, implying that normalisation and validation of distressing or unusual experiences contributes to positive well-being or better ability to cope. This premise is at the heart of the Hearing Voices Network (see Baker, 1989) which was inspired by the ground-breaking research of Romme and Escher (1989) and now provides over 180 groups across the UK in which individuals who have lived experience of voices and visions can explore the meaning of their experiences in a validating and accepting environment (see www.hearing-voices.org). The importance of connecting with a community that shares the same belief system and validates experiences has also been emphasised by other researchers investigating mediumistic experience (Gilbert, 2008; Taylor & Murray, 2012; Temple & Harper, 2009) and the voice-hearing phenomenon (Jackson et al., 2011).

Participants also talked about how important it was to have control over when they communicated with spirits. This is consistent with the work that emphasises the importance of asserting boundaries within the voice relationship, with individuals who relate from a position of powerlessness experiencing more distress (Jackson et al., 2011; Vaughan & Fowler, 2004). Certain techniques, such as invoking protection from spirit guides and negotiating with spirits, have been found to be useful for managing experiences of voice hearing in mediums (Temple & Harper, 2009). Our interviewees also mentioned the importance of having a spirit guide to regulate communication and set boundaries as to when spirit voices would be heard and communicated with. This draws attention to the importance of finding ways to relate to voices that are grounded in "acceptance of and assertive engagement with voices" (Hayward, Overton, Dorey, & Denney, 2009, p. 225).

Most participants described spirit guides as having a separate personality and identity, although some speculated that they might represent aspects of their own consciousness. The suggestion that spirit guides are a construction that bears some resemblance to dissociative personalities has been thoroughly discussed in the literature on mediumship (see especially Braude, 1995). Merckelbach, Devilly, and Rassin (2002) have proposed that "alter personalities" of individuals with "dissociative identity disorder" are metaphors for emotional states rather than genuine entities.

Likewise, the "Talking with Voices" approach (Corstens et al., 2012) is based on the theory that we all have multiple "selves" or "sub-personalities", each with its own views and opinions about how we conduct our lives, and that voices may represent selves that are repressed or "that relate to overwhelming emotional difficulties in the hearer's life" (p. 97). Participants also mentioned that spirits could influence them in a positive or negative way, in keeping with previous research that found that individuals experienced their voices as being on a continuum of personification with lower malevolent beings (e.g., demonic energies) at one end of the spectrum and divine benevolent beings or a connection to the higher self at the other end (Jackson et al., 2011). Therefore, one proposition from the current findings is that participants' spirit guides represent a part of the medium that has a self-protective narrative. In addition, given that mediums have been found to report lower psychological distress (Roxburgh
& Roe, 2011) it could mean that they have discovered ways to better integrate parts of their psyche (both negative and positive) into a more coherent whole, not dissimilar to working with configurations of self in the person-centred approach (Mearns & Thorne, 2000).

Conclusion

The mediums that took part in this study who were initially distressed by their experience of hearing voices placed particular importance upon finding or developing a personal experiential framework or explanatory model in which experiences could be understood and mastered. In par- ticular, emphasis was placed on the normalisation and validation of experiences by family, society and the spiritualist church. Given these findings, we recommend that Hearing Voices Groups should be widely available to individuals who become distressed by voices so that they can benefit from a supportive environment where they can feel accepted, valued and understood. Mental health professionals and services may also benefit from an increased sensitivity to service users' anomalous beliefs and experiences and awareness of research that is open to alternative interpretations of those beliefs and experiences (cf. Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2013).

The belief that there are negative spirits but that they can be guarded against by having control over the communication process provides an informative contrast to the experiences of people who hear voices and are distressed by them and are consistent with the findings from previous studies involving mediums (Gilbert, 2008; Taylor & Murray, 2012; Temple & Harper, 2009). Findings from this study support a relational approach to the voice-hearing phenomenon whereby individuals are encouraged to actively engage in a dialogue with their voice and under- stand the voice characteristics and meaning (for an overview of this approach see Corstens et al., 2012), rather than trying to suppress or "get rid" of the voice.

Notes
1. This research was part of a larger mixed methods study that investigated the psychology and phenom- enology of mediumship in order to explore the broad range of mediumistic experiences rather than focusing exclusively on the voice-hearing

phenomenon (see Roxburgh & Roe, 2011). As such, some findings reported here overlap with those reported elsewhere (Roxburgh & Roe, 2013).

2. Transcription notes: Ellipsis […] in the participants' quotes mean there was a pause and three question marks in round brackets (???) signify missing data due to inaudible recording. Round brackets with an asterisk (*) indicate that personal information has been removed and round brackets with ellipsis (…) indicate that irrelevant information has been removed due to space restrictions.

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