

# **Experiencing the presence of the deceased: Symptoms, spirits, or ordinary life?**

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## Abstract

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Experiences of presence are common in bereavement. The bereaved person may see the deceased, hear their familiar voice, or otherwise feel they are close at hand. But although common, they are experiences not without controversy. They have come under a variety of descriptions, from 'hallucinations', lacking in meaning and even essentially meaningless, to 'continuing relationships', of rich personal significance. The current thesis represents the first systematic investigation of the properties and meaning of experiences of presence. Narrative biographic interviews with bereaved informants were analysed using Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis. Analytical focus was on the ways in which participants made such experiences meaningful. As a novel approach, this thesis reports several new findings about these phenomena. Firstly, the experiences happened in a variety of bonds (including spouses, parents, grandparents, children, siblings and others), and in a variety of circumstances of the bereavement (including sudden and expected deaths). In all cases, they were described as richly meaningful experiences and as relying on several sources for this meaning. The personal histories of participants were of particular importance in making sense of experiences of presence. Within this context, the experience acquired sense as a continuation of some aspect of the relationship with the deceased. The experiences also had diverse functions, from soothing to destructive. Sometimes, the experiences helped the bereaved to resolve unfinished business with the deceased; at other times, the help was with a much more ordinary problem. On some occasions the experiences of presence caused the bereaved more problems; they simply pronounced the grief or continued a fraught relationship. Participants showed that they had many cultural resources available to them in making sense of their experiences but they did not use all of them. Many informants used some spiritual and psychological ideas to make sense of their experiences. The thesis concludes that many of the most popular theories for these experiences impoverish them by stripping them of their diversity and important aspects of their meaning. The thesis also makes recommendations for psychotherapy for those who have problems of living as a result of their experiences of presence. The study also has implications for psychological research as none of these findings could have been observed through the use of an experimental methodology.

## Declaration

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# Dedication

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*I have written this thesis in loving memory of*

Audrey May Bednarek

1930-2010

Bronislaw Bednarek

1923-2007

and,

Liz Gardner

1980-2010.

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# Transcription Notation

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Based on Jefferson (2004)

()	Pause in speech
(1.0)	Pause in speech of 1 second
(.)	Very short pause in speech
(word)	Transcriber's guess, due to poor audio quality
(     )	Inaudible speech
_____ ((information))	Word deleted for reasons of anonymity – information about what kind of word it was, e.g. _____((town name)).
((information))	Transcriber's descriptions
[word] [word]	Overlap in speech between speakers
:	Prolongation of immediately prior sound
.hh	Speaker breathing in
hh	Speaker breathing out
>	Speech becomes faster
<	Speech slows down
<u>word</u> <u>word</u>	Speaker emphasis on word/word fragment – emphasis may be via pitch and/or amplitude
WORD	Loud speech
word=word	'Latching' with previous word/speaker i.e. no break or gap between sounds
wor-	Cut-off/ abrupt ending to a word or word fragment

wo(h)rd

(h) indicates plosiveness – associated with laughter, crying or breathlessness

°word°

Sounds are softer than the surrounding talk

## Chapter 1 – Introduction and Literature Review.

### Experiencing the presence of the deceased; symptoms or spirits?

---

This thesis is about experiences that will happen to most people at some point in their lifetime. It is estimated that between 50% (Rees, 1971) and 80% (Wiener et al, 1996) of people will experience the presence of a deceased person after the death of someone close to them. The current study defines experiences of presence as when a bereaved person experiences a voice, or other sound, vision, touch, smell, taste, or a sensorially-unspecified feeling of presence, relating to the deceased person. They may also experience a 'sign' from the deceased. There are references to such experiences throughout popular culture, films and literature, as the following vignettes illustrate;

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet's father, the late King of Denmark, appears to him and tells him who committed his murder.

In *Wuthering Heights*, towards the end of his life, Heathcliff is troubled by visions of Cathy that he sees everywhere. He cries out to Nelly "The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her!"

In *The Lion King*, Simba's father, Mufasa, appears to him in a cloud. Mufasa reminds him of his heritage and encourages Simba to take his place in the 'circle of life', as head of the pride. After this vision, Simba returns to lead the pride.

In the recent film, *Genova*, a grieving little girl sees her dead mother in the night. Her mother talks to her, comforts her and alleviates her guilt.

In these examples, the presence is of someone very close to the bereaved, is emotion-filled, and significant for the plot of the story. However, as we shall see, such experiences may in other contexts be presented very differently, as false perceptions lacking in sense and meaning. In the media, hearing voices in particular is associated with violence; the hearer is presumed to act compulsively on the dangerous commands of voices (Leudar and Thomas, 2000). Experiences of presence are situated in the controversies surrounding hallucinations in general. They are, moreover, of a highly contextually-sensitive nature. There is evidence that

cultural atmosphere even affects the frequency that these happenings are reported: it is thought that 90% of widows in Japan have these experiences (see Yamamoto et al, 1969).

There are competing descriptions of these experiences – from ‘hallucinations’, to ‘spirits’. There is no neutral way of referring to them. Throughout this study, in interviewing, writing and analysis, I have endeavoured not to make a judgement on the ‘reality’ status of these happenings. This is reflected in the terms I have used – ‘experiences of presence’ or ‘feelings or presence’. The emphasis on ‘experience’ or ‘feeling’ aligns with the phenomenal qualities of what happens and brackets questions relating to ontology. In some situations, I will use other terms, such as ‘hallucination’, but only in representing the language of participants, or of a paradigm. In general, I do not aim to make a case for what these experiences *really* are. Instead, my purpose is to describe their features, the storytelling methods by which they are conveyed, and in doing so to respect the variety of ways in which informants make sense of them.

### **1.1. Outline of the thesis**

The first task is to establish the background to this study – how these experiences are described in previous research publications. This forms the remainder of this chapter. We shall see that experiences of presence are situated in controversies that surround hallucinations in general, and that they may come under a variety of descriptions, with diverse consequences.

The second chapter explains the methodological approach and why this was fit for the current enquiry. The chapter begins by describing participants to the study and their recruitment, before describing in detail the interview process. It closes with an explanation and discussion of the chosen analytical approach which was ethnomethodological in character and influenced by phenomenology and in particular the ideas of indexicality and ‘thematic field’ (Gurwitsch, 1964).

The third chapter presents some descriptive results from the study. This includes the types of presence reported by informants, along with the frequency that these were

reported. It also offers brief summaries of informants' stories, in order to give the reader a flavour of the variety of these experiences across all of the cases.

What follows are five further empirical chapters, which focus this thesis on the narratives of participants to the study and what these can tell us about the phenomenon of 'presence'. The first of these (chapter 4) aims to demonstrate and establish a suitable method for investigating meaning of experiences, through the examination of one case in detail, the case of 'Julie'. This enquiry will show the analytical approach in concrete form, whilst at the same time examining one person's methods of contextualising her experiences of hearing a voice.

The next four chapters carry forward this method into an examination of all of the cases that reported presence in bereavement. Chapter 5 does this through examination of how references to the words used by voices, the immediate setting for the experiences, and biographies, shape the meaning of experiences of presence. Chapter 6 examines sources of meaning for those experiences of presence that were non-linguistic – the visions, smells, tastes and feelings reported by participants.

Chapter 7 builds on this by focusing on the metaphysical significances the experiences are given in the interview – symptoms, spirits and others - and the sources, or 'epistemes' from which they are inspired.

Chapter 8 pays closer attention to the function of the experiences of presence in the lives of the bereaved. Meaning and function are inextricably linked, so rather than being a whole new enquiry this chapter shifts the focus of the investigation to ask a different question of the interviews – do the experiences of presence mitigate pain and loss in a bereavement? This is a question that comes directly from the field of bereavement studies, and the answer, as we shall see, is complex, and as individual as relationships are.

The final chapter is a discussion of the findings of this research project. In it, the findings will be related to past research, both in the field of hallucination-studies and of bereavement-studies. Past theories are evaluated for their relevance. The chapter will also explore implications of the research for persons experiencing presence, including therapy for those who find it problematic.

## 1.2. Experiences of Continuing Presence - Literature Review

*“hallucinations”*

*“illusions”*

*“awareness”*

*“hearing voices”*

*“pathological grief”*

*“continuing relationships”*

This investigation is concerned with experiences that have come under a variety of descriptions, such as those above. These are not just words. Each term carries its own frame of relevancies – assumptions about what these experiences *really* are, the methods by which they should be investigated, the implications they have for the person who owns them, the social consequences of the experience. It is not enough then in this review simply to report the findings of psychological literature on this topic without a consideration of the context in which these findings are derived and consequential.

The current review then will treat the settings in which these experiences are studied, and the reported findings, as one and the same enquiry. It will soon become clear that some methods acknowledge the context-sensitive nature of experiences of presence, but others do not. For the sake of simplicity in the following discussion of each research paradigm I will sometimes use the term of that paradigm – whether this is ‘hallucinations’ or ‘continuing relationships’ – to refer to the experiences of presence that are the focus of this study. Occasionally, I will refer to sub-types of presence, including ‘voices’ and ‘visions’. In fact, as we shall see, hearing voices are the ‘sense’ of presence to have been given the most empirical attention. The first stop will be medical psychiatry. Here, seeing, hearing or feeling something that should not objectively be present is known as a ‘hallucination’.



### 1.2.1. Medical Psychiatry – hallucinations as the ‘un-understandable’

Psychiatry, like all scientific paradigms<sup>1</sup>, is a ‘disciplinary matrix’ made up of shared beliefs, values, instruments, and methods (Kuhn, 1970). These define the kinds of questions that are asked as well as the methods to be employed in answering them (Kuhn, 1970). In medical psychiatry, the writings of Karl Jaspers have been enormously influential in clinical practice and research about hallucinations. His recommendations, as outlined in *General Psychopathology*, form the foundations of modern classificatory systems, including the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) and the International Classification of Disease (ICD). Jaspers defined ‘hallucinations’ in perceptual terms;

hallucinations proper are actual false perceptions which are not in any way distortions of real perceptions but spring up on their own as something quite new and occur simultaneously with and alongside real perceptions (Jaspers, 1959, p.66).

For Jaspers, hallucinations are “actual false perceptions” which contrast with “real perceptions” of objects in the environment, and distorted real perceptions (“illusions”), where one object is taken for another. The former appear quite randomly in consciousness and have no meaningful relationship to the events they follow or to objects in the environment.

If hallucinations then are ‘false’ perceptions, they are not perceptions. So what are they? For Esquirol (see James, 1995), they were memories and fantasies, mistaken for perceptions. In fact, the term hallucination was introduced into medicine not by Jaspers but by Esquirol in 1817. This definition distinguished hallucinations from illusions, on the basis that the latter were false perceptions of existing objects and the former perceptions without objects. Hallucinations were also defined by Esquirol as dreams that take place in a waking state, due to neural anomalies;

the activity of the brain is so intense that the visionary or the hallucinatory gives a body and substance to images reproduced by memory...In hallucinations, *everything* takes place within the brain (as cited in James, 1995, my emphasis).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Some argue that ‘pseudoscience’ is a more apt term for psychiatry (see the work of psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> According to James (1995), the concept “replaced such terms as visions, voices, locutions or apparitions with one generic term” (p. 70).

This was the first medical concept of hallucinations, and at its heart is the idea that these experiences are errors, that occur in the brain and not in the world.

Jaspers developed this concept, grouping such hallucinations with other phenomena of the 'psychoses'. Unlike the neuroses, which can be grasped by the empathy of the psychiatrist, according to Jaspers the psychoses are "Un-understandable" – a group of mental states that are not amenable to empathic understanding;

In psychopathology our genetic understanding (or perception of meaningful connection) soon reaches its limits.....In psychopathology psychic phenomena appear suddenly as something entirely new, in a way we cannot understand at all. One psychic event follows another quite incomprehensively; it seems to follow arbitrarily rather than emerge (Jaspers, 1959).

According to Jaspers then hallucinations and other phenomena of the psychoses *lack meaningful connection to other events in a person's psychological life*. Trying to understand the experiences is therefore a futile exercise, and Jaspers recommended that the clinician's focus must instead be on the 'forms' that hallucinations take (noting features such as the acoustic qualities of voices), rather than their content. And this prescription is found accordingly in the accounts of hallucinations that he uses in his chapter, *Abnormal Psychic Phenomena*, which concentrate on the frequency and acoustic qualities of the verbal hallucinations of his patients, rather than the content of the experience or his patients' beliefs about what was happening to them.

The Jaspers conception of hallucination is not a historical curiosity, but is alive in the foundations of psychiatric classification today, as DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, American Psychiatric Association) demonstrates;

Hallucination: A sensory perception that has the compelling sense of reality of a true perception but that occurs without external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ (DSM IV, 1994).

In DSM, hallucinations are defined as sensory perceptions. This is not qualified with 'false', but their falseness is implied by the contrast to "true perceptions". DSM expands Jaspers' definition to add that hallucinating involves a "compelling sense of reality" – hallucinations thus have misleading qualities that make them phenomenologically indistinguishable from 'real perceptions'. Another way of looking at it is that these phenomenal qualities must be dealt with and denied in order to

produce a definition of hallucination. Similarly, a contemporary psychiatric textbook defines hallucinations as;

perceptions that occur in the absence of corresponding sensory stimuli.....Phenomenologically, hallucinations are ordinarily subjectively indistinguishable from normal perceptions. Hallucinations are often experienced as being private, so that others are not able to see or hear the same perceptions. The patient's explanation for this is typically delusional (Sadock and Sadock, 2000, p.108).

For trainee psychiatrists or nurses, this definition or that of DSM is likely to be the first they will encounter. In it, there are echoes of Jaspers' ideas. Hallucinations are once more defined in terms of perception, this time not false perceptions but 'abnormal' ones. Hallucinations happen to 'patients', those with mental illness, usually 'privately'. Of particular interest is the fact that the patient's meaning for their experience is presented as typically delusional<sup>3</sup>. In medical-psychiatry then, hallucinations are random phenomena with misleadingly realistic qualities that relate to nothing but individual pathology<sup>4</sup>.

So how do you investigate an experience that is inherently meaningless? The answer of psychiatric research is to look for the cause of the experience. One method is to situate the cause in genetics and trace hallucinations and schizophrenia through families. This research programme, once dominant, has receded in recent years due to the problematic nature of this evidence (see Marshall, 1990). Instead, the answer of modern psychiatry is to investigate hallucinations as a malfunctioning of the brain. For example, Shergill et al (2000) identify their research methodology in the following way;

We used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to compare the neural correlates of inner speech and auditory verbal imagery in patients with schizophrenia who were predisposed to hallucinations and comparison subjects (Shergill et al, 2000, p.1691).

---

<sup>3</sup> In fact the words 'hallucination' and 'delusion' are often used synonymously (see Leudar, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> century psychiatrists and medics including Esquirol debated whether it was possible for hallucinations to co-exist with reason (James, 1995; Leudar and Thomas, 2000, Chapter 1).

They discovered that schizophrenic patients with auditory hallucinations<sup>5</sup> have different patterns of brain activation when talking silently to themselves. Similarly Hoffman and Varanko (2006) summarised their research concern as locating “the neural basis of verbal hallucinations”, and (Gavrilescu et al 2010) used fMRI and found that “AH (auditory hallucination) patients had significantly reduced interhemispheric connectivity in both A1 and A2 (primary and secondary auditory cortices) when compared with non-AH patients and healthy controls” (p. 1149). Research findings showing neural correlates for hallucinations – whether this is cited as under, or over-activation of an area of the brain - produce implications for therapy. So Blumberger et al (2010) seek therapeutic solutions in “repetitive transcranial stimulation” of those with hallucinations (p.85)<sup>6</sup>.

The search then is not for etiology of any kind – it is not social, emotional or psychological causes that are sought but physical ones. The tools of this research paradigm – typically fMRI and electroencephogram (EEG) – as well as the therapeutic solutions that are funded and investigated, reflect this philosophy.

So what happens when medical psychiatry investigates ‘hallucinations’ that occur after a bereavement – a clearly distressing life event? Are the hallucinations still presented as random and meaningless happenings? The following is an excerpt from a recent study in the journal *Psychopathology*;

She....reported hearing the voice of her deceased daughter, olfactory perceptions of her, seeing her shadow and being touched by her. She experienced hearing the natural and genuine-sounding voice daily, most often while alone and during the nights. The voice (“Mamma, don’t be afraid, I’ll come back”) came from the outer subjective space<sup>7</sup>.....The psychopathological examination of the patient (who was dressed in black) yielded a lack of facial expression....She reported decreased drive and sad mood (Baethge, 2002, p.298).

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<sup>5</sup> Most studies focus on auditory hallucinations, perhaps because these are the most common kind reported, and in the psychiatric paradigm hold diagnostic significance as “first rank symptoms” of ‘schizophrenia’ (Schneider, 1959).

<sup>6</sup> Neural correlates for hallucinations of course do not indicate a clear cause-effect relationship – are the neural abnormalities the cause of the hallucinations? Or do the hallucinations result in differences in the brain? Might the life experiences of those who hallucinate cause their brains to look or function differently? It is impossible to answer such questions with the results of the neurological studies (see Bentall, 2003, for a discussion).

<sup>7</sup> This appears to be a contradiction in terms – ‘subjective space’ is commonly used to refer to ‘inner’ experience – how can it be both ‘inner’ and ‘outer’?

As in Jaspers there is a focus on the forms of the woman's experiences rather than the content – the words she hears are in fact bracketed and only of subsidiary relevance in the report. The hallucinations are not treated as understandable through reference to the bereavement, but instead perceptual aspects of the experience are emphasised – the experience of smelling her daughter is described as an “olfactory perception” and the voice comes from “outer subjective space”. It is “genuine-sounding”, hinting at the misleading nature of the experience in the definitions cited above. There is an absence of biographical references in the account, and the woman's emotions are only relevant in so far as they indicate psychopathology. The vivid grief, sadness, and longing of bereavement in this patient are a “decreased drive” and “sad mood”.

Similarly Kersting (2004) and Wells (1983) reported hallucinations in cases of ‘pathological grief’. The following comes from Kersting (2004);

In Mrs A's case, the persisting grief hallucinations in conjunction with depressive and traumatic symptoms were the expression of a pathological grieving process (2004, p.51).

So in medical-psychiatry, hallucinations whether after a bereavement or otherwise are investigated in terms of their causal antecedents and they find meaning only as symptoms of a mental illness. Emotional and interpersonal aspects of the experiences are either irrelevant, or triggers for an essentially meaningless process. Events in a person's life history, or in their culture and society, are ignored altogether. Even after a bereavement, the experiences are explained rather than understood – although rather than indicating ‘schizophrenia’ they are associated with an alternative category – ‘pathological grief’. Hallucinations are in short, framed as a problem, and positive aspects of the experiences (that as we shall see, are reported in other investigative settings) are absent.

But there is alternative evidence indicating that hallucinations can have meaning beyond that of being a symptom. Firstly, there is indisputable evidence that hearing voices is strongly associated with significant life events, most pertinently of course bereavement (Rees, 1971), but also abuse (Honig et al, 1998; Ensink, 1994; Altman et al, 1997), and a variety of other emotional traumas (Siegel, 1984; Comer et al 1967; Belenky 1979, as cited in Bentall, 2000).

Secondly, hallucinations are common in people free from psychopathology (Sidgwick, 1894; West, 1948; Bentall and Slade, 1985; Posey and Losch, 1983; Eaton et al, 1991; Tien, 1991; Barrett and Etheridge, 1992; Altman et al, 1997; Leudar et al, 1997; Leudar, Hayes and Turner Baker, in preparation). Estimates of frequency have ranged considerably due to differences in methodology, but overall they indicate that somewhere between 40% and 70% of people will experience hallucinations at some point in their lives (Eaton et al 1991; Posey and Losch, 1983)<sup>8</sup>. Bentall (2000) concluded that “for every person who receives a diagnosis of schizophrenia...it would appear that there are approximately 10 who experience hallucinations without receiving the diagnosis” (p. 95). Hallucinations then seem to be a *relatively common experience, and do not the majority of the time relate to psychopathology*. The experiences must say something more about life than medical-psychiatry would officially advise.

### **1.2.2. Cognitive Psychology – hallucinations as cognitive mistakes**

The research programme of reduction and causal explanation extends into the cognitive paradigm in psychology. Here, however the reduction encompasses cognitive processes rather than neural processes alone<sup>9</sup>. The main theory of hallucinations in cognitive psychology is the source monitoring hypothesis. According to this;

people who hallucinate make faulty judgments about the sources of their experiences, and it is for this reason that they mistake their inner speech or visual imagery for stimuli external to themselves. (Bentall, 2003)

A hallucination may not be a medical symptom, but it *is* a mistake, where an internal event is taken to be stimuli in the environment. This is consistent with the DSM definition, but extends it by specifying the error involved in hallucinations – it is at the level of faulty judgement. The hypothesis may be divided into two sub-theories, based on differences in the precise reasons for the faulty judgements; 1) the theory

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<sup>8</sup> The first survey in this area was conducted by the society for psychical research (Sidgwick, 1894). More recently however Sandra Escher and Marius Romme of the Netherlands revived this interest. This happened when Romme and one of his patients appeared on a popular Dutch television show and encouraged viewers who heard voices to write to them. They had hundreds of responses from people who coped well with voices.

<sup>9</sup> The two may be combined (see Seal et al, 2004, for a review).

originating with Frith (1992) that hallucinations arise due to an impairment in monitoring one's intentions and actions; 2) Bentall's thesis that hallucinations result from a cognitive bias towards attributing inner events to outer (Bentall, 2003). The main difference between the theories is that Frith's is impairment-based (usually at the neural level), but Bentall's is bias-based – he cites other factors, including emotional and cultural, alongside a neural problem, that may contribute to the cognitive bias (Bentall, 2003). Despite the differences in detail the same central premise underlies both – the person that hallucinates *as a trait* confuses internally-generated events for external perceptions. In the case of hearing a voice, the internal event that is mistaken is specified as inner speech.

The methods used to investigate this theory are experimental in character. A typical study would examine auditory hallucinations in particular and involve a comparison of three groups; those with a diagnosis of psychosis who experience auditory hallucinations; those with a diagnosis of psychosis who do not experience hallucinations; and a control group of people free from psychiatric diagnosis and who do not experience hallucinations. The three groups may be asked to perform a task in the laboratory such as reading aloud word lists into a microphone. These lists are played back to the participant but in a distorted form and they are asked to classify each word as 'self' or 'other' generated, or to say if they were 'not sure'. A typical example of this methodology may be found in Johns et al (2006).

The aim of this research programme is to determine whether the 'hallucinators' make more 'other' attributions for their own speech, and thus reveal a "deficit in verbal self-monitoring" (Johns et al, 2006). Evidence from this paradigm has typically supported the source-monitoring theory (Bentall and Slade, 1985; Young et al, 1987; Bentall et al 1991; Rankin and O'Carroll, 1995; Morrison and Haddock, 1997; Johns et al, 2006) though not without exception (see Seal et al, 1997). The therapeutic implications of this evidence can be seen in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), where practitioners encourage people who hallucinate to reattribute their experiences to the 'inside'.

Evidence from beyond the paradigm though has not followed this pattern of theory-confirmation. Leudar and Thomas (2000) used a semi-structured interview with voice-hearers with and without a psychiatric diagnosis instead of an experimental

methodology. They found that voice-hearers did not conflate their experiences with their environments because they made use of what they termed 'mundane reality testing', to determine the source of the voice. This was not the kind of cognitive process of determining 'inner' experience from 'outer' that the source-monitoring hypothesis suggests, but instead involved everyday actions such as looking over their shoulder for the speaker or asking companions if they had heard anything. Many voice-hearers were also aware that they were hearing a voice, rather than a person in their proximal environment, without needing to use these procedures, and significantly, this knowledge did not change the experience into something else (i.e. inner speech). This knowledge was not separate from, but somehow constituted the experience itself.

Historical case studies have also indicated some complexity to the ontological categories used by those who have heard voices. For example, Daniel Paul Schreber, in his memoirs of his experiences, showed that he assigned his experiences to three domains; 'inner', 'outer-social', and 'outer-divine' (Schreber, 1903/1955; Leudar & Thomas, 2000). St Teresa of Avila assigned her voices to three separate categories, none of which were 'inner' or 'outer' (see Leudar, 2001). In interviews with student voice-hearers I found that informants struggled to use the terms 'inner' and 'outer' in descriptions of the voices they heard, sometimes inventing new categories to get round this problem. These included using the categories relatively rather than in absolute terms - such as 'more inner' or 'less inner'. Some used 'inner' and 'outer' differently when referring to 1) the phenomenal qualities of their experience or 2) their judgments about its relation to 'self' after some reflection (Hayes, 2008). It seems that the inner/outer dualism is not only too simplistic in philosophy (see Popper, 1972; Wittgenstein, 1953) but also in everyday speech<sup>10</sup>.

In common with medical psychiatry the source monitoring thesis is concerned with causality and it brackets the content of the experience. This is not the case with all research in cognitive and cognitive-behavioural psychology as a minority of studies have focused on aspects of meaning (Legg and Gilbert, 2006; Hayward, 2003; Chin

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<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein cautioned against using terms appropriate to physical phenomena equivalently with mental phenomena. Mental events, thoughts, cannot be inner in the same sense that one physical object can be inside another (Wittgenstein, 1953).



et al, 2009; Jones et al, 2003). Legg and Gilbert (2006) for example studied gender and hearing voices using a semi-structured interview method, finding that for both men and women their dominant voice was most likely to be male, and that insults towards men and women reflected the different ways men and women are derogated in everyday social contexts. Chin et al (2009) and Hayward (2003) both studied the concept of 'relating' to voices, the latter study finding that voice-relating mirrors interpersonal relating. These studies pointed to interesting and important aspects of the experience of hearing voices. Yet the methodologies employed were not ideal for an investigation of personal meanings – the use of structured interview schedules targeted at a particular aspect of the experience (gender, or relating), and Q-methodology place obvious restrictions on participant responses. Firstly, participants are confined to giving answers that relate to existing theories and concepts and this may stifle new/idiosyncratic meanings. Secondly, responses rarely allow for ambivalences in beliefs about voices or changes in meaning over time.

But why is meaning so important when it comes to studying hallucinations? Firstly, hallucinations show a high degree of context sensitivity, the experience itself changing, (although still recognisable) across different cultural (Al-Issa, 1978; Yamamoto, 1969) and historical contexts (Leudar and Thomas, 2000; Leudar, 2001). If they were simply a physical symptom, hallucinations would show greater universality.

Secondly, several studies have shown consistently that meanings are in fact *the* aspects of the experience that determine levels of distress in patients (Birchwood and Chadwick, 1997; Close and Garety, 1998; Sayer et al, 2000; van der Gaag et al, 2003; Jones et al, 2003), influence whether patients act compulsively on the commands of voices (Beck-Sander et al, 1997), and even, separate patients who hear voices from non-patients who hear voices (Romme et al 1992, Honig et al, 1998; Pennings and Romme, 1996). For example, non-patients, those who are coping with their experiences, are more likely to see themselves as stronger than their voices (Romme et al 1992; Honig et al, 1998; Pennings and Romme, 1996), less likely to be frightened of them (Jones et al, 2003), but more likely to consider the worth of what their voices say (Leudar et al, 1997). In short, those who cope with their verbal hallucinations are more likely to engage in a dialogue with them, treating them as meaningful utterances, rather than avoid them or ignore them.

Thirdly, patients and former patients through various media have urged mental health professionals to engage with personal meanings about their hallucinations (Gray, 2008; Cockshutt, 2004; First World Congress on Hearing Voices, 2009), and what's more, this engagement has well-documented therapeutic benefits (Romme et al, 1992; Chadwick and Birchwood, 1996; Davies et al, 1999; Corstens, Longden & May, in preparation).

So meaning is central to whether hallucinations are personally problematic or not. But this important aspect of the experience is not only disregarded but *treated with suspicion* within a medical-psychiatric framework, and only given cursory attention in a cognitive paradigm.

### **1.2.3. Voices, Visions, and Meaning**

Yet voices, visions, and other experiences of presence have not always been known as hallucinations - the concept did not exist until Esquirol's definition. It was this and the influence of the Enlightenment that transformed the significance of hearing voices and seeing visions from supernatural signs into symptoms of insanity (Schmidt, 2000).

References to seeing and hearing from angels appear frequently in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, and these find meaning not as signs of madness but as messages from God. Similarly in the New Testament, angels appear to Mary to tell her of her pregnancy, and Saul hears the voice of God which spurs him on to change his ways – this life-transformative experience coined the term 'Damascus road experience'. The prophet Mohammed saw and heard an angel who presented to him a message from God – a message that Muslims believe forms the basis of the Koran. Watkins (1998) observed that several of the world's major religions in fact originated in voice-hearing experiences and that references to such experiences appear from ancient Greece, to the Middle Ages, to contemporary accounts.

Many prominent historical figures have reported voices and visions. In Ancient Greece, Socrates is said to have heard a 'daemon' who guided his actions. This was taken by Socrates and those around him to be a source of divine wisdom (see Leudar and Thomas, Chapter 1). Joan of Arc heard the voices of saints which

advised her to join the French Army (Pernoud, 1962). The personification of the voices as saints positioned them as a source of extraordinary intelligence and divine wisdom, and she used them to account for her actions in her trial. John Bunyan, eventually the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, heard a voice of Jesus, that urged him to reconsider his life as a 'sinner', and also heard a 'tempter' that stopped him from praying. These experiences were not taken to be signs of madness but as expressions of his moral conflict and became decisive moments in his religious career (Leudar and Sharrock, 2002). Saint Teresa of Avila documented voices and visions originating from three sources; 'God', 'the devil', and her imagination. Each source had quite a different significance – "the imagination enfeebles the soul, while heavenly visions afforded spiritual riches and renewed bodily strength" (St. Teresa of Avila, 1997). There is a similar concern in so-called charismatic Christian movements as to whether the voices believers hear are the true word of God or in fact the work of imagination or the devil (Luhmann, 2009). Clearly the questions that are asked about voices and visions in religious and spiritual settings are different from those in the clinic (as well as those in most psychological research) – the ontological categories are not simply 'self' or 'other' but tend to be 'self/imagination', 'other-divine', or 'other-evil'.

The experiences in these stories are of high personal and social significance. They are not private matters that indicate individual pathology but may in contrast even be used as evidence of a person's moral worth in a trial (see chapter 1 of Leudar and Thomas, 2000, on Socrates). They can also be identity-transformative experiences. Watkins (1998) identifies the functions of hearing voices in spiritual settings as including conversion and vocation, guidance, direction and inspiration, instruction and illumination. This diversity of function contrasts with a medical paradigm where as hallucinations, the experiences have little significance beyond that of perceptual error and as sources of delusion and unfounded action. In fact, all of the historical figures cited above have been diagnosed retrospectively as mentally ill – but as neither this concept nor psychological medicine existed during their lifetimes the validity of this practice has been questioned (Leudar and Sharrock, 2002).

Hearing voices are commonly reported in religious settings to this day – in a survey of religious experiences, 7% concerned hearing a voice (Hardy, 1979). Often, the

voices are taken to be prophecies based on a divine source of knowledge<sup>11</sup>. In some religious settings, the competing descriptions 'voices are messages from the divine', and 'voices are signs of mental illness' may co-exist and be used flexibly dependent on local circumstances. In spiritualism, mediums claim to hear the voices of deceased spirits and to be able to hold conversations with them (see Stokes, 2000). Voices and visions are also regarded as a gift in cultures practising shamanism – as a call to become a healer (Al-Issa, 1978; Littlewood and Lipsedge, 1993). This idea of voices and visions as signs of therapeutic talent is in ironic opposition to the account of the 'hallucinator' as mistaken, deluded and in need of therapy. The meaning of these experiences then is highly social and so is contingent upon cultural and historical context.

Even within psychology, a variety of descriptions have been available and practised. Some of these link 'hallucinations' to aspects of a person's life, to emotions, and actions, rather than perceptions only.

The psychologist Pierre Janet, like Esquirol, classed hallucinations as a kind of memory. In Janet's theory, these were not due to intense brain activity but were the result of 'fixed ideas', a type of action that was incomplete and impulsive (Janet, 1925, as cited in Leudar and Thomas, 2000). Janet described voices, verbal hallucinations, as consisting in "a simple inner language, repeating monotonously ever the same idea" (Janet, 1901, p. 388, as cited in Leudar and Thomas, 2000, p.76). According to Janet, these ideas/voices remained 'fixed' and repetitive because they are not integrated through inward conversations which adapt them to the environment and give them psychological completion (Janet, 1903, as cited in Leudar, 2001). In other words, hallucinations were those actions that had not been linked meaningfully to other aspects of the person's life and personality. Janet in fact concluded that treating hallucinations as false sensations was superficial, and not the most interesting feature of the experience (Janet, 1925, as cited in Leudar and Thomas, 2000). Janet instead wrote of a 'reality function' to experiences – the 'realness' of an experience was not to do with its correspondence to an object in the environment, but a matter of psychological integration (Mann, 2006).

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<sup>11</sup> These are tested as genuine messages from God or the work of imagination by whether others in the community can relate to the prophecy, and also of course by what happens next.

The relationship to action and memory in Janet's theory of hallucinations gives the 'hallucinator' a less passive role in their experiences and also links hallucinations to biography. In common with medical psychiatry however, hallucinations according to Janet were inherently pathological – not as symptoms of 'schizophrenia' but the sequelae of 'hysteria'<sup>12</sup>. But as mentioned above, we know that hallucinations happen frequently in those without serious psychological problems.

In Freud, we see various descriptions of hallucinations. Like Janet, this includes hallucinations as a type of dissociated memory, but in Freud this memory is not incomplete, but has been repressed, with a high emotional charge. The memory holds an "unbearable idea" that the ego separates itself from, but the cost is a denial of reality (1966, 1949; 1894). In other places, hallucinations are caused not by unbearable ideas but by wish fulfillment. Freud's theory is that very young children often hallucinate the fulfillment of their internal needs when they are not being met in reality. However the disappointment that follows the hallucination (in reality, the need has not been met and so the child is still hungry, wants attention etc) leads to a form of reality-discrimination where the child learns to rely less on this mode of wish fulfillment. This is a normal developmental process in children but in adults, according to Freud, this process is either the sequelae of neuroses or is delusional (and a part of psychoses). The exception to this is if the wish fulfillment takes place during sleep in the form of a dream (a normal process, see "The Interpretation of Dreams", 1999; 1899). In fact, the two conceptions of hallucination - psychological defence and wish fulfillment – are really two parts of the same theory as Freud demonstrates in his case examples;

A young girl gave her first impulsive affection to a man and firmly believed in the return of her love. As a matter of fact she was mistaken.....Finally on a certain day, she waited for him in a state of intense excitement. The day wore on without his coming; after all the trains by which he could arrive had gone by, her condition passed into one of hallucinatory confusion. He *is come*, she hears his voice in the garden, hastens downstairs in her night-dress to receive him. From that time she lived for two months in a happy dream, of which the content was that he was there, ever by her side, everything as it was a little while ago

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<sup>12</sup> Janet's ideas on hallucinations developed and he later made a distinction between 'true' hallucinations and 'symbolic' hallucinations. The latter were due to *conscious* 'obsessions', rather than 'fixed ideas' split off from conscious life (Janet, 1903, as cited in Leudar and Sharrock, 2002).

(before the time of the disappointment against which she had so strenuously defended herself) (Freud, 1949, p. 73; 1894).

The hallucination of presence in this example is both an attempt to fulfil a wish for her sweetheart to be with her and a defence against the idea that she had been forsaken. So in Freud's theory, hallucinations are associated with infantile processes, and are normal in children but pathological in adults. The main difference from hallucinations in psycho-medical settings today is that they are not un-understandable but are linked to a person's needs (typically emotional). Moreover the reality-check that the person makes is not a cognitive judgement about the source of their experiences but is based on what happens *after* the hallucination – the disappointment that follows indicates its status as a hallucination rather than a person in the environment. So in Freud's theory, hallucinations are meaningful not as mistakes but as a psychological response to un-met needs. This theory accounts for the feeling of reality that accompanies hallucinations, but wish fulfillment does not easily explain those hallucinations that are unpleasant and unwanted (unless they are preferred to an even more unbearable idea).

Conversely, some psychological theories have conceptualised hallucinations not as a defence but as an intrusion, that is disowned due to meta-cognitive processes about the acceptability of the thought (Morrison, 2001). Others have commented on the intense feelings that accompany hallucinations. William James wrote of a "feeling of reality" that may not only come from the senses but can also be given independently of them (1902). According to James, this is not an intellectual operation but an embodied experience (James, 1902). Others still have studied verbal hallucinations, hearing voices, in terms of their linguistic features. In fact, a strong case for treating hallucinations as meaningful lies in the fact that many of them are verbal, involving language, and language is inherently meaningful (Leudar, 2001). Leudar et al (1997) observed that voice-language had many of the same features as ordinary conversation, and that much of the content of voices was focused on the mundane activities of the hearer. This language had both representational and pragmatic functions, and investigation revealed that the most common functions of voice talk were to issue directives, evaluatives, and questions to the hearer. Furthermore, voice-identities were typically aligned with significant others in the hearer's life. Experiences of voices were not meaningless to

participants in this study (nor the interviewers) but related to ordinary people and ordinary activities. Davies et al (1999) using a case study methodology made similar observations about voices and in addition found that the voices were not only personified as significant others in the hearer's life but were responsive to events in the social world and even constituted by them. For example the hearer, 'Peg', heard voices in response to the Aberfan<sup>13</sup> disaster, and the Dunblane tragedy<sup>14</sup>, and both times she heard the cries of children. Treating voices, and voice language, as meaningful, is the basis of therapeutic techniques that encourage the hearer to dialogue with the voice/s – the benefits of which have been documented (Davies et al, 1999; Chadwick and Birchwood, 1994; Corstens, Longden and May, in press; Romme et al, 2009). Methodologies that allow the possibility that voices and visions are meaningful produce different findings to those that limit the enquiry to causal explanation.

In anti-psychiatry and 'social psychiatry' voices and visions take on other meanings; as expressions of distress (Lynch, 2004; Romme, 1996), as expressions of dysfunctional family relationships (Laing and Esterson, 1970), as responses to alienating and oppressive social conditions (Ussher, 1991; Lynch, 2004), and as features of social organisation and the exercise of power (Rosenhan, 1973; Foucault, 1967). This expands the field of significance of voices and visions further into a person's (traumatic) biography, social and existential concerns, and emotions, these writers arguing that treating voices and visions as meaningless symptoms only confounds a person's self-alienation and suffering. But are voices and visions *by their very nature* related to trauma? Or can they also signify more everyday meanings? One aim of the current thesis is to investigate these questions (see Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8).

#### **1.2.4. Hallucinations and illusions as a grief response**

We have seen that medical-psychiatry treats hallucinations in bereavement as mistaken perceptions and as signs of pathological grief. But alternative descriptions exist in the field of bereavement studies. Here, hallucinations are largely presented

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<sup>13</sup> In 1966, 116 children and 28 adults were killed when a colliery spoil heap collapsed in Aberfan, South Wales.

<sup>14</sup> In 1996, 16 children and a teacher were murdered at a primary school in Dunblane, Scotland.

as “normal and helpful accompaniments of widowhood” (Rees, 1971, p.37). In fact, in this literature there is often an active attempt by authors to dissociate such experiences from a symptom-formulation – for example, Hinton (1967) adds to his description;

Quite normal people, grieving over their loss, have glimpses of the person who has died....People having such hallucinations may wonder if they are going mad, but it usually comforts them to know that many other sane people have similar experiences following bereavement (Hinton, 1967, p.181).

Similarly, Glick, Weiss and Parkes (1974) state that “Unlike the hallucinating psychotic, they (the widows) had full insight into the illusory character of their perceptions” (p. 147)<sup>15</sup>. The dissociation from psychosis here is on the basis of the ‘insight’ of the widows in their study, but it can also occur on other grounds – one author claiming that “mourning hallucinations” are culturally-specific ways of coping with intense feelings in “Hopi Indians” (Shen, 1986, p.365), others referring to continuing relationships with the deceased (see below).

In this field of study – bereavement research – *normal grief* is a causal trigger for the unusual experiences, not pathological grief or schizophrenia. Moreover this cause is not located in the brain but in intense emotional processes – loss and longing.

In the largest survey study on this subject to date, Rees (1971) interviewed 287 people who had lost a spouse and found that a feeling of presence was the most common grief experience, followed by visions and voices (in similar amounts), and tactile hallucinations. Moreover the experiences were associated with happy marriages – there was an absence of them in those widows (11 of them) who described their marriages as unhappy. Other authors have suggested that the experiences appear most frequently in widows who were more ‘dependent’ on their husbands (Glick, Weiss and Parkes, 1974). All in all, Rees (1971) found that 46.7% of participants had some kind of hallucination – but this proportion may have been even higher if he had not excluded those who ‘rationalised’ the experience (p. 38).

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<sup>15</sup> There is no evidence that hallucinating ‘psychotics’ do not have this insight – Leudar and Thomas (2000) noted that those with and without a diagnosis of schizophrenia used practical activities to determine the status of their experiences. The authors termed this ‘mundane reality testing’ (see chapter 9).



Rees' (1971) survey also found that most widows/widowers kept their experiences private to them before participating in the study – only 27.7% telling another person what had happened – and the author concluded that this points towards significant stigma surrounding the hallucinations. Two studies have since replicated this finding (Grimby, 1996; Conant, 1996), Grimby (1996) noting that in the case of one elderly man who did disclose his experiences to family members, his family arranged for him to have a psychiatric examination, which he reluctantly attended.

In his studies of bereavement, Colin Murray Parkes documented 'hallucinations' and 'illusions' as reflecting a search for the 'lost object' - the deceased person who is absent and longed for is found, albeit briefly (Parkes, 1972; Parkes, 1965; Glick, Weiss and Parkes, 1974). Marris (1958) framed the experiences as a withdrawal from a harsh reality. Situating the experiences not only in perception but also in terms of emotional needs brings these ideas closer to Freud's theory of wish fulfillment – and indeed there have been well-documented benefits to these experiences in bereavement. In particular, they have been associated with less loneliness, (Glick et al, 1974), more restful sleep, mitigation of intense pain and loss (Parkes, 1972), and as providing guidance and encouragement for the bereaved (Conant, 1996). Hallucinations in this field of study then can be a means of coping rather than a source of delusion. However there is another side to the experiences – Davies described an initial fear that some people may feel when they experience a presence (Davies, 1997) and Rees (1971) found that although 68.8% found the hallucinations helpful, 5.9% found them unpleasant and 25.5% found them neither helpful nor unhelpful. The precise reasons for these differences are not clear, but the methodology of the current thesis allows the functions of the experiences to be examined in detail (see Chapter 8).

There are other points of disagreement – some authors suggesting that these experiences are most likely following sudden deaths, (Glick, Weiss and Parkes, 1974; Conant, 1996), but others finding these to be equally common in sudden and forewarned deaths (Rees, 1971). The current study aims to illuminate this issue by studying the experiences of presence in a variety of bereavements.

Parkes, an influential figure in bereavement studies, largely normalised hallucinations and illusions in bereavement as reflecting 'attachment', which as

understood in psychology is not a matter of pathology but occurs in all close relationships (see Bowlby, 1969). However this normalisation has a temporal dimension – the experiences are frequent and expected in the first 1-6 weeks, but after 6 months (except at anniversaries) vivid experiences of presence indicate pathological grief (Parkes, 1965).

So, defined as a reaction to grief, the hallucinations and illusions are normal. But this definition also means that if these experiences continue beyond 6 months, as markers of intense grief, they in turn indicate an 'abnormal' grief process. However not all bereavement literature limits the definition of experiences of presence to a grief-reaction.

### **1.2.5. Continuing Relationships**

Theories of the 'Continuing Bond' were a response to a dominant model of bereavement that cites the work of grief as aiming for the eventual relinquishment of ties with the deceased (Stroebe et al, 1992; Klass, 1996; Huang, 2008). In this view the breaking of bonds is regarded as necessary for the bereaved to adjust to the death and move on with their lives (Bowlby, 1980). Continuing bond studies in contrast cite the benefits of maintaining an active connection to the deceased in helping a person to cope with the loss (Klass, 1999; Klass, 2001; Stroebe et al, 1992; Conant, 1992). They also move away from a 'stage' model of grief that prescribes what constitutes 'normal' and 'abnormal' bereavement.

Huang (2008) has suggested that the term continuing 'relationship' may be preferable to 'bond' as it reflects the dynamic nature of the process. Such continuing relationships may include powerful dreams of the deceased, talking to the deceased, talking about them to others, doing things for them – and most pertinently for this study, experiencing the deceased's presence. The experiences of presence in this literature are therefore embedded in a family of other activities relating not to pathology but to the bereaved's (changing) relationship to the deceased. This may include feelings of grief and loss, but is not restricted to this. Within this field of study, experiences of presence are considered as one means of resolving 'unfinished business' with the deceased.

The separation of continuing relationships from medical-psychiatry is reflected in the terms that are used to describe the phenomena; they may be known as an “awareness” (Davies, 1997), “evocative experiences” (Wiener et al, 1996), “images” (Conant, 1996), “sense of presence” (Conant, 1996), or “inner representations” (Klass, 1992). The relevance of the category ‘hallucination’ is in fact often openly denied (Conant, 1996; Grimby, 1996).

In some cultures, continuing relationships with the deceased are not only accepted but are furthermore socially-prescribed (see Yamamoto et al, 1969, on Japan, and Huang, 2008, on Taiwan). This has been shown to affect the experience of presence itself – in terms of the greater frequency of these happenings, and also in terms of the bereaved’s worries about their sanity as a result of them (Yamamoto et al, 1969). As stated above, such anxieties are commonly reported in UK (Rees, 1971; Hinton, 1967), but none of the Japanese widows in Yamamoto et al (1969) feared for their sanity. The authors concluded that the cultural atmosphere in Japan normalised continuing relationships with the deceased and thus helped these widows to integrate their experiences (Yamamoto et al, 1969).

The tools of the ‘continuing bond’ paradigm - interviews and personal accounts - reflect a concern with meaning. Very few studies have in fact focused on experiences of presence in particular, but those that have explored this topic have found them to be richly significant experiences, relating to changes in personal relationships and transitions in identity (Klass, 1992; Conant, 1996). Like hallucinations in religious settings, the experiences may be personally transformative, leading to an accommodation of a more spiritual outlook on life (Klass, 1999). Exactly how experiences of presence interact with a person’s spiritual sense, and how both influence personal identity, will be concerns of the current research (see Chapter 7).

This thesis is also concerned with the functions of these experiences in a wider sense, in particular in coping with the bereavement. We have already seen that several authors in bereavement studies have pointed towards the helpful nature of these experiences (Glick et al, 1974; Parkes, 1972). A narrative study (Conant, 1996) reported additional functions of experiences of presence in bereaved widows, including a “resolution of helplessness and feeling unsafe after the death”, alleviating

isolation, and reassurance that there is life after death (p.191). Personal interpretations then clearly matter for whether the experiences are helpful or problematic. In addition, Conant (1996) suggested that the experiences function to provide “a place of inner safety from which to acknowledge a disturbing reality” (p.181). This transforms the experience of hallucinations from a reality-testing failure *to a means of accepting the reality* of the death. Chapter 8 asks whether this is the case for informants to this project.

The study by Roberta Conant (1996) is the closest in methodological approach to the current research, but there are important differences. Firstly, Conant’s study was with 9 widows, all of whom had experienced the sudden deaths of their husbands. In fact, most research has studied experiences of presence in spouses, and only a few in the losses of children (Klass, 1999; Wiener, et al, 1996). Interviews in the current research cover a variety of bonds – spouses, partners, parents, and children, but also grandparents, siblings, uncles, cousins, and family friends. Some of these deaths were sudden, including the result of accidents and in one case, murder, and others were expected, either over the course of a few weeks, months, or longer. Analysis of interviews is also different – Conant (1996) conducted a thematic analysis of interviews, and collapsed them into a composite vignette in the report. The current study will aim to maintain the integrity of each case in the report as well as to present narratives in the context of the local activity that is being performed in the interview.

In ‘continuing bond’ research then, it is not only the grief that gives meaning to the experiences of presence but also the relationship with the deceased. The current research is not a ‘continuing bond’ study, in that it does not aim to prove this theory. However in investigating participant descriptions and respecting personal meanings, this thesis offers an evaluation of the relevance of this concept. There are significant gaps in the knowledge of just how experiences of presence relate to continuing relationships, as outlined in a recent textbook of bereavement;

We have yet to understand the importance of sensing the dead in sustaining the bond with the dead and how interactions with the dead compare with other experiences deemed hallucinatory (Walter, 1999, p.57).

As the first systematic enquiry into the properties of these phenomena, the current research aims to clarify these concerns and others.

#### **1.2.6. Experiences of presence, and this study**

Experiences of presence may be known in a variety of ways. From the intense and embodied feeling of reality cited in William James' work, to the false perceptions of Jaspers. Put simply, controversies about the phenomena centre on the following questions; do they represent illness?; are they meaningful, or meaningless?; are they helpful, or problematic?; do they represent contact with the supernatural? In medical psychiatry the experiences are hallucinations and are explained causally as symptoms of mental illness. As false perceptions, they are treated as 'un-understandable' and not linked meaningfully with a person's life. In cognitive psychology there is also a search for the causes of hallucinations at the expense of meaning. In this paradigm, the cause is attributed to a faulty cognitive process in those who hallucinate.

On the other hand, studies that have examined experiences of presence as meaningful have found the possibilities of this to be almost endless – from the spiritually transformative (see Bunyan in Leudar and Sharrock, 2002), to expressing distress about a tragic national event (see 'Peg' in Davies et al, 1997). Experiences of presence have reflected changes in personal relationships and have helped bereaved people to come to terms with significant loss. The personal stories in the report that follows will bring these experiences alive and allow us to see which of these descriptions, if any, are most relevant to the bereaved themselves. This will be achieved through a close examination of the sources of meaning – biographical, psychological, spiritual and others – that participants use in their stories.

We have seen what the existing research says about experiences of presence in general and in bereavement in particular. The current research does not seek a causal explanation for experiences of presence, nor to predict who of the bereaved will hallucinate and who will not. Instead, it begins with the assumption that the experiences are meaningful, and aims to expand knowledge in this area in several ways. As an approach to hallucinations in general, the study does not confine the experiences to pre-determined categories and concepts based on past theories.

Instead the openness of the interviewing technique, which will be described in detail in the next chapter, allows informants a choice about how they describe their experiences, including whether they refer to existing theories or even produce their own. Conversely, the flexibility of the interviewing approach also permits participants to make their experiences meaning/less – to reduce them or dismiss them. The narrative-approach affords a detailed description of the ‘explanandum’ - an essential foundation for any kind of explanation of the phenomena (see Sharrock and Read, 2002, chapter 3). The detailed stories that result allow us to tackle un-answered questions - such as exactly why some people cope with their hallucinations/presence and why some do not – and to understand the roots of this in meaning.

In terms of the specific topic of experiences of presence in bereavement, this project is the first systematic examination of the properties of these experiences. It is also the first enquiry into participant meanings of their experiences of presence, and the sources of this. The current research is also the first to study the narratives of presence in bereaved people from a variety of backgrounds, bonds with the deceased, and circumstances of the death.

In summary, the aims of the study are as follows;

- a. To elucidate the phenomenal characteristics of experiences of presence in its variety. This involves paying careful attention to the terms participants themselves used to describe their experience/s.
- b. To determine the sources of meaning that participants used in the interview – in particular what is in the ‘thematic field’ of their experience/s?
- c. To determine how participants used resources in religion, spirituality, psychiatry and psychology. This includes the question of how these experiences influence or are influenced by a person’s faith or spiritual sense.
- d. To investigate the function of the experiences in the lives of the bereaved – in particular, do they help the bereaved to cope with their loss?
- e. To observe the relationship between experiences of presence, ‘hallucinations’ in general, and stigma.
- f. To consider implications for working with people who are experiencing presence.
- g. To consider all the above within the local interactional setting of the interview.

The next chapter will outline the methodological approach that was taken to complement these aims. In it, the approach to studying meaning is described, before it is demonstrated in the empirical chapters that follow.

## Chapter 2 - Methodology

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The aims of the current project are to identify the sources of meaning for experiences of presence in bereavement and to examine their function in the lives of the bereaved. The project does not aim to produce a causal explanation for these experiences but rather to describe the process by which they become meaningful. As chapter 1 documented, these experiences can come under a variety of descriptions, with altogether different significances. A method that is able to encompass the situated nature of this meaning is therefore essential for this investigation. This chapter concerns the methods chosen to meet these aims. It begins by outlining the participants in the study, how they were recruited, and basic information about them and the interviews. Following this is a description and discussion of the chosen method of data collection, the Narrative Biographic Interview. Finally I will outline the analytical approach.

### ***2.1. Pilot Study/sister project***

The research project reported here was anteceded by a detailed pilot study. This was with people who heard voices (not exclusively in a bereavement), and piloted the interviewing method as well as the analytical approach to identifying sources of meaning. When the current research project began, this 'hearing voices' project continued to run alongside it, and involved the eventual recruitment and interviewing of over 30 'everyday' voice-hearers. This led to two journal papers (Leudar, Hayes and Turner Baker, and Hayes, Leudar and King, both in preparation). I will occasionally refer to these papers in the chapters that follow when it bears relevance to the interviews reported in this thesis on presence in bereavement.

### ***2.2. Recruitment***

The original plan was to recruit bereaved informants through hospices and churches. I approached two hospices over the course of the research and both, despite their interest in the project, were unable to help. This was for a mixture of reasons to do



with limited resources and different research priorities (which were largely focused on palliative care). Concurrently I was sending letters of invitation and poster adverts about the project to several bereavement support services, and churches, across Greater Manchester. When this proved largely unsuccessful, I began tapping into personal contacts, and also the significant recruitment resources attached to the University of Manchester – for example through a single advert on the *StudentNet* volunteering website, I recruited over half of participants. At the final count then, this advert, personal contacts, and the ‘snowballing’ method, were the eventual means of recruitment of 18 people.

In the recruitment materials I identified my interest as “continuing relationships” in bereavement, particularly any “experiences where a bereaved person may sense the continuing presence of their deceased loved-one; they may feel their touch, hear their voice, see images of them, smell them, or somehow feel that they are present”. Therefore, particularly in the early stages of the study when I relied more on adverts, not all of those interviewed related concrete instances of continuing presence, but rather talked more generally about the ways that their relationships with the deceased continued. Initially this was a means of accessing accounts of voices and presence while side-stepping some of the obstacles posed by the obvious stigma that may be involved – the rationale was that people would be more willing to put themselves forward as “bereaved” rather than as someone who ‘hears voices’, ‘sees things’ etc. However as time went on and recruitment improved, I could afford to become more discerning and only interviewed those who at the first contact expressed that they had felt the deceased’s presence in a concrete way since the death. The focus of the current thesis is on instances of presence – therefore I have not used those interviews that do not discuss specific instances of these in the empirical chapters that follow. However, they will contribute to a large corpus of interviews concerning “continuing relationships in bereavement” collected by a colleague, Dr Feng-Ying Huang.

In the empirical chapters I will also draw on 5 interviews taken by two other interviewers, made available to me by my supervisor from a previous project.

### 2.3. Participants

Table 1 shows brief details of the participants to the interviews. This includes their names, their relationship to the person they were grieving, whether they had experienced concrete instances of presence, and basic facts about the interviews. All names have been changed.

Table 1: interview participants

Name	Person lost	Presence?	No. of interviews	Interviewer
<b>Clare</b>	grandmother, grandfather & cousin	yes	2	JH
<b>Samuel</b>	grandmother & grandfather	yes	3	JH
<b>Anne</b>	father	no	1	JH
<b>Christine</b>	father	no	1	JH
<b>Esme</b>	father	yes	1	JH
<b>Phillippa</b>	father	no	1	JH
<b>Julie</b>	mother	yes	1	JH
<b>Ching</b>	mother	no	1	JH
<b>Penny</b>	mother	no	1	JH
<b>Isaac</b>	mother & father	yes	1	JH
<b>Inge</b>	partner	yes	1	JH

<b>Tracey</b>	husband & father	yes	2	JH
<b>Esther</b>	husband	yes	1	JH
<b>Sade</b>	ex-partner and auntie	yes	3	JH
<b>Jude</b>	brother	yes	1	JH
<b>Frances</b>	brother	no	1	JH
<b>Sarah</b>	son	yes	1	JH
<b>Samira</b>	uncle	yes	1	JH
<b><u>Additional interviews</u></b>				
<b>Aggie</b>	partner	yes	1	JTB
<b>Matt*</b>	father	yes	1	AG
<b>Kelly</b>	grandfather	yes	1	JTB
<b>Heena</b>	grandfather	yes	1	JTB
<b>Linda*</b>	husband	yes	1	PT

Total no. of cases: 23

Total no. of interviews: 29

\*= pragmatic interview (see below)

Participants were resident in the UK, most, but not all, lived in the Manchester area at the time of the interview. Participants were from a variety of backgrounds, religious and cultural. I did not gather specific information about the ages of

participants but in terms of range, the youngest was about 20 years old, and the eldest was in her 80s. It is clear from the table that more women than men wished to take part in the study. All participants completed the interview apart from one (not shown here), who withdrew from the interview early after realising it was not the right time in her life to be talking about her grief.

As the table shows, a small number of participants were interviewed several times to provide a handful of in-depth case studies to complement the breadth of this particular study. In the end, follow-up interviews were not possible in most cases – this was due to several factors. After the first interviews with many of the participants, due to personal circumstances I had to take an interruption period of several months. By the time I returned, I had lost touch with some participants (with some, their contact details had changed and others had moved away). Also, the recruitment of participants was much harder than had been anticipated and took more time. This, as well as the time consuming process of transcription, meant that there was less time for follow-up interviews.

## **2.4. *The interviews***

### **2.4.1. Recording and transcription**

All interviews were audio-recorded. The total duration of the recordings was 2030 minutes (nearly 34 hours). The longest interview was 152 mins, the shortest 26 mins. The average length of interview was around 1 hour. These were transcribed verbatim using simplified Conversation Analytic Conventions (Jefferson, 2004) (please see p. 11 for transcription notation, and the appendices for full interview transcripts).

### **2.4.2. The interviewers**

The main interviewer was me, JH. JTB, or Johanna Turner Baker, interviewed three participants as a research assistant on the aforementioned 'hearing voices' project. PT was a psychiatrist, and AG a postgraduate student and their interviews with Elizabeth and Matt respectively were part of an earlier research project on the

pragmatic features of hearing voices. This contributed to the book, *Voices of Reason, Voices of Insanity* (Leudar and Thomas, 2000). These interviews took a different format (described below) but were included on the basis that both concerned hearing a voice in bereavement.

### 2.4.3. Narrative Biographic Interviewing

The interviews took a Narrative Biographic (Rosenthal, 1993) format in which participants are asked to tell the researcher about themselves but in relation to an initial theme. In this case, participants were told that my interest was in “bereavement, continuing relationships, and particularly any experiences of continuing presence”. However the introduction, just as any other part of the interview, was a matter of mutual accomplishment – and so varied depending on various factors. These could include orientations to the interviewee’s prior knowledge of the project, what they had already mentioned before the recorder was switched on, their queries along the way, or their personalisation of the research theme, as the interview with Isaac shows;

#### Extract 1: intro to interviews (from Isaac)

1. JH: I'm collecting stories from people that've been bereaved
2. Isaac: right
3. JH: erm, and I'm particularly interested in erm any aspects of erm, continuing
4. relationships, so
5. Isaac: with the dead?
6. JH: yeah [so, that]
7. Isaac: [right, yeah]
8. JH: and particularly anything, er, that might, erm, involve maybe hearing a
9. voice, or [seeing, seeing a vision, yeah]
10. Isaac: [or seeing my father, or, yep.]
11. JH: [yeah, exactly, things like that, or smells, or]
12. Isaac: [yeah, and er, in my case] it was a s-a, a plug
13. socket, which hadn't worked for years
14. (2.0)
15. and I put in the plug on, I think it was a vacuum cleaner
16. (3.0)
17. and it went!

Although the exact words varied then, my aim was to provide participants with the same starting themes and categories. What one would expect to yield from this

approach to interviewing is a detailed and personalised narrative about a particular subject.

The approach was chosen for the flexibility and spontaneity it affords - participants were given space to introduce their own terms and relevancies, and were not confined to an interview-schedule.

Why then was this interview approach chosen over other methods that could have examined constructions of hearing voices in a 'naturally occurring' (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998, as cited in Speer, 2002) social setting such as a psychiatric or therapeutic interview? The aim of the study was to investigate the meaning of experiences of presence in its variety, and to avoid the governance of the subject by medical practice and terminology that so often occurs in everyday settings, particularly as meaning that strays away from that of symptom-talk is often closed down in these settings (McCabe et al, 2002). The openness of the Narrative Biographic Interview allows participants to draw upon a greater diversity of meaning resources and make links to a variety of settings – including the medical where relevant. It is, of course, important that these experiences are investigated in common social or institutional settings, but this would not have been suitable for an investigation of the use of sources of meaning.

Some have in fact disputed the distinction between 'naturally-occurring' and 'contrived' data, on the grounds that it falsely treats the method as a resource to 'get-at' data, rather than constitutive of it (Speer 2002). Speer argues that;

'naturalness' is not a quality that resides in certain types of data and our data collection practices are not intrinsically natural or contrived (2002, p.518).

Rather, researchers should be concerned with *participants'* orientations to an interaction as 'contrived' or 'natural', and in whether a method of data collection is "procedurally consequential" to the topic of enquiry (Speer, 2002). For Schegloff (1991) this concerned the consequences of the social setting for the talk;

How does the fact that the talk is being conducted in some setting (say, 'the hospital') issue in any consequences for the shape, form, trajectory, content, or character of the interaction that the parties conduct? (Schegloff, 1991, p. 53).

Is the setting of the narrative interview procedurally consequential for the research aims? If I was looking at patterns of turn-taking in talk about hearing voices or seeing visions then clearly a research interview would have significant consequences for my findings and would not be the best method. But these are not the claims I am making about the data. Following from Speer then, my strategy is not to problematise the interview as a technique of accessing data. The narrative is not considered in isolation but as inseparable from the occasion of the social science interview (see below for more on reflexivity). But even within the terms of the first argument (the preference for 'naturally occurring' data) the narrative interview *has* a large share of ecological validity, in that it taps into an everyday activity - storytelling (Bruner, 1990). Harvey Sacks noted that stories are used in ordinary conversation to accomplish "interactional business" (Sacks, 1992, p.249) – they have particular purposes in local circumstances. Stories are not told in a social vacuum but always have an element of design and this holds for ordinary conversation just as much as the narrative interview.

To return to the specific interview procedure of this study, second and third interviews started with a question along the lines of "what has happened since the last time we met?" and then followed a narrative biographic format. The second half of these interviews was often dedicated to clarifying questions based on the initial narratives, and occasionally, questions related to the researcher's supplementary interests if those subjects had not already been oriented to spontaneously (e.g. whether the person was religious). Some also participated in joint analysis in their third interview (see below). In cases where it was uncertain whether follow-up interviews were possible, JH asked supplementary questions in the first interview, but only after a spontaneous narrative had been produced (i.e. when the participant had run out of things to say). For those that were interviewed several times, the time between interviews ranged from 3 months, to one year in some cases. The most common interval was 6-9 months.

A few final points about the interview procedures; participants were sign-posted to therapeutic and support services if it was apparent in the course of the interview that they were finding it hard to cope, or if they expressed a wish to talk further about their experiences. All participants were also told that they could withdraw from the study at any point, without giving a reason. Consent was obtained for the interview

and separately for the audio recording. The study was granted ethical approval from the University of Manchester Psychology Department.

#### **2.4.4. Reflexivity and the Narrative Biographic Interview**

So the Narrative Biographic Interview was the chosen method for the reasons outlined above. But can we ever expect the accounts yielded to be simply a direct reportage of what happened? Or as Rapley (2001) puts it “a transparent window on life beyond the interview” (p. 305)? No, as research in the social sciences is always a situated social activity. Researchers have in fact talked of a triple orientation of the narrative in research; 1) as a description or demonstration of experience; 2) as orientation to the local situation of the interaction; 3) as an orientation to the research project - to the local situation as a strategic site for research aims (Mazeland and ten Have, 1996). There are “essential tensions” between these agendas in narrative interviewing (Mazeland and ten Have, 1996). So participant accounts of their experiences of presence were not simply reports but were constructed in a unique local situation - a specific time and place, with a particular person, but also with an orientation to the wider setting of the research project. As a social interaction the interview is a site for self-presentation, for “continuous situational imputations, strategies and the like...which influence how actors treat each other and manage their presence before each other” (Cicourel, 1964). Following in this vein several writers have drawn attention to the moral character of narrative in general (Taylor, 1989; Bruner, 1990; Rapley, 2001). Narrative practice, the interview, then, is also a site of moral action and accounting.

Following from these insights I aim to acknowledge my position as a participant in the interview, paying attention to how my identity is achieved and situated, and to what categories I implicitly invoke in my talk. So, returning to the introduction to the Isaac’s interview (extract 1), what was my part in setting the scene? Firstly, I refer to the current interaction as part of a collection of interviews that yield stories (line 1) – this implicitly placed me in the category, ‘researcher’, as well as positioning Isaac as a suitable informant. These comments in effect provide an account for ‘why we are here now’. The introduction is also a request, and so implies a preferred response - more information. The request also produces certain relevancies – it thematizes “continuing relationships” (lines 3-4) and “hearing a voice, seeing a vision, smells,



things like that” (lines 8-12). However as Isaac also demonstrates, participants were not passive to JH’s requests but are involved in making the introduction personally relevant to them and setting-up the themes of the interview (line 10, line 12).

The circumstances of the interview then are formed in this talk but also in certain other facts such as that the interview took place in the psychology department, and the ‘omnirelevant’ aspects of identity such as the gender and the skin colour of the interviewer (female, white). The following narrative then should be viewed as partly a response to these locally-produced categories and relevancies.

My responses in first interviews tended to be a mixture of minimal continuers and formulations. Minimal continuers are units such as “mm:.”, “mm=hmm” “yes” and sometimes, “right”. Seemingly simple words or fragments, but these are in themselves complicated as they can mean a variety of things normatively depending on sequentiality and tone (Fitzgerald & Leudar, 2010). The silences of the interviewer similarly have specific meanings at particular moments. Formulations were also complex, here is an example (lines 106-110, shown in bold);

Extract 2: a formulation. From Sarah

101. Sarah: Erm, and that was incredibly helpful and comforting  
102. JH: Yeah  
103. Sarah: to, to have  
104. JH: Yeah  
105. Sarah: experienced that.  
106. JH: yeah. Yeah, **it sounds very soothing and [very sort of like he]**  
107. Sarah: [Yeah. Yes]  
108. JH: **gave you, gave you a feeling of**  
109. Sarah: Yeah  
110. JH: **more strength**  
111. Sarah: Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely, absolutely that. Erm, so that was qui-a-  
112. er, it was very very powerful, er (.) experience.

Some of the functions of formulations identified previously in narrative interviews have been 1. to demonstrate a shared understanding (Mazeland and ten Have, 1996) 2. to preserve the theme from the previous topic, 3. select one theme from the previous talk for elaboration, 4. to present candidate readings of the informants’ previous utterances (Heritage and Watson, 1979). Others have argued that in addition, formulations can also channel the talk (Fitzgerald, 2010). A formulation, as the first part of an adjacency pair (Heritage and Watson, 1979), invites the informant to accept, reject or modify it, on her next turn. In this case, Sarah accepts JH’s

formulation as “absolutely that” (line 111) and then provides her own formulation of the ‘power’ of the experience (line 112).

Formulations sometimes had additional functions in the present study. Participating in psychological research always has the potential to be an uncomfortable experience, at worst, even exposing and humiliating. The current study is about heavily stigmatised (see chapter 1) and sensitive personal experiences, and formulations here had an important role in expressing the interviewer’s stance on what has been said; for example, as evaluative or accepting. The structure, timing, and tone of formulations can demonstrate an accepting and respectful attitude to what was being related. Further, non-evaluative formulations can facilitate a self-reflective atmosphere - deepening the narrative as one more personal. We may then see features of the narrative that perhaps would otherwise be absent, for example orientation to emotional aspects of the experience, including loss or guilt. The interviews were interviews and certainly not psychotherapy, but careful use of formulations may give them some very basic features of therapy.

As others have noted before me (Huang, 2008), the line between an in-depth interview of this kind, and a therapeutic encounter, may not be absolute, particularly if the interviewer has therapeutic training. This does not have to be a problem but in fact could be viewed as a responsibility in some psychological research. As a matter of course I needed to draw upon my therapeutic knowledge and experience to conduct the interviews, as well as in negotiating the relationship with informants before and after. I found that previous therapeutic training, as well as independent supervision, was essential to interviewing people about such a sensitive and emotional area of their lives.

The use of formulations is not common practice in narrative biographic interviews, particularly in the first interview (Rosenthal, 1993). However I developed this style of interviewing because the alternative - use of minimal continuers, and a refusal to offer a participant more than the initial introduction - seemed inappropriate in light of the focus of the interviews. It may be argued from an ethical standpoint that highly emotional topics warrant a different kind of engagement from the researchers that have ‘opened-up’ this area of someone’s life. It is true that informants have volunteered for the research and have not been pressured to take part, but

sometimes what may surface when someone is given the space to talk about their experiences may surprise (and possibly overwhelm) a person. The contributions of the researcher, my contributions, obviously may influence the narrative – but this is already a ‘fact of life’ of psychological research. The procedure of confining my responses to ‘yes’ or ‘mm=hmm’ does not automatically exclude me from any influence on the narrative (see Fitzgerald and Leudar, 2010 on the effect of continuers). The interview is an interaction between two people, it is not a controlled experiment. Nor does it seek to control the conditions of the interview – it is doubtful that any psychological study can truly be controlled in the way a ‘natural scientific’ study can (see Hacking, 1995; Sharrock and Read, 2002, Chapter 3). This does not invalidate the research, but rather acknowledges the humanity of the participant and the interviewer. Best practice in the analysis of these interviews then is to acknowledge what the interviewer is doing on their turns – and to bear these facts in mind when making claims about the data (procedural consequentiality). For example, if I had used the word ‘psychopathology’ in an interview I could not then claim that a participant oriented to this term *spontaneously*.

The narrative interview may be regarded, then;

as a situated, collaboratively achieved re-constitution of the part of the informant’s world in which the interviewer is interested (Mazeland and ten Have, 1996, p.16).

It is a re-presentation of an experience for the interviewer. So we cannot regard the resulting data simply as about, for example, hearing voices in bereavement, but as about how people talk about this topic in a particular environment – in this case, a facilitative and understanding research setting. This could look very different to talk-about-voices in an environment where, for example, the person is suspected of lying, or examined for signs of insanity. Rapley puts this well;

The ‘data’ obtained are highly dependent on and emerge from the specific local interactional context and this local interactional context is produced in and through the talk and concomitant identity work of the interviewer and interviewee. (2001, p. 316)

As such, the present analysis aims to examine the narratives as constitutive of, and responsive to, local interactional contexts.

So if narratives are influenced in this way by local circumstances, should the narrative interview's reliability as a source of knowledge be questioned? The answer is no, and for two reasons. Firstly, Nekvapil (2003) found that the basic core of biographical narratives of Germans living in the Czech Republic remained the same, despite changes in the interviewer's ethnicity, timescale, and even how the research topic was introduced. He found that the words used were sometimes different, but that importantly the basic story was constant. With regard to the current project, the person's story about bereavement may be designed for me, but some aspects of the story will be more socially contingent than others (for example, normalising their experiences).

And secondly, this enquiry is not concerned with objective "truths" about these experiences, but with meaning. The personal meanings of voices, can of course change over time and in different situations. Bruner (1990) has previously identified narrative as opportunity for sense-making according to *present situational and emotional concerns* - an active process of sense-making may occur in interviews and this in no way invalidates but rather adds to the richness of the enquiry.

#### **2.4.5. The Pragmatic Interview schedule**

Two interviews included in the corpus were not Narrative Biographic but followed a Pragmatic Interview Schedule. This was developed by Leudar and Thomas (1995) and was designed to establish the pragmatic aspects of the language that voices use. This is an interview schedule that includes questions about the dialogical properties of voices, the influence of voices on the actions of hearers, and the positioning and individuation of voices from the hearer (Story, 2002). This yielded information about the ascribed identities of voices and the kinds of interactions that take place between voices and voice-hearer – what the voices can do with words (Leudar et al, 1997). Parts of the resulting narratives cannot be considered as 'open' or 'spontaneous' as those yielded in Narrative Biographic Interviews, but as we shall see other parts in fact deviate from the interview schedule and this is revealing both of participants' *active* endeavour to make the research personal to them, and in turn of important aspects of the experiences themselves (see chapter 5, on use of biography). In using extracts from these interviews, I will be particularly mindful of the

principle of procedural consequentiality. They were included on the basis that both informants heard a voice in bereavement and can contribute to the answering of the questions posed in empirical chapters (5, 6, 7 & 8).

## **2.5. Analytical Principles**

In analysing the interviews I did not use a single method but rather drew upon a 'toolbox' of complementary principles and methods of analysis. In the sections that follow I will one at a time outline what those analytical influences were, and why they were relevant to the current research.

### **2.5.1. Ethnomethodology and Indexicality**

The current project investigates narratives of experiencing presence in bereavement, and has a particular interest in how these experiences are contextualised. What is needed therefore is an analytical framework capable of illuminating the variety of personal meaning and the ways in which this is established in the narrative interview. Ethnomethodology, meaning literally the 'study of people's methods', provides this scaffolding for the analysis.

Garfinkel made a number of important observations about practical activities and meaning which became the foundations for ethnomethodology. Firstly, that social activities are "observable and reportable" (Garfinkel, 1974, p.17), and accountable – that is, they have an "essential reflexivity" (Garfinkel, 1967, p.7). It is possible for members (of society) to narrate, describe, account for what they are doing and that this account, is built into those actions (it is not separate to them) (Garfinkel, 1967). The practice of ethnomethodology, then

is not motivated by the aspiration to make *discoveries* about the nature of social phenomena, but to undertake the *recovery* of what is already known – but is 'known' in the form of competent mastery of practical affairs – to the members of society (Sharrock, 2001, p.258, emphasis in original)

The task of the analyst then is not to build a theory of what is happening in the data, but to draw attention to what is already there, those features of social life that are 'seen, but not noted'. This partly involves paying attention to the terms that members

use in the course of everyday practical activities – what members refer to in a local context when they use terms such as ‘rationality’, ‘sanity’, or ‘hallucination’.

One implication of ethnomethodological insights for psychology is that the meaning of an action does not reside ‘in someone’s head’ but is in the actions themselves – it has visibility. In other words, this meaning is situated in activities and cannot be divorced from them. This context-dependent conceptualisation of meaning contrasts with the experimental paradigm in psychology which strives for universal, context-independent claims. Garfinkel (1967) instead referred to the study of “indexical expressions and indexical actions” (p.4).

This indexicality of terms and activities is an important guiding principle for the current analysis. What exactly is meant by this? According to Levinson (1983), indexicality;

concerns the encoding of many different aspects of the circumstances surrounding the utterance, within the utterance itself. Natural language utterances are thus ‘anchored’ directly to aspects of the context. (Levinson, 1983, p.55)

Levinson was referring specifically to language but this principle in ethnomethodology refers to any form of social action. The meaning of a term/action then does not simply reside in that term but depends also on what it relates to in a given context, or in other words -

‘Signs’ point towards circumstances (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2010)

An implication for empirical work is that a detailed understanding of context is crucial for understanding the phenomena under investigation. The notion of ‘context’ itself though is not a straightforward matter. Often it is used as a dualism with an action/experience/event – separate to it and of a different substance. From this perspective, context simply provides the container in which something happens (Leudar et al, 2008b). The current investigation, following from Leudar et al’s (2008 a, 2008b) discussion, treats context and action/event rather as mutually constitutive, a figure-ground relationship. This means that a description of an experience is not simply anchored in a setting, but that settings and descriptions are co-produced in discourse. We will see examples of this in the empirical chapters that follow.

The concept of context used in this investigation is influenced by Gurwitsch's (1964) ideas of 'theme' and 'thematic field'. The 'theme' or object of consciousness, is related to its context in the following way;

When a theme presents itself to consciousness, no scattered and isolated items are given. In its very appearance to consciousness the theme points beyond itself to other facts and data which appear along with, and are referred to, by it. (p.319)

The 'theme' is an index to a field of relevancies, the 'thematic field', which is;

the totality of items to which a theme points and refers in such a manner, and which form the context within which the theme presents itself (p.320).

The character of the 'theme' is therefore inseparable from the 'field' from which it emerges. Meaning does not reside simply in the theme but in its relationship to the thematic field. The current study aims to track this theme-thematic field relationship by tracing how participants draw on different settings to provide their experiences with particular meanings. This analysis also makes use of the concept of 'structured immediacy' - interactions that take place in the here-and-now are 'structured' by exophoric circumstances (Leudar, Sharrock & Hayes, 2008b). A particular here-and-now is not a discrete moment in time but may be related to other times and places by participants in the interaction. This does not indiscriminately encompass all of the past but only those parts that are thematically related and consequential to the present in some way<sup>16</sup>. We shall see that participants structured the interview by making some aspects of their past relevant to the here-and-now.

Ethnomethodology in general and the principle of indexicality in particular then, influence the current analysis in a number of ways; firstly, to foreground the methods that participants used in narrating their experiences (including their 'structuring' of the interaction); secondly, to direct attention to the terms that members used, and their indexical meanings; and thirdly, to acknowledge the collectively-accomplished nature of the resulting narrative in the institutional setting of the psychological investigation.

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<sup>16</sup> Leudar and Nekvapil recently used this concept to illuminate how politicians make reference to the past in their speeches (in press).

### **2.5.2. Conversation Analysis**

Conversation Analysis (CA) focuses on how language is used to accomplish activities in situ (see Jefferson, 1990; Sacks, 1992; Wooffitt, 2005). An approach that emerged from Ethnomethodology, it examines participants' understandings of what is happening in an interaction by paying attention to the way talk is organised. Sacks (1992) proposed that the analysis of conversation was a way of practising sociology as a natural observational science where claims about the practices of members could be made and proven through actual instances of interaction (via recordings and verbatim transcriptions).

So why use CA in the current study? Firstly, it offers an analytical framework for investigating the interview as a social interaction – complementing a reflexive approach to research. The CA tradition would begin with the premise that the narrative interview is not simply an occasion whereby experiences are reported to a detached social scientist, but where other things are done too. Such activities may be – positioning of the interviewer (for example, as a researcher, woman, counsellor), self presentation (e.g. as an interviewee, an artist, a grieving widow, a patient), positioning of others (e.g. as a good mother), construction of personal biography, and the interrelatedness of all the above sequentially. This is achieved jointly by both parties through use of conversational devices such as adjacency pairs, preference and repair (Sacks 1992). CA focuses attention on these delicacies of interaction, on the achievement of the social science interview itself.

Secondly, this is partly an investigation of hearing voices. CA has been used to explore the pragmatics of voice-talk in past research to revealing ends (Leudar et al, 1997) and is used in the present study to take a closer look at voice-language and its referents.

Further, CA acknowledges the indexical nature of language. The aim is to look at language use in its locally-produced context – within a section of speech, local occasion or whatever else an interlocutor makes relevant, but importantly not a context imposed by an analyst. The sequential context - looking at a speech act in terms of what has come before and what comes after - is vital for an understanding of what is being achieved. It facilitates the analysis of storytelling, but also of the actions of the 'listener', such as the formulations and continuers mentioned above



(Extract 2). CA therefore grounds the analysis in the detail of the interaction, and when it comes to voice-talk, CA principles can also guide us towards looking at the meaning of it in relation to the locally-produced settings of the interview interaction.

In the tradition of CA the current investigation does not treat talk/language unproblematically as simply a representation of an experience – rather, it examines how language is used to construct a version of the experience and to accomplish activities in the interview. For example, a participant may not just be describing hearing a voice, but in doing so also constructing and distancing themselves from a notion of ‘psychopathology’.

### **2.5.3. Membership Categorisation Analysis**

Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) is a branch of CA that looks at the resources language provides for representing participants in conversation, and at how speakers make use of such social categories in talk (Sacks, 1992). It focuses on how social categories are invoked by members of the interaction, and to what ends. Sacks (1992) highlighted the fact that it is always possible to identify a person in a number of different ways - for example the same person could be termed a ‘mother’, ‘daughter’, ‘bereaved person’, ‘professional’, ‘activist’. For MCA, what is interesting is *why* a particular social category is invoked *at a given moment* of talk. The answer is in the particular normative assumptions that a social category carries – including possibilities for action, or “category-bound activities”. MCA then interprets actors not just in terms of their sequential positions in the talk but also with regard to the positions, or social categories from which they speak.

MCA was used in this study to focus attention on the positioning of participants in the interaction, and of others in the narrative. For example, MCA can illuminate the way I am positioned in the talk - as a ‘psychologist’, a ‘voice-hearer’, ‘another young woman to chat to’. These different positions and the normative assumptions they invoke have obvious implications for narrative design.

I also used MCA to highlight how a person referred to themselves and others in the narrative, and what activities this allowed – for example, referring to someone as ‘a traditional Jewish grandma’ (from the case of Samuel, see chapter 5) invoked

normative assumptions about care, nurture, conservativeness, and fantastic cooking, in one person's narrative. Positioning oneself as a bereaved lover (from Inge, see chapter 5) allows an expression of deep grief.

#### 2.5.4. Discursive Psychology

Developed from Ethnomethodology, speech act theory, and CA, discursive psychology (DP) questions the premise of much of psychological research that language is a "direct route to cognition" (Willig, 2008, p.93). Rather, like CA, the discursive tradition in psychology emphasises that language has both representational *and* pragmatic qualities – it is a form of social action;

All language, even language which passes as simple description, is constructive and consequential for the discourse analyst (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p.34).

Language is *constructive* in that it constructs 'reality' rather than simply representing an objective 'reality', and *consequential* in so far as it has functions – the words do something in a given context. This hints at the indexical properties of language, of speech acts, discussed previously.

DP aims to highlight the "function, construction and variation of accounts" (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p.34). This departs from a large section of psychological research – whether it be experiments, surveys, or coded data – that aims to iron out the variability of accounts (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). The tradition holds that talk, language itself, and what language does, should become the focus of enquiry – shifting the topic of investigation from cognitions to discursive actions (Willig, 2008).

Some authors have argued that DP is not a distinctive discipline with its own methodology but a branch of ethnomethodology concerned with what is known as the 'psychological' (Coulter, 2004). It has also been criticised on the grounds that despite claiming to be an alternative to the 'mentalism'<sup>17</sup> that runs through most of Psychology, DP analysts sometimes impose such interpretations on participant

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<sup>17</sup> The idea originating from Descartes that mind is 'internal' to the individual and invisible to the world (except through experimentation).

discourse (see Sharrock, 2009). I will avoid importing such Cartesian concepts in the analysis reported here.

The current study is psychological in character. But this is not because these experiences can *only be* psychological – it is a matter of focus – on the individual within their context, rather than the context itself (e.g. the social process of psychiatric practice or bereavement). I am investigating experiences that happen most of the time to one person only – the person who for example sees the deceased or hears their voice. But these psychological experiences are not ‘inner’ to the person. They may sometimes be kept *private*, but they are also socially shareable and accountable phenomena. It is *this* aspect of the experience that I am investigating through gathering and examining narratives.

## **2.6. Further Analytical Methods**

### **2.6.1. Group analysis**

Analysis of the interviews took place with other members of the research group. This was to open dialogue surrounding analytical perspectives on the interviews to increase the reliability of the resulting analysis.

### **2.6.2. Psychoanalysis**

Two of the bereavement cases (Inge and Clare) were analysed with a practicing psychoanalytic psychotherapist. The main purpose of this was to provide an alternative education for the interviewer, but these interactions were recorded and are interesting in themselves – in so far as they provide a different institutional frame of relevancies, and therefore alternative sources of meaning for voices. Unfortunately there was not the space to examine these in the current thesis.

### **2.6.3. Joint Analysis**

Two cases (Sade and Samuel) were jointly-analysed with participants in a third and final interview. This involved a process of verifying the pertinence of the analyst's initial take on the narrative (see Leudar et al 2008a). The joint-analysis in effect shifts the analytical perspective from the third-person back to the first-person narrator,

revealing any discrepancies and irrelevancies of the analysis. Joint-analysis is similar to taking the 'internal perspective' in anthropology, and also holds some commonalities with Sandor Ferenczi's method of 'mutual analysis'<sup>18</sup>. It could also be described as a return to the 'internal frame of reference' (Rogers, 1951) of the participant to the study.

From a research perspective it was an opportunity for clarification and for maximising the relevance, and validity of the analysis. But in this process I also found a useful function for participants themselves; besides from the fact this promotes more collaboration in research, it was at times personally clarifying and even integrating for participants to reflect on the analysis of their talk. Perhaps this should come as no surprise in light of the fact that formal narrative analysis has become the foundations of some therapeutic interventions (White and Epston, 1990; Leiblich, McAdams & Josselson, 2004). Unfortunately, due to time constraints, I was unable to complete this with all participants.

## ***2.7. Settings for experiences of presence***

In general then, the methods of data gathering and analysis detailed above enabled a close examination of the ways in which participants created settings for their experiences in their narratives – settings in which their experiences find particular meanings. This method is applied in detail in chapter 4, which looks at a single case study of a woman, Julie, who hears the voice of her deceased mother. The four empirical chapters that follow this draw on examples from all the cases of presence. This was done through a detailed analysis of the thematic field in each case, followed by a comparison across the cases, with commonalities and idiosyncrasies noted. The final reports, shown in chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8, answer specific questions about the topic of presence in bereavement through reference to these cases.

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<sup>18</sup> Ferenczi was a psychoanalyst and contemporary of Freud who, along with his patient Elizabeth Severn, pioneered a new method where both analyst and patient would undergo analysis. This had therapeutic benefits for the patient but according to his letters, made the relationship difficult for Ferenczi himself (see Fortune, 1993, for an interesting discussion).

Before we come to this, the next chapter offers some brief descriptive 'results' of the kinds of experiences people narrated in the bereavement interviews, as well as a summary of informants' stories.

## Chapter 3 – Descriptive Results

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This chapter provides an over-view of the kinds of presence that participants described as well as a summary of their stories of bereavement. The aim is not to produce statistics on presence but to describe the range of people and experiences that are the subject of this thesis.

### *3.1. What kinds of presence?*

Table 1 in the last chapter (Chapter 2) showed some brief details about participants to the study, including that 17 people reported one or more experiences of presence since the death. Table 1 (below) shows some details about the kinds of presence experienced by these 17 participants. This includes the sensory modality that their experience corresponded to (did they see, hear, touch, taste, feel or smell the deceased?) but also included those ‘feelings’ of presence that were not specified according to one of the five senses. Also reported here are those participants who reported ‘signs’ that the deceased was still close at hand. Signs were included because they were experienced as a form of communication from the deceased, much like many other of the experiences.

Table 1: types of presence

Name	voice	vision	smell	taste	touch/ tactile	other sounds	fop*	signs
Clare	•	•	•		•		•	•
Samuel	•	•	•	•				
Esme	•				•			•
Julie	•						•	
Isaac	•	•						•
Inge	•						•	
Tracey			•					
Esther								•
Sade		•	•					
Jude		•	•					•
Sarah					•		•	
Samira					•		•	
Aggie	•						•	•
Matt	•							
Kelly		•						
Heena	•					•	•	
Linda	•						•	
<b>TOTALS</b>	11	6	5	1	4	1	8	6

\*fop= general feeling of presence

In this group of participants, hearing voices of the deceased were the most commonly reported experience (11 people). This was followed closely by a 'general' feeling of presence (8 people), signs of presence and visions (both 6 people) and smells (5 people). The least commonly reported modes of presence were touch/tactile (4 people), taste (1 person), and sounds other than the deceased's voice (1 person). Most people reported more than one kind of presence (11 people). 6 people reported three or more kinds of presence. What's more, some informants (3) talked of sensing the presence of more than one person that they had lost. These figures are not intended to be representative of the proportions of these experiences in all of the bereaved as the study was not designed to do this. However two past studies were both intended to be quantitatively representative (of spousal bereavements) - Rees' (1971) survey of 293 people and Grimby's (1998) survey of 50 people. How do the frequencies of types of presence compare? The two past surveys in fact both found that by far the most common mode of presence was a general 'feeling' of presence. This was 40% of widows in Rees (1971), compared with the next most common experience, visions, which were reported by just 14%.

The difference is probably due to the fact that the current study placed greater focus on voices due to the availability of data from both a sister project and a past project about hearing voices (see Chapter 2). The figures may also be different due to the type of bond investigated, Rees (1971) and Grimby (1998) both counting spousal bereavements in older people only. In Rees (1971) and Grimby (1998), there was in fact little difference in the frequency of voices and visions (about 14% of instances of presence in Rees, and approximately 30% in Grimby). More consistent with the current study, however was that touch was reported rarely – only 2.7% in Rees (1971), and this was not studied at all in Grimby (1971). Taste, other sounds, and ‘signs’ were not reported in Rees or Grimby (this may have been because neither of them asked participants about these phenomena).

So the figures on presence in Table 1 are not generalisable but are reported to describe the range of experiences reported by informants to this study. The summary vignettes below will give the reader a clearer idea about the nature of these experiences in the individual cases.

### ***3.2. The stories of presence***

What follows is a series of brief summaries of participant's stories. Not all informants disclosed a religion or an occupation but for those that did, I have included this information.

#### ***Clare***

Clare is a teacher in her mid-thirties. In her story, she talked about the bereavement of her grandmother, grandfather, and young cousin. She reported strong continuing relationships with all three, frequently talking to them and talking with others about them. Both of her grandparents died after short illnesses. Her grandmother died first, and Clare and her mother were with her as she died. Clare saw strange shadows on the walls as her grandmother passed-away, in the shape of ‘church windows’. Shortly after her death, in the night-time she experienced a strong feeling of presence of her grandmother. This occurred at the same time as Clare's mother saw a vision of Clare's grandmother enjoying a game of cards around a table with others.



Clare's feeling induced fear in her and she felt her body was unable to turn to look at what her mother could see. Later, Clare also regularly experienced the vivid smell of her grandmother's perfume at moments when she was upset and needed support. She also occasionally heard her voice if she couldn't sleep, saying, 'Clare, close your eyes'. These experiences comforted Clare. Sometimes, she saw white feathers which she felt were signs from her grandmother that she was watching over her.

When her grandfather died several years later, she also saw strange 'church window' shadows on the walls at the time of his passing. She felt that this was someone coming for her grandfather. When she went to visit him in the chapel of rest, Clare felt a strong feeling of presence that was resisting her entering the room. She interpreted this as her grandfather not wanting her to dwell on his death.

After her grandmother's death, a child, Isabella, was born into the family. She was Clare's cousin, and was born with significant learning difficulties as well as epilepsy. Clare took an active role in caring for the child when Isabella's parents needed respite. Isabella died young, and quite suddenly. Clare felt a strange feeling at, as she later learnt, was the time of her death. When she was alive, Clare had to administer strong drugs to Isabella for her epilepsy. These had a very distinctive smell – they could "knock out an elephant" although had little effect on Isabella. Since Isabella's death, Clare still smells these drugs strongly in the porch of the family home (where she looked after Isabella when she was alive). As with her grandmother's perfume, there is no apparent source for the smell. Clare finds this strange but also comforting as a sign that Isabella is still in contact with them. She also experiences signs from Isabella in the form of butterflies. In general, Clare felt a continuity of her grandmother's spirit in Isabella (in life and in death). In the second interview, Clare discussed her recent friendship with a person, the closeness of which surprised her. She said that she felt her grandmother's spirit continuing in this friend.

### **Samuel**

Samuel is a Jewish man in his mid-thirties. He is a social psychologist. His grandmother had died very suddenly nearly four years prior to the interview, and his grandfather had died six months after that. Samuel experienced his grandmother's

presence since her death in a variety of ways. At the time of her death, he saw a vision of her while he was working in his study. She was sitting on the sofa in the room, looking downwards at him with a sad and peaceful smile. A few minutes later, he received a phone call to say that she had died at that time. He also heard her voice on one occasion, while he was trying to fix something for his grandfather. In the first few weeks after her death, he also saw glimpses of her in busy public places like the supermarket they used to go to together. This would happen only very momentarily before she would disappear again. On one occasion, Samuel also saw her in his office with the same expression on her face – the sad but peaceful smile – that she had had at the time she died.

Samuel was the only informant who had a taste that related to the deceased's presence. This was the taste of his grandma's cooking. In such instances, Samuel would start to smell something his grandma used to cook. This smell would be over in a flash but would repeat in 'waves' over the course of the next hour, and eventually he would start to taste the food, as if it was in his mouth. The food he smelt and tasted would vary, but would all be in his grandma's repertoire of recipes.

### *Esme*

Esme is a woman in her fifties, from a Jewish heritage. She runs her own business. She is Samuel's auntie. Her father had died 6 years before the interview, after a very short illness. He had fallen ill when visiting Esme in her holiday home in Granada, Spain, but died in a hospital in England. Some weeks after his death, Esme returned to Granada. In the night, she awoke feeling a strong pressure, which felt like a large person on top of her. She then heard the voice of her father. They had a short conversation, in which her father told her he was "fine". This sent Esme on a quest to explore the spiritual meaning of her experience, and she described visiting a clairvoyant who confirmed that her father had contacted her that night.

### *Julie*

Julie is a woman in her fifties. She is a Christian, and works in administration. 6 years before the interview, her mother died after spending some weeks in hospital. A

few weeks after her death, Julie began to hear her voice. This began with Julie hearing her mother calling her name. The voice had a strange echoey-sound to it. Since then, Julie regularly heard the voice of her mother calling her insulting names and telling her to harm herself. On one occasion in the night time, she had a strong feeling of her mother's presence standing next to her as she was lying in bed. She did not dare to turn round for fear that she would then receive a tirade of insults. Her story is the subject of chapter 4.

### *Isaac*

Isaac is a Jewish man in his sixties. He is retired, but used to work in the clothing industry. He is Samuel's father. In his interview he talked about the loss of his mother and father within six months of each other. His mother had died first, very suddenly, nearly three years before the interview. His father died after a short illness, just over 2 years prior to the interview. He described an instance of hearing his mother's voice, which helped him to fix a kitchen appliance for his sister. He also described a 'sign' from his mother and father. This happened when he tried to use a plug socket in his house which had not worked for several years. He plugged the vacuum in, and it worked. He took this to be a sign that there was 'something up there'. Isaac also described visions of his mother and father. One was of his father in the synagogue they used to attend together. Another was of his mother in the street during a weekly routine of collecting some bread from a local bakery.

### *Inge*

Inge is a woman from Norway in her mid-twenties. She is a postgraduate student. Inge's boyfriend died in a car accident, two years prior to the interview. Inge described a period of extreme grief where she did not leave her bed. She created a 'bubble' in which she could induce his presence, in which they could still 'talk together' and be close. Inge talked about an intense relationship with her late boyfriend, at the time of the interview feeling that they were 'still together' as partners. She regularly talked to her boyfriend, and occasionally, would hear him answer her back. Inge also described a dream that had told her of his death. On the night he died, she had gone to sleep without her usual text message from him. She

then dreamt about a body lying in the road. She could only see the legs, but she recognised them as his. She went back to sleep, but was woken later to the news of his death.

### *Tracey*

Tracey is in her late thirties, and a psychology student. She lost her husband and her father, both to cancer, within a few months of one another. This was three years prior to the interview. Tracey has a young son, Jack, and discussed her concerns about the impact of the loss of his father on him. Tracey described a vivid smell of her husband on a few occasions. In the first interview, this had happened a few times after meeting up with her husband's friends. On leaving and getting into the car, she would smell her husband's aftershave very intensely. In the second interview, she described how this happened on one occasion when she was in her bathroom after her and her son have received news of another family bereavement.

### *Esther*

Esther is a Jewish woman in her seventies. She is Esme's mother, and Samuel's grandmother. Her husband had died six years prior to the interview. At the time of his death, the lights flickered in hers, her son's, and her daughter's houses. She hinted in the interview that this had been a communication from him.

### *Sade*

Sade is a woman in her early twenties, and a psychology student. She lost her ex-boyfriend through suicide, and she described catching glimpses of him in the street shortly after his death. In these instances, as she got closer to what seemed to be her ex-boyfriend, she would discover that the person was in fact someone else, someone who looked a bit like him. This happened for a few weeks before it stopped. Sade also discussed the death of a close family friend, Merlene, through cancer. Sade had known Merlene since she was born, and was known as an 'auntie'. Sade described how one day she was shopping in a different city when suddenly she was surrounded by the smell of Merlene. There was no source for the

smell, and further, it wasn't Merlene's usual smell, but the one she had developed since her illness. Sade had described helping her down the stairs the last time she saw her and noticing how strangely she smelt. Sade found smelling this same smell when she was nowhere near to Merlene a strange experience. Later that day, she found out that Merlene had died at the time she had smelt her.

### *Jude*

Jude is a woman in her late twenties. Her brother was murdered. This happened four years prior to the interview. Since his death, Jude experiences signs from him, in the form of 'minor mishaps' that she feels he is mischievously orchestrating. These include her father's car failing to start, the panic alarms in her house being set off, an alarm being set-off in a young-offenders institution in which she worked, her computer crashing while she was writing an essay, and frequent instances of the TV spontaneously switching off. She also described an instance of seeing him since his death. This happened late at night while she was at a petrol station, and she saw her brother sitting at the back of a bus that drove past her. She described a further group of instances of smelling cigarette smoke when no-one was around her and feeling that this was him. She also talked about a very significant dream in which she had seen her brother standing on a beach, dressed in white, with a cigarette tucked behind his ear, throwing a fishing-net into the water. A Muslim friend of Jude's told her that in her culture this was a communication from him and it was a good sign. Jude took comfort from this dream.

### *Sarah*

Sarah is a vicar in her fifties. Her son died as a new born baby, 27 years prior to the interview. Since then, Sarah has had three distinct instances of sensing his presence. The first instance did not happen until 20 years after his death. Sarah had just read a passage in church that she found emotionally very difficult as it identified closely with her own grief. As she sat down, she felt her son place his hand on her shoulder. It was as if he had grown into a man in all the time she had missed him and was now comforting his mother. In another instance, when she felt upset on Mothering Sunday, she felt him hug her. The third time, she felt him sitting next to

her at another moment where she had felt upset. This gave her a 'great joy and strength'.

### **Samira**

Samira is a woman in her early twenties, and a British Hindu. She studies psychology. An uncle that she did not know well, as he lived in India, died suddenly. Her mother was very upset as this was her eldest brother. In the night after receiving news of his death, Samira awoke with a strong feeling of presence. She described this as a feeling of coldness, like a cold breeze, and a white blur, as if something had 'flown' over her. She checked for a source of the breeze but there seemed to be none. In the morning, her mother told her she dreamt that Samira's uncle had visited the house to say goodbye.

### **Aggie**

Aggie is a woman in her mid-twenties, and a medical student. Her boyfriend died after a short illness, a year before the interview. She wasn't expecting his death, but she later found out that he knew he was dying. She discussed that prior to his death, he had broken up with her and she hadn't understood why. They were reconciled just before his death. Since then, Aggie hears her late boyfriend speaking to her on a regular basis. The voice says a variety of things to Aggie and sometimes she converses with him. On one occasion she vividly felt his presence in bed with her after waking up one morning. She also experiences signs of presence from him. One of these signs happened to be the title of a lecture she attended, which was his place of birth and the year he was born.

### **Matt**

Matt was a man in his early twenties at the time of his interview. He was a student of Law. His father had committed suicide several years previously. Ever since, Matt had heard his voice. This voice often criticised Matt and his plans.

### *Kelly*

Kelly is a woman in her early twenties, and a psychology student. She discussed the death of her grandfather, who had lived with her and her family. At the time of his death, downstairs in her house, she was in her bedroom, asleep. She awoke to see him floating above her in the room. He was smiling at her. She went downstairs and found out that he had died.

### *Heena*

Heena is a woman in her early twenties. She studied psychology. Her grandfather lived with her family before he died, around 5 years prior to the interview. Since his death, Heena sometimes feels his presence in the house, sometimes hearing him moving around the house. She would hear him doing the things he used to do, such as pottering about and making a sandwich. When he was alive, he occasionally used to drink in secret. Occasionally since his death, in the night, Heena has heard the sound of someone opening a bottle.

### *Linda*

Linda was a social worker in her fifties at the time of her interview. Her husband had died suddenly, 5 and a half years before. They had not had a happy marriage. Since then, Linda hears his voice on a regular basis. The voice is often insulting and critical of Linda. In the first six months after her bereavement, Linda had sometimes felt her husband's presence without hearing his voice. At these times, when she was despairing, she would feel him next to her 'almost' breathing on her face. She felt comfort from this. At other times, Linda would sometimes wake and feel that her husband was lying in the bed next to her.

### **3.3. Seventeen stories of presence**

The stories summarised above show a huge variety in the manner in which the presence was experienced and a large variety of circumstances surrounding the bereavement. The bereaved and the deceased were related in a number of different

ways. The majority of the bonds were familial, except in one case where the deceased was an ex-partner and another when it was a family friend. In some cases, the deceased died suddenly, in others the death was forewarned. The proportions were fairly even, with 10 of the deaths happening suddenly, and 11 of the deaths expected.

Most informants started to experience presence fairly soon after the death, usually within the first few weeks. One case, Sarah, was an exception, as she did not start to feel her son's presence until 20 years after his death. Often informants discussed not just one type of presence but a 'family' of experiences of communication or contact from the deceased that included dreams. Sometimes, the experiences that participants talked about occurred at the time of the death, and 'told' them of it (Inge's dream, for example). The time between the death and the interview ranged considerably, between 1 year and 27 years, but the most common time period was 2-5 years.

All of the stories were told with sadness, but at times also with tenderness, affection, lightness, and humour. Some of the stories were particularly tragic. This was felt by the interviewer even to this day when reading through the transcripts.

The stories in this chapter were brief summaries written by the author. The following five chapters include extracts of informants describing these experiences in their own words. It is hard to do justice to every story – there is not the space to do this. Not every instance of presence that was described in the interview will be analysed in the chapters that follow, although most find a place. These chapters will show exactly how informants drew on various sources to give their experiences significant personal meaning.



## Chapter 4 - How can we investigate meaning? The case of Julie.

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The aim of this chapter is two-fold. The first purpose is to demonstrate the analytical approach outlined in chapter 2 in a concrete way, in order to provide a framework for the analysis of further cases. The second is to show how one person's experience of presence in particular, that of Julie's, is made meaningful. This involves an investigation of how Julie constructs the 'thematic field' of her voice experience – what is in this field, and what narrative methods does she use to create it?

Chapter 1 has offered clues as to what sources of meaning might make up this field. One of these could be the language the voice uses, including the pragmatics of these words. Another, moments in a person's biography, the event of the death being an immediate possibility. Society offers various interpretations for voice-hearing – whether these are psychiatric concepts that present voices as 'hallucinations' with little meaningful connection to life at all, or religious discourse that suggest that this may be a communication from a spirit in an afterlife. These semiotic frames may not be in opposition but could both be drawn upon at different times for particular narrative effect. This chapter demonstrates how one person uses these sources of meaning, and others, to provide a context in which her voice is both intelligible and meaningful.

The interviews employed in this study provide rich data. However it has not been possible to examine the depth and breadth of this without this thesis becoming a series of unconnected case studies. Thus the aim here is to focus on a single case in-depth, before showing the commonalities and deviations of this story from the other sixteen stories in the chapters that follow.

A final note about the case itself: Julie's narrative is not meant to represent a 'typical' case – this is not why it was chosen. Her voice is very derogatory, and as chapter 8 will testify, this was by no means the only possibility for experiences of presence. In fact, this study does not aim to define an 'average' case or provide statistics; rather the aim is to provide methods to analyse individual cases that take seriously precisely that individuality and to start to foreground the methods our informants use

to make experiences of presence meaningful. That is not to say there may be commonalities across the cases – and these will also be noted.

Julie's case was selected instead on the basis of its rich narrative structure – she draws on a variety of sources of meaning, and so her story is an interesting and appropriate place to start this enquiry into methods of meaning making. Through Julie's case we shall see clearly that meaning is not simply an 'academic' concern but a practical matter with consequences for the bereaved.

The analysis focuses on the voice that Julie hears on a daily basis. The feeling of presence that she once experienced in the night is discussed more fully in a later chapter (Chapter 6).

#### *4.1. Defining the occasion*

JH and Julie met at Julie's house for one interview, after being put in touch by a mutual friend/colleague. We could view the narrative interview that ensued as a 'structured immediacy'. As explained in Chapter 2, this refers to the fact that it is an interaction that takes place in the 'here-and-now' and is locally managed, but is also structured exophorically by contextual circumstances (Leudar et al, 2008.) So how does JH begin to establish the circumstances of this interview?;

##### Extract 1, Julie

18. JH: I've basically been collecting stories from different people  
19. Julie: Mm=hmm  
20. JH: about their experiences of bereavement?  
21. Julie: Yeah  
22. JH: And particularly, hearing voices  
23. Julie: Mm=hmm  
24. JH: and, erm, I, basically er, Will put us in touch, didn't he?  
25. Julie: Yes, he did, yeah  
26. JH: ahm, and that was because you, you hear voices, and it relates [to]  
27. Julie: [I did]  
28. JH: oh, you did hear voices  
29. Julie: yeah  
30. JH: Okay  
31. Julie: Just one voice  
32. JH: Okay!  
33. (1.0)  
34. So you heard a voice in the past?  
35. Julie: Yeah  
36. JH: and was that, related to your mother's death?

37. Julie: Yes, that's right [yeah,]  
38. JH: [yeah]  
39. Julie: that's her ((*points to picture on wall*))

JH's introduction on lines 18-20 begins what is in effect a request for Julie to tell her own "story" (line 18). In it, JH positions Julie as one among a number of participants in the study. She then thematises two subjects as relevant to this story; 1. bereavement; and 2. hearing voices 'in particular'<sup>19</sup>. We shall see that Julie responds to these themes by focusing her story around them. Up until this point, Julie has used minimal continuers to indicate her understanding and encourage JH to say more (for example, "mm=hmm", line 19). Then in her next turn JH appears to do something quite unnecessary – she refers to the means by which she met Julie, and why they were introduced to each other, which is knowledge both Julie and JH already have. So why does she mention this here? The reason is to do with its conversational function - it helps to position Julie as a relevant informant to the research, and therefore elaborates JH's request for her story by providing it with a warrant. Introducing "Will" at this point also positions the relationship as not only between an interviewer and informant, but also partly on an acquaintance footing (although this is the first time JH and Julie actually met).

Julie then makes two corrections of JH's introduction – she places her voice-hearing in the past with "I did" (line 27), and singularises it with "just one voice" (line 31). JH marks this correction by amending what she said previously – "so you heard a voice in the past?" (line 34), and Julie accepts this re-formulation (line 35). Julie's corrections make the introduction relevant to her personally as well as displaying the jointly-accomplished nature of introductions to the interviews referred to in chapter 2. JH once more points towards exophoric information with the question "was that related to your mother's death?" (line 36) to which Julie agrees. She then draws JH's attention to the photographs and paintings of her mother around the room before spending the next part of the interview talking a little about these.

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<sup>19</sup> The work of defining the interview began prior to this point – Julie was told by Will that JH was a researcher interested in experiences of the deceased in bereavement. A brief phone conversation followed to organise the interview in which JH reiterated her interest and where Julie gave basic information about this including that she heard a voice and that it involved her mother's death. JH's introduction (extract 1) is thus tailored to Julie based on this information.

So JH makes relevant particular background information about Julie – that she heard a voice that related to her mother’s death – as well as particular interests in bereavement and hearing voices. Julie responds to this introduction by producing a detailed narrative of her voice, contextualising it in a number of settings. This contextualisation is of course not created in a vacuum but designed for its recipient – JH – and thus oriented to her background knowledge (or lack of) and to her positioning in the interview. Julie does not actually introduce her voice until a little later in the interview, but let us first look at what this voice says, examining the language it uses as a first possible source of meaning.

#### 4.2. Voice talk – linguistics and pragmatics

A voice, more often than not<sup>20</sup>, consists of language, and language is inherently meaningful. We could therefore expect a significant part of the meaning of an experience of voices to come from this linguistic aspect of the experience. However as we shall see, in linguistic terms, Julie’s voice is fairly simple. Most of the meaning of her experiences instead comes from the context of this voice.

So what does Julie tell JH about the language of her voice? Immediately prior to the extract shown below, Julie began to describe the voice she heard – it called her name (although by a different name to the one she takes now) and sounded ‘echoey’. JH asks her more about this;

##### Extract 2, Julie

446. JH: so would it be a bit like sort of, erm, "Etta?" Kind of like that?  
447. Julie: Yeah, but [echoing at the same time, yeah, yeah, erm]  
448. JH: [that sort of thing? Echoing as well, right.]  
449. Julie: strange, [erm]  
450. JH: [yeah]  
451. (3.0)  
452. Julie: that went on, .hh::=hh:: ((sighs)) I'm trying to think of how long  
453. (3.0)  
454. I don't know, for a while anyway  
455. JH: right  
456. Julie: erm, then she started calling me names like, "Slag" [and "Slut"]

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<sup>20</sup> “more often than not” because it is possible to imagine a voice that speaks but does not use clear language, or hums a tune, etc. In fact, many people do report sometimes hearing indistinct voices in the form of a babble or ‘chorus’ of voices (reported in Leudar, Hayes and Turner Baker).

457. JH: [right]  
458. Julie: and “Whore”  
459. JH: right  
460. Julie: and telling me I wasn’t fit to live  
461. JH: right  
462. Julie: “take all your tablets”

Julie gives here a brief history of what this voice has said, discussing trends rather than one specific instance. Prosodically, the voice is female, and is certainly not anonymous – it is recognisably the voice of her mother. It also has what Julie characterises as a “strange” (line 449) echo to it – suggesting some of its phenomenal qualities separate the voice from the way it sounds when someone speaks in ordinary circumstances.

In lexical terms the voice began by simply calling her name. These very simple and repetitive utterances happened “for a while” (line 454) before there was a change. Julie indicates this change with “then she started calling me names” (line 456). Julie also states that the voice began to use repeated phrases such as “take all your tablets” (line 462). Note that the vocabulary composing the voice is very simple – it is restricted to her name and single words such as ‘slag’ and ‘whore’, and simple phrases. So some of the meaning is provided lexically but this source is restricted.

Syntactic contribution to the meaning of the voice seems to be restricted too – it utters the single words mentioned above or repeated phrases like “take all your tablets!” (line 462). In terms of grammatical complexity then, the voice is simpler than the language of a Mr Man book<sup>21</sup>.

However, the voice is not simply language, but it also has pragmatics (see Leudar et al, 1997) and in this sense the voice is less restricted. The “names” (line 456) she is called are all of a particular kind – they are gender-specific *insults* referring to sexuality. The words thus have clear general meanings. In ordinary conversation, an insult of this kind would normally warrant some kind of response, and we will see if and how Julie responds a little later. The language of the voice also evaluates her as unworthy of life and encourages her self-destruction (line 460-462). Pragmatically then, the voice can summon her, insult her, make personal evaluatives, and command her. Some of this pragmatic meaning comes from the lexicon, prosody

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<sup>21</sup> See *Little Miss Sunshine* (1998) by Roger Hargreaves. Egmont books.

and the identity of the voice as her mother. Much of it however is indexical to the context that Julie provides, to which we will now turn.

### 4.3. *Here-and-Now*

There are two kinds of 'here-and-now' that are relevant to the analysis. The first is the interview setting – the 'here-and-now' of Julie talking to the interviewer about her voice. The second is the 'here-and-now' of the voice itself, the immediate situation in which Julie heard it. In this section we are focusing on the second type, as it is described to the JH in the first.

Some theories of voices suggest that as hallucinations, they do not have any meaningful connection to the person's environment (n.b. Jaspers, Chapter 1). Is this true of Julie's voice? In order to answer this question, it will be useful to look at some examples of specific instances of the voice that Julie provides (Extracts 3 & 4).

#### Extract 3, Julie

732. Julie: Yeah. I remember once at work, erm (.), one of the clients rang, rang  
733. up, I'll call him John.  
734. JH: Yeah  
735. Julie: And he said, "Hello, it's John Smith" And I had a bit of a conversation  
736. with him, and finished up calling him (.) by another client's name. And he  
737. got quite angry with me, he said "It's not, it's John!"  
738. (3.0)  
739. And it was because I had voices going on, you know, my mum's voice  
740. going on at the same time, so I'd lost the (.)  
741. JH: yeah  
742. Julie: concentration

#### Extract 4, Julie

970. JH: Can I ask you a question?<sup>22</sup>  
971. Julie: Yeah, course  
972. JH: erm  
973. (1.0)  
974. I wonder if you could tell me (.) when the last (.) time you heard a voice  
975. was?  
976. Julie: Today.  
977. JH: okay.  
978. (3.0)  
979. Can I ask you a bit about, like, what the situation was, like, what you were  
980. doing,

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<sup>22</sup> As mentioned in chapter 2, JH occasionally asked questions towards the end of narrative biographic interviews if it was unlikely that a follow-up interview would take place.

981. (1.0)  
 982. what was going on at the time  
 983. (1.0)  
 984. and  
 985. (1.0)  
 986. what she said?  
 987. Julie: Just sat this morning watching television and  
 988. (1.0)  
 989. "why don't you take all your tablets?"  
 990. (1.0)  
 991. JH: right  
 992. Julie: "you've got" (.) "you've just got a couple of months supply"

As the transcript shows, Julie provided the first example spontaneously (extract 3), and the second in response to JH's request for the particulars of a voice-situation (extract 4, line 974). What the two examples have in common is that the voice distracts Julie from her immediate task, and causes her a problem. The main difference, is in the first example, Julie is at work, attending to professional duties, and in the second, she is at home, alone, and watching the television. This leads to different here-and-now consequences; the voice at work causes her a social problem – the client becomes angry and she appears to be less competent. To put this across, Julie uses 'direct'-reported speech, where another's words are repeated in new circumstances, rather than paraphrased, to add vividness to a story. Tannen (1989) pointed out that reported speech is not simply 'reported' but is "*creatively constructed* by a current speaker in a current situation" (1989, p.105). In this example, we know that this could not have been the client's exact words because "John Smith" (extract 3, line 735) is not his real name. Julie uses this directly-reported style to convey the clarity with which the client said his name at the beginning of the conversation, the simplicity of the name, and the client's disgruntlement at being called the wrong name. The implication is that the voice here causes Julie to make a mistake that is not her fault and which does not present a fair picture of who she is. The voice at home has different consequences; it distracts her from the TV programme she is watching, and by implication causes her emotional upset.

Another difference is that in the first example, Julie has "voices going on" (extract 3, line 739) but she does not say what the voice said. It is the mere presence of the voice in this situation that causes the problem. In the second example, the problematic status of the voice is in part dependent on the linguistic meaning, and

Julie narrates what her voice said in a directly-reported style. “Why don’t you take all your tablets?” (extract 4, line 987) in this context acts as a request, and “you’ve got a couple of months supply” (line 990) is an informative that complements and strengthens this request. Note that the language of this voice is more complex than that shown in extract 2 – syntactically, and semantically. It is not a simple repeated phrase but is a sentence using the perfect tense to refer to a recent action that resulted in the tablets in Julie’s current environment. In this way, the voice has some ‘knowledge’ of Julie’s here-and-now, and recent past, that evolves with Julie’s life. Note also that what Julie says at the beginning of extract 4 – that she heard the voice “today” (line 975), curiously contradicts her earlier assertion that her voice was in her more distant past. This apparent contradiction becomes clearer a little later in the interview.

The voice is a distraction from her activity of watching television, that contains an exophoric<sup>23</sup> reference to something else in her immediate environment – the tablets, and their current status a two-month supply – easily enough to kill her. In this sense, the words of the voice combine with aspects of the here-and-now setting to focus Julie on her tablets, and to encourage an entirely feasible means of killing herself. This analytic point becomes clearer if you imagine a situation in which the same phrase, “why don’t you take all your tablets?”, means something quite different – for example as something a nurse might say when giving a reluctant patient their daily dose of medication for a health condition, or something a psychiatrist might ask a patient who has not been complying with their treatment plan, or the same words could even be said by a concerned friend who notices some tablets left in a daily dosette box.

So both voices in these examples have a relationship to the here-and-now in which they are heard. This relationship involves a degree of interference of the voice with Julie’s here-and-now intention. We will see in the next two chapters that voices and other experiences of presence may have other here-and-now consequences, some even facilitative of the person’s intentions. But what reaction does Julie have to this distraction? She tells JH how she responds to the voice;

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<sup>23</sup> It is exophoric in that it points towards a referent that is outside the ‘text’/previous discourse – in this case an object in her immediate environment.



### Extract 5, Julie

674. Julie: sometimes I get angry and shout  
675. (1.0)  
676. JH: mm::.  
677. (5.0)  
678. so hearing it makes you angry sometimes?  
679. Julie: yeah, yeah  
680. JH: and you, are you shouting back at the voice, or are you shouting, just  
681. ge- generally shouting?  
682. Julie: no, I'm shouting at the voice  
683. JH: at the voice  
684. Julie: yeah  
685. (2.0)  
686. but you can't always hear that  
687. (2.0)  
688. when it happens at work, I can't start  
689. Julie: [shouting at it.]  
690. JH: [mm::.]  
691. Julie: Or in the street.  
692. JH: mm:  
693. (6.0)  
694. so when you're in public it's difficult to do that?  
695. Julie: yeah  
696. (3.0)  
697. JH: is that something that sort of helps you feel better, when you can do  
698. it?  
699. (2.0)  
700. Julie: Yeah, when I'm here on my own  
701. (2.0)  
702. I'll do it.  
703. JH: mm::.  
704. (4.0)  
705. what do you do when you're at work, or when you're in the street?  
706. (5.0)  
707. Julie: try and talk to somebody else about things at work or  
708. JH: Okay  
709. Julie: try and find something to distract me  
710. JH: Okay  
711. (18.0)  
712. Julie: but I find it hard to concentrate then. Erm

Julie's reaction to the voice is revealing of her understanding of it. Her anger, and shouting, indicates that she sees it firstly, as a voice of someone: her mother (for example, rather than as 'mishearing' another sound, or as part of her). Further, she responds to it as an abuse that warrants this anger, and its expression "at" (line 682) the voice. Julie thus responds to the voice as someone might in ordinary conversation if they are distracted and insulted by someone else.

However, Julie does not respond compulsively to the voice. Instead her proximal

circumstances mediate her reaction; she will shout at it, but only if she is on her own (line 700). By implication, this is her preferred method. If she is at work, she attempts to distract herself from the distracting voice (line 707-709). Her reactions are thus socially mediated, and hint at a distinct privacy to her experiences, and even shame – she is not able to respond in the most effective way if others are around.

So Julie situates the voice in particular details of the here-and-now which gives it particular meanings. On one level, the voice *is* distraction – and this can cause different kinds of problems. In the first example, the voice results in a social problem. In the second, the immediate environment of the voice provides a means of self-destruction intelligible to the voice's command. Her immediate 'conversational' response indicates that she experiences the voice as insulting and abusive, and hints at an agency behind the voice – an agency that takes further shape when she talks about her family history.

#### **4.4. Personal family history**

We have so far examined the contributions of two sources of meaning to Julie's voice; the linguistic aspects of the voice and the here-and-now context in which it happens. To recap, the voice is that of her mother, and it can summon her, insult her, evaluate her and command her to self-destruction. It can also distract her from her immediate activities and draw her attention towards a means to kill herself. The meaning of this rejection develops in the interview through the biographical particulars that Julie introduces. In fact, even before the description of her voice (extract 2), Julie spontaneously provided these details. There is a slight divergence then between the order of Julie's concerns, and the way I have structured this chapter, starting with the simplest sources of meaning and then moving onto looking at how Julie uses the more complex. Julie did not build her account up in this way but rather began by establishing the thematic field of the voice, referring to aspects of her family biography to 'set-the-scene'. As it turned out, these were a set of problems that occurred before, and during the time of her mother's death. We saw that the interview began with JH and Julie defining the interaction in particular ways, before Julie began to point JH to pictures of her mother on the wall. This is the very

next thing that happens;

#### Extract 6, Julie

147. JH: Just talk for as long as you want  
148. Julie: yeah  
149. (1.0)  
150. JH: so, er (.) when you're ready  
151. Julie: Yeah  
152. JH: go for it  
153. Julie: hm  
154. (9.0)  
155. I never had a fantastic relationship with my mum  
156. JH: Right  
157. Julie: erm ((clears throat))  
158. (3.0)  
159. she was always more for my older brother, I've two older [brothers]  
160. JH: [Right]  
161. Julie: one's in Australia, one's in this country [the oldest]  
162. JH: [Right]  
163. Julie: one [and]  
164. JH: [Yeah]  
165. Julie: she was (.) always for him (.) [erm]  
166. JH: [Okay] okay (.) for the oldest one?  
167. Julie: Yeah, yeah. He was her  
168. (1.0)  
169. her son

The thematic field of the voice contains Julie's family relationships. Julie puts across the complexity of her relationship with her mother quite delicately – it was “never...fantastic” (line 155) rather than a ‘bad’ relationship. She warrants this comment by introducing the favouritism towards her older brother – her mother was “always *more for* her older brother” (line 159, my emphasis), and then upgrades this to, “she was always *for* him” (line 165, my emphasis). Note how Julie makes use of the extreme-case formulation “always” (line 159 & 165) to convey that this was not a one-off, but an everyday pattern of relating (see Pomerantz, 1986, on functions of extreme-case formulations). Julie also expresses the favouritism through the addition of “he was her (1.0) her son” (line 167-169), and the absence of Julie saying she was “her” daughter. This hints at rejection – she did not feel treated like a daughter. Her other brother is at a distance, living in another continent (line 161) – this implies that he was also distanced from the favouritism – but that Julie was not. These are the facts of the family that Julie makes immediately relevant to her voice-experiences, which she has not yet introduced. In the immediacy of the interview, the hardship that Julie faced in this relationship was told to JH against the background of the room

itself – a room containing several large pictures of her mother. This was a background that pointed to her mother as an important figure in Julie’s life despite the love that was sometimes absent.

Julie then outlined three further problems. In the first, the feeling of care for her mother, combined with her own rejection continues, even to her mother’s deathbed;

Extract 7, Julie

194. Julie: I was given compassionate leave from work  
195. JH: yeah  
196. Julie: erm  
197. (2.0)  
198. and I was with her when she died  
199. JH: right  
200. Julie: erm (.)  
201. JH: right. So you were kind of there through all the last few weeks  
202. Julie: yeah  
203. (4.0)  
204. But I still felt she wanted Mike (brother) there and not me  
205. JH: mm::

Here Julie narrates a particular time in their shared history that encapsulated her feelings of rejection. Her mother was dying, and Julie, who was by her side throughout, her brothers absent, still did not feel wanted. The ‘deathbed’ scene conjures up notions of making amends, tying up loose ends and being with your ‘nearest and dearest’ – which contrast with Julie’s experience. Her comment is in fact tagged onto JH’s formulation – “you were kind of there through all the last few weeks” (line 201) – with the “yeah but” (line 204). This completion of JH’s formulation sets up the contrast between her dedication, care and loyalty, and what she received back: rejection. So in telling JH what happened Julie also works on her own identity - as a dutiful, but wronged daughter. This comes across not only in the details of the story but also in the way she shares it - she is careful not to criticise her mother and she states what happened and how she felt in a ‘factual’ way. The next problem in the story also involved her mother, and also happened at the time of her death (extract 8).

Extract 8, Julie

252. Julie: my brother from Australia had come over, and my niece was there, and  
253. erm they were saying yes, take the drip down, and I felt that was wrong,  
254. erm, because I felt like then she was gonna de-die!  
255. (1.0)

256. Of thirst, basically, because she'd have no fluids. Erm, they were saying  
257. "yes, do it, yes, do it"  
258. (2.0)  
259. and reluctantly I agreed to do it, erm, but I never felt comfortable with that.  
260. Erm  
261. (1.0)  
262. JH: it sounds like you still feel very uncomfortable about that  
263. Julie: yeah  
264. JH: idea  
265. Julie: mm:.

Julie, who is dutiful but not recognised for this, is joined by one of her brothers at the deathbed who up until this point had been absent. Their relatively light engagement with her mother in the final days contrasts with Julie's, yet, it is they who were absent who effect the discontinuation of the intravenous fluid that is keeping her mother alive. Julie brings this scene alive with the switch into a 'direct-reported' speech style that conveys the strength of their orders to discontinue the sustenance. Julie presents herself in the past as reluctantly acquiescing to this pressure. Her discomfort with this course of action is put across in several ways – she says she felt it was “wrong” (line 253) to take her intravenous drip down, and says with horror, “because I felt like then she was gonna die! Of thirst” (line line 254-256). She also indicates regret over this “I never felt comfortable with that” (line 259). On her next turn JH orients to the immediacy of this discomfort - “it sounds like you still feel very uncomfortable” (line 262), and Julie accepts this formulation (line 263-265). The implication of this part of the interview is that Julie felt partially responsible for giving-in to this pressure to hasten her mother's death, and it hints at guilt. This meaning is worked at by Julie but also with JH's collaboration.

So far, the shared biography of Julie and her mother points towards a generally hurtful relationship for Julie, with particularly hurtful moments. Her character, and the treatment she received, contrasts with that of her brothers. It is *she* who seems to care and do the duties that her brothers do not (whether this is due to distance or neglect she does not say), yet it is *they* who are preferred (whether this is just the elder brother or both is not clear from Julie's story). This creates a problem – *why, if she was a good daughter, was she rejected?* The next detail in the beginning of Julie's story took the interviewer back in time again to another moment of the family's history.

### Extract 9, Julie

346. Julie: My father (.) had (.) a mistress  
347. JH: mm:  
348. Julie: I pieced that together long after  
349. JH: right  
350. Julie: erm, and he named me after my, after his mistress,  
351. JH: right  
352. Julie: Julietta,  
353. JH: right  
354. Julie: but he said I had to be called Etta, which I absolutely hate  
355. JH: Okay  
356. Julie: and my mum never gave up calling me Etta.  
357. JH: right  
358. Julie: I took Julie  
359. JH: right  
360. Julie: erm  
361. (4.0)  
362. and to all my friends, my work colleagues, everything, I'm Julie  
363. JH: right  
364. Julie: erm  
365. JH: so it was only to your mum that you were Etta  
366. Julie: No, other members of the family call me Etta as well, but erm, absolutely  
367. hate it<sup>24</sup>

The problem is that Julie is identified with a shadowy part of the family history through her name – she does not simply end up with the same name as her mother's rival, but is deliberately named after her by her father. So her name, a central aspect of her identity, is the result of an act of nastiness from her father to her mother. This is not an open fact in the family but is a secret that Julie has “pieced...together” (line 348). She “had to” (line 354) be called a shortened version of this name (which implies that this was also the name that the ‘mistress’ was known by), one which Julie “absolutely hate(s)” (line 354). The strength of this formulation, used for a second time on line 366-367, is striking. It implies that the name has associations that the name ‘Julie’ has not – it represents the woman her father cheated with. The name that Julie takes herself (line 358), seems to carry a sense of ownership and less of these negative connotations. It is notable that her mother persisted in calling her “Etta” (line 356), ignoring her wishes to be known as Julie, and as we saw previously, the voice also calls her by this name (Extract 2, line 446). It is thus not only a name but an action that keeps the associations with the ‘mistress’ intact.

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<sup>24</sup> Obviously neither ‘Julie’, ‘Julietta’ or ‘Etta’ are this person’s real names but I have done my best to put across the complexities of her name with the pseudonyms; her real name is also a long name that can be broken into two or more shorter names.

The historical particulars Julie introduces to JH are wholly problematic and they outline the negativity that the voice continues. The history gives a meaning both to the rejection of Julie before her mother's death, and to the language of the voice - the insults, summons, commands and evaluatives take on specific meanings as a continuation of her mother's rejection. Unfortunately, the voice does not resolve this rejection and make it liveable for Julie as postulated by 'continuing bond' theories of bereavement. Is Julie's voice then a simple continuation of abuse? Not entirely, because there is no suggestion that Julie's mother used these words against Julie in life. Rather, the voice seems to magnify, and crystallise in words the rejection of Julie in the past.<sup>25</sup> It is arguable that the openly abusive words of the voice may also *allow* Julie to express anger openly: anger that may come from the past rejection by her mother, as well as from the abusive voice now. Indeed, Julie's story suggested that there was never an open conflict with her mother during her lifetime. Chapter 8 further explores the function of Julie's voice.

The biographical context Julie provides implies something else – that Julie herself is identified with the 'mistress'. In fact the words the voice uses – 'slag', 'slut' and 'whore' – are not dissimilar from the way that the term 'mistress' is sometimes used. The words combine to provide a family of derogatory categories aimed at female sexuality. This is consistent with findings that voices are gender-specific in their insults (Legg and Gilbert, 2006), and shows how this manifests in one case. The voice also uses the name that her family insisted on calling her in life, a name she disowned. This begs the question – did Julie's mother reject her because she somehow symbolised the problems with her own husband? Was Julie an unwanted child from an unwanted time? Julie herself does not say this, but this remains one possible interpretation due to the relevancies and implications that she establishes. Another hypothesis is that the voice relates to Julie's guilt over things that have happened in the past. This guilt could be over several different aspects of the relationship. It may relate to the manner of her mother's death, about Julie not realising her mother's misery due to her father's infidelity (she was not told), or the

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<sup>25</sup> A similar process may be seen in the voices of 'Violet' reported in Hayes, Leudar and King. Her voices regularly abused and rejected her. Their identities were aligned not with deceased persons but with those who had rejected or bullied her in the past. Voices do not always 'mirror' interpersonal relationships in a precise way but seem to symbolize and sometimes distil aspects of these relationships.

guilt may concern Julie being a reminder of this affair herself (through her name) and not realising this sooner. These are possibilities that Julie's story leaves in the background, rather like indistinct 'fringes' of the thematic field. But it would be a mistake to over-interpret what Julie says, to turn into a certainty what her story only alludes to. So what is Julie's explicit position on why she heard this voice?

#### Extract 10, Julie

625. Julie: I just don't understand why she's doing it  
626. JH: mm::.  
627. (6.0)  
628. a bit like, "why would my mum hurt me like this?"  
629. Julie: Yeah, I think  
630. (16.0)  
631. JH: and then, the not knowing why, the not having a reason for it, feels very  
632. very hard?  
633. Julie: Yeah.  
634. JH: yeah.  
635. (5.0)  
636. Julie: It makes me question, is it true?  
637. (2.0)  
638. JH: right  
639. (5.0)  
640. So it makes you think, what, what she's saying to you, might be true?  
641. Julie: yeah.  
642. JH: right  
643. (28.0)  
644. Julie: when you hear a thing often enough  
645. JH: mm::.  
646. (4.0)  
647. Mm::.

Julie begins by stating that she does not have a reason "why she's doing it" (line 625). Her mother's intentionality is embedded in this formulation (it is possible to imagine quite a different formulation such as 'I don't understand why I have a voice'). The language then that Julie uses here does not query the existence of the voice in the first place, but rather what her mother's purpose is in speaking to her in this abusive way. Julie indicates that in the absence of an alternative explanation, she begins to doubt herself – is the reason her mum is saying these things because they are the truth (line 636)? Julie suggests to JH that she has begun to see herself in the insulting terms that the voice suggests. The long silences in this part of the interview (lines 627, 630 and 639) are followed by formulations by JH of what Julie has said – designed to display understanding and to encourage Julie to say more (particularly when JH's 'continuers' appear not to have the desired effect, line 626, for example).



Formulations warrant acceptance or rejection on the next turn, and Julie seems to accept these formulations mostly with a “yeah” (line 633 and 641), and in one place qualified with “I think” (line 629).

Julie warrants the voice’s power to make her doubt herself in this way – it is the repetition of its message. This she implies when she says “when you hear a thing often enough” (line 644), leaving this sentence incomplete for JH to draw her own conclusions. It is also possible that what the voice says to Julie is powerful precisely because it is voiced by her mother. Other parts of her story have already indicated that Julie was concerned with what her mother thought of her, and whether she loved her. Furthermore, Julie did not only experience a voice, but on at least one occasion had a powerful feeling of her mother’s presence beside her (see chapter 6, extract 11). This no doubt increases the potency of the experience - of her mother and of the rejection. The consequences of this voice could imaginably be quite different if it sounded anonymous, and would therefore not register with the family history in the same way. Imagine also the consequences if the voice sounded like Julie’s mother but Julie did not experience it as a direct communication from her.

These are some of the emotional consequences of the biographical link for Julie. As far as she is concerned, she hears the voice of her mother abusing her on a regular basis, both reminding her of the rejection she felt and also replenishing it. She begins sometimes to see herself in the voice’s terms. But has Julie come across any alternative explanations for her voice? The next part of the analysis examines the use that Julie makes of semiotic resources from religion and society in the interview.

#### ***4.5. Is Julie’s voice a verbal hallucination?***

Chapter 1 suggested that psychiatric concepts have a considerable influence on descriptions of hearing voices, certainly in the UK. This appears even in bereavement studies, albeit in the form of a denial of a medical meaning. We have seen so far that Julie does not refer to her voice as an auditory hallucination, but as “she” (extract 9, line 625) – linking the experience to her mother. Neither does she refer to the experience as a symptom of an illness, but implies rather that it has

something to do with her family history and her experience of being a daughter. Psychiatric meanings are, however, not altogether absent from Julie's account.

#### Extract 11, Julie

533. Julie: the voice still went on, erm  
534. (1.0)  
535. and I eventually ended up off work  
536. JH: right  
537. Julie: erm  
538. (2.0)  
539. and I was put under home treatment, I- do you know what a home  
540. treatment is?  
541. JH: Is that where you have to accept a community psychiatric nurse, coming  
542. round?  
543. Julie: yeah  
544. JH: to give you an injection or something?  
545. Julie: Well, n- er, I was on oral medication  
546. JH: right  
547. Julie: erm, and they put me on olanzapine  
548. JH: right  
549. Julie: and erm  
550. JH: right  
551. (2.0)  
552. Julie: I ended up on 20 milligrams and that eventually stopped the voice  
553. JH: right  
554. Julie: erm  
555. (6.0)  
556. and I'm still on olanzapine now  
557. JH: right  
558. Julie: erm  
559. (3.0)  
560. I still get the- I'm not on 20 milligrams now, I've got it down to ten  
561. Erm  
562. JH: ((whispers)) °Okay°  
563. Julie: and I still get the voice  
564. JH: right  
565. Julie: sometimes, and it's still as abusive and  
566. (4.0)

Julie's voice "still went on" (line 533), and this simple phrase implies three things; the voice would not cease and be quiet, the voice was repetitive, and the voice continued over a significant time period. The "and" (line 535) forms a logical tie between the cause – the voice 'going on', and its effect – "I eventually ended up off work" (line 535). The voice is presented as having a disabling effect on Julie, and it is at this point that the psychiatric involvement is introduced to her story – she becomes a patient. This framed her problem as a medical condition and provided her with a solution – medication - which "eventually stopped" (line 552) the voice. So far,

this fact is consistent with the version of events that she has told JH at the beginning of the interview – that she does not hear the voice anymore. But surprisingly, Julie shifts her position on her next turn, saying she “still” hears the voice “sometimes” (lines 563-565). This is consistent with the example that she gave JH later in the interview (shown in extract 4) of a voice she heard on the very morning of the interview. This statement that she “still gets the voice” (extract 11, line 563) also makes her false start more obvious on line 560 – the sequential organisation here suggests that it is important for Julie to introduce the fact that she has now halved her dose of olanzapine medication before she says that she still hears the voice in the present. This forms a link between the medication and the voice, a link that she elaborates slightly later in the interview.

Note that at this point of the interview, Julie switches from talking about the voice as her mother, to calling it “*the* voice” (lines 552 and 563, my emphasis) and “it” (line 565, rather than “her/she”). This switch of terms leaves behind the biographic relevancies of the voice, and coincides with her introducing a psychiatric mode of her experience. The biographic details shift into the background and another field of relevancies appears – including medicine, nurses and home treatment. In this psychiatric frame, the meaning of Julie’s voice is limited to its here-and-now consequences - to distraction, and abuse – rather than what it means in the broader context of her life story. Thus Julie used varied descriptions of her voice in the interview, with different background relevancies and consequences. In the process she was not simply describing the psychiatric involvement but also characterising her voice and its causal aspects.

In tune with the psychiatric literature described in chapter 1, Julie talks not about the relationship between her mother and the voice, but between the medication and the voice. The tablets have not changed the quality of the voice to make it less vicious – “it’s still as abusive” (line 565). In fact, Julie’s repetition of “still” when referring to different aspects of her life (line 533, line 556 and line 563) strongly creates the impression that both the medication and the voice-abuse are a constant state of affairs – the status quo has been maintained and there have been no positive changes in her life. The language Julie uses when describing the medical treatment of her voices is notable for its passiveness – “I was put under” (line 539), “they put

me on” (line 547), “I ended up on” (line 552). Julie’s agency appears in a stronger form when she says “I’ve got it down” (line 560). The tension between the upward and the downward influences on her dose is also expressed in the next part of her story;

#### Extract 12, Julie

1096. JH: I was just asking you about the reasons why you keep it (.) private  
1097. Julie: erm. With the psychiatrist erm, when they put me on the olanzapine and  
1098. put it right up to 20mg  
1099. JH: mm::  
1100. Julie: they also put my antidepressant up  
1101. JH: right  
1102. Julie: and my mood stabiliser up  
1103. JH: right  
1104. Julie: erm, and I've managed to get erm  
1105. (3.0)  
1106. I got my mood stabiliser down myself, a bit  
1107. JH: right  
1108. Julie: and erm, the consultant, the last time I saw her reduced the  
1109. antidepressants, erm, and I, I got the olanzapine down,  
1110. JH: mm:  
1111. Julie: erm  
1112. (2.0)  
1113. but I think they will, if  
1114. JH: mm:  
1115. Julie: if I told them about it, they would  
1116. JH: yeah  
1117. Julie: put them all back up again and  
1118. (2.0)  
1119. it's harder to function  
1120. JH: yeah  
1121. Julie: on more medication  
1122. JH: yep  
1123. Julie: or  
1124. JH: because of side effects?  
1125. Julie: yeah.

At the beginning of the extract, JH topicalises something Julie had said previously about keeping her voice private. Julie takes up this theme, and provides an explanation for her secrecy. Julie conveys a tension between “them” (line 1115), who put the medication “up” (line 1117), and her own wish to get the medication “down” (line 1106). As in the previous example there is an absence of Julie’s agency in going onto the medication – “they put me on the olanzapine” (line 1097). But this time Julie conveys a runaway effect on her other medication by listing them – “they

also put my antidepressant up....and my mood stabiliser up” (lines 1100-1102)<sup>26</sup>. The result is that Julie is on high doses of three different types of psychiatric medication. In this part of the narrative, Julie is the agent pushing them back down again – which is conveyed as a lone struggle – “*I’ve managed to get....my mood stabiliser down myself*” (line 1106, my emphasis), “I got the olanzapine down” (line 1109). This suggests hard work, and time, and an element of deception on Julie’s part – hard work that would be undone if she is entirely open about hearing the voice. Julie implies that hearing a voice provokes a reflex response from the psychiatric services that does not take her wishes into account.

Julie also offers a reason for wanting her medication reduced so badly – “it’s harder to function” (line 1119) on the dose preferred by her psychiatrist. “Function”, in this context, implies a basic level of everyday activity. Interestingly this is a term that is part of the clinical vernacular, used for example, to refer to a patient as having ‘impaired social functioning’. However Julie uses this word differently, not to refer to the pathological consequences of a mental illness but to refer to the effects of the medication itself. JH uses continuers such as “yeah” (line 1120) and “yep” (line 1122) to indicate understanding and encourage Julie to continue to talk until line 1124, when she asks the clarifying question – is it the side-effects of the medication that make it harder to function? Julie confirms that this is what she meant on her next turn.

So who are “they” (line 1097) who have the power to make these decisions about the tablets she should take? The context that Julie provides suggests they are psychiatric professionals, but it is possible that this could also refer to Julie’s family. One point is clear, and that is that the lack of authentic consent to the treatment affords a situation of secrecy. This is not a situation in which Julie can ask for the type of help that she wants. She presents her choice as being between a high dose of anti-psychotic drugs, or silence;

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<sup>26</sup> This implies Julie has a previous history as a psychiatric patient. As with other aspects of Julie’s account, this was by no means typical for those who heard a voices in bereavement – nor is it the case for many other voice-hearers (see Leudar, Hayes, & Turner Baker; and Bentall, 2003).

### Extract 13, Julie

1045. JH: Can I ask you another question?  
1046. Julie: Yeah, course  
1047. (1.0)  
1048. JH: Are you able to talk to anybody in your family (.) about it, or do you keep it  
1049. to yourself?  
1050. Julie: I keep it to myself.  
1051. JH: okay.  
1052. (2.0)  
1053. Do your, erm, family know that you hear (.) your mum's voice?  
1054. Julie: No.  
1055. JH: No.  
1056. Julie: My husband knows I did, but I don't think he knows that I still do.  
1057. JH: okay  
1058. (10.0)  
1059. so it's very very- you keep it very private?  
1060. Julie: Yeah.  
1061. (22.0)

### Extract 14, Julie

1141. JH: Is it the same reason that you can't tell your husband  
1142. (1.0)  
1143. that you're hearing voices now?  
1144. (5.0)  
1145. Julie: Yeah, 'cause he'd just worry.  
1146. JH: Right.  
1147. (3.0)  
1148. you don't want him to worry about you?  
1149. Julie: No.

In both extracts, it is JH who topicalises sharing with the family. In extract 13, Julie responds minimally, but what she does say indicates that she keeps the voice a secret, even from her husband now (line 1056). This resonates with previous literature on these kinds of experiences which suggests they may be heavily stigmatised and kept private even from family members (Rees, 1971). The stigma here is underwritten by psychiatry, and we will see in chapter 7 whether this psychiatric stigma appears in other cases. Staying with Julie for now, extract 14 begins with JH asking whether she does not tell her husband because of the “same reason” (line 1141) that she does not tell the psychiatric workers. Julie answers in agreement (“yeah”, line 1145) before giving a slightly different reason - telling her husband would “just” (line 1145) cause worry (and by implication, nothing helpful for Julie). The psychiatric involvement then seems to result in worry and secrecy.

So Julie becomes a patient in her story, but does she have an illness? Her voices

are certainly a huge problem for her – at times they are acutely self-destructive experiences. Psychiatry offered Julie a temporary solution<sup>27</sup>, albeit a solution that caused her other problems (side effects). However there is no clear evidence that Julie presented her voice as an illness. She did not use psychiatry (or psychology, for that matter) to account for her voice as, for example, part of a mental illness, locating the problem within herself only. Yet her story does point towards the social consequences of psychiatric meaning when it is applied to her own voices. It transforms her experiences into symptoms, which by default warrant long-term medication. Indirect consequences include that her voice, rather than discussed and worked out with other people, becomes an abusive secret, and a confusing one at that. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the immediacy of the interview itself – initially, this secrecy extends to JH, who is given the ‘official version’ of events at the start of the interview. She is only later told that this is not the whole truth. This is a stark instance of how the positioning of the interviewer – as someone who can be trusted with this information or as someone who cannot – can change. Here Julie appears to adjust her narrative as the interview relationship with JH progresses<sup>28</sup>.

#### **4.6. Religion and Culture**

This enquiry is focused on the methods by which people contextualise their experiences of presence, in order to make them meaningful and consequential. We saw that Julie told JH about the psychiatric involvement in her bereavement voices, and she showed the consequences this had for her. Psychiatry offered her a ‘treatment’ for her voices, but not an interpretation that satisfied her questions about what her voice was and why it was there. Psychiatry also underpinned a form of stigmatisation and secrecy. Chapter 1 showed that religion and spirituality have been used throughout history to make sense of voices, as for example, a calling from God, or contact from the afterlife. Do any of these frames provide Julie with an adequate explanation for her voices? Julie did not bring religion into the interview spontaneously (and we shall soon see why), but began to talk about this in response

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<sup>27</sup> Although in light of her later shift in position it is not entirely clear if the reported success of the medication was part of the ‘official version’ of her voice designed to get her medication reduced.

<sup>28</sup> Julie was aware at the beginning of the interview that her story would not be traceable to her personally once in written form, and JH reiterated this anonymity at the end.

to JH's question;

Extract 15, Julie

1280. JH: okay. The one more question that I forgot, is erm, I just wondered if you  
1281. had any religious beliefs  
1282. Julie: Yes I do.  
1283. JH: okay.  
1284. Julie: Christian beliefs.  
1285. JH: okay  
1286. Julie: Erm  
1287. (4.0)  
1288. and it feels very hard, I can't talk to my Christian friends about it because  
1289. erm  
1290. (1.0)  
1291. they would talk in terms of, erm, demons and devils  
1292. JH: Right.  
1293. (3.0)  
1294. And you don't wanna think of your mum as having anything to do with that.  
1295. Julie: No. No  
1296. (10.0)  
1297. ((*budgie whistles*)) shut up!  
1298. (3.0)  
1299. erm  
1300. (10.0)  
1301. JH: Do you believe that that's what it is?  
1302. (2.0)  
1303. Julie: No, I think it's her!

JH's question concerning Julie's "religious beliefs" (line 1281) implies that these may somehow be relevant to voices and bereavement, and so implicitly acts a request for Julie to tell JH about any relationship there may be. Julie responds in the affirmative and specifies these beliefs as "Christian" (line 1288). The Church is therefore available to Julie as a place in which to make sense of her experiences. However, she deliberately does not use it in this way, and for good reasons – her friends at church would immediately view her situation as a case of possession (line 1291). This would link her mother to the devil and also presumably result in spiritual consequences for Julie involving particular religious practices (possibly exorcism). However, refraining from mentioning her experiences is not something Julie does lightly – rather it "feels very hard" that she "can't talk" (line 1288). She wants to talk to others about what is happening to her, but as in the psychiatric frame, Julie chooses silence, because the alternative is worse. She conveys the impression that speaking about her voices is dangerous because it is likely to initiate a chain of events, interpretations and practices, beyond her control. There is no sense in which Julie is



able to ask for the kind of help that she will find useful, and to receive this. In light of this it becomes clear why Julie does not discuss her religious faith spontaneously – it does not offer her a useful interpretation of her voice.

So the negativity surrounding Julie's voice persists, through different sources of meaning; personal, psychiatric, and religious. What does Julie think of this latter interpretation – *is the devil causing her abusive voice?* JH's question (line 1301) follows a long silence in the interview (line 1300) and is designed to elicit Julie's explicit position on this. Her response – "I think it's her!" (line 1303) – clearly puts her mother's intention behind the voice and implies some kind of spiritual engagement. The following extract offers more clues as to where Julie herself locates her problem with the voice;

#### Extract 16, Julie

1313. JH: Have your experiences of hearing your mum affected your beliefs at all?  
1314. (3.0)  
1315. Or changed them in any way?  
1316. Julie: Erm  
1317. (2.0)  
1318. I often think "why does God let it happen?"  
1319. JH: Mm:.  
1320. (2.0)  
1321. Julie: Why doesn't he stop it?  
1322. JH: Mm:.  
1323. Julie: If he's so (.) all powerful

JH's question here again thematises Julie's religious beliefs and this time the sub-theme is change of beliefs as a result of hearing her mother's voice. Julie does not say explicitly that her religiosity has changed, but hints at significant anger and resentment at her god. The picture she paints is of an undeserved punishment that points towards an unjust god. The way she says this is resonant of ways that people talk in philosophy and also in a more everyday sense about the contradiction between an omnipotent god, and the depth and prevalence of human suffering.

Note that what Julie says here frames her problem as an ordinary problem of human suffering, rather than the kind of spiritual problem she fears her church friends would see. This conception of her problem is developed when Julie draws on a very everyday source of meaning – the TV soap, *Coronation Street*;

### Extract 17, Julie

1331. Julie: Do you watch Coronation Street?  
1332. JH: afraid not.  
1333. Julie: No? Erm  
1334. JH: We've not got a TV actually!  
1335. Julie: Right!  
1336. JH: At the moment. Heh!  
1337. (2.0)  
1338. Julie: Just there was an instance on there, there's a young [girl who's]  
1339. JH: [okay]  
1340. Julie: become a Christian  
1341. JH: Oh, right  
1342. Julie: and, her mother (.) had breast cancer (.) and her father had a right go at  
1343. her and God  
1344. JH: okay  
1345. Julie: in a recent episode and... Like, "how could you let this happen?" Sort of  
1346. thing  
1347. JH: yeah  
1348. Julie: erm, 'cause she said she'd been to the youth group at Church, and they'd  
1349. thanked God, because when they'd done the lump-ectomy, they'd got it all.  
1350. (1.0)  
1351. And then her father was saying, "Why did God let it happen?" And "What  
1352. about my mum?" Because his mum died of cancer, and "Why does he let it  
1353. happen at all, and what about all the people that  
1354. (1.0)  
1355. it doesn't have a good outcome?"  
1356. (2.0)  
1357. Or, and it feels a bit like that.  
1358. JH: Yeah.  
1359. (2.0)  
1360. so you could relate to that man's (.) kind of, anger, at God?  
1361. Julie: Yeah. Yeah.  
1362. JH: okay  
1363. Julie: Oh, I get angry at God  
1364. (38.0)

Julie begins by determining JH's knowledge of the plot of the programme (line 1331), which is none at all (line 1332). She then tells JH about a particular storyline that by implication, has relevance to their conversation about her voice and her god. In this plot, the protagonists take on two positions in their attitudes towards God; the first position is of gratitude to God for the woman's recovery when she becomes ill – God is attributed with the good outcome rather than blamed for the illness. This is adopted by the girl and the youth group (line 1348-1349). The second position blames God for the illness in the first place – for the suffering of innocent people. This stance by implication doubts God's greatness – if God can allow such torment then he is either cruel, or not omnipotent. The man in the story holds this position. At

this point in her narrative, Julie uses 'direct-reported' speech, which brings his words alive and adds emotional vividness to the story (line 1351-1355). Note that she does not use this with the first position, and so becomes the 'animator' of the man's words only – and in doing so she is not merely repeating them, but they perform a particular action in the circumstances of the interview. Animating his words here in fact vocalises her own anger, but in an indirect way. At this point however, she makes only a hedged statement about her own feelings, which are “a bit like that” (line 1357).

Julie only aligns explicitly with the man's anger when JH formulates a question along these lines (line 1360). Julie agrees that she has anger and resentment towards her god (that she only implied earlier) – this is done vehemently with the “yeah, yeah” on line 1361 and the emphatic statement that follows. “Oh, I get angry at God” (line 1363) followed by a long silence implies that this is somewhat of an understatement of the strength of her feelings. Note that this part of her narrative also has the effect of likening her problem, the voice, to the cancer – in so far as it is random, undeserved, and the source of significant misery.

Julie's reference to Coronation Street is revealing of how she characterises her voice. It is a spontaneous reference, unlike religion which is introduced by JH. It is a programme about ordinary people, and the cancer-storyline is a common dilemma – it is not related in the programme or by Julie to demons, devils or psychopathology. Rather it is an undeserved affliction resulting in terrible suffering, furthermore a suffering that her god allows.

Resources in society available to someone in Julie's position also include self-help groups, which can be a source of support and sense-making for voice-hearers. However, this is not how it works for Julie;

#### Extract 18, Julie

854. Julie: I went to the hearing voices group once.  
855. JH: mm:  
856. Julie: erm, but (.) it felt different from what other people were talking about  
857. JH: right  
858. Julie: erm, because they seem to have (.) many voices  
859. JH: right

860. (2.0)  
861. right. So you felt like you were the only one that had just the one voice?  
862. Julie: yeah, yeah.  
863. (3.0)  
864. It didn't feel the same somehow so I didn't go back.  
865. JH: Okay

Julie invokes two categories of people that were at the group. The first is those people who hear many voices – “they” (line 858). The second category consists of Julie only, who hears one voice. As a result, Julie’s experience “felt different” (line 856), and this implies firstly that they were not comparable experiences, and secondly that Julie herself was different to the rest of the group – an outsider. The result is that this setting provided Julie’s voice with the meaning of ‘difference’. The theme of Julie’s isolation continues even in this place that is meant for all voice-hearers to share and help each other with their experiences.

So Julie draws on a variety of semiotic resources in her account, but none of these on their own provide a satisfactory interpretation of her voice. Psychiatry offers Julie a causal explanation for her voice, but does not engage with the biographic link or aid her interpretation of the voice. Access to the hearing voices group does not provide Julie with ideas about her voice except that it underlines the difference of her voice from others. The TV programme does not provide Julie with a direct interpretation of her voice, but it does allow her to convey the consequences of it – her suffering and subsequent anger towards her god. The religious episteme is a source of meaning for Julie’s voice, but it does not affect all aspects of the experience, for example it does not provide an identity for the voice or an interpretation of the words. What it does do is offer another causal explanation for her voice (devils and demons), which underpins another form of stigmatisation that Julie faces. Julie as a result has to actively avoid a situation in which her voice comes under this description – and so tells no-one.

#### ***4.7. Establishing methods for exploring meaning – what have we learnt from Julie’s case?***

This chapter has examined one person’s voice from two basic presuppositions; that experiences of presence are meaningful, and socially-shareable experiences, here most pertinently shareable with the interviewer, JH. The other side of this is that the

stories that are told are not the 'only truth' but may have situation-contingent features – most obviously illustrated in Julie's case through the change in her story regarding whether the voice was only in the past or also in her current life.

With these presuppositions in mind, a method has been established that investigates the way that a 'presence'-experience (or this could stand for any experience, for that matter), is made meaningful in the immediate setting of the narrative interview. This can be achieved by paying close attention to the way in which the person contextualises their experiences in ways that make it intelligible, meaningful and consequential. This method will be carried forward into the chapters that follow.

Julie's case itself illuminates a number of important things about the use of meaning-resources in religion and society. She shows that even when these are available to her, she may not use them. She also shows *why* they may not be used to interpret her voice – devils and demons, and symptoms, disregard the biographical significance of her voice and its words. Julie did not 'borrow' interpretations from cultural and religious resources directly and mechanistically, but drew upon only those parts that were personally acceptable and convincing.

It is interesting that in Julie's story at least, the devils and demons conception of her voice results in similar consequences to the symptom formulation – Julie's silence and isolation. Both offer her causal explanations for her voice, but do not offer her clues as to what the language of the voice means, and both of the causal explanations underpin stigma. This is an irony when these two frameworks – medicine and religion - are often seen as polarised when it comes to interpretations of voices, visions, and feelings of presence. Instead, the cultural resource that seems to fit Julie's experience best is the man's anger at God in the TV soap. Julie's experiences change her relationship to her religion not by way of doubting her god's existence, but through the anger she feels towards her god. Does everyone use religion to understand their experiences of presence in this way? As we shall see in Chapter 7, some participants used spiritual and religious resources to explain how their experience happened to them. Others, more similarly to Julie, used references to religion to express something else about themselves.

Notably absent as a cultural frame in Julie's narrative is academic psychology. This

includes interpretations of all varieties: her voice is not presented as a cognitive mistake – there is no downgrading of her voice as an error but instead it carries enormous significance as messages from her mother. Nor is it characterised as an expression of a part of her that she is not aware of (c.f. Freud and Janet, chapter 1). The absence of psychological concepts is perhaps surprising in the context of the interview situation – Julie knows that JH is a psychologist. This demonstrates that participant stories do not have to be mechanistically influenced by the interviewer or interview situation. We shall see however that not everyone ignores psychology in descriptions of their voices – some may make active use of their knowledge of psychological concepts (see chapter 7).

The most important source of contextualisation for Julie's voice is her own biography: her family history, her relationship with her mother, and the event of her death. Three sources of meaning – the language of the voice, her immediate environment, and her biography – combine to give her voice the meaning of a continued personal rejection from her mother. Her voice points towards these biographical facts in the 'thematic field', and the biographical facts also shape the voice. It is in this sense that the theme and thematic field are mutually constitutive.

Julie's explicit position is that it is her mother who is abusing her through the voice but that she is puzzled as to why this is so. But the facts from her life story hint at possible interpretations, including that Julie is abused because of an association with the 'mistress', or that the voice may express the conflict with her mother that was never openly expressed during her mother's life. What her voice says seems to have a degree of resonance with Julie's own view of herself – she hints that she sometimes feels the sense of worthlessness that the voice pushes into her awareness. Thus the consequences of the voice for Julie can be acutely destructive – she is fairly reserved about her distress, but it is implied throughout her story. The destruction comes not from the fact that she hears someone who has died. It comes from the fact that it is a repeated message that she is morally-reprehensible and worthless; this message, as far as Julie is concerned is from her mother; and that there is a part of Julie that aligns with this opinion.

The analysis of Julie's case prompts some questions to be carried through into the

chapters which follow;

- Are biographical relevancies as important in the thematic field of other experiences of presence? (see chapters 5 and 6)
- Is psychiatry ever-present in these stories? (see chapter 7)
- Are psychological concepts absent from other stories of presence in bereavement? (see chapter 7)
- Do the bereaved ever make direct use of religious and spiritual interpretations? (see chapter 7)
- Are experiences of presence always linked to problems in relationships with the deceased? (see Chapter 8)
- How does the immediate setting of the interview influence the structure of the story?
- Is the language of voices in bereavement usually quite simple? (see chapter 5)

Julie's story is somewhat horrific. She feels haunted by her mother and cannot share this fact with even her closest family. This is not typical of the stories of presence in bereavement, but her detailed contextualisation of the experience *is*, as we will see in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5 - Sources of Meaning: Part One. Hearing Voices.

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This chapter looks at those experiences of presence that were linguistic in character. These were voices, like Julie's, that used words. Non-linguistic experiences of presence - including visions, smells and feelings of presence - will be treated separately in the next chapter (chapter 6). This separation has been made because voices that use language have an additional, and complex, source of meaning that the other experiences of presence lack.

In medical settings, voices are seen as 'verbal hallucinations' and are treated accordingly as symptoms of an underlying mental illness – and certainly not as meaningful experiences in their own right. Ascription of other meanings to the voice is often viewed as delusional. Informants to this study however did talk about hearing voices as experiences of rich significance to them. This chapter concerns the business of where this meaning comes from. This involves looking at the ways in which informants contextualise their voice on the occasion of talking to the interviewer – how they structure their immediate activity of storytelling by drawing on various sources of meaning.

Bruner has argued that despite the fact that all human action is meaningful, the discipline of psychology has become somewhat dislocated from this concern, in favour of investigating the processing of information (Bruner, 1990). A review of literature at the beginning of this thesis demonstrated that the field of voices/hallucination studies is by no means an exception to this trend – with most studies aiming to explain the experiences as failures to process perceptual information correctly (see chapter 1). This chapter moves away from an endeavour to provide a causal reason for why some bereaved people hear a voice and others do not. Instead, it is an investigation of the significance of the voices to informants, and the methods by which this meaning is conveyed.

The current chapter builds on the last through the analysis of eight further cases of hearing voices in bereavement. In the course of this enquiry analysis will reveal trends across the cases, as well as noting exceptions to these trends. The present



chapter will focus on three sources of meaning. The first of these is the language of the voices. Past studies have shown that voice-talk is an important source of meaning and that this language can contain many of the same features of ordinary conversation (Leudar et al, 1997). In Julie's voice, the language was fairly restricted lexically and syntactically, but the words carried a pragmatic force which included insults and commands. Considered as language, we can expect the voices reported here also to have intrinsic meanings. But like any language, this will acquire specific meaning in the context provided by informants.

The next source of meaning is the proximal settings of the voices (the here-and-now). This may include the person's immediate physical environment at the time of the voice, their current activities or focus of attention. Julie drew upon this source of meaning to make the commands of her voice intelligible and also to give her voice the meaning of an unwelcome distraction that could cause her problems. The term 'hallucination' assumes that there is no connection between a 'perception' and the environment of the person – but that the object of this perception is mistakenly placed in the environment. We can expect then that informants may use this source of meaning to demonstrate the relevance (or irrelevance) of their voice to their environment at the time it was heard.

The third topic of this chapter concerns the informants' use of biography as a source of meaning. In medical settings, voices, as 'hallucinations', are not linked to the life experiences of a person. We saw though that Julie referred to her history with her mother to contextualise her voice as an extension of her mother's rejection of her. It is conceivable that other informants may refer to their past, perhaps to different phases of their life, in making sense of their voices. This chapter examines how informants construct the thematic field of their voice and in doing so give the voice a description that is richer and 'thicker' (Ryle, 2000).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In Ryle's terms, a 'thick' description of an action takes account of the broad context in which it happens. A 'thin' description is de-contextualised, for example, a description of the physical aspects of the act only (Ryle, 2000).

## 5.1. Linguistic characteristics of voices

This section aims to determine some linguistic features of the voices that were reported in the interviews. Some of the reports were made in a 'directly-reported' style; seemingly verbatim accounts of voices. Others were almost certainly 'gist' formulations of what the voice said. We will see that the linguistic characteristics of voices make a contribution to meaning, but that this contribution is indexical to settings created for these voices. We will also see that the linguistic analysis of the voices reported here has implications for theories about the origins of voices.

The first element of the voice-language is its auditory qualities, e.g. phonetic and prosodic – which may carry the gender and identity of the voice. In fact, all voices sounded like the deceased and none of the informants reported prosodic changes from how they sounded in life, apart from Julie who described a strange echo to her mother's voice (see chapter 4). So the identity of the voice was aligned in every case with the deceased – they were not anonymous like many of the voices reported in other studies (see Leudar et al, 1997).

The second relevant linguistic aspect is the grammatical complexity of the voices. This is in response to claims in the literature that voices are very simple in grammatical terms, 'fixed ideas' (see Janet, 1925) consisting only in fragments of words, single words or repeated phrases. Is this true of the voices reported in the interviews, or on the contrary, do they consist of complex sentences? At a lexical level – how broad is the vocabulary of language composing voices? No research to date has investigated this question. Here are some examples of what the voices said;

*“you're a loser, don't even bother carrying on”* (Matt)

*“It's alright dear, it's me”* (Esme)

*“I love you”* (Inge)

The fact is that the language of the voices varied considerably. At a pragmatic level from a declaration of love (Inge), to a discouraging insult (Matt). At a grammatical level from the single words that were said to Julie (chapter 4), to more complex two-clause sentences such as in Matt's and Esme's examples. So the first finding was

that the voices were not always grammatically and lexically simple. In fact, not one informant heard a voice that consisted *only* of single words, without a grammatical structure, and just two informants heard a voice that consisted only of simple repeated sentences<sup>30</sup>. The rest had voices that varied in complexity (just as ordinary language does). Julie's voice for instance ranged from a single word to grammatically complex language.

The following shows an example of a simple, repeated phrase, from Inge;

Extract 1, Inge

97. Inge: I will tell him about, everything that's going on and the only thing, we had a  
98. thing we used to say to each other, like,  
99. (3.0)  
100. Er:m:  
101. (1.0)  
102. >I will say "I love you" and he would say "I love you" and I would  
103. say, er >"will we be together forever?" and he would say, "yes"  
104. and I would say "do you promise?" and he would say "yes".< do  
105. you know what- you would say it in a certain way ( ) and you  
106. would always say it in that way. so that's the only thing he still  
107. says back. He says that still.

The repeated phrase in this example is "I love you" (line 102). Inge introduces (biographic) contextual information to present this voice as a replaying of a love-script that she and her boyfriend said to each other before his death – "we had a thing we used to say to each other" (lines 97-98). Note that just like in ordinary talk, the grammatical complexity varies – from the voice being a single word ("yes", line 103) to being a relatively simple phrase ("I love you" line 102). Both of these have pragmatics – partly determined by the linguistic character but also depending on the context constructed. In their most immediate context they are answers to Inge's questions, a reciprocation of her own "I love you" (line 102) and a poignant promise to "be together forever" (line 103).

But most voices in fact used novel linguistic forms ('creative' in Chomsky's terms) and the following is an example of such from Aggie;

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<sup>30</sup> These findings are quite different to those in a sister project of interviews with voice-hearers who were students. The voices in this sample most often consisted of single words (Leudar, Hayes, and Turner Baker).

### Extract 2, Aggie

140. Aggie: I t:hink I was in the bath at home  
141. JTB: mm  
142. Aggie: um (.) an (.) I was just (.) he was just saying that he missed me (.) an that  
143. everything was going to be alright because there was loads of changes  
144. going on an

How do we know this voice was not a repetition? From the contextual details - Aggie talks about a specific time in the bath at home (line 140). Here Aggie does not convey the words of the voice directly, but uses a third-person formulation of the 'gist' of what the voice said. In fact, Aggie was not the only person to use summary formulations – it was not unusual in this study and in a sister-project with student voice-hearers for informants to find it difficult to remember the exact words said by a voice. Rather, what is often reported is a 'gloss' of the meaning of those words, as shown here with Aggie. This is not surprising in light of what happens in ordinary conversation – the meaning of the conversation may be remembered, but the exact words of it rarely are.

The fact that we rely sometimes on formulations makes a detailed analysis of the grammatical structure of voices difficult. The observations made here are therefore intended to be indicative of the fact that linguistic aspects of voice-talk can contribute to the significance of a voice as contact from the deceased. A more detailed linguistic analysis must be left for a future study, although it is in fact hard to imagine a method that *could* reliably record the words of voices directly without interfering with the experience.

However, in some cases we can more confidently depend on verbatim reports of the voice;

### Extract 3, Samuel 1

224. Samuel: sort=of=like bent down to  
225. (1.0)  
226. look for the waste disposal, and I heard my grandma say, "it's at  
227. the back, it's at the back". And, just, I just heard her say those  
228. words, and as I looked towards the back I could see there was like  
229. a, thing that needed, needed to be turned

There are two aspects of Samuel's report that indicate that this is not a summary formulation of what his voice said. Firstly, he is narrating a concrete instance of the voice rather than a general 'type' of situation in which he hears it. Second, he says resolutely "I heard my grandma say" (line 226) and "I just heard her say *those words*" (lines 227-228, my emphasis). The voice here seems to be a verbatim report. Although simple, this voice still has a grammar, which contributes to its meaning. The sentence however contains words that are clearly indexical – their meaning depends on the context that Samuel provides. So for example, the "it" (line 226) refers to the handle that needed to be turned, the "back" (line 227) is the back of the waste disposal unit. This reference is clear in the interview because Samuel told JH first what the context was before he quoted the voice. At the time of the experience, the meaning came from his immediate here and now context, which will be explored in more detail below.

Samuel's voice plainly does not fit Pierre Janet's description of voices – as a "simple inner language, repeating monotonously ever the same idea" (Janet, 1901, as cited in Leudar and Thomas, 2000). It is *not* a repetition of something he knows already – in fact it would make no sense if it was because he would have had no trouble fixing the appliance. Most voices of informants in this study did not support Janet's claim. Even in Julie's case, where the voice repeats insults and her name, this explanation would not account for all instances of her voice, as the words may sometimes change (see chapter 4, extract 4). The language of voices can evolve. From the linguistic form alone *it seems that voices must be more than memories*.

Another noteworthy feature of the language of the voices was that some of it was reflexive - the voice referred to 'itself'. This was surprising as past literature has suggested that voices do not consist of this kind of language, and on those grounds Leudar concluded that voices should not be thought of as persons (Leudar and Thomas, 2000, chapter 5)<sup>31</sup>. But in this group of informants, reflexive voice-language was evident in the stories of Linda, Inge (see above), Aggie (in almost every instance of her voice), and Esme, from which the following example comes;

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<sup>31</sup> Reflexivity is a condition of *personhood* in several theories of the self (see Mead 1934; James 1890).

#### Extract 4, Esme

113. Esme: I could hear my dad, and he said “it’s alright dear.” And it was exact words  
114. that he would’ve used. “It’s me.” and I was like “WHAT?! WHAT?! What  
115. you doing? What you doing? Oh GOD! I can’t believe you’re talking to me”  
116. and ‘e went “yes” I said “how are you?!” he says “I’m fine thank you”

Esme reports here a concrete instance of the voice that is not presented as a formulation. Like Inge’s voice, the voice here uses a combination of single words (“yes”, line 116) and short phrases (“It’s alright dear”, line 113, “I’m fine thank you”, line 116). The voice reflexively does two things – it makes a self-identification (“it’s me”, line 114), and, a self-assessment (“I’m fine”, line 116). The phrases are indexical; “it’s me” requires extra-linguistic information in order to be understood – in this case this was an anonymous feeling of presence that preceded the voice. “I’m fine” refers to Esme’s father’s illness and death (a context that she provides first) – it means that now he is not suffering. The pronoun “you” (line 116) refers to Esme in the here-and-now context. In this context these words are also indexical to Esme’s initial fear about the feeling of presence, and to her questions.

So why do we find reflexivity in voices experienced by people in bereavement and not, so far, in others? Possibly because in all these cases, voices of grief are aligned with specific persons<sup>32</sup>. Attributing personhood to the voice is also supported by the circumstances in which it appears – often there is an ecological tie between the place where the voice is heard and places shared by the people in life (such as the family home). This will be explored further in the next section which looks at what the immediate situation contributes to the meaning of voices.

So, collecting information by means of interviews somewhat constrains the grammatical analysis of voice-talk for the reasons outlined. Nevertheless, we are able to determine that voices in bereavement are not grammatically simple, and that this grammar contributes to the meaning. We can also see that much of the meaning is indexical – the lexicon, grammar, and the context interact.

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<sup>32</sup> In fact, a recent case study soon to be published has shown that reflexive voices were also present in a case of hearing voices without a bereavement – in voice-hearer Violet’s story. Like the bereavement voices, her voices were aligned with specific people in her life (Hayes, Leudar and King, in preparation).

A third aspect of the language we are interested in here is its pragmatics and by this I mean the actions that people carry out in and through talking – speech acts. Previous research has identified pragmatic features of voice-language, and in order of popularity these were directives, evaluatives, questions and informatives (Leudar et al, 1997; Leudar and Thomas 2000). We saw that Julie’s voice had some of these functions - directives, evaluatives, informatives - but that it also issued summons. How did the voices of the rest of the group compare pragmatically? (The language of voices given in the examples below is stripped of most of its context, and some phrases may not make sense to the reader until we move onto looking at this context.)

The first thing to note is that all voices carried a quality of addressivity – they were directed at the hearer, rather than merely ‘overheard’. The second is that the pragmatic functions of the voices varied widely. Evaluatives and informatives were the most common kinds of voices, followed closely by commands (directives). Informatives therefore seemed to be more common than those found in a general sample of voice-hearers (Leudar et al, 1997). Further, evaluative voices could have very different meanings, and could be divided into two groups; *compliments*, and more unhappily, *insults*<sup>33</sup>. We have already seen examples from Julie (chapter 4) and Matt (above) of insulting voices, but these were also found in Linda’s story;

#### Extract 5, Linda

79. Linda: you know he'd he'd say things like "you're fat" "you're ugly" "your hair's a  
80. mess"

Linda presents formulations – “he’d say things like” (line 79) - rather than a verbatim report of the voice said on a specific occasion. By reporting in this way, she expresses something typical about the voice – its insulting nature. The insults are furthermore centred on Linda’s appearance. It will be remembered that the insults directed at Julie were about female sexuality, and Matt’s insults were focused on his abilities. Compliments came from only one voice in this sample, Aggie’s;

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<sup>33</sup> This was also identified by Leudar and colleagues who termed them ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ evaluations.

#### Extract 6, Aggie

59. Aggie: when he died I had long dark hair down to there ((*points to half-way down*  
60. *her arms*))  
61. JTB: mm  
62. Aggie: an now I've got short blonde hair  
63. JTB: mm=hm  
64. Aggie: he says "I absolutely love your hair and I hated the thought of you getting it  
65. cut (.) but it's nice"

This evaluative voice was also about appearance. The evaluatives in these cases resonate with past research into gendered themes of insulting voices (Legg and Gilbert, 2006) - but the voices in this study suggest that there are gender themes in the *compliments* issued by voices, with the voices of women more commonly complimenting them on their appearance rather than on their skills or abilities. A larger number of male informants would be needed to confirm this pattern.

Several voices issued information to the hearer – we have already seen examples of this from Samuel, Esme and Julie;

"it's at the back" (extract 3)

"it's me" "I'm fine thank you" (extract 4)

"you've just got a couple of months supply" (chapter 4, extract 4)

An example of this was also found in Linda's narrative;

#### Extract 7, Linda

141. Linda: my son said to me "Dad wouldn't have been impressed with this would  
142. he?" (0.35) and I heard him say (0.29) "No, I wouldn't"

This is a reflexive informative – the voice disapproves by commenting on its own disapproval ("No, I wouldn't", line 142). Moreover in the immediate context Linda provides, this was an indexical reference to "impressed" (line 141) – i.e. to her son talking about his father. More on this in the next section.

Just three people heard voices that sometimes issued directives, which are in fact the most common representation of voices in media (see Leudar and Thomas, 2000, or search for 'hearing voices' on a newspaper website). These directives could be



considered as *commands*, or less forcefully as *instructions*, depending on aspects of the situation. This is what Isaac heard, for example;

#### Extract 8, Isaac

300. Isaac: I was on my knees, under the cupboard where the waste di- disposal is,  
301. and I go, "there's another, there's a button or there's something I'm  
302. missing here." And, "Isaac, it's ju- just put your hand further around, it's just  
303. around at the back." "Oh s-," and I said "OK mum,"

Clare was told by her voice "close your eyes, Clare" (extract 29), and we saw that Julie's voice often commanded her to "take all your tablets" (chapter 4). Only one person's voice issued a question, and this was Aggie's, which asked her "where's the ring?" (extract 18).

Analysis also revealed pragmatic functions that have not been documented before. This included the *summons* of Julie, the *declaration of love* for Inge, the *promise* to Inge, an *apology* and a *recital* both found in Aggie. The next two extracts show Aggie relating this language;

#### Extract 9, Aggie

282. Aggie: things like "I'm sorry" an "now I understand why things happened"

#### Extract 10, Aggie

40. Aggie: he sings a couple that he sung to me when he was alive erm (.) and  
41. there is a poem that I've never heard before that he sings to me  
42. JTB: mm? yeah?  
43. Aggie: it's er- I can't (.) remember the first name, but Morgan an it's called  
44. Strawberries<sup>34</sup>

Aggie's voice in particular was linguistically complex and pragmatically varied – in this second example reciting a whole poem. Moreover, this is a poem that she had never heard before which makes the voice hard to reduce to a memory, or to a form of inner speech.

So is the language of voices in bereavement fairly simple? The answer seems to be that the language can actually be at times quite sophisticated, even poetic. The linguistic features of these voices undermine theories of voices as simple repetitive

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<sup>34</sup> See appendix 4 for the full poem.

memories that are restricted in form – in fact the most common form of the voices was varied/novel sentences. Most of the voices of our informants therefore showed evidence of a ‘linguistic creativity’ (Chomsky, 1980) in that they were capable of producing new sentences that were not simple repetitions<sup>35</sup>. Some voices may even comment on themselves. These features arguably impart the voices with a quality of agency, and we shall see that other sources of meaning do this too.

The language of the voice contributed to particular pragmatic meanings noted previously – commands, insults, compliments, informatives and questions – and analysis also revealed additional pragmatic functions of voices – declaration of love, promise, apology and recital. This may be due to the methodological approach, which did not confine responses to a pre-conceived interview-schedule, or due to the fact that these voices relate exclusively to bereavement. One person’s voice may have a variety of pragmatic functions, best illustrated in Aggie and Julie. We can safely say then that linguistic characteristics contribute to the pragmatic meaning of the voice. But this always occurs in a context construed by the voice hearer, as we will see in the rest of this chapter.

## *5.2. What kind of meaning does the here-and-now of the voice provide?*

As mentioned in chapter 4, there are two kinds of ‘here-and-now’ that are relevant to this study. In this section, the focus continues to be on the here-and-now of the voice, as it is described in the interview. Do the voices have connections to this most immediate of settings, in the way that Julie's voice did? Or are they 'all in the mind'?

Let’s start by taking a second look at Samuel’s voice.

### Extract 11, Samuel 1

218. Samuel: And, t.! the waste disposal in the house wasn't  
219. working, my grandpa was like getting quite stressed about it  
220. because, erm, (.) he couldn't, that's what (I'm on about), he really  
221. sort of like caved in a bit and tiny little things like the waste  
222. disposal not working the television maybe like going, on the blink  
223. for like a second, .hh or, like half a day or something, really really  
224. like ( ) would stress him, and sort=of=like bent down to

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<sup>35</sup> According to Chomsky, the creative aspect of language is “the ability of all normal persons to produce speech that is appropriate to situations though perhaps quite novel, and to understand when others do so” (1980, p. 77).

225. (1.0)  
 226. look for the waste disposal, and I heard my grandma say, “it’s at  
 227. the back, it’s at the back”. And, just, I just heard her say those  
 228. words, and as I looked towards the back I could see there was like  
 229. a, thing that needed, needed to be turned

The meaning of Samuel’s voice is not simply in his head but is indexical to his immediate environment, and the task he is trying to accomplish. In fact, Samuel has no problems at all connecting the voice with this environment – he is standing next to the waste disposal that the voice refers to. The “it” (line 226) refers to the handle/switch that needed turning, which was exactly where the voice said it should be – behind the appliance. His immediate physical environment therefore makes this informative intelligible as referring to a concrete object. The externalisation of the voice in this example was not delusional but in fact entirely appropriate to the circumstances – the handle/button that provided the solution was not a fantasy but a real, functioning one.

Samuel also contextualises this voice as occurring in his grandparents’ house (line 218) – a shared environment of Samuel and his grandma in her lifetime. So the voice was far from being random and unconnected to the environment but rather fits the immediate situation like a glove. The voice is in fact startling in its ordinariness and we shall see that the biographical details that Samuel provided make this ordinariness understandable as a continuation of everyday life with his grandma.

Samuel’s voice was by no means an exception – all voices in fact had some kind of meaningful connection to the here-and-now. This was not always to concrete objects such as the button in Samuel’s story or the tablets in Julie’s. This connection was sometimes through relevance to a person’s current activities, including their immediate dialogical/conversational setting. Linda’s voice was a good example of the latter;

Extract 12, Linda

141. Linda: Seb, my son said to me “Dad wouldn’t have been impressed with this  
 142. would he?” (.) and I heard him say (.) “No, I wouldn’t.”

Immediately prior to this voice, Seb, Linda’s son, makes his father conversationally relevant. There is no indication in her story that they are aiming to invoke the voice,

but the fact that they refer to him makes the voice appear – but only for Linda - “I heard him say” (line 142, my emphasis). The voice contains an ellipsis to Seb’s comment – there is conversational cohesion between the voice and what he said<sup>36</sup>. Linda shows this cohesion in the way she narrates the voice and the setting – by retaining the turn-taking sequence and therefore the ellipsis. The indexicality of the voice to the here-and-now is clear – “No, I wouldn’t.” (line 142) is the second part of a two-part sequence, question followed by answer. This question however is not intended for the voice to answer but is either rhetorical or for Linda. Thus by answering it, the voice transforms the third-person reference “he” (line 142) into an active “I” (line 142). It also refers back to the word “impressed” (line 141), and negates it. So the pragmatics of this voice, as a self-referential informative, depend on Linda’s here-and-now conversational context for their full meaning. To give the voice intelligibility in the here-and-now of the interview, it was necessary for Linda to pre-narrate aspects of this conversational context.

So the here-and-now consists in not only a person’s immediate physical surroundings but also a conversational and dialogical immediacy of the setting<sup>37</sup>. This can be seen in the voices of Inge and Esme, which were responses to a question. Inge’s questions, “will we be together forever?” (extract 1, line 103) and “do you promise?” (extract 1, line 104) gave the voice’s repeated “yes” (line 103 and line 104) meaning as answers. In Esme’s case, “I’m fine thank you” (extract 4, line 116) was meaningful as an answer, in the context of her question “how are you?!” (extract 4, line 116). In both cases there is conversational cohesion between the voice and the voice-hearer. In Esme’s case, the voice initiates the conversation, and in Inge’s case, she does. In sum, the voice is not arbitrary, but meaningfully connected to the concerns and activities of the hearer.

The responses of informants in the here-and-now also contextualise the voice and reveal their understandings of them. We saw in Chapter 4 that Julie responded to the voice as a person, her mother, insulting her. Samuel’s immediate response to the

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<sup>36</sup> This voice responds to what someone else says to the hearer, which was unique in our informants (as well as rare in other studies, see Leudar and Thomas 2000). An exception to this is voice-hearer Violet, who heard voices that commented on the actions of other people (as documented in Hayes, Leudar and King, in preparation).

<sup>37</sup> See Leudar et al (2008) on ‘structured immediacy’.

voice was to use the informative to find the button and fix the appliance (extract 11). He did not stop and look for a ghost or dismiss the voice as a hallucination but reacted in an entirely ordinary way to what the voice said. He was not the only one. Clare followed the instructions of her voice by closing her eyes and going to sleep (extract 29). Esme's immediate response to her voice was to continue the conversation and enquire as to her father's welfare (extract 4). Inge's was to continue the next part of their shared love declaration by asking the voice questions (extract 1). Thus the responses may be verbal or physical. Isaac also responded to the instructions of his voice by following them, but that was not all he did;

#### Extract 13, Isaac

86. Isaac: And as clear (.) as (.) I'm speaking  
87. to you  
88. (2.0)  
89. it sung, "keep going Isaac, it's there"  
90. JH: woah  
91. Isaac: In (.) that was  
92. JH: and that was your mum's  
93. Isaac: yeah, I mean, I mean, yeah, even my, er, sister and, we ha  
94. the gardener there, and I mean they both looked  
95. JH: yeah  
96. Isaac: yeah. And that, that's one  
97. JH: they, they both, look, what, looked round? [to see what]  
98. Isaac: [yep, they were]  
99. astonished, yeah  
100. JH: [because they heard it as well?]  
101. Isaac: [no no no] no they didn't hear it, no, I heard it  
102. JH: OK, so it was just for you  
103. Isaac: because I said "yeah," and said "OK mum" blindly, and you  
104. then think, "ooh what else"  
105. JH: oh, I see,  
106. Isaac: No  
107. JH: so you, you replied  
108. Isaac: mm:!

The voice that Isaac reports here appears to be a formulation as he uses different words to earlier in the interview (see extract 8). However the general meaning was the same, and in both formulations this is indexical to the here-and-now setting. So in this instance – “keep going Isaac, it's there” (line 89) - “keep going” refers to Isaac's current activity of looking for a solution to the problem. “it” is the button that provides the solution (see extract 8), and “there” refers to the place he is looking, under the cupboard where the waste disposal is (extract 8). The words are formulated differently to Samuel's voice, but the pragmatic function is the same. In

the circumstances the words refer to the same button/lever, and the voice takes place in the same location – Isaac’s mother’s kitchen. In fact, the fit of the voice with Isaac’s circumstances is so good that he replies: “yeah”, “okay Mum” (line 103). He does not react in surprise, ask her if she is speaking from heaven, or ignore the voice because his mother has died. Instead he replies in this strikingly ordinary way. Isaac describes this reply after JH topicalises the reactions of his sister and the gardener (lines 97-100) – why did they look? Isaac then confirms JH’s formulation – “so you replied?” (line 107) with “hmm!” (line 108). Isaac’s immediate response to the voice then was not only to use the informative but to also respond conversationally.

So Isaac describes to JH a voice that he heard privately alongside a response he made publicly. He in fact uses the word “blindly” (line 103) to characterise his reply, indicating that it was done without reflection. This was somewhat different to Julie whose reply to her voice was socially-mediated, and to another case – Matt. In fact Matt described a range of conversational responses to his voice depending on the situation;

#### Extract 14, Matt

254. AG: How do you talk to his voice? Is it in your head or?  
255. Matt: No, I sometimes talk to him out loud.  
256. AG: What does it depend on?  
257. Matt: If there is anyone else around. Um (.) how strongly I'm feeling about what  
258. he's saying. Sometimes I'll just kind of shout and scream at him, if he  
259. really annoys me.

#### Extract 15, Matt

44. AG: And what sort of things would you say back?  
45. Matt: Well it depends on the circumstances. Sometimes I'm just fairly abusive  
46. and very angry and sometimes I'll try and reason with him, say "Look this is  
47. my life, you know, you've had yours, you're gone, so just let me live mine".  
48. It depends on what sort of a frame of mind I'm in at the time.

Matt describes two ways in which he reacts to the voice – at times, he might shout and scream abuse at the voice (Extract 14, line 258), at other times, Matt will reason with the voice (extract 15, lines 46-47). The example he gives here refers to his father’s death (“you’ve had yours, you’re gone”, extract 15, line 47) and the consequent inappropriateness of his interference with Matt’s life (extract 15, line 47). His reaction depends on two things. Like Julie, Matt describes his reaction as partially socially mediated – he will not respond “out loud” (extract 14, line 257) if he

is with other people. But also Matt's response is emotionally and psychologically influenced – it depends on his current “frame of mind” (extract 15, line 48) and how “strongly I'm feeling” (extract 14, line 257) about what the voice says. So by proxy his reaction also depends on the words of the voice. What Matt offers here are generalisations of what he would say to the voice, prompted by the interviewer's questions, but he also gives an example of a particular instance of his voice and his reaction to it;

#### Extract 16. Matt

24. Matt: Um (.) I was on an assault course for one of my army qualifying courses  
25. and I fell off a wall, a ten foot wall and subsequently I slipped some discs  
26. and was in quite a lot of pain. If I'd have left the assault course and not  
27. have completed it I would have failed the course which would have meant  
28. that I wouldn't be able to qualify. And I was lying on my back at the base of  
29. the wall in quite a lot of pain and he said, my father said to me "You're a  
30. loser don't even bother carrying on" and he was just telling me that I  
31. wasn't ever going to get to the army anyway, that I was doing it for all the  
32. wrong reasons. But then I realised I wasn't and so I got up and even  
33. though I had slipped disc I finished the assault course.  
34. AG: How did you react to him speaking to you  
35. Matt: I (.) my father in general is a very driving force in my life and he knows  
36. well I know that he wouldn't want me to accomplish anything, so he acts as  
37. a real source of motivation.  
38. AG: Because you go against the voice?  
39. Matt: Yeah. Well no not against. I don't (.) he says things and I don't necessarily  
40. think well I'll do exactly the opposite, I just carry on considering what I think  
41. to be right and that is usually the opposite to what he's said (.) and (.) that's  
42. about it.

In this example, the insult that Matt hears is connected to his current activity, specifically, questioning his ability to achieve it (lines 29-30). Once more it is clear that the voice is not arbitrary but coheres with the immediate setting of the hearer. Indeed in this instance, Matt uses the voice to motivate himself to overcome his pain and finish the course – although he does not do this compulsively. His response is again mediated – this time through his consideration of the worth of what the voice has said (line 32), which allows him to dismiss it as irrelevant. Note that he refers to aspects of their relationship to warrant his response to these insults – they are not due to Matt's qualities but due to his father's wish for him to fail (lines 35-37). So it is not a simple rebellion but a considered response that takes into account their shared history.

It is clear from Matt's responses to the voice in these examples (extracts 14-16) that he treats it as his father's agency – it is not simply dismissed as a 'hallucination' but he calls the voice "he" (extract 16, lines 29, 30, 39, 41) and on line 29 says quite clearly "my father said to me". The words of the voice then are experienced in the here-and-now as discouragement from his father that he needs to think about and bolster himself against. The voice is personified and the insults are personal.

Linda also responded to the insults of her voice in a very ordinary way – she argued with it and defended herself;

#### Extract 17, Linda

83. PT: Now (0.33) would (0.55) would you ever answer back? (0.36)  
84. Linda: Oh yeh. (0.37) [heh heh.  
85. PT: [and what] sort of things what would you say? (0.43)  
86. Linda: ahm=  
87. PT: =in reply (1.76)  
88. Linda: oh well, I try and defend myself, I used to say "no, I'm not". (0.37) [You  
89. know,]  
90. PT: [right]  
91. Linda: "I'm doing a good job, I'm doing OK, (0.47) I'm OK, I'm OK" (0.98) and then  
92. he would say "no" (0.33) "you're not!" and then he would remind me of  
93. things (0.69) that ehm  
94. (1.48)  
95. that perhaps, well obviously things that I was aware of (0.64) he'd, but he  
96. would remind me of things that I hadn't done (0.31) or wasn't going to do  
97. (0.26) [or didn't want to do.

PT asks for a formulation of the "sort of things" (line 85) that Linda would say to the voice, and this is what she gives. Her usual response to the insults is to invalidate them and defend herself ("No, I'm not" line 88). Note however her use of "try" (line 88) - the defence is not enough to silence the voice and it continues to argue with her version. The implication is that the voice then reminds her of things about herself that she finds harder to defend.

So far we have seen that the responses of our informants tied to the voices, which in turn tied to the here-and-now setting. What happened when the voice had varied pragmatic functions – how did the person respond? Aggie's voice had varied pragmatics and her immediate response to the voice differed accordingly. In this first example, she responds to the voice's question, with an answer;



### Extract 18, Aggie

380. Aggie: before he died (.) cos he brought me an engagement ring erm (.) an he  
381. didn't tell me til we broke up but h-  
382. JTB: mm  
383. Aggie: after we broke up (.) cos (.) hi:s (.) friend was my- became my best friend  
384. from knowing him (.) and she went "did you know he brought you that, I  
385. was talking to him" so he's left it for me (.) but erm it's with one of his  
386. aunties and I don't know where it is (.) an:d (.) he keeps on asking me  
387. "where's the ring, where's the ring" and I'm like "I can't get it I don't know"  
388. JTB: mm  
389. Aggie: "what to do", cos it's getting in touch with the right people and I just don't  
390. have the time or energy to do that right now so

Aggie presents a formulation of her response to the question - "I'm like..." (line 387) - rather than her exact words, and she does not say whether she says this aloud or silently. In the immediate context the voice's question is the first part of a two-part sequence, which is followed by Aggie's answer. Further, her answer is of a dis-preferred type – she provides an extended warrant for not knowing where the 'ring' is. The sequence is therefore exactly of the kind found in ordinary conversation. Aggie's answer provides one of the felicity conditions for the words of the voice to be a question. However when the voice affords something different, Aggie does something different;

### Extract 19, Aggie

78. Aggie: erm (.) he sang- he sings a couple that he sung to me when he was alive  
79. erm (.) and there is a poem that I've never heard before that he sings to me  
80. JTB: mm? yeah?  
81. Aggie: it's er- I can't (.) remember the first name, but Morgan an it's called  
82. Strawberries  
83. JTB: yeah?  
84. Aggie: erm because he used to nickname me strawberry  
85. JTB: yeah  
86. Aggie: so I listened to it (.) he said it a couple of times an then I went (.) and  
87. researched what it was  
88. JTB: mm  
89. Aggie: and found out it was strawberries an I was like "that's weird I've never  
90. he(h)ard that before"  
91. JTB: yeah

As a recital, this voice affords listening, and this is exactly what Aggie does. In fact, she does not respond at all verbally to this voice. Instead, she looks for the source of the poem and in doing so discovers its personal significance – its title was (bar one

letter) her boyfriend's nick-name for her, "Strawberries" (line 82). As in the first example Aggie refers to historical particulars of their relationship that we shall look at in more detail in the next section.

So far, what have we learnt about these voices in bereavement? We have seen that the language of the voice varies and is often complex. The voices use words intended for the hearer which carry a pragmatic force, which can also be varied. None of the voices were incoherent, but all used clear words<sup>38</sup>. Further, when contextualised in the here-and-now, this pragmatic function is not arbitrary, but intelligible and relevant. Stripped of this context the voice could appear random, but in the narratives of informants the voice always refers to the immediate situation in some way, is meaningful, and therefore always invokes some form of response from the hearer appropriate to this pragmatic meaning. Thus instructions were followed, insults provoked a defence, and questions prompted answers.

Such 'externalisation' of the voices would be seen as pathological in many psychiatric and some psychological theories (see Chapter 1). The voice-hearer would be deemed to lack insight in responding to the voice at all. However we saw that many of these voices were in fact directly relevant to the person's environment – they were not 'all in the mind' but were in fact 'in life'.

In only one example was the voice not relevant to the person's proximal setting. This was the example given by Julie of the voice she heard at work (Chapter 4). But even in this case, the here-and-now is a source of meaning – it gives the voice sense as an interference with her task. The meaning of the voice did not begin and end there but we saw that this distraction was endowed with her mother's intention through references to her biography.

Immediate responses of voice-hearers were revealing of other things – none of the informants said they were frightened of the voice, and none of them ignored it either, treating it as a 'mistake'<sup>39</sup>. Their responses were in fact entirely ordinary and

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<sup>38</sup> Some voices are of course incoherent – as speech without words or a chorus of unintelligible voices. This was not uncommon in other studies (see Leudar et al, 1997, Leudar, Hayes & Turner Baker, in preparation) but absent from the informants' narratives here.

<sup>39</sup> This was not the case in a parallel study of student voice-hearers – some of whom downgraded the voice as 'mishearing'. Few responded conversationally to the voice. These voices were less often aligned with particular persons (see Leudar, Hayes and Turner Baker).

resembled what might happen in any conversation. This included the fact that the responses varied according to aspects of the immediate circumstances; what the voice said; whether the informant was with others at the time; and the informant's 'frame of mind' in one case (Matt). Responses to voices were most often mediated and not compulsive. This was similar to Socrates, whose response to his voice was mediated by his own reason - whether he considered the advice of the voice good, or not (Leudar and Thomas, 2000). In this study, some of the voice commands were followed – Isaac 'kept going', and Clare closed her eyes. But these activities were not counter-intentional, but in fact in line with what the voice-hearer was already trying to achieve – sleep, or fixing the waste disposal. Julie, whose voice did not (for the most part) concur with her intention, did not follow the command of her voice to take all her tablets. The ordinariness of most of the voices, and the way the informants engaged with them, challenges common media representations of voices as dangerous and voice-hearers as passive to them and compulsive.

One final point to note before we look at other sources of meaning for the voices is that the language of the voices can be reflexive and indicate agency and that the immediate setting of the voice can support this agency. This includes the fit of the voice with the environment, physical and conversational, where the voice-analogue once lived. And it also includes the actions of informants, who responded to the voice not as a hallucination or a mistake but as they might have done to another person. We shall see that the biographic particulars that informants introduce may also support this quality of personhood to the voice experience.

### ***5.3. Personal history as a source of meaning***

This section aims to outline the different ways by which informants enriched the here-and-now of the voice by introducing details from their personal and family histories into the interview. This is in part an investigation of the methods by which informants set up relevancies for the interviewer – relevancies that enable the interviewer to make the 'right' sense of the voice. We saw that in Julie's case, the biographic details she introduced accounted for her problems with the voice.

But was Julie exceptional in her use of biography as a source of meaning for the voice? The answer is 'no', as biographic details were an important part of the thematic field for all the other voices. In this part I will illustrate how these details were introduced and to what effects.

Medical theories do not link voices to the life experiences of a person at all. However the first finding of the current enquiry was that biographic information was so crucial for contextualising the voice that most informants in fact started the interview by providing it. (This was despite the fact that participants knew that JH's primary interest was the voice and other experiences of presence). This biographic information often went beyond the event of the death itself to include aspects of the former life with the deceased. This was visible in Julie's interview, which began with her outlining several problems in her relationship with her mother.

Samuel, at the start of his interview, also introduced several details about his past to contextualise his experiences of presence. We will see that these details set-up a contrast between his family life with, and without, his grandma, and that within this context the voice has the meaning of continuation of life with grandma. This is the very first thing that Samuel says, after JH's introduction;

#### Extract 20, Samuel 1

35. Samuel: so, in two-thousand and five, my grandma died, very  
36. suddenly, and she was amazing, she really was absolutely amazing,  
37. and we were extremely close, and whenever I tell people like how  
38. close we were, I always find that, there's just never really a way to  
39. explain, how close we were because, I can sit and just tell you, that  
40. we were, really close but what does that really mean I mean, I saw  
41. her, everyday. And if I didn't see her everyday, which was quite  
42. unusual, and that's like through my life, it, the only time I wouldn't  
43. see her is if I was on holiday for like two weeks in which case I  
44. would phone quite often  
45. JH: mm  
46. Samuel: and if I didn't see her during the day then I'd probably  
47. ring her, in fact I'd almost certainly ring her, and I'd have that  
48. quick chat with her, make sure she was okay and everything

Samuel does a lot of work at the beginning of his interview to establish the closeness of his relationship with his grandma. This suggests that the category "grandmother" does not usually carry these norms – and by implication a deep grief for a grandparent is not normative as it is for some other kinds of family bonds (parent, partner, sibling). Samuel certainly implies this when he comments on the difficulty of

conveying their closeness to other people - the word “close” (line 38) is presented as an understatement, and “there’s just never really a way to explain” (line 38). In the context of the interview, this implies a possibility that JH may not understand either. However, this does not stop Samuel from trying to explain the closeness – he opens this up with the rhetorical question “what does that really mean” (line 40) which allows him to go onto tell JH what kind of closeness this is. And the first thing that this includes is their daily contact throughout his life (lines 41-48). The details show that this contact was not due to them being thrown together but was a matter of choice and effort – even when he was on holiday he would phone (lines 43-44). This implies that Samuel had a lot of care for his grandma, and it positions her as a crucial figure in his life<sup>40</sup>.

Samuel also lays emphasis on several other details of his relationship with his grandma at the very beginning of the interview. This includes his regard of her, which is upgraded from “amazing” to “absolutely amazing” (line 36). The use of “she really was” (line 36) does two things here. Firstly gives the impression that this is not just something that is said for effect but is heartfelt. Secondly, it emphasises the status of the description as ‘truth’ rather than opinion. Another important aspect of his story here is the unexpected nature of her death – it was “very” sudden (line 35) implying its shocking nature. The significance of this event is also conveyed in the very first detail he gives - the year that this happened (line 35).

In the next extract, also from the beginning of his story, Samuel continues to paint a picture of a very special grandparent-grandchild relationship;

#### Extract 21, Samuel 1

51. Samuel: we lived, very near, each other, so, er, it’s like five  
52. minutes in the car, or, slightly longer to walk, and, yeah,  
53. she was just, I suppose, she: wa: ju:, a brilliant traditional,  
54. almost like traditional Jewish grandma I guess? So  
55. JH: yeah  
56. Samuel: so she, you know, was brilliant at cooking and she just,  
57. she wouldn’t like anything more than to like cook me a meal and  
58. sort of watch me eat it

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<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, this narrative effort to establish closeness of the relationship with the deceased was absent in most of the other bereavement interviews – involving losses of partners, spouses, siblings, parents and children. The only other interview in which this effort was pronounced was in Clare, who also discussed a grandparent loss. Thus one way in which biographic information was used was to warrant the intensity of a grief for a grandparent. This fact points towards normative assumptions about different family bonds.

59. JH: m hm hm hm  
 60. Samuel: erm and, if I had a problem, I think there were probably  
 61. quite a few occasions where, erm I was worried about some things  
 62. or whatever when I was growing up and, if I told, my grandma  
 63. she'd always like, say eat with me and you know the next day  
 64. she'd find a solution to, any problem really, no matter how big. .hh  
 65. or small and erm, .thh

In this extract Samuel stresses his closeness with his grandma – geographical and emotional. In doing so he does further work in characterising her – referring to her as an “almost like traditional Jewish grandma” (line 54). This draws on certain associated category predicates; including nurture, and showing her love through cooking brilliant food – through “chicken soup and home-making” (Samuel 3, joint analysis, see appendix 3). The “almost” (line 54) however suggests that is not all that she was.

This part of the interview positions his grandma as a solver of problems, and a soother of worry. Samuel does this using extreme-case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) “she'd *always*” eat with him (line 63), and deal with “*any* problem” (line 64); and the idiomatic phrase “no matter how big or small” (line 64-65). So the care that Samuel showed to his grandma was mutual. This picture of life with her contrasts with the details he gives of his life without her. In the next part of the interview, Samuel told JH about his grandma’s death, including how he had seen a vision of her at the time she had died (see chapter 3). The following extract appears subsequent to this, and in it Samuel is describing what happened in his family after the death of his grandma.

Extract 22, Samuel 1

184. Samuel: and then after that it was just like family sort=of=things  
 185. were like, quite horrific, cos my grandpa was eighty, eighty-seven I  
 186. think at the time and, or eighty-eight even, so, he was really lost  
 187. without my grandma because she did everything for him and stuff  
 188. and, the next six months were just really stressful.

There is a break in Samuel’s narrative that is marked by his grandma’s death – after this point, family life becomes “quite horrific” (line 185) and “really stressful” (line 188). It turns out that his grandma was not only central in his life, but *essential* to his grandpa’s. Samuel here stresses his grandpa’s age (lines 185-186), and reliance on his wife, with the extreme case formulation she did “everything” for him (line 187).

These details function to account for the extent of his grief and confusion – “he was really lost without” her (lines 186-187). We will see a little later how this biographical contextualisation interacts with the here-and-now of the voice to give the voice meaning as a continuation of his grandma’s helping. For now, we turn to another informant who drew heavily on biographic information from the start of her story: Esme.

#### Extract 23, Esme

9. JH: if you want to finish before then then, that’s absolutely fine  
10. Esme: okay, um, right okay, fine. Well, he died, six years ago in August, so that  
11. was August 29<sup>th</sup>, and, we knew he was dying because, well, we just did.  
12. Heh! You know, he was in the hospital and we were told there was no  
13. chance  
14. JH: yeah  
15. Esme: it was a very very quick thing that happened. I mean, d’you want to know  
16. what happened or? Is that not relevant  
17. JH: er yeah yeah, if it’s important for your story  
18. Esme: why it’s relevant to a degree is that he was coming out to Granada to our  
19. house  
20. JH: yeah  
21. Esme: with my mum, for a two week holiday and, my brother, who is, my older  
22. brother, was very concerned about his health

#### Extract 24, Esme

38. Esme: so anyway, by the afternoon my brother actually had flown over, and he  
39. said to me “I don’t like, I don’t like this at all”. He said erm, “he’s not well”.  
40. And he took ‘im to the doctor, and she just took one look at his stomach  
41. and she said you have to go straight into the hospital

The first extract here (extract 23) shows the end of JH’s introduction, which concerns time-keeping (line 9). Esme then begins her story not by telling JH about her feeling of presence and hearing a voice but by introducing several biographical facts. The first of these is the amount of time that has elapsed since her father’s death – six years – and the date that this happened (lines 10-11). These details of time and time passing demonstrate the importance of her father’s death as an event in her life. The next fact that she made relevant was that this was an expected death, *but* that this was not expected over a long period of time and was in fact “very very quick” (line 15). Like Samuel then, Esme conveys the suddenness and the shock of the death. The next thing that Esme does is to ask JH a question – “d’you want to know what happened or? is that not relevant” (lines 15-16). In the interview setting this is in effect a checking-out of the scope of the interview – is this the proper place to talk

about the death itself? JH gives a preferred answer, but one that is qualified – only “if” it is “important for Esme’s story (line 17). This hands the floor back to Esme to determine the relevance of these details<sup>41</sup>.

In her next turn, Esme in fact warrants the inclusion of these biographical facts - her father was not taken ill at home, but in Granada, where he was visiting her holiday home (lines 18-19). The beginning of his demise is marked by her older brother’s worry for his health – voiced in a formulation (extract 23, line 21-22), and in 'directly-reported' speech (extract 24, line 39). This part of her story marks the beginning of a distressing time for Esme, and also points towards a trace of guilt – her father was ill before he travelled to see her but went ahead with the trip. We shall see later that these biographic details contextualise the feeling of presence that occurs in Granada the next time she goes there after his death (see chapter 8, extract 2).

Perhaps it is hardly surprising that informants refer to their biography in a narrative biographic interview that asks for personal stories. However, two participants were not interviewed in this way but rather using the ‘pragmatic interview’ schedule, which was structured by the interviewers and did not include questions about biographic aspects of the voices. Yet even in this interview context, spontaneous contextualisation of the voice through biography was evident.

#### Extract 25, Linda

49. PT: so what sort of things does Geoff tell you not to do?  
50. (2.06)  
51. Linda: well, it changes. Initially, just after he died, it was always, it was like a  
52. comforting voice I thought (0.43) thought initially perhaps that was me  
53. projecting (0.23) wanting him to comfort me (0.63) but then he would do it  
54. in anger (0.30) and he he was a very angry man (0.54) and he'd be angry  
55. and irritated by me and he'd say 'you're being stupid'

In this extract, Linda makes on a comment on her past life with her husband - “he was a very angry man” (line 54). However PT did not ask Linda about how ‘Geoff’

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<sup>41</sup> This little sequence demonstrates an important feature of the interviews – the fluid negotiation of topics and relevancies in the here-and-now of the interview. If JH’s response or the methodology had been different, Esme may have given quite a different account that did not include details about the death as a contextual feature. This instance highlights the situated nature of narrative discussed in chapter 2.



was in life, but how he is as a voice, in the continuous present. So why does she mention it? What this biographical fact does is to account for the anger of the voice – as a continuation of her husband’s anger. Note that Linda explains the "comforting voice" (line 52) as her own "projection" (line 53) - i.e. a part of her, but the angry voice as her husband's agency.

Linda distinguishes between her husband’s voice now, and her husband’s person in the past, in a subtle way. She starts by talking about a “voice” (lines 51-52) and this contrasts with “he” (line 51) who died. But then she personifies the voice - “*he* would do it in anger” (line 53, my emphasis), “*he’d* be angry and irritated” (lines 54-55, my emphasis). So how do we know that she is talking about the voice and not the person if she uses the same pronoun? The answer is that Linda uses “he would” to talk about the voice, and “he was” to talk about the man in the past. “He would” is a conditional phrase. In this context the condition seems to be his status as a voice. Indeed, Linda says “he would do it in anger” – and in the context of her story “he” refers to ‘Geoff’ and “it” refers to the voice. So Linda endows the voice with her husband’s agency, and the detail about his anger in life supports this. Linda in fact makes references to her biography in a similar fashion in several places in her interview. The comments work to emphasise their unhappiness as a couple and his anger and aggression when he was alive.

Matt also introduced details from his past relationship with his father in his ‘pragmatic interview’, as the following extract demonstrates;

#### Extract 26, Matt

73. AG: How do you react to him asking you questions like that?  
74. Matt: I become very defensive because when he was alive he um (.) was very  
75. threatened by me because although he was a very successful person in  
76. his own right (.) uh (.) he felt that because I'm academic and other things  
77. that he wasn't, I was a great threat to him. So, I get very defensive when  
78. he asks me these questions because I know he's going to try to pose his  
79. values on me (.) um (.) which I'm not prepared to let him do.

The interviewer AG does not ask for details of Matt’s life in the past - her question (extract 26, line 73) instead concerns Matt’s response to the voice in the continuous present. Matt responds by firstly, saying that he reacts 'defensively' (line 74) to the

questions of the voice and secondly, by accounting for this by giving details of his history with his father – “he felt that...I was a great threat to him” (lines 76-77). His father’s jealousy in the past, which is presented as unfounded (“he was a very successful person in his own right” lines 75-76) warrants his response to the voice now. Although he treats the voice with his father’s agency (as does AG) Matt also distinguishes between the voice and the person – the person is referred to as a “he” in the past tense, for example, “when he *was* alive” (line 74) “he *felt* that” (line 76), and the voice is also a “he” but in the present tense, for example, “when he *asks* me” (line 78). Like Linda, Matt uses the same pronoun, “he”, to talk about the voice and the person. This stresses the continuity of his father’s identity. However the tenses distinguish different eras of his person – suggesting that he is not simply the same man but a different type of person now.

Once again a close look at the language reveals the distinctions made by informants – and note that this is not a distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ experiences, but can be quite individual. In Matt’s case, the distinction is between “he” in two different tenses. In Linda’s it was the use of a conditional tense for the voice. So the epistemic categories used by Matt and Linda are different phases of their biographies. The living human being that they knew has not ceased to exist for them but has been transformed by death into a *voice-being*. This voice-being is not only a voice but has some features of the person, but simultaneously, it is restricted in its personhood – it has no body (although may sometimes carry a feeling of ‘presence’, see chapter 6), it cannot perform many kinds of actions, but it can still perform speech acts. To understand the distinctions the informants make between the voice and the person it is necessary to observe the subtle ways that they talk about their biographies and its different phases.

So why was biography such an important source of meaning? What does the biographic information provide that references to the here-and-now of the voice do not? It is no doubt visible by now that the biographic information gives the voice meaning as a *continuation*. It adds to the information about the immediate setting of the voice by showing that what happens is not a one-off but connects in some way to the past life with the person. The continuation is of a specific kind in the different cases. Julie showed through references to her family history that her voice was

partly a continuation of rejection. Matt referred to his life with his father to give his voice sense as a continuation of his father's jealousy, and Linda did so to show that her voice was a continuation of her husband's anger. So what about Samuel? We saw that he started his interview by describing family life with his grandma, the event of her death, and his family life without her. The next extract shows how these relevancies interacted with the here-and-now of the voice to give his voice meaning as a continuation too;

#### Extract 27, Samuel 1

213. Samuel: there was, one time where I heard a voice, only once or  
214. maybe twice, erm, I was in my grandma's house, and obviously the  
215. house hadn't changed=or, so everything was, was the same. And it  
216. was about maybe, a month after she died, so it's still quite,  
217. JH: mm  
218. Samuel: soon. And, t.! the waste disposal in the house wasn't  
219. working, my grandpa was like getting quite stressed about it  
220. because, erm, (.) he couldn't, that's what (I'm on about), he really  
221. sort of like caved in a bit and tiny little things like the waste  
222. disposal not working the television maybe like going, on the blink  
223. for like a second, .hh or, like half a day or something, really really  
224. like ( ) would stress him, and sort=of=like bent down to  
225. (1.0)  
226. look for the waste disposal, and I heard my grandma say, "it's at  
227. the back, it's at the back".

In this part of the interview, Samuel's references to the here-and-now of the voice are interwoven with biographic details. This starts with his description of the immediate physical setting of the voice, his grandma's house, and his reference back to how the house was before her death in order to portray it as unchanged (line 215). He also refers back to the event of his grandma's death in order to indicate how much time had elapsed (line 216). So the biographic references so far situate the here-and-now of the voice in a time soon after her death, and in a place where she would have been found in life, that furthermore contained no signs of her death.

Samuel then on line 218 switches back to describing the here-and-now problem – the faulty waste disposal and his grandpa's "stress" (line 219) about this. The information about his family life without grandma – as "quite horrific", and "stressful" – given at the beginning of the interview makes this here-and-now situation understandable as an instance of this (and if the transcriber's guess is accurate, he actually refers back to this explicitly: "that's what I'm on about", line 220). So this is a

specific instance of a voice but also a specific instance of his grandpa being “really lost” (extract 22, line 186). In light of the aforementioned description of life with his grandma that he gives at the beginning of the interview, this voice is a continuation of his grandma; as an agent that helps him to solve problems.

In fact, all other participants used biographic information in their interviews to establish a continuation of some kind. These continuations were varied and not all were necessarily focused on the deceased’s character. In Inge, the information “we had a thing we used to say” gives the voice meaning as a continuation of love (extract 1, line 98). In Aggie, the voice was a continuation of her boyfriend singing to her (“he sang- he sings..”, extract 19, line 78).

In Isaac, references to the past demonstrated the continuation of a routine;

#### Extract 28, Isaac

68. Isaac: she has, er, she had, in the sink, (.) what's it called now? I'm, my, my  
69. name's gone, er  
70. (2.0)  
71. you get rid of your rubbish  
72. (1.0)  
73. JH: waste [disposal, yeah, yeah]  
74. Isaac: [waste disposal, sorry, waste disposal] ((*sips drink*)) and  
75. erm ((*sips again*)) I was always, forever fixing it for her, she'd put  
76. down something, a spoon or whatever, and it broke  
77. (2.0)  
78. anyway, my sister said can you come across, and when you come  
79. can you fix the  
80. (2.0)  
81. waste disposal  
82. JH: mm=hmm  
83. Isaac: so I said okay, yeah.  
84. (2.0)  
85. and like, there's a button, at the back (.) which I know now (.) but I  
86. didn't remember it as of the time. And as clear (.) as (.) I'm speaking  
87. to you  
88. (2.0)  
89. it sung, "keep going Isaac, it's there"

It will be remembered that Isaac and Samuel are members of the same family and that the pragmatic and prosodic features of their voices were almost identical – of the same person (grandma/mum), helping to solve the same problem (waste disposal). However, they use biographic details differently to show a different kind of continuation. Samuel used it to show a continuity of his grandma’s care and

problem-solving. Here Isaac describes the here-and-now problem as linking to a past routine of “forever fixing it” (line 75) for his mother. This gives his mother a different identity in the past – as someone to be helped, rather than the helper in Samuel’s story.

In Clare’s case, the voice was a continuation of her grandma’s care for her;

Extract 29, Clare

907. Clare: I always remember the last things my nanna said to me was “Clare, close  
908. your eyes.” And that was the last thing cos I was, I was like wide awake all  
909. night cos I didn’t want to fall asleep myself just in case.  
910. JH: awh::  
911. Clare: you know I remember cos we were in hospital for well over twenty-four  
912. hours you see before she died.  
913. JH: mm=hmm  
914. Clare: because she got to that point and then she couldn’t speak any more. But,  
915. sometimes now in that, so you’re saying continuing relationships, I do still  
916. feel that er, I can hear her saying that in my head. You know like if I’m  
917. worried about something or I can’t go to sleep or anything I just think, I can  
918. hear her saying “Clare, close your eyes.”  
919. JH: ah::

Clare contextualises the voice by referring to the time when her nanna was dying, specifically to the last words that she said to Clare. The details that Clare provides, including that she was “wide awake all night” (lines 908-909) imply that she was significantly exhausted. What her nanna said to her - “Clare, close your eyes” (lines 907-908) - demonstrated that she was in control, and caring for Clare even under these, the extremist of circumstances.

Clare then orients explicitly to JH’s research interest and by implication links what she says next to “continuing relationships” (line 915). The type of situation in which the voice appears (this is a formulation), has similarities with the deathbed scene – Clare is worried, and/or is not sleeping (line 917). The voice repeats the last words that her nanna said to her. However the continuity does not lie simply in the repeated phrase, but in certain aspects of the circumstances, and the effects, which are the same – Clare is not sleeping and the words help her to sleep (see Clare 2, appendix 2). The voice thus brings this time from the past into the present, but not as a trauma. Instead, it brings a feeling of care. So the meaning of this voice, as a continuation of her grandma’s care, depends on two things; firstly, it is a repetition of

her grandma's words in the past, and secondly the here-and-now situation of the voice, in which this care is both appropriate and needed.

So far, we have seen the importance of biography in the thematic field of the voice through demonstrating how informants started their interviews with these references, and by showing that in alternative interview schedules informants diverged from questions they were asked in order to provide this. We have also seen a predominant way in which this information was used – to show a continuity of some aspect of life with the person in the past. This did not always have to be an 'important' part of life (e.g. showing care), but might sometimes appear to be quite trivial (e.g. helping with a household chore). Some informants used biographic information not only to show continuity but for other purposes.

We already saw an instance of Esme establishing continuity of her father's person in the voice she heard. This was through the reference to the past, shown in extract 4 of this chapter - "And it was exact words that he would've used." (lines 113-114). She also used biographic information to account for why the voice happened in Granada at the time it did (extract 23). Besides this, there was a third method by which Esme used this information in her interview. In the following extract, Esme is talking about a visit to see a medium (clairvoyant);

#### Extract 30, Esme

248. Esme: "oh she said, I love it when you're dad comes through" she says "because,  
249. it makes me feel very happy. just cos, he was a very nice man wasn't he?"  
250. and I said "yeah", and she says "oh I really feel nice when I'm talking about  
251. him"  
252. JH: uh=huh  
253. Esme: and, when she said like the time was up because she seen us an hour or  
254. whatever she kept saying "well I think that" and then she said "oh no 'e  
255. doesn't want to go" and that is so typical 'e used to do that all the time he  
256. used to say like "oh by the way" you know and always stop you and it was  
257. like the same thing happening

In this extract, Esme introduces facts about her life with her father that function to strengthen the credibility of a medium that she goes to see. She does this through adding the comment "and that is so typical 'e used to do that all the time...." (line 255). It is the coherence of this information from the past, with what the medium said to Esme, that implies that her contact with Esme's father was genuine. Esme is in

effect providing the information for the interviewer that would allow her to draw the same conclusions as Esme herself. Interestingly, Aggie also uses biographic particulars for the same end. Chapter 7 explores the use of these spiritual resources in more depth.

Finally, Aggie referred to the past when describing the here-and-now of her voice in order to illustrate a *change*, as well as a continuation. Let's take a second look at how she contextualises the voice that comments on her hair;

#### Extract 31, Aggie

59. Aggie: when he died I had long dark hair down to there ((*points to half-way down*  
60. *her arms*))  
61. JTB: mm  
62. Aggie: an now I've got short blonde hair  
63. JTB: mm=hm  
64. Aggie: he says "I absolutely love your hair and I hated the thought of you getting it  
65. cut (.) but it's nice"

In the here-and-now of the interview itself, the interviewer can see that Aggie has shoulder-length blonde hair. But it is the biographic information – “when he died I had long dark hair” (line 59) - that allows the interviewer to make sense of the voice as a compliment concerning a significant change in Aggie's appearance. However, the voice also continues something about their relationship - her boyfriend's approval of her. He liked her hair before, and he still likes it now - the 'liking' is fixed, although the hair is not. Aggie represents this continuation of her boyfriend's agency through the words she uses - “he says” (line 64) rather than, for example, ‘his voice said’.

#### **5.4. Sources of meaning for hearing voices**

This chapter has investigated the contributions of three sources to the meaning of the voices that people heard; the language of the voice, the immediate setting of the voice, the biographical context. The first conclusion was that the reports of voices showed evidence of linguistic creativity and so the voices could not be accurately described as fixed memories (as past theories have suggested, chapter 1).

There also appeared to be no specific constraint on the kinds of pragmatic functions available to voice-talk. The function of the voice seemed to vary from case-to-case,

discounting claims in the literature that voices have very specific functions (such as encouraging violence, or helping the bereaved with unresolved business). Despite media representations, only one command voice, Julie's, could be considered to urge destructive acts. However, her response to it meant that the voice was not dangerous. Many more voices were mundane in character and often helped the hearer to achieve an aim.

We saw that the voices were not just language but were situated in complicated ways. In the immediate setting, this could be to the proximal environment of the hearer when the voice was heard (including objects in this environment) or to a conversational environment. The voices were not 'in the mind' of the person that heard them but were situated.

Responses to the voices were revealing of their meanings - they were not treated as a linguistic form but were *related to as speech acts*. This indicated that the agency of the voice was continuous with the remembered agency of the deceased. The agency was compelling, but not compulsive, with informants describing their responses to the voices as mediated by several things. These factors included the type of speech act of the voice, the social environment at the time, the hearer's original intentions (and whether these concurred with what the voice told them), and the hearer's emotional state. This is similar to past literature on the effects of voices on their hearers - the effects are most often mediated by the hearer's moral sense and reason. Socrates, for example, treated his voice as an impetus for reflection rather than compulsion (see Leudar and Thomas, 2000, chapter 1).

So did the bereaved voice-hearers make reality-testing errors by treating the voice with the deceased's agency? The language showed that informants made subtle distinctions between the person when they were alive, and the voice-being since the death. One method was by talking about the voice in the present tense, and the person in the past tense. Informants do not use the terms inner/outer to distinguish voice/person but this does not mean that they confuse the voice with a person speaking to them in their physical environment. A connection with the deceased person is maintained not at a physical or legal level but at a relational level.

Analysis in this chapter also revealed that all informants drew on their biographies - most commonly on the shared life before the death - to integrate their voices in



particular ways. Historicising the here-and-now of the voice in the setting of the interview in fact did several things. Most commonly, it accounted for the voice as a continuation of an aspect of the former life together. So a father continues to be jealous of his son (Matt), a grandmother continues to help (Samuel, Clare), and a boyfriend continues to show his love (Inge, Aggie). References to the past also showed that the words of the voice were directly intelligible (in Aggie's case, the here-and-now situation of the voice alone was not enough to demonstrate the relevance of the voice). Biographic particulars may also be used to account for why the voice happened when it did and in the place where it did (Esme). Introducing this information could also demonstrate the closeness of a relationship and account for the voice as the result of intense grief. And finally, these details were even used to demonstrate the credibility of a medium, supporting a spiritual interpretation of the voice. Use of spiritual resources will become an analytic focus in chapter 7.

All in all, the introduction of personal and family history broadens the field in which the voice may be seen – the field in which the voice is meaningful.

But is this a new finding? Haven't other studies linked aspects of a person's life history to their voices (Honig et al, 1998; Siegel, 1984; Comer et al 1967)? This is true, but this biography has always been of a particular kind – traumatic. By contrast, what we have predominantly seen in these interviews is a *biography of everyday life*. From the very mundane routines – kitchen appliances and haircuts – to common aspects of relationships – nagging husbands and doting grandmothers. It is certainly the case that the death, an important event in all of the interviews, could be regarded as traumatic. Indeed in Clare's narrative there was a direct link between the words of her voice and the time of her grandmother's death. Even in this case though, the voice did not link to the awfulness of death, but to the extent of her grandmother's care at the time of her death. The voice does not repeat the traumatic aspect of this moment but instead relaxes her and allows her to sleep (see appendix 2, Clare 2).

Some theories make a causal link between dissociation through a trauma, and hearing voices (Honig et al, 1998; Andrew et al, 2008), but there does not seem to be this clear relationship in these informants. The voices are better described as continuations of self-in-relationship rather than dissociations.

This continuation is reflected in the language the informants use to talk about the voice – they do not talk about ‘voices’ or ‘hallucinations’ but in a very ordinary way about ‘grandma’, ‘my father’ etc. What is the source then of this personification? There seem to be certain conditions for this – firstly, the voice needs to sound like the person. Secondly, although conceptually it is possible to separate the here-and-now of the voice from its biographic connections, these two sources of meaning in a practical sense work together. There needs to be a here-and-now situation into which the person fits, where the relationship can become consequential. So Matt needs to fall over for his father’s negative attitude to take hold, a problem needs to arise in which a grandma can help, and there needs to be an ‘I love you’ in order for a boyfriend to reciprocate. Thirdly, the biographic information supports this ‘fit’ – by showing the relevance of the nature of the relationship or the things the person did before. If these conditions are fulfilled it seems that a spiritual frame-of-reference is not always necessary to give the voice personhood (although some may use this, see chapter 7). There is what Pierre Janet called a ‘reality function’ to these voices – they fit neatly into the person’s environment and activities. In these voice-experiences, the deceased person is not ‘just’ a memory but rather more concrete.

## Chapter 6 – Sources of meaning: part 2. Non-linguistic experiences of presence.

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The last chapter examined the voices of the deceased heard by informants to the study. It concluded that these voices were described as meaningful happenings and that this meaning came from at least four sources – the prosody of the voice, the language of the voice, the here-and-now situation of the voice, and the biographical context, both before and after the bereavement. Most commonly, these sources of meaning combined to show that the here-and-now situation of the voice was actually a continuation of some aspect of the past life with the deceased.

This short chapter concerns those experiences of presence that do not involve language as a source of meaning. These are the visions, smells and tastes, touch, 'signs' of presence, 'feelings' of presence, and speech without words reported by informants to the study (chapter 3). We shall see that most of these experiences, like the voices, are signs of the person (in the semiotic sense). Some, like voices, iconically represented the deceased (they sounded like them, or looked like them). Others relied entirely on the context for their connections with the deceased. What follows is a brief discussion of each 'type' of experience starting with those that were more clearly iconic (e.g. visions of the person) as well as indexical – and moving towards those that were linked to the person entirely indexically (e.g. smells). One concern of the chapter will be exactly how 'anonymous' experiences such as a feeling of touch, become signs of the deceased's presence. The chapter will end with a discussion of those experiences that were best described as emotions rather than signs, the so-called 'feeling' of presence.

### *6.1. Visions*

6 people reported visions relating to the deceased. These were experiences where the bereaved saw someone or something that should not objectively have been there. Most of the time they were direct visual representations of the person, and so intrinsically carried features of the deceased's personhood. But like voices, they were also situated experiences.

In the last chapter, we saw that Isaac made biographical references to show that the voice he heard of his mother – "keep going Isaac" – was in part a continuation of a shared routine. Isaac also talked about several instances of seeing his parents since their deaths. In extract 1, Isaac is talking about two occasions where he saw his father in a synagogue.

#### Extract 1, Isaac

45. Isaac: So  
46. (5.0)  
47. it was (.) Yom Kippur  
48. (1.0)  
49. which is a fast day  
50. JH: m  
51. Isaac: so we don't eat from  
52. (2.0)  
53. I think it was Friday evening till Saturday- Friday evening half-six, till half  
54. past seven on the Saturday  
55. JH: Right  
56. Isaac: This is the great, er, atonement, you can atone for all::: your sins. Very  
57. similar to Catholics who go once a week, but er, it, for the Jewish people  
58. it's just once a year  
59. JH: sounds better, heh!  
60. Isaac: heh=heh=Yeah, yeah, a lot better. And er, the first year after my dad, my  
61. dad died, and I went with Samuel,  
62. JH: mh  
63. (1.0)  
64. Isaac: and I could see=him, I could see=him, er ah he, my seats, Samuel's and I,  
65. were just one down to me dad, he was on a, he, he, on a corner, so, you  
66. know as you get up to the toilet and  
67. (2.0)  
68. And I saw him again this year  
69. (3.0)  
70. and I could see him, I-, even touch him sometimes  
71. JH: it's that, real?  
72. (1.0)  
73. Isaac: it's that real.  
74. JH: that you feel you could reach him  
75. Isaac: I think you could reach out.

Isaac is talking here about two visions of his father, on successive Yom Kippurs, a year between them. In this vision, his father is sitting on a pew in the row in front of Isaac and his son. Isaac stresses the reality of this experience of his father – it was so life-like that Isaac felt there was a substance to him – he felt that if he wanted to, he could reach out and touch him (line 70). The vision fits, as the voice did, neatly with the here-and-now situation – his father is sitting on a pew, facing forward as one does in a religious ceremony. There is no suggestion that his father looked at Isaac

or acknowledged his presence in the same way that Isaac acknowledged his father's - the vision did not carry addressivity towards Isaac in the way that the voice did.

The detail of where his father was sitting hints at biographical information – it was on the corner, at the end of the row making it easier for an older person to get up to go to the toilet (lines 65-66). This suggests links with his past life with his father – he does not say explicitly in this extract but Isaac had been to many Yom Kippur ceremonies with his father when he was alive. So the biographic source of meaning combines with the here-and-now of this vision to give it meaning as a continuation – this time of a religious routine rather than the domestic routine of his mother's voice. This perhaps reflects the difference in the two relationships, and the kinds of activities they shared. The timing of the vision itself also points towards the significance of Yom Kippur in the Jewish calendar – it is a time of particular piousness.

Isaac's vision was typical of those reported – it involved seeing the deceased person in a familiar place, but was not *for* the person in the way that most of the voices were. It was like seeing someone familiar in the crowd, but without them seeing you – there is one-way recognition but no interaction. Sade, for example, saw her ex-boyfriend in the places she used to see him. Samuel saw his grandma in the shop she used to frequent. Jude saw her brother at the back of a bus. However, not every vision was like this. One vision, reported by Clare, was not a representation of the deceased but instead symbolic of the death itself. This in fact happened three times to Clare, when three of her grandparents were dying. Clare introduces these experiences in the following way.

#### Extract 2, Clare 1

74. Clare: as my Nana was going through that dying process which I've seen more  
75. often now coz I've seen more people die since but when she was I could  
76. see honestly see these definite behind the hospital bed these definite two  
77. kind of black [figures]  
78. JH: [Right]  
79. Clare: it's the only way I can explain it to you but kind of I knew they were people=  
80. JH: =Mm:=  
81. Clare: =but they were kind of like that kind of e:rm like a church window  
82. kind of shape [really] but that's the [only]  
83. JH: [Ok ok] [Ok ok]  
84. Clare: way I can explain it to you but at the time you kind of knew that they were  
85. two figures that were obviously waiting for her

Unlike Isaac's vision, what Clare saw - church window shaped 'figures' - did not directly represent a particular deceased person. But in this example, the situation of her grandmother dying meant that the vision became symbolic of something - of "people" (line 79) waiting for her grandmother. By implication, these were dead people. The vision then fits into the here-and-now in quite a different way than Isaac's because it does not happen during the bereavement but during the death. Within this context, the vision represents not the dead person, but the situation of impending bereavement. In this way, it marks the beginning of the bereavement.

There were two other cases of visions that were different from the norm, and this was also due to the here-and-now situation. These could be found in the narratives of Samuel and Kelly. In these cases, the vision occurred at the time of the death, without the person knowing of the death. The following example comes from Samuel.

#### Extract 3. Samuel 1

151. Samuel: I looked up from the table. Um, and there's  
152.           like a couch, and I saw her like sitting on the couch, like with  
153.           her eyes like looking down wards towards me, like quite peaceful,  
154.           but quite sad  
155. JH:       mm, m=hm  
156. Samuel: she seemed to be saying basically goodbye in, in her  
157.           posture, that's how I took it.  
158. JH:       m=hm  
159. Samuel: and it really worried me that like, that, I'd seen her, and  
160.           then a few, well maybe like half an hour later, or even less,  
161.           later, we got a phone call saying that she died at that time  
162. JH:       mm::  
163. Samuel: and that my dad hadn't, like phoned straight away because  
164.           obviously it was like, the family, my grandpa and auntie and, dad  
165.           were distraught, obviously, there was a slight delay, and yet in a  
166.           way that to me seemed like an instant message, from my grandma  
167.           saying sort of goodbye.

Samuel saw his grandma looking down with a peaceful and sad expression, and posture - it was almost as if her whole body carried a message for him. However, it is within the context Samuel provides that the sadness and peace that she captures becomes a parting gesture. Samuel narrates the meaning of this vision from two positions - how it seemed to him in the moment, and how it was retrospectively, at the time of the interview. At the time, her appearance was worrying for him - and this was because he was aware of her being ill and in hospital. The vision was thus

worrying precisely because it did not fit into the here-and-now context, and stood out as strange - what was Grandma doing here, now, when she should be in hospital? The here-and-now situation seems to be 'omnirelevant' to the experiences of presence - it either gives the experience 'meaning as usual' (Isaac's father in the synagogue) or makes the experience stand out as odd, alarming or surprising, as in the case of this vision of Samuel's.

It was only on receipt of the phone call, a few minutes later, that his worst fears were confirmed (lines 160-161) - his grandma had come to say goodbye. Thus the 'goodbye' is realised retrospectively, not at the time of the experience - over time, there is a broader context of interpretation. At the time, the vision hinted at the loss of his grandma because it stood out as odd and because she had been taken ill. In this sense, the vision marked the beginning of the grief in his story. Unlike Isaac's vision, this experience had a quality of addressivity - it "seemed like an instant message from my grandma" (line 166). It was experienced as intended for him, just as the instructions of the voice. Samuel also referred to his shared history with his grandma established at the beginning of his interview (chapter 5, extracts 20-22) to give this vision meaning as an intended and direct communication from his grandma. In particular he referred to conversations they had in the past where he reacted with distress to the idea that she would die one day. He drew the conclusion that she was saying goodbye because she knew his grief would have been intense.

Samuel was not the only person to report such a 'saying goodbye' experience. Kelly also saw her grandfather at the time of his death. Sade smelled the 'illness' of her family friend, Merlene, at the time of her death. Clare 'felt' a strange feeling at the time of her cousin Isabella's death. Inge dreamt of her boyfriend's lifeless body. The experiences may happen in different modalities (although, not it seems in the form of a voice, or 'feeling' of presence), but what they have in common is that firstly, they happen when the bereaved person is at a proximal distance from the dying person. Secondly, they do not fit the person's here-and-now circumstances, and stand out as odd. Such oddness is puzzling, and affords an enquiry. Thirdly, they acquire meaning retrospectively as communications from the deceased about the death. And fourthly, as an interruption to ordinary life with the person, the experiences mark the beginning of the bereavement.

## 6.2. Non-linguistic noise

Only one person, Heena, heard noises that were non-linguistic. This included a voice but with no distinct words, a "grumbling", that was accompanied by other noises.

This prompted a question - are the procedures for linking the signifier to the signified the same as with the linguistic sounds shown in chapter 5? Heena in fact said little about these experiences;

### Extract 4, Heena

240. Heena: one day I was convinced I'd heard him making a sandwich and sort of  
241. grumbling whilst he made it  
242. JTB: Yeah heh!  
243. Heena: Erm, there was another time it was, erm (.) err my granddad before he  
244. died, he used to drink quite a lot

A voice without words has the prosody of the deceased person, and this is partly what links it to them. For Heena, the link between the 'grumbling' and the grandfather, or between the signifier and signified, was also formed by other sources of meaning. The other noises that accompany the grumbling indicate an activity - making a sandwich. This very ordinary activity indicates Heena's grandfather due to the biographical context - they shared the house when he was alive, and Heena would hear his everyday activity;

### Extract 5, Heena

38. Heena: I used to like, hear- not hear him, when I was on my own in a room, but  
39. like if I was in the house I'd hear him, think he'd be there sort of thing  
40. (2.10)  
41. JTB: Yeah  
42. Heena: Coz I'd spent a lot of time with him at home in the house (.) It wasn't so  
43. much that, I was hearing him talk to me or anything, it was more that I was  
44. hearing things he used to do

On line 42, Heena switches tense to refer to the shared past with her grandfather - when he was alive, she had spent long periods with him in the house. The 'grumbling' voice, and the sounds that she has heard since the death, find meaning as a continuation of this sharing of space. The voice and the noises are not meant for her but are akin to *over-hearing*. It is possible to imagine indistinct speech that is experienced with addressivity but this was not reported by any informants to this study.



Thus the interviews showed that even a voice without language, and noises, can be meaningful because of their indexicality as signs - specifically to the person's environment and personal history.

### *3. Smells, and Taste*

So far, most of the signs have been linked to the 'signified' i.e. the deceased, in an iconic sense. Either by looking like them, or sounding like them (the exceptions are the noises in Heena and the 'shadows' in Clare). The meanings are also indexical to the person's proximal environment and biography. We now move to experiences that do not intrinsically carry these qualities of personhood, but are linked to the deceased as an index of them, rather like the way that smoke is an index of fire. These indexical signs include the smells experienced by 5 people, and a taste by one person, Samuel.

In fact, in Samuel, the taste always came with a smell, as the following extract illustrates;

#### Extract 6, Samuel 1

286. Samuel: I had a meeting with Matt erm, and I was just a bit worried about it cos I  
287.           hadn't seen him for like quite a while before Christmas and had like,  
288.           quite a lot of work to get done, and it was late at night the night  
289.           before the meeting and I was like quite um, .t! I think it was in  
290.           January then I was quite worried
291. JH:       mm
292. Samuel: but it was late January because Matt was away for most of  
293.           January, and um, I was just sort of tried to pull this paper together  
294.           which I finally managed to do and, I was just, it was late at night it  
295.           was like gone, gone eleven probably. Or maybe later. And then it  
296.           started actually with a smell of like this, this meatballs that she  
297.           used to make
298. JH:       yeah
299. Samuel: which were quite gorgeous
300. JH:       mm
301. Samuel: and um, I was, I just remembered sort of smelling it and  
302.           thinking "oh god it's starting." Not in=a in=a kind of worried way  
303.           like "oh god it's starting" but just like, "that's really  
304.           interesting." And, it was a very strong, powerful smell. Which, I knew  
305.           wasn't in the room but I could definitely smell it none the less. Erm,  
306.           and, erm, sort of a few seconds after that, I could really taste like
307. JH:       mm
308. Samuel: the food

Samuel had experienced the smell and taste of his grandma's food several times since her death (not always the same dish!<sup>42</sup>), and the extract shows him describing a specific instance of this. The smell and taste are intrinsically pleasant experiences for anyone who likes meatballs. But what links them to his grandma? The experience is not of her, but relates to her activities in the past - the cooking of good food. The link between the experience and his grandma then is entirely indexical. What makes the meatballs specifically *her* meatballs are two sources of meaning; 1) his anxiety in the here-and-now about the meeting the next day, and 2) the links to a past shared form of life with his grandma. We saw in chapter 5 that Samuel established a thematic field for his experiences at the beginning of the interview and that this included references to aspects of their former life together (chapter 5, extracts 20-22). It will be remembered that one of these aspects was their relationship with food;

#### Extract 7, Samuel 1

60. Samuel: erm and, if I had a problem, I think there were probably  
61. quite a few occasions where, erm I was worried about some things  
62. or whatever when I was growing up and, if I told, my grandma  
63. she'd always like, say eat with me and you know the next day  
64. she'd find a solution to, any problem really, no matter how big. .hh  
65. or small and erm, .thh

The smell and taste of her food after her death, at a time of worry, is introduced against this background of her showing her love for him in life through cooking for him and helping him to solve his problems (extract 7). This gave the smell and taste, like the voice, meaning as a continuation of this love and care at times of need. The difference was, however, that the smell and taste was not experienced by Samuel with the same addressivity that was in the voice and 'saying goodbye' vision. This prompts a question: can a smell be 'intentional' in the same way a speech act can?

Samuel was the only person to experience a taste relating to the deceased in this study and this mode of presence has not been reported previously. But the biographical source of meaning shows its appropriateness to the relationship Samuel had with his grandma. Even the order in which the events happened fitted with the past when she cooked - the smell of cooking always anteceded the taste.

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<sup>42</sup> Samuel told JH in a later interview that the food could vary - he even experienced a dessert, rice pudding, on one occasion. What all the dishes had in common was that they were all in the collection of recipes that his grandma cooked regularly when she was alive.

Two further cases reported smells relating to the deceased's activity rather than directly to the deceased themselves. Jude smelt cigarette smoke and referred to the here-and-now to show that there was no source for it, and to the past when her brother was alive to make sense of this as a continuation of him smoking. Clare smelt a strong smell of pharmaceutical drugs. She contextualised this in her care of her cousin Isabella in the past including the administering of strong-smelling drugs for her epilepsy. This care usually took place in her parents' house, which was the proximal environment in which she smelt the drugs since Isabella's death. These two sources of meaning combined in her narrative to endow this smell with Isabella's presence.

Three other cases experienced smells that were more directly *of the person*. As mentioned in the last section, Sade's experience of smell occurred at the time of her friend, Merlene's death. Sade referred to Merlene's final illness to give this meaning as the smell of 'death' - it was not Merlene's usual smell when she was healthy, and so marked her demise.

Tracey experienced the smell of her husband, specifically his aftershave. It usually appeared after she had been socialising with his friends (extract 8).

#### Extract 8, Tracey 1

83. Tracey: occasionally, erm, if I'm with Paul's friends,  
84. (3.0)  
85. this sounds really bizarre, if I'm with Paul's friends cos they all stayed really  
86. good friends because they've got kids the same age, and they stayed  
87. really good friends he had a really good group of friends that he'd known  
88. since he was, twelve thirteen years of age  
89. JH: right  
90. Tracey: and I still see them quite a bit  
91. JH: yeah  
92. Tracey: erm:::, I'll come away and I'll smell him.  
93. JH: right  
94. Tracey: and I'll smell his aftershave, which I know none of them wear  
95. JH: right  
96. Tracey: and I'll be in the car (.) and all I can smell is him.  
97. JH: right  
98. Tracey: and that is very sort of like, wow  
99. JH: yeah  
100. Tracey: freaky  
101. JH: yeah

What Tracey smells is aftershave. But why does it indicate Paul, her late husband? Tracey shows this connection through her references to the here-and-now context and her history with him. In the immediate environment there is no source for the smell - she is alone in the car and the people she has been with do not wear this fragrance (line 94). Her narrative describes a process of 'mundane reality testing' similar to how the voices were narrated in chapter 5 - the smell warrants a search for the source. Tracey marks the lack of fit with the proximal environment several times - it is "really bizarre" (line 85), "wow" (line 98), and "freaky" (line 100). What links the smell to Paul is the past - he wore it when he was alive. It is this that makes it "him" (line 92, line 96). The function of the experience will be explored in chapter 8.

The second type of smell that Clare reported was similar to Tracey's - it was her grandma's perfume. She gave this smell the meaning of her grandmother's presence through reference to the lack of source in the proximal environment and through reference to her grandmother wearing the perfume when she was alive.

Like the voices in the last chapter, informants contextualised the smells (and taste) to give them meaning as the deceased's continuing presence. In each case, the smell was not random but had connections with the here-and-now environment. This connection conversely was sometimes the smell's lack of fit with the physical environment, making it stand out as an odd experience. The here-and-now fit instead may have been to a person's psychological state (such as worry, in Samuel) or to a recent activity (Tracey). Informants contextualised the smells in aspects of their biographies to give them meaning, for the most part, as a continuation of some aspect of the person or relationship. The exception was the 'saying goodbye' experience of Sade, which marked a break in the relationship through Merlene's death.

#### **6.4. 'Signs' of presence**

The 'signs' of presence reported by 6 informants consisted of happenings that, in themselves, were not significant. Examples included lights that flickered (Esther), alarms that went off (Jude), and seeing butterflies (Clare). They carried nothing iconic about the deceased, in the way that a familiar voice or a vision does. Rather,

they became signs of the communicative intent of the deceased within the particular context provided in the narrative.

Some of these signs were linked to the deceased through reference to the here-and-now context of the event. Others became messages from the deceased through a combination of this source of meaning with biographic references. The following example comes from Jude. She listed several happenings, two descriptions of which are shown in the extract below. Without the context that Jude provided, the items on the list could be united as 'electrical/mechanical faults'. Within the context of Jude's story, they acquired altogether different meanings;

Extract 9, Jude.

169. Jude: and=um, another time I was up at the (.) young offender's institution, and  
170. (.) the alarm went off, in the young offenders, and there was all these=er,  
171. ( ) and everything, running round and, it'd just gone off for no  
172. reason I thought, "that's him. He's doing that." .hh and he, he had this huge  
173. TV and it sits at mum and dad's and it sort of stares. And often I'll be sitting  
174. watching it and it just switches itself off. Sometimes it'll work fine for ages  
175. and other times it's just ((clicks fingers))  
176. JH: m  
177. Jude: and you just, and you know it's him and I just said to him, and I'll just say  
178. to the TV, "it's not funny"  
179. JH: eh=heh=heh=[heh=heh!]  
180. Jude: [huh=huh]=heh! Huh=huh=huh! "And you were irritating  
181. when you were alive, and you're still irritating now". hhuh!=heh!

In the first example shown here, there is a 'false alarm' at the young offenders' institution where Jude works, resulting in minor chaos. In the second, which is not a one-off but a collection of instances, the TV Jude is watching switches off, resulting in her frustration. In both types of happenings, Jude emphasises the suddenness of the problem ("it's just" ((clicks fingers)), line 175) and the lack of an apparent cause in her proximal environment (line 174). It is her response in the here-and-now that links the 'fault' to her brother. She conveys this through a 'directly-reported' style in both examples. In the first case, in the public place of the young offenders' institution, her reaction is private - "I thought, 'that's him. He's doing that'" (line 172). In the second, she speaks aloud to the "him" (line 177) via the TV - "it's not funny" (line 178). Her response endows the events with her brother's mischievous intent, but so do her references to the past. The TV was not just any TV - it is the "huge" one her brother "had" (line 172). Her description of it is anthropomorphic - "it sits at mum and

dad's and it sort of stares" (line 173). The TV is personified. Her reported response to the TV "And you were irritating when you were alive, and you're still irritating now" (lines 180-181) structures the immediate event in the terms of her brother's mischief in the past. The result of these references to her immediate responses and her brother in the past when he was alive is that these happenings become communicative signs from her brother - practical jokes from beyond the grave. And like any 'sign', the indirectness of it means that it could also be mischievously denied.

Other informants drew on fewer sources of meaning to link the 'sign' to the deceased. Clare for example, referred to aspects of the here-and-now situation to link a butterfly she saw, to her late cousin, Isabella;

#### Extract 10, Clare 1

274. Clare: with Isabella it's butterflies. I mean just er wherever I go if I think of  
275. Isabella there's always some kind of butterfly that either lands here or goes  
276. past me or I mean recently I went on a day out in York and er the the lad  
277. that I went with I was telling him for the first time all about her and then  
278. suddenly as I'm talking this little blue butterfly comes you know comes near  
279. us and honestly it was ju it was amazing but it's always anything from  
280. seeing a butterfly drawn on a car if I'm thinking about her or in a shop  
281. window or: and I know people could probably say there's lots of butterflies  
282. around seem to be a popular thing that are always on things but yeah.

In the example, Clare is discussing Isabella for the first time with a date. As this happens, a blue butterfly appears. It is this order of events in the here-and-now situation that makes the butterfly a sign of Isabella, not anything about Isabella when she was alive. But Clare also draws on a biographic source of meaning to make this link. Unlike Jude's case, she does not refer to a fact about the deceased when she was alive, but to the experiences of butterfly 'signs' that have come before. To do this she uses the extreme-case formulation - "wherever I go" (line 274) - to present a general law - *if* she thinks of Isabella, *then* a butterfly appears. This general law becomes a part of the thematic field for the blue butterfly giving it significance as a communication from Isabella.

'Signs' of presence then were those seemingly insignificant happenings that have an indexical reference to the deceased's presence. In this respect, the noises that Heena heard (extract 4) were similar because they did not directly carry aspects of her grandfather's personhood like a voice or a vision might but became signs of him

within the context of her memory of his past activities and habits. However, the important difference is that all of the 'signs' were endowed not only with the deceased's presence but with their communicative intent - they were messages for the bereaved (just what they were messages about is examined in chapter 8). They were not merely happened-upon or 'overheard' like the noises were.

### **6.5. Touch/tactile sensations**

4 people reported a feeling of touch, or other tactile sensation related to the deceased. Most of these happened along with another experience of presence. A touch, on its own, is likely to be anonymous, unlike a familiar voice. So on what grounds did the informants link the 'sensations' they had with the deceased?

For Esme, a tactile experience became a sign of her father because of a voice she heard at the same time;

#### Extract 11, Esme

106. Esme: I went downstairs and, I was lying in bed and, I was sleeping and I felt like,  
107.           literally somebody lying on top of me, and I tend to sleep on my stomach,  
108.           and it was somebody and they were like pressing me down like this  
109. JH:       right  
110. Esme: and, I don't know whether I said it aloud, cos I really don't know but I said  
111.           "oh!" and I was thinking it was my husband, and I was saying "GET OFF  
112.           ME!! GET OFF! I CAN'T BREATHE, you're pushing me, you're pushing  
113.           me!" like and I was panicking. And then the next thing I could hear my dad,  
114.           and he said "it's alright dear." And it was exact words that he would've  
115.           used. "It's me."

Esme describes here a strong and vivid tactile experience - a person was "literally" (line 107) lying on top of her, "pressing me down" (line 108), and "pushing" her (line 112). She describes this as "somebody" (line 107) - indicating the initial anonymity of the presence. Due to the immediate situation of Esme being on holiday with her husband, she then infers that this was her husband (line 111). In adding this, she displays an ordinary process of accounting for the events. It is the voice that makes the pressure far more extraordinary - the prosody of the voice (it sounds like her father), together with the language of the voice (the indexical reference to the pressure, "it's me") change the meaning of the pressure into a sign of her father. Chapter 5 examined the biographical contextualisation that Esme produced for this

experience (extracts 23-24), which included that his final illness started in Granada, where her experience of presence subsequently took place. So the feeling of pressure becomes her father's presence in the context of the here-and-now situation and aspects of her biography.

Sarah's situation was slightly different because she experienced a touch without a partially iconic sign that linked it to the deceased. How did she make sense of it as her son, and not someone or something else?

#### Extract 12, Sarah

66. Sarah: And she asked me to do a specific, erm, reading and sort of reflection  
67. meditation on part of the Good Friday, experience, and I hadn't known  
68. what it was going to be until I got there. And I, so I arrived, and then she  
69. gave me (.) the er s-bit of the Good Friday story to read, which was of erm,  
70. Mary, the mother of Jesus'  
71. (1.0)  
72. er, the, the story of her (.) watching her son die  
73. JH: Right  
74. Sarah: and I thought, "Oh my goodness"  
~~~~~23 lines omitted~~~~~  
92. Sarah: So I went back to my seat, and I was almost physically shaking with the  
93. effort of having to, to do this and remain (.) together while I was doing it.  
94. And, at that point, I felt, I had, almost like, a some sort of a not, a, a  
95. pressure on my shoulder, there, and I just thought well, ah, that's Benjamin  
96. and he's saying "Mum, you've done it,"  
97. JH: mm:  
98. Sarah: you know, and it was (.) so strong that I, I put my hand up to feel (.) his  
99. hand  
100. JH: awww  
101. Sarah: there, which was (.) incredibly powerful, and has never happened, never  
102. happened before

In Sarah's example, it was an aspect of the here-and-now situation that linked the feeling of touch on her shoulder to her son. Her description begins with her being asked to read something in church that she found personally very challenging because of its significance to her own loss (Mary's story of watching her son die, line 72). She therefore sets the scene as one where she is acutely aware of the pain of losing her son. It is this emotion of grief for him that gives the tactile feeling significance as her son's presence. The qualities of this feeling in itself were not entirely clear from the narrative - it was "some sort of a not, a, a pressure" (line 94). It is unclear whether "not" (line 94) was a false start, corrected by "a pressure" (line 95) or whether Sarah was denying its status as pressure. In any case, the feeling she



had was definitely localised - "on my shoulder, there" (line 95), indicating this to JH. The form of this 'sensation' - the feeling of someone touching her shoulder - is consistent with the setting of sitting down in church and someone next to her reaching across to her to give a form of moral support.

Thus the form that Sarah's experience takes - a feeling of touch on the shoulder - also contributes to its meaning as it fits with a situation of someone offering her support. However, this, on its own, does not link the experience to her son in particular. Instead it is her emotions in the here-and-now that link the feeling on her shoulder to her son's presence. Note also that the biographical context of her son's death is required for JH to understand exactly why she finds the Mary-passage difficult in the first place.

Sarah's experience was unusual because the presence within the context of her biography did not provide a direct continuity of her son's personhood from when he was alive. This was because her son was only a baby when he died. The 'person' that put a hand on her shoulder could not have been a baby. Instead, the experience was a continuation of Sarah's relationship to him as a mother, but also in some sense a continuation of his life elsewhere - he had grown-up in the time since his death. Chapter 7 looks at how Sarah (and others) used spiritual and religious meanings to account for her experiences.

### **6.6. The 'Feeling' of presence**

The diffuse and sensorially-unspecified 'feeling of presence' is perhaps the most enigmatic of the experiences of presence. The person does not see, hear, smell, taste or feel the touch of the deceased, but yet feels vividly that they are there. The general 'feeling' of presence has been by far the most common experience of presence reported in previous research (Rees, 1971; Grimby 1998). William James described this phenomenon in his lectures on religious experiences;

it often happens that a hallucination is imperfectly developed: the person affected will feel a 'presence' in the room, definitely localized, facing in one particular way, real in the most emphatic sense of the word, often coming suddenly, and as suddenly gone; and yet neither seen, heard, touched, nor cognized in any of the usual 'sensible' ways (1902, lecture 3, p.3).

Anyone who has been recently bereaved might be aware of having strange feelings when they are in the place the person lived - it seems as if the house is 'charged' with an intangible presence. For this section, in the interests of clarity I am going to make a distinction between 'sense' of presence (implied by sensory information, e.g. a voice), and 'feeling' of presence (apparently unrelated to any particular sense). This is different to William James' term a "sense of reality" (1902, lecture 3, p.3) which he used to refer to a feeling of presence given independently of the five senses. For James, this was a spiritual sixth sense (Leudar, 2001). Here, I do not aim to invoke the same metaphysical implications with the term 'feeling of presence' but instead to concentrate on the phenomenal qualities of informants' descriptions and on how they form the link between such a feeling, and the deceased themselves.

9 informants to this study reported feeling the presence of the deceased at some point since the death. On closer analysis, only three of the examples fitted William James' description of an awareness of another being given independently of the senses. In the other cases, the feeling of presence always happened simultaneously with an experience of presence related to the senses. The language participants used to describe their 'feeling' of presence was varied - from the very concrete "he was holding me" (Sarah), to the more vague "a weird sensation" (Clare). On the whole, the experience seemed hard for participants to put into words. In some cases, it was difficult to determine whether the person 'felt' a presence in a direct way, or whether they were referring to the effects of a 'sense' of presence like a feeling of being touched or hugged by the deceased.

Firstly, let's look at how the feeling of presence was described when it happened without an accompanying 'sense' of presence. How does a 'feeling', without the characteristics of the deceased person that a voice or vision has, become linked to them in particular?

Julie described a foreboding feeling of presence that happened on one occasion in the night;

### Extract 11, Julie

473. Julie: I can remember waking up one night  
474. (2.0)  
475. and I was so aware of her at the side of the bed, I didn't  
476. Julie: [look]  
477. JH: [right]  
478. (1.0)  
479. Julie: but, I was  
480. JH: right  
481. Julie: so aware of her being there (.) just standing there looking down at me  
482. (1.0)  
483. and I wouldn't look  
484. JH: mm::  
    ~~~23 lines omitted (see appendix 1, for full extract)  
485. JH: Sounds like it could have been quite scary, I don't know if it was?  
486. (4.0)  
487. Julie: I were just waiting for the bombardment of ['Slag' and ]  
488. JH: [right]  
489. Julie: 'Slut' and 'Whore' and (.) that, and it just never came, that  
490. JH: right  
491. Julie: that was really strange.  
492. (1.0)  
493. JH: so it was like you were expecting to be abused then?  
494. Julie: yeah.  
495. (1.0)  
496. JH: then, when it didn't happen, it felt really odd?  
497. Julie: yeah, yeah  
498. (2.0)  
499. it was like, "what does she want?" But I'm not going to give her the  
500. satisfaction of looking at her.

What Julie describes here is typical of the feeling of presence found in William James in that it is vivid ("so aware of her", line 475), definitely localised ("at the side of the bed", line 475), and facing in one particular direction ("looking down at me", line 481). This knowledge of where her mother was standing, and the direction she was looking, remarkably was given not through any of her senses (Julie "wouldn't look", line 483), but she describes it in the terms of a strong 'awareness'. This is very similar to the 'consciousness' that one of James' informants described;

I then turned on my side to go to sleep again, and immediately **felt a consciousness** of a presence in the room.... I do not know how to better describe my sensations than by simply stating **I felt a consciousness of a spiritual presence**....I also felt at the same time a strong feeling of superstitious dread, as if something strange and fearful were about to happen (Gurney, as cited in James, 1902, lecture 3, p.5, my emphasis).

Julie also describes something similar to this 'dread' concerning what might happen next - "I were just waiting for the bombardment" (line 487). So without any sensory accompaniment, the presence affords a certain activity - bombardment. In Julie's case, the dread was not 'superstitious' but based on her horrible experiences with the voice. She refers to the words of the voice (lines 487-489) to give a shape to what she feared at the time. So the presence, in itself, did not carry any representation of her mother's personhood. What linked it to her mother seemed to be the emotions that she felt - dread, and anticipation of abuse. This emotion was situated in her experiences of the voice, and as we know from chapter 4, the voice also brings the past feeling of rejection when her mother was alive into the thematic field. The feeling of being attacked by her mother through the voice gives sense to her response - "it was like, 'what does she want?' But I'm not going to give her the satisfaction of looking at her" (lines 499-500). It is like a response someone might give to a school bully - don't show them you care, they only want a reaction from you. Julie's anger at her mother is also visible in this formulation - the feeling of presence is part of a continuing conflict. Thus the voice constitutes the thematic field of this 'feeling' of presence to make it a continuation of rejection and bullying. The feeling of presence in turn becomes part of the thematic field for Julie's subsequent voice-hearing. It becomes a part of her continuing relationship with her mother.

Julie's biography, and voice-biography in particular, links the emotion she feels in the night with her mother. A similar process is described in the narrative of Sarah, but this time, the emotion was quite the opposite of dread. Sarah had been describing a tricky moment during a church service for babies who had died. She was feeling a lot of grief for her own son, and a friend who had been sitting next to her, unaware of her distress, left her side to sit elsewhere;

#### Extract 12, Sarah

283. Sarah: so he, he went and I thought, "ohh." You know, "I'm here now on my own."  
284.           And (.) but again, you know, it was that moment when I, and I, I can  
285.           visualise it now, I had, I had my hand (.) down on my, on my chair  
286. JH:       mm  
287. Sarah: and the next chair was empty,  
288. JH:       yeah  
289. Sarah: and I, I felt definitely a presence next to me, that was saying, "actually,  
290.           you're not on your own," you know, and it was, again, it was almost that I'd  
291.           put my hand out (.) and turned to smile and (.) put that and that was, erm,  
292.           but that was not at all (.) it wasn't (.) there was no sadness there.

293. JH: yeah  
 294. Sarah: there was a great joy and strength  
 295. JH: yeah  
 296. Sarah: that, that he was, he was there, saying, "yeah, you know, I know you're  
 297. remembering me today, and I'm here, and it's (.) ok"

Sarah describes feeling a presence despite sensory information to the contrary - she sees that the chair is empty (line 287). Unlike Julie, the emotion that Sarah felt was not dread but that of companionship, and "great joy and strength" (line 294). The presence Sarah felt in the chair next to her was her son in the context that Sarah provides. Firstly, in the here-and-now prior to the feeling, she was missing and grieving for her son, and feeling very alone. Secondly, Sarah has felt her son more tangibly on two previous occasions at times of intense longing (one shown in extract 12). This context makes the 'presence' her son. A rapid change in emotion - from loneliness and grief, to great joy and strength - seems to constitute the presence. Just the fact of the presence, and nothing else, reassures her. Sarah shows that the feeling of presence can go against sensory information yet be more compelling.

Linda did not talk about one example but a collection of instances of feeling her husband's presence. Unlike Julie and Sarah, she felt her husband's presence prior to any instances of a 'sense' of presence. This was how she described it;

#### Extract 13, Linda

143. Linda: eh right at the very beginning when he was it was about six months after  
 144. he died (0.66) and I used to have this overwhelming desire to kill myself  
 145. (0.36) [just to have him hug me.]  
 146. PT: [m=hm (0.64) Right. (0.48) right]  
 147. Linda: and erm I would almost feel that kind of comfort and almost feel him  
 148. there (0.44) almost feel his breathing on my face, [comforting me.  
 149. PT: [right right  
 150. Linda: So even though he never said anything, I could (0.25) feel (0.53) like a  
 151. comfort, like like a (0.83) feeling OK. (0.28)  
 152. PT: ri:ght.  
 153. IL: it wasn't words? (0.45)  
 154. Linda: no, no it was a feeling but it's not something I could do to myself.

Rather like Sarah's, the "feeling" was "like a comfort, like a feeling ok" (lines 234-235). It was her emotions prior to the feeling - intense grief (lines 228-229) - that linked the feeling to her husband specifically. Like in Sarah's description, there is a sudden change in intense emotion. Note though that the language she uses is less definite than in Sarah's story - she "almost" felt the comfort, and "almost" felt him

there (line 231). In fact, with some of the examples informants gave, it was difficult to classify them as a feeling of presence, or as something else. In particular, there was a considerable overlap in the descriptions between a tactile sensation and a feeling of presence, as Samira's descriptions shows;

#### Extract 14, Samira

55. Samira: as I was going to sleep, I just kind of felt, (.) I'd already ( ) out, I  
56. remember that, I was already sleeping, .hh=and um, I felt that there was  
57. this sort of presence, you know when you're sleeping, and you just, even  
58. though your eyes are closed, and, it's all pitch black, I could see like=a, it's  
59. was like something slightly white.  
60. JH: okay  
61. Samira: Erm, but it wasn't, it wasn't erm, I'm not too sure, I didn't really see  
62. something as an image or anythink  
63. JH: yeah  
64. Samira: it was all a bit of a blur, and that went fairly quickly, but one thing I do  
65. remember, and I know that for a fact what I did sort of, um, feel (.) was  
66. erm, a sort of coldness,  
67. JH: right  
68. Samira: if you know what I mean, a sort of breeze.  
69. JH: right  
70. ((*sound of a passing car*))  
71. Samira: erm sort of like as if something's just kind of, just flew over me,  
72. necessarily but (.) sort of around, around. So I didn't hear anything, I didn't,  
73. erm, you know, I can't even say if I saw anythink, even though I do feel that  
74. it was a bit of a blur

Samira starts with a summary formulation of what she experienced - "I felt that there was this sort of presence" (line 57), before describing what this entailed. It turns out that this was "like" (line 58) a visual experience, yet not "an image" (line 62). She expresses further uncertainty over a visual element to the experience, it was "a bit of a blur" (line 64). This formulation of uncertainty contrasts with her next statement - "but one thing I do remember" (lines 64-65) - she is sure that there was a tactile aspect to the experience. She describes this as a "sort of coldness" (line 66), "a sort of breeze" (line 68). Her descriptions suggests that she knew that something strange happened to her, but that there was something ineffable about the experience. It was thus unclear in Samira's case whether the feeling of presence was this cold/breeze sensation, or something separate to it. In fact, most of the remaining examples were like this - it was hard to tell whether the 'feeling' of presence informants talked of was

the 'sense' of presence, or some feeling separate to it. Clare, for example described hers as "like a force" (extract 15, line 362);

#### Extract 15, Clare 1

360. Clare: when my Granddad died and I went to see him in the coffin I opened the  
361. door of the room when you go in and it was as if something was like  
362. bouncing back at me as if like a force again did he did not he did not want  
363. me in that room=  
364. JH: =woah=  
365. Clare: =I know he was in a coffin but he just did not  
366. want me in and the woman who took me in that's obviously part of the Co-  
367. op funeral thing said "are you alright?" and I went "no, god you know" and I  
368. felt really freaked out and kind of frightened and I mean she's kind of into  
369. all of this and she's obviously seen a lot of what's gone on through her job  
370. and she said to me, "he obviously just he doesn't" she said "I can" she  
371. said "I can feel it he doesn't want you in here he doesn't want you grieving"  
372. coz he'd have seen I've just grieved for everybody for like years=  
373. JH: =ye:ah=  
374. Clare: =and he just really just didn't want me in there then I knew so I didn't go  
375. back after that and then she said to me afterwards that she felt a happier  
376. like as if he was happier with the fact that I wasn't looking at him how he  
377. was in there.

This "force" described by Clare is a borderline case of 'feeling of presence' because it seems to involve a bodily feeling, albeit fairly diffuse. The "force" preventing Clare from entering the room *is* her grandfather within the context she provides. Firstly, in the immediate situation she is going to visit her grandfather - his death is in the foreground. Secondly, after she expressed disconcertment, the Co-op worker is presented as making the link to her grandfather's will (line 371). Thirdly, she uses a biographic reference to cement this connection - she has been grieving "for everybody for like years" (line 372) and this provides an intelligible reason why he would not want her there. Clare's response to the force, to not go back to the chapel (lines 374-375), treats the event as a valid communication of her grandfather's wishes.

What have we learnt about the feeling of presence from informants' testimonies?

Firstly, the feeling of presence was not a semiotic sign of the deceased in the same way that the other experiences of presence were. It did not represent the deceased but seemed to be a more direct apprehension of their being. It was more akin to an

emotion - the dread in Julie, the joy in Sarah. The links with the deceased were therefore entirely indexical to the here-and-now context, and/or the person's biography. Most of the time, the person was in bed at the time of the feeling although reported being fully awake as it happened. However, Clare and Sarah both showed that this can happen in public places too. Often, the biographic aspect to the meaning included a past 'sense' of presence (such as in Julie and Sarah). The 'feeling' of presence, in its pure form, is best described as a situated emotion. Like the voices, responses to the feeling as reported by informants treated this presence as personal and intended for them.

However there were many other possible instances of the 'feeling' of presence that occurred along with another 'sense' of presence. In these borderline cases it was difficult to decide if the feeling of presence was a part of the tactile experience/voice, or something separate to it that gave the 'sense' of presence added vividness. Perhaps in some cases this is a false dichotomy - the 'sense' of presence (touch, voice, or vision) - may be so emotion-filled it is impossible to separate sign from emotion.

It is possible to imagine that many 'senses' of presence are in fact accompanied by a feeling of reality that gives them a particularly vivid quality, but that some are not.

### ***6.7. Non-linguistic experiences of presence - general discussion***

In the above analysis of reports of non-linguistic experiences of presence I have made use of some broad distinctions between semiotic 'signs'; the iconic, the symbolic, and the indexical (Pierce, 1966). These categories are not mutually exclusive - for example a voice may signify the deceased in several ways. It may be iconic (sound like the person), symbolic (of things they said in the past) and indexical to a context. Visions were partially iconic signs of the deceased, as visual representations of them, but were also indexical; their meanings depended on a narrative contextualisation in the immediate situation of the happening (physical environment or psychological state), and biographical particulars (such as the life with the person before the death).



Smells were indices to the deceased in two ways; as an index to the person (their scent), or as an index to their activities (e.g. smoking).

The remaining signs were also related to the person entirely indexically. They were otherwise anonymous or insignificant happenings that became signs of the deceased only through contextualisation. Most of the time this was through a combination of the immediate setting of the experience and aspects of the person's biography. Sometimes this biographic reference was to a time when the deceased was alive, at other times it was to prior experiences of presence that the bereaved had since the death. As a general point, the biographic setting was important for integrating the experiences. This is counter to the medical-psychiatric concept of hallucinations as errors that resist meaningful integration and understanding.

Is the 'feeling' of presence a semiotic sign? No, as it is not mediated by a signifier. There is an absence of sensory information to provide an inference of the deceased's presence, and it instead seems to be a direct apprehension of the deceased. Whether the feeling of presence *is* an intense emotion (that contrasts with what was felt immediately prior to it), or is accompanied by an intense emotion, is difficult to answer with the descriptions provided to this study. What does seem clear is that the 'feeling' is connected to the deceased in a thematic field that includes references to the immediate setting and a biographical setting. The feeling of presence may be experienced as communicative - carrying a message for the bereaved, such as "actually, you're not on your own" (lines 289-290), in Sarah's case.

All of the experiences of presence, linguistic or non-linguistic were narrated as meaningful happenings that relied on several sources for this meaning. The biographical context gave visions, smells, taste, tactile sensations, 'signs' and 'feelings' significance as some form of continuation. This may have been a continuity of personhood in the sense of Isaac's vision where his father's religious persona was continued, or a continuity of a form of life shared by the bereaved and the deceased, like in Samuel's experience of taste and smell. Like the voices that people heard, the experiences did not relate to trauma in the past of the person but were more commonly related to everyday routines. Julie's feeling of presence did not relate to a

particular traumatic event but to a series of relationship difficulties with her mother when she was living (chapter 4).

The experiences that did not fit this pattern of continuation were those that occurred at the time of the death. These 'saying goodbye' experiences conversely marked a *break* in ordinary life with the person. They happened in a number of modalities - visions, smells, dreams and signs - but interestingly did not include voices, touch, or a 'feeling' of presence. Why this was the case is not clear, as it is possible to imagine a voice of the deceased informing them of the death, or someone feeling a presence or touch at the time of the death. This warrants further investigation.

It will be remembered that the voices that people heard shown in chapter 5 were without exception experienced with addressivity - e.g. they were experienced as intended for the deceased rather than simply overheard. Was the same true of the other types of presence? The answer is mixed. 'Signs' such as flickering lights, butterflies, or appliances switching off, were experienced as having communicative intent for the bereaved. But the exact nature of this intention was not always clear to the bereaved (unlike voices which are speech acts). Touch, pressure, other tactile sensations, and a 'feeling' of presence were also experienced as intentional - not as accidents. The only exception to this was Samira, who experienced a 'presence' as if someone was passing through her room. The grumblings of Heena's voice were most definitely overheard and not for her. Some visions had addressivity, and some did not, and were more like 'over-seeing'. And finally, the smells (and taste), were not formulated as intended by the deceased. There are imaginably few situations where a smell could be intended, it is more commonly in Goffman's terms, 'given off'. They are not communicative but are informative of the deceased's presence.

## Chapter 7- Semiotic Resources. Symptoms or Spirits?

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This chapter concerns informants' use of semiotic resources in descriptions of their experiences of presence. By 'semiotic resources', I mean those sources of meaning available in culture that aim to tell us what experiences of presence *really* are.

Chapter 1 showed that medical psychiatry terms these experiences hallucinations, and explains them causally as due to faulty brains. This is a dominant semiotic resource and basis for clinical practice in the UK. But the chapter showed that other semiotic resources may be available too. These include various psychological theories that may cite them as cognitive errors, or the expression of a 'wish' or emotional need. Also available are religious and spiritual meanings that account for the experiences as contact with a god, or with spirits in an afterlife. It is possible that a bereaved person may use any of these ideas, or new ones, to reach a particular understanding of their personal experiences.

The current chapter is also an enquiry into those semiotic resources that are not used - those that are available to informants, but not applied as interpretive resources for their own experiences. Julie, for example, showed that both medical and religious ideas were immediately available to her but that she used neither to explain what her voice was. Instead, she drew on her history with her mother to give the voice meaning as a continuation of rejection. The current chapter extends this enquiry to ask the following questions: what semiotic resources did the rest of the informants use to account for their experiences, and exactly how did they use them in the narrative interview?

The last three chapters demonstrated that all informants used biographical references to show their experiences were of rich personal significance to them. This chapter shows what they did next with these meanings - did they reduce, or enrich their experiences? In the answer to this question there may be differences in how they thought of the experience at the time it happened, and how this changed subsequently.

The chapter starts with an investigation of participants' use of ideas from religious and spiritual teachings, exploring how these were introduced in the interview and with what consequences. The chapter then moves to look at whether informants used psychiatric concepts in descriptions of their experiences of presence, and if so, how these were used. Finally, there is a discussion of how psychological ideas were used.

### ***7.1. References to spiritual and religious meanings***

This section is primarily about the kinds of activities that may be achieved through references to spirituality and religion. These centred around two broad themes. The first was that it allowed participants to work on the character of their experiences – predominantly, to present the experience of presence as contact from the deceased. The second was in order to constitute the identity of the bereaved and express feelings about the death.

#### **7.1.1. Underpinning Continuity**

The last two chapters demonstrated that in all cases, informants used references to their biography to make their experience/s of presence meaningful as a continuation of some aspect of the relationship or the deceased's personhood. This biographical source of meaning was sufficient to accomplish this. However most participants also used semiotic resources in order to say something about the ontological status of this continuity. There were several examples of this in the interviews.

We saw in chapter 5 that Esme referred to the way her father spoke when alive to establish her feeling of presence as a continuation of her father's person (chapter 5, extract 4). Esme could then have done a number of things. She could have ended her account there, making no further speculations as to how and why this voice may have happened. Alternatively she could have presented this voice as reflecting a part of her – as for example, a product of her grief. Or, Esme could have put the voice down to a force other than herself, giving it a spiritual significance. In fact, this is what she does; through reference to a clairvoyant she visits.

### Extract 1, Esme

128. Esme: and she did me a reading, and I told her about this happening to me,  
129. and she said, “well yes, it would’ve been him, he was lying on top of  
130. you” that’s their belief, that they were lying on top of you, “and he  
131. was talking to you, because he was trying to, you know, ‘e was trying  
132. to communicate”, .hh, anyway she did um, a very very good reading  
133. and she reckons that she, you know, she got him.  
134. JH: okay  
135. Esme: and she was talking to him.

Being from a Jewish background, Esme has certain cultural and religious resources available to her. But interestingly, she does not use religious teachings to give her experience meaning. Instead, Esme refers to a clairvoyant who validates her experience – that her father was lying on her and talking to her - by saying that this is possible and in fact probable within spiritualist metaphysics. But the clairvoyant herself is not talking to JH, Esme is, and so by mentioning it Esme is reinforcing the idea that the presence was her father. Esme does this without committing herself openly to this interpretation, but by implying it in several ways. The use of ‘direct-reported’ speech (line 129) allows her to convey the sentiment of the medium whilst simultaneously distancing herself from the interpretation. This is combined with an evaluation of the clairvoyant’s reading as “very very good” (line 132). In fact, Esme expands on this reading, and by doing so continues to work on her clairvoyant’s identity – in particular, as a credible source of information;

### Extract 2, Esme

141. Esme: now this woman could not have known all this  
142. JH: right  
143. Esme: and he said he’s sorry they never got a chance to say goodbye but  
144. that was the truth as well because obviously it all happened, when he  
145. died he was in a coma so we didn’t, there was no like, oh chatting  
146. about what we wanted to do or anything, you know for about, at least  
147. nearly two weeks we didn’t really have any communication, so when  
148. he said, when she said that about, not saying goodbye, that set me  
149. off then, and I started to cry, and she came up, and she was only a  
150. very small woman, and she got hold of me and she put her arms  
151. round me and it felt like it didn’t, it wasn’t her, it felt like, again a man.  
152. And she said, “He just said ‘will you stop crying. I don’t want you to  
153. cry, there’s no point of crying because, I’m here all the time so it  
154. doesn’t matter that we didn’t say goodbye because, I’m here, and  
155. I’m watching all of you’ ”

Immediately prior to this part of the interview Esme had been listing accurate facts about her and her family that the clairvoyant had presented in her reading. Her

comment, “now this woman could not have known all this” (line 141) points to the remarkable nature of the medium’s claim. Esme follows this by relating to JH what the clairvoyant communicated to her, about what her father said – “he’s said he’s sorry they never got a chance to say goodbye” (line 143). Esme’s addition of the biographic information – “that was the truth”, they never *did* say goodbye (line 143-147) – implies that this is another example of something the clairvoyant could not have known, at least not in a usual way of knowing. She then describes her upset, and the remarkable hug which seems to come from a “man” (i.e. large/strong person) rather than the tiny clairvoyant (line 149). Esme reports these events in ‘real time’. Wooffitt (2007) observed that this could enhance the objectivity of the spirit contact in accounts of anomalous experiences, which seems to be a consequence in Esme’s story here. In this vein the hug is presented as synchronous with the report of her father’s reassuring words (lines 151-154), and note that Esme here switches into ‘directly-reported’ speech of the medium’s ‘directly-reported’ speech of her father<sup>43</sup>. The strategy lends vividness and reality to both Esme’s account in the immediacy of the interview, as well as to the medium’s account of her father. The words attributed to Esme’s father give him the character of a guardian angel - “I’m here, and I’m watching all of you” (lines 153-154). They also deny that a separation has occurred – “it doesn’t matter that we didn’t say goodbye because, I’m here” (line 153) and in doing so deny a need to grieve.

There is a final aspect of Esme’s talk in this extract that implies genuine contact from her father, which is the tangibility of the hug. It is not just the clairvoyant’s words that concur with what she knows of him but the feeling that Esme receives from her.

So Esme orients to spiritualism as relevant to her feeling of presence, and in doing so implies that this was not simply her imagination but a message from her father. She does not explain the experience in this way explicitly, but does so indirectly (more on indirect alignments with spiritualism in section 7.2. of this chapter). By working on the credibility of the medium, an institutional figure that validates her account, Esme works on the credibility of her contact with her father. She is not alone – Aggie employs a very similar strategy (extract 3).

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<sup>43</sup> A note on the transcription – quotation marks " and " were used when informants were 'animating' the speech of others, or their own at an earlier time.

### Extract 3, Aggie

76. Aggie: cos sometimes I talk back to him heh=heh  
77. JTB: yeah  
78. Aggie: heh (.) and um (.) he just saying that oh I'll be alright and (.) that I'll  
79. make the best decision in the end (.) an (.) that he's sorry an (.) um  
80. (.) that he understands everything now (.) um (.) so ((clears throat))  
81. (.) cos I've been to a psychic a couple of times  
82. JTB: yeah  
83. Aggie: an he talks to me there  
84. JTB: yeah

### Extract 4, Aggie

413. JTB: mm (.) you said you'd been to a psychic a couple of times as well  
414. Aggie: yeah erm (.) the last time I went was like (.) September, August,  
415. September (.) erm and she was saying some of the things he'd  
416. already said to me  
417. JTB: mm:  
418. Aggie: like so it was nice that somebody else could tell me  
419. JTB: yeah  
420. Aggie: mm (.) but he was also telling me about my health (.) that I needed to  
421. take my medication an everything an (.) erm (.) that despite me  
422. worrying that I will have kids (.) one day  
423. JTB: mm  
424. Aggie: erm (.) that he was asking where the ring was as well an  
425. JTB: yeah  
426. Aggie: an he was saying sorry to me again so he must mean it heh=heh  
427. JTB: heh=heh  
428. Aggie: erm heh=heh (.) erm (.) I think he was just saying stuff like I'll be a  
429. good nurse an stuff as well  
430. JTB: yeah  
431. Aggie: that he's proud of me and he won't leave me (.) he won't ever leave  
432. me (.) until I don't need him but he still (.) will be there ((clears  
433. throat)) she picked up that erm (.) his dad lived in \_\_\_\_((country))  
434. JTB: mm  
435. Aggie: and he: (.) had the burial in \_\_\_\_((country))  
436. JTB: yeah  
437. Aggie: so then she picked up stuff like the funeral was far too far away for  
438. me to go to  
439. JTB: mm

Aggie reports her interactions with a psychic to give the voice meaning as contact from her boyfriend. In common with Esme, this shows validation of her continuing relationship by an institutional figure. Aggie points to this validating element when she comments that the psychic's reports of what her boyfriend says are similar to what she hears from his voice directly (extract 4, lines 415-416). She also suggests this when she says "it was nice that somebody else could tell me" (extract 4, line 418). Like Esme, she shows that a list of facts that the psychic presented were entirely consistent with the person she knew. The medium 'picks-up' (extract 4, line

437) these facts – suggesting a spiritual sensitivity, and building on the objectivity of her contact with Aggie’s boyfriend. In common with Esme the message that Aggie receives through the psychic also denies the separation of her and her boyfriend. However Aggie aligns with this sentiment more directly, formulating it as “he won’t leave me (.) he won’t ever leave me (.) until I don’t need him but he still (.) will be there” (extract 4, lines 431-432). In fact Aggie’s account departs from Esme’s in so far as she shows more explicit alignment with the spiritualist framework, also evident in the way she introduces this area of her life: “an he talks to me there” (extract 3, line 154). This is not however without a little embarrassment shown through the laughter (extract 3, line 147, and extract 4, line 426).

In these two people’s stories, using the clairvoyant as a resource changes the experience of presence from an individual issue to a shared one – ‘I have heard him’ becomes ‘we’. One consequence is that this stifles the possible interpretation that the experience was due to the bereaved informant’s psychology. That effect can be seen clearly in the story of another informant, Samira. She experienced a feeling of presence in the night after learning of her uncle’s death in another country (shown in chapter 6, extract 14). In the morning, she learnt that her mother had simultaneously experienced a dream, where her brother (Samira’s uncle) returned to say he was saying goodbye to Samira. As a British Hindu, Samira showed in her story that she had an eclectic range of interpretative resources immediately available to her. In fact, she introduced ideas from Hinduism to show that her deceased uncle’s visit was entirely possible within this cultural frame:

#### Extract 5, Samira

- 159 Samira: p: and er, it’s not just good things it’s good and bad things sort of  
160 thing, because with us- in our culture we believe that erm, there are  
161 sort of good, evil spirits and  
162 JH: yeah  
163 Samira: good spirits  
164 JH: yeah  
165 Samira: as well, so I think it is to do with that a lot but um  
166 JH: okay. so her ((Samira’s mother)) kind=of belief in her sixth sense is  
167 sort of to do with being able to sense the good spirits and the bad  
168 spirits  
169 Samira: yeah. Yeah yeah yeah.  
170 JH: yeah  
171 Samira: yeah she, but it’s weird because I get really like, “oh my god what is



172 she talking about?" And, it's not just my mum's generation but a lot of  
173 like family friends and that when they have the bereaved, you know  
174 during that period, they do believe that the person sort of comes back  
175 and says goodbye and  
176 JH: yes  
177 Samira: all that sort of stuff.

Samira does not have a straightforward relationship to Hindu metaphysics.

Nevertheless, she refers to this semiotic resource and in doing so implies things about her own experience. In the first extract shown here, Samira aligns with a belief in good and evil spirits – “with *us* in *our* culture *we* believe” (line 160, my emphasis). JH then refers back to something Samira had said earlier about her mum's claim to a “sixth sense” (line 166). This marks the beginning of Samira's separation from her mother's belief, and by implication, the beliefs of some other traditional Hindus. This is conveyed with the contrast structure “yeah she, but it's weird because I” (line 170) where Samira no longer speaks as “we and “us”. She uses, if you forgive the expression, ‘directly-reported thought’ (lines 170-171) to present the beliefs as strange and hard to relate to. She then introduces a Hindu belief that the deceased returns to say goodbye to the bereaved whilst at the same time distancing herself from this – “they” (line 173) believe this. “They” are not just older Hindus, but also “family friends” (line 172) indicating both that these are beliefs that Samira has wide exposure to and that they may be held by people as young as her. So reference to Hindu beliefs allows Samira to introduce several possibilities - that there are spirits, that they can be good or evil, and that dead people can return to say goodbye to the living – without having to align resolutely with any or all of these possibilities. She uses semiotic resources from Hinduism but in a somewhat detached way. Samira in fact works on her identity as a Hindu person born in the UK, and this is interwoven with the meaning she gives her experience;

#### Extract 6, Samira

435 Samira: yeah, in a sense. But=um, yeah. It's weird thinking about it actually,  
436 cos I don't know where I stand on it,  
437 JH: yeah  
438 Samira: I think that's the weird thing,  
439 JH: yeah  
440 Samira: I don't know what to believe  
441 JH: yeah  
442 Samira: if that makes sense  
443 JH: yeah

444 Samira: a lot of the stuff they come out with I'm like "what are you talking  
445 about", it's just really weird  
446 JH: yeah, yeah  
447 Samira: some of the stuff I honestly, I do think they've got a point but, I don't  
448 know.

Immediately prior to this extract Samira had been telling JH about aspects of Hindu spirituality, including the role of priests. Here, she crystallises her dilemma – being a Hindu 'born and bred' in the UK she has rival resources for interpreting things that happen, Hinduism and by implication 'western' scientific rationalism, and sometimes she's not sure which to use, and "what to believe" (line 440). Some things "they" (line 444), meaning other Hindus, say, is "really weird" (line 445), but "some of the stuff" (line 447) she can relate to. This formulates in a general way what she did earlier in the interview with her changing alignment with specific beliefs, shown in extract 5. Remember also that Samira is talking to JH, a UK non-Hindu, who is not familiar with most of the Hindu spiritual ideas – and to some extent is also orienting her talk to a newcomer.

Despite presenting these doubts about some of the Hindu metaphysics that other people use, Samira eventually settles on the interpretation that her uncle had visited them that night;

#### Extract 7, Samira

474 Samira: Even though I don't believe in half the stuff that people come up  
475 with I do think he was there, um, um, it was a way of just like=um, if I  
476 was to, if my mum was to get it wrong, I can understand that because  
477 you know when you're in that sort of state of mind  
478 JH: m  
479 Samira: you wanna believe things, that aren't true  
480 JH: yeah, yeah  
481 Samira: but the fact that I believed it, I just, as in I, you know, I experienced  
482 it, not believed it, I experienced it, that just kind of sets me like wow!

Samira explicitly presents the feeling of presence as due to her uncle being "there" (line 475). She warrants this by downgrading a psychological account of her experiences. Her mother, in a grief-stricken state, could have made a mistake (lines 476-479), but the fact that she, Samira, also experienced the presence (and she was *not* grieving, see chapter 8) discounts this explanation. Samira follows this by marking an extraordinary nature to the experience with "that just kind of sets me like

wow!” (line 482). So Hindu culture provides a frame for interpreting her experience – but this resource cannot be used mechanistically. First Samira has to show doubt, work on her identity as a Hindu *and* a ‘westerner’, and introduce a rival ‘rationalist’ interpretation in order to downgrade it as unlikely. There will be more on the downgrading of psychological accounts later in this chapter.

This is where we leave Samira, but only for now. In this section we have seen through three cases how informants used references to spiritualism to underpin the continuity of the deceased’s person through the experience of presence. This continuity had already been established through the use of biographic references, but spiritualism extends it by *explaining how* this can happen. This has only been a taster, as later in this chapter we will look in more detail at the kinds of strategies informants used to introduce these interpretations in their talk. First however, the next section shows some examples of other ways in which religious and spiritualist discourse was used in the interviews.

### 7.1.2. Expressing bereaved identities

Several informants used a concept of ‘heaven’ as a resource to express their grief at the separation from their loved-one, and their hope of a final reunion. The following example comes from Inge;

#### Extract 8, Inge

521 Inge: I don’t believe in God and stuff and I don’t g(h)o to chu(h)rch or  
522 anything.  
523 (1.5)  
524 But now I have to because, that=e: e:  
525 (1.0)  
526 I don’t have to take on the whole thing and go to church and do  
527 anything, but I have to believe that like (.) (we will meet in heaven)  
528 cos o: otherwise it’s=a I know with my (.) logically I know that I will  
529 never see him again but=.h! (.) but if I can just believe in that part at  
530 least I can see him when I  
531 JH: m  
532 (4.0)  
533 Inge: so I think (.) It’s comforting because it’s just, we’re still together and  
534 it’s just a matter of time before we’re physically together  
535 (10.0)  
536 and I’m even, I’m thinking about it when I’m, when I’m thinking about  
537 e:, seeing other guys or (.) I’m thinking of, I can’t, it would be=um, not

538 as=in I can't as in he would be (.) he would be:::: (.) jealous or he  
 539 would disapprove of me seeing other people but I can't because it  
 540 would be a mess when we die and we meet and there will be two of  
 541 them and one=of  
 542 (1.0)  
 543 JH: mm, and one of you.  
 544 Inge: yah  
 545 JH: yeah  
 546 (31.0)

Inge refers to an idea of 'afterlife' in order to express the intensity of her grief for her boyfriend. The extract starts by Inge making a spontaneous denial of a belief in "god and stuff" (line 521) or of going to church (line 521). This, however, suggests that Christianity is the most immediately relevant religion to Inge. The vagueness of the additions "and stuff" (line 521) and "or anything" (line 521) seems designed to encompass all religions and to stress her personal dismissal of religion. However, this lack of personal religious belief poses a problem – she would have to face the idea of never seeing her boyfriend again. These two positions – lack of belief, but need to deny separation - are presented as conflicting with the "but" (line 523). Inge contrasts her logical self with this part of her that is impelled to believe that a form of heaven exists in which they will be reunited (lines 527-532). She implies that circumstances have forced this belief upon her – specifically her emotional circumstances, as the belief allows her to deny a finality to the separation that an atheist position would not (lines 533-534). The projection of their relationship into the future allows her to not only believe that they will be reunited "physically" (line 532) but also enables them to be "still together" (line 531) in some way now. The contrast with "physical" suggests that this togetherness is psychological, emotional or spiritual – similar to the idea of 'soul mates'.

Yet, the idea of heaven in which they will be "physically" together, while helping with her grief, also creates a new problem – she cannot have a new boyfriend on earth without creating a "mess" (line 540) in heaven. The concept of heaven that Inge is using then is of a place where exclusivity in their love- relationship still applies.

Inge then selects just one part of Christianity – heaven – for what she presents as emotional reasons – it allows the force of the separation to be mitigated as it is 'only' physical, and 'only' temporary. In doing so Inge also demonstrates a change in her

personal beliefs and thus the transformative nature of her grief. The reference stresses her identity as a grieving girlfriend. JH in fact topicalises change in belief in an interview with another informant who is a vicar. Extract 9 shows JH's question, and how the informant, Sarah, responds;

#### Extract 9, Sarah

492. JH: One thing I was wondering as well erm (.) erm, was (.) and you sort  
493. of answered this question anyway, I think, that erm (.) was how your  
494. religious faith (.) was involved  
495. Sarah: yes  
496. JH: in the experiences  
497. Sarah: yeah  
498. JH: has it changed in any way your faith, or?  
499. Sarah: eh, gosh, yes, I mean it, it has, it's shaped it I think  
500. JH: right  
501. Sarah: in, in many ways  
502. (1.0)  
503. erm  
504. (1.0)  
505. any i- you know, what I think I've written down there ((referring to a  
506. leaflet)) as well, that I've  
507. (1.0)  
508. I, I f- I feel a very (.) strong sense of affinity with (.) Mary, the mother  
509. of Jesus  
510. JH: mm::  
511. (1.0)  
512. Sarah: In, i- in that respect [( ) at least]  
513. JH: [losing your son]  
514. Sarah: erm, so that, yeah, it's made me think about all that (.) side of it a lot.  
515. And yes, I mean it has, it has, it has shaped my faith, it has shaped  
516. what I do, shaped my work and my ministry, erm (.) and it, it, yes, I  
517. mean it, it shaped it in a way that I never thought it would. Er.  
518. JH: Wow.  
519. Sarah: But, it has. er  
520. JH: yeah  
521. Sarah: And I, I, I don't know (.) I don't know what I would've  
522. (1.0)  
523. how it would have gone if that had have happened, it would have  
524. probably gone in another direction altogether, but who knows. Erm (.)  
525. and yeah, I mean in without (.) without that- >the faith<, I don't think I  
526. would've  
527. (1.0)  
528. probably got where I am now, I think it's  
529. (2.0)  
530. a, it's something to do  
531. (1.0)  
532. with the fact that (.) I know that- well, I don't know, but I (.) hope and  
533. believe that death isn't the end, that I will see him again. Erm, and  
534. that's, that's certainly removed all fear of death, for me.  
535. (1.0)  
536. Just, absolutely no problem with it at all. Erm

537. JH: yeah  
538. Sarah: So that has  
539. (2.0)  
540. yeah. I know that when my time comes that I will not be afraid.  
541. JH: yeah.  
542. (1.0)  
543. Yeah.

JH asks Sarah about her “experiences” (line 496), implying her experiences of presence, but it is not entirely clear whether Sarah’s response refers to her experience of grief for her son in general or of his continued presence in particular. Either way, she responds to JH’s question “has it changed in any way your faith, or?” (line 498) with the emphatic affirmation “gosh, yes” (line 499). This implies that “change” may be an understatement of the influence of her “experiences” – they have in fact “shaped” her religious faith (line 515). Unlike Inge, she had a religious faith before the death. To demonstrate the significance of her experiences, Sarah refers to the Christian figure Mary, the mother of Jesus, with whom she feels a “strong sense of affinity” (line 508). This creates implications about her identity: she is also a grieving mother of a special son.

Sarah continues to stress this formative influence with the list on lines 514-517. Again it is not clear whether she is referring to her experience of intense grief in general, or of ‘presence’ in particular, but either way the repeated use of “shaped” combined with the four-part list stresses the powerful significance of her son’s death on all areas of her life. This influence has been so potent and extensive that this has even been a surprise to her – “it shaped it in a way that I never thought it would” (lines 516-517). Part of this list also refers to her work as a vicar and therefore makes relevant her social identity as a representative of the Christian faith.

In common with Inge, Sarah also uses a reference to ‘heaven’ to account for how she has coped with her grief. In Sarah’s heaven there will also be a reunion (line 532). The separation of her and her son therefore has an end-point. She implies that it was this belief that allowed her to survive the grief – “without that- the faith, I don’t think I would’ve...probably got where I am now” (line 525-527). And that it is so important that she no longer even fears her own death (line 533) – an absence of fear that she emphasises through reformulating it twice (lines 535 and 539). Sarah’s

emphasis possibly marks the counter-normative nature of her feelings – fear of death is often presented as a universal phenomenon in all people (see for example, Yalom, 2008, and Inge’s reference below, extract 40). The potential problems in heaven of Inge’s account are absent too – the relationship is different in nature as Sarah obviously can be mother to more than one person.

So Sarah uses references to her religion in three ways. Firstly, to constitute her identity as a grieving mother. Secondly, to account for how she survived her bereavement –through her faith in an afterlife. And thirdly, in response to JH’s question, to express the significance of her son’s death as moulding all aspects of her faith and life from that point.

There was a third method by which references to the spiritual were used in the interviews in order to work on the character of the experience of presence. This appeared in only one case, and is documented in the next section.

### **7.1.3. Contrasting the paranormal with the everyday**

In his interview, Isaac told JH about a supernatural experience that happened to him many years before the bereavements of his mother and father and when he was young person. This story contrasted with his descriptions of his sense of his parents’ presence after their deaths, most pertinently stressing its mundane character. Effectively, he told JH a traditional ‘ghost story’ in the interview;

#### Extract 10, Isaac

791. Isaac: I think it was about three days before we c- were coming back, and I  
792. started to drink cider.  
793. JH: hm!  
794. Isaac: That was the first alcoholic drink er, I'd, re- you know, really gone to  
795. town with it. And I felt rank for the last couple of days, so I was, >no  
796. drinking<, stone cold sober.  
797. (2.0)  
798. And I'm looking up at this, there's this foot- load of steps going up, (.)  
799. so I thought "ah!, they can't throw me out now, I'm going home in a  
800. day or two!" So I scrambled up, and scrambled r::ound, and I (.) er,  
801. and I brushed a door, just like that ((*gestures*)), and I went through  
802. the door!  
803. (2.0)  
804. and I hit the table, which was probably a desk

805. JH: oh my god  
 806. Isaac: and I thought, "bloody hell, that's filthy!"  
 807. (2.0)  
 808. and then as I looked around, I saw a little girl hanging  
 809. JH: oa::h:!!  
 810. Isaac: she, I could tell you, even to this day, forty-odd years later, it sends a  
 811. shiver down my spine! But it doesn't end there...<sup>44</sup>

In telling this story, Isaac begins with what Wooffitt (1992) termed a “state formulation” – he emphasises his sobriety with the formulation “no drinking, stone cold sober” (lines 795-796). Wooffitt noted in accounts of anomalous experiences that such formulations are designed to convey the reliability of the speaker (Wooffitt, 1992). In this case, Isaac’s formulation is designed to block the interpretation that he saw the ghost because he was drunk.

Isaac then uses further dramatic devices in the telling of this tale. The pause that follows this state formulation emphasises Isaac’s sentience as well as building suspense. He sets the scene – he is exploring the old building in which he is staying, including the places where access is normally forbidden. This is conveyed in the 'direct-report' of his thoughts at the time (line 799) – he has a rebellious intention. The inclusion of this detail hints at mystery about this part of the building and a possible danger in entering it. Isaac then describes his exploration of the building in detail, which accounts for how he ended up in the abandoned, and as it turns out, haunted, wing of the building. His exclamation, “I went through the door!” (line 801) continues to shape the event as extraordinary and adds to its drama. JH joins in by marking the suspense and the spookiness of the scene with her exclamation “oh my god” (line 805). Isaac then uses 'directly-reported' thought to fix his surprise at the strangeness at how “filthy” (line 805) the table was. The pause that follows continues the suspense and marks the climax of his story – he sees the ghost of a girl who he later found out died there several decades previously. JH’s response – “oa::h:!!” – conveys fear and disgust and so cements the spookiness of Isaac’s story. Isaac does not stop there – he puts a cherry on the cake of his spooky story by formulating his reaction to telling it in the immediacy of the interview, forty years later. And it happens that the experience was so chilling that it has the power to “send a shiver down my spine!” (line 810).

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<sup>44</sup> To be continued in appendix 5.



This classic haunted house story creates a contrast-structure in the context of his experiences of presence – but this is not in adjacency pairs as Wooffitt (1992) documented but occurs across Isaac's whole story. The consequence is that this extraordinary ghost story underlines the familiar and the ordinary character of the presence of his mother and father. Isaac says this in not so many words - the next extract shows a summary formulation of his experiences of presence that he made spontaneously at the end of the interview;

Extract 11, Isaac

1376. Isaac: Yeah. Well, basically, they're banal, every day. There's no great, "oh  
1377. I'm in heaven, and there's, and [such-and-such]  
1378. JH: [yeah]  
1379. Isaac: "is here, oh, and your cousin's not here", I could say, "ooh" I could  
1380. say, you know that's  
1381. JH: heh=heh!  
1382. Isaac: it's, it's not that, it's small things, very banal

To summarise so far, references to aspects of spirituality and religion were used by some informants to work on the 'wider' significance of their experiences of presence. The most common usage underlined the continuity of personhood already established through references to biographic information by explaining *how* this could happen. Consequences of this include that the presence becomes significant as a genuine message from the deceased. This surely adds to the potency of the message – could Aggie for example have found the apology of her boyfriend half as healing if she did not endow it with his will? Without the intention of the 'other', this speech act would not meet all its felicity conditions.

Not all references to religion and spiritualism were presented as providing a causal explanation for the presence – some were used to accomplish other actions. This included expressing the intensity of the informant's grief, and even to demonstrate the identity-transformative nature of the death. One person showed that it was possible to use a ghost story in order to normalise their experiences of presence.

It was clear from these examples that religious and spiritual resources were used flexibly. For example, as a Jewish person Esme did not by default refer to Judaism's teachings to make sense of her experiences, but used a specific practice in spiritualism only. Similarly Samira was selective about which Hindu traditions she

made relevant to her own experiences. In each case, these references performed specific activities. A later section of this chapter focuses on this choiceful use of semiotic resources in the interviews.

We also saw hints in the talk that referencing spirituality and religion is a controversial activity. The next section looks in more detail at the evidence in the talk that this kind of resourcing is in some sense counter-normative. This section demonstrates by proxy further examples of the variety of resources that were used in the interviews.

## ***7.2. Using spiritual and religious resources - a problematic activity?***

This section aims to document the variety of rhetorical strategies people used to introduce non-materialist interpretations of their experiences. This is important to acknowledge because the way these references are introduced shows that they are in some way seen as controversial and so point towards the dominance of a 'rationalist' episteme. We will see that there were a number of strategies: some people using only one of these, and others using many of them in their talk.

### **7.2.1. Downgrading of Alternatives**

In the interviews, several informants attributed the experience of presence to the deceased's spirit. However, only a minority of them did this in a 'purist' or straightforward way without mentioning alternative explanations. More commonly, an informant would orient to an alternative causal explanation for the experience of presence in the interviews before demonstrating its inadequacy as an account of these happenings. It seemed that most of the time it was not enough to present a spiritualist/religious interpretation in its own right without showing an awareness of other possibilities.

But what were the other possibilities, and how were they countered? We have already seen one example of this method when Samira undermined a psychological account of her mother's feeling of presence through reference to the fact that she also sensed a presence. The following example comes from Linda's interview;

### Extract 12, Linda

155. Linda: I often, I try and qualify it sometimes, thinking "Okay, he's my  
156. conscience" (.) you know, I am like, I'm bringing up two teenagers on  
157. my own, (.) a:h it's very difficu:lt, I want a balance there is no balance  
158. (.) and I used to try and qualify it by saying (.) "I've invented him" (.)  
159. "I've brought him into my life" (.) but I don't want him there (.)  
160. [because he]  
161. PT: [yeh]  
162. Linda: hr he causes me a lot of (.) hassle, a lot of problems, and a lot of  
163. preoccupation at ti[mes,]  
164. PT: [yeh]  
165. (1.0)  
166. Linda: and I don't want him there=  
167. PT: = so it's not, it's not it's not (en) a positive  
168. feeling a lot of the time? (.)  
169. Linda: eh you could interpret it as positive like he's questioning me about  
170. me consenting to the children or allowing them or (.) not disciplining  
171. them for doing [things like that.]  
172. PT: [m=hm]  
173. Linda: I used to think "Okay, perhaps this is the good part of me and that  
174. I've (.) pictured it an' he", but he wasn't a good man.

Here Linda introduces potential psychological explanations for hearing her husband's voice. These include the possibility that the voice is her "conscience" (line 156), that it is a fulfillment of her wish for "balance" (line 157) or that it represents "the good part" of her (line 173). These thoughts that Linda shares are projected into the past – "I *used* to try and qualify" (line 158), "I *used* to think" (line 173), showing that Linda has searched for a range of explanations and given this part of her life much thought. However, she then disqualifies all of these candidate explanations. How can the voice be a wish fulfillment if she does not "want him there" (line 166) and it makes her life harder (note the three-part list, lines 162-163)? And secondly how can her husband be her conscience, her moral guide (like Socrates' daemon), if he was fundamentally not "good" or moral himself? Linda refers to their shared life in the past to make this case (line 174).

Clare also uses the (Freudian) psychological idea of a wish-fulfillment (see chapter 1) and dismisses it, but for different reasons;

### Extract 13, Clare 1

531. JH: So she was the one that kind of made you feel completely reassured  
532. about things

533. Clare: Yeah  
 534. JH: And you were safe or:  
 535. Clare: Yeah totally but of course when that person's not there: it's very very  
 536. difficult to feel like that isn't it and that when that's when that support  
 537. line's gone so you see for me anybody could say maybe that it's me  
 538. that's carried on that coz I coz I want to believe that she's obviously  
 539. still there don't I but I think there's some things that can't be  
 540. explained away but that's just my opinion but er:m

JH's formulation of Clare's previous talk thematises the importance of her grandma in her life in the past (line 531). Clare responds to this in an interesting way. She accepts the formulation with gusto (line 535) before contrasting her life without her "support line" (line 536). Clare then deals with the unsaid accusation that as a result of this situation, she has carried on the support line herself. JH does not aim to imply this in her formulation but Clare orients to this idea as what "anybody" (line 537) might say, showing awareness of other perspectives on experiences of presence and avoiding attributing this sentiment directly to JH. Obviously Clare cannot manage the wish fulfillment idea in the same way as Linda, when she *does* wish her grandmother was still alive. So how does she get round this problem? She does this by saying that rather than explaining her experiences, this actually would be explaining them "away" (line 540); it would be an over-simplistic reduction of her experiences. She follows this assertion by once more demonstrating awareness of counter-perspectives – "but that's just my opinion" (line 540).

The next example of this method comes from Esme. She also introduced a psychological opponent to a spiritual account.

#### Extract 14, Esme

308. Esme: unless it's something to do with, with your brain makes you think it, I  
 309. mean I could've just been thinking "oh, here I am in Granada, I wish  
 310. he was here" and then, had a dream that he was there. But I've had  
 311. quite a few dreams where he's appeared  
 312. JH: yeah  
 313. Esme: and, my daughter has had them as well  
 314. JH: yeah  
 315. Esme: now she's, in a different place to me, she's in London

Esme here introduces a composite psychological explanation of her experience; that her "brain" was the cause of the experience (line 308, n.b. medical psychiatry, chapter 1), that it was a dream (line 310, n.b. Esquirol, chapter 1) and that it was a

fulfillment of a wish to see her father (line 309, see Freud, chapter 1). The way that she uses these ideas makes them complementary rather than mutually exclusive. She positions this theory as an alternative to the spiritualist (clairvoyant's) account by starting it with “unless” (line 308). In this theory, the feeling of pressure and voice becomes a “dream” (line 310) caused by the place she is in – she has already established that this place, Granada, is where her father fell ill. The word ‘dream’ normalises the experience and also situates it in Esme’s imagination. The “but” (line 310) represents the beginning of her downgrading of this theory. Her reasons are that firstly, she has had other dreams in which he’s appeared (and the implication that is made is that these dreams were quite another experience entirely to what happened on that night in Granada). Her second reason is that her daughter has had dreams but in a different place. So these two points effectively undermine her earlier theory that the experience of presence had a psycho-ecological cause.

So far, the downgraded alternative accounts to spiritualism are psychological in nature. This seemed to be the most common. The next example is from Isaac, who instead resourced the phenomenon known as “coincidence” (line 315) as an alternative:

#### Extract 15, Isaac

313. JH: and how, how do you think of that now?  
314. (3.0)  
315. Isaac: coincidence maybe, or (.) there is something else up there?  
316. (3.0)  
317. erm, I'm  
318. (1.0)  
319. not a religious Jew, but er  
320. JH: right  
321. Isaac: I still believe in er, one god and [yeah]  
322. JH: [er]  
323. Isaac: you know, er it, it er  
324. (1.0)  
325. er  
326. JH: Yeah.

The format of this example is different to the others shown so far. Firstly, Isaac is responding to a question of JH's. The question does not suggest that he has to provide more than one possible cause of the sign of presence he's discussing, yet he does. What the orientation to “coincidence” (line 315) does here is to show that he makes a considered response with an awareness of other possibilities, and

thereby accomplishes face-work as a 'rational' person (for more on this identity-work, see below). Isaac then downgrades the 'coincidence' explanation in two ways. Firstly, introducing "god" (line 321) militates against the idea of coincidence – god creates connections between events that are not readily obvious (god-incidences) and so may be discounted as coincidences. Secondly, the downgrading of 'coincidence' is implied in his follow-up of “coincidence maybe, or (.) there is something else up there?” (line 315) with a development of the latter theme but not the former. In doing this developing he works on his religious identity, conveying that he believes there is “something else up there” (line 315), “one god” (line 321) while disclaiming an identity as a “religious Jew” (line 319), which would imply orthodoxy. Isaac’s identity-work here then gives the impression of a ‘moderate’ Jewish person with a belief that God exists and can influence things on earth, while showing that he does not apply this belief compulsively.

Esther does something very similar while describing what seemed to be a ‘sign’ from her husband;

Extract 16, Esther

90. Esther: And then I thought, "well, you know, we live near one another,  
 91. maybe there was something wrong with the electricity," I always try to  
 92. explain things logically, and erm, when my son came, and he lives in  
 93. \_\_\_\_((town in Cheshire)), that's the other side, you know, he said,  
 94. erm,  
 95. (2.0)  
 96. when we got the phone call, he says "th- th- th- th- the they, a lot of  
 97. lights fu-, bang, was like bang, and all the lights went out!" and he's  
 98. very clo- he's got a very (.) they worked together, you know, and erm,  
 99. I think he feels it, s:::omething, I don't know what it is, but, they were  
 100. very very close, and that was something rather unusual, but then you  
 101. can always explain, if you want- if you're cynical, you'll say well,  
 102. "maybe your bulbs just happened to go or something," you heh=heh!  
 103. you know, it's, there's always an explanation isn't there?  
 104. JH: yeah  
 105. Esther: and  
 106. JH: where do you stand on it?  
 107. (0.5)  
 108. Esther: Where do I stand? I'd, I, I really don't know. I  
 109. JH: yeah  
 110. Esther: I- sometimes I think, "no, it's (.) impossible," I'm not really a very  
 111. religious person. I do follow the religion a little bit, but I'm- I don't  
 112. know, I just sometimes feel. It was different when I was younger but  
 113. sometimes, now, I, I don't know  
 114. JH: yeah  
 115. Esther: I just, erm  
 116. (1.2)

117. I just can't explain it!, you know?  
118. JH: yeah

In this extract Esther refers to alternative explanations for the 'sign' from her husband (lights flickering at the time of his death). She cannot easily use a psychological explanation as three people experienced this in three different places. She shows a process of rationalising the experience. When she hears from her daughter, she attributes the flickering lights to a physical cause – a fault in the electricity (line 91). On hearing from her son in another town, she rules this explanation out and like Isaac, she uses 'coincidence' as an explanatory resource (lines 100-101). However this is portrayed as a "cynic" position (line 101), and so holds less validity – being called a 'cynic' is not usually a compliment and it is often characterised as an extremist position.

Esther's demonstration of rationality here is also accompanied by more explicit face-work – "I always try to explain things logically" (lines 91-92), "but then you can always explain, if you want" (lines 100-101), "there's always an explanation isn't there?" (line 103). The last statement implies that although there might always be a material explanation for an event, it will not necessarily measure up to a supernatural one. The face-work also involves Esther disclaiming the identity of a "very religious person" (line 111), in a strikingly similar way to Isaac. In fact when JH's question – "where do you stand on it?" (line 106) – prompts Esther to be explicit about her position, the format of her response is also very similar to Isaac's. She starts with a denial of spiritualism, and then foregrounds her religious identity, which effectively strengthens the spiritual account. However the difference from Isaac is that she does not formulate the alternative that 'there's something else up there' but instead stresses the absence of an alternative explanation for the flickering lights – "I just can't explain it!" (line 117). The result is, like Isaac she does not make a 'final' interpretation of the lights but leaves her account open, allowing JH to draw her own conclusions. Esther presents herself as somewhere between two polarities – cynicism, and an extremely religious person. Esther thus emerges as a partially religious person who 'believes', but only in the absence of an adequate alternative explanation.

This section has examined some examples of the ways in which informants formulated spiritual explanations for their experiences by downgrading rival explanatory resources. The method allowed informants to demonstrate awareness of alternative explanations, to state reasons why these were not adequate, and to thus work on their identity as a 'rational' person - just as I am aiming to do here in this thesis.

There were some further commonalities in face-work across the cases – for two Jewish people, for example, it seemed important that they defused an unstated assumption that they were very religious Jewish people as a result of their spiritual alignment. So rather than the experience of presence resulting in a strongly asserted religious feeling, the spiritual semiotic resource is applied, but in conjunction with reparative face-work. Further investigations may identify other identities that are commonly disclaimed in talk about religion and spirituality.

Many of the alternatives presented were psychological. This could be because there were a number of psychologists in the study (more on this later) – however Clare, Esme and Linda, who resourced psychological ideas here, were not psychologists. Many of these ideas – “conscience” (Linda), ‘seeing/feeling/hearing what I want to believe’ (Linda, Clare), ‘dreams’ and ‘associating a place with a person’ (Esme) - could in fact just as well be regarded as ‘folk psychological’<sup>45</sup>.

Perhaps these psychological/folk psychological rival accounts were introduced because the interviewer is a psychologist? Thus there may be an ‘unsaid’ pressure to orient in some way to the psychological. However, this cannot explain why some psychological ideas were selected and others were not - for example, no-one oriented to the idea of the presence as a hallucination or a cognitive mistake as an alternative to the person’s spirit. There will be more on the practice of psychological accounting later in this chapter. For now, we stay with the evidence in the talk that using spiritual discourse was treated by informants as controversial.

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<sup>45</sup> By folk psychological I mean the ways of invoking mind and mental states that are present in ordinary talk, as opposed to 'institutional' talk. This is a 'lay' psychology rather than an academic or empirical psychology. However, folk psychology encompasses concepts from the discipline of psychology that have been naturalised as part of the vernacular.



### 7.2.2. Boundaried Spiritualism

This was where participants resourced spiritual or religious ideas, but also demonstrated the limits to which they might do this. One way of setting these boundaries is to disclaim a religious identity – which we have already seen in Isaac and Esther. Another is to show selectivity about the teachings/discourses of the religion/spiritualism in question. Samira did this by showing that she does not take on board all of Hinduism but is discerning about what to believe. Inge combined the two methods, saying she was not religious but using a concept of heaven only. In the next extract Esme works on her relationship to spiritualism, expressing some doubt about particular spiritualist metaphysical teachings;

#### Extract 17, Esme

287. Esme: I mean I've always had a very strong belief even before this  
288.           happened um, when I was a kid I used to mess about with ouija  
289.           boards and, I've always believed that there's something  
290. JH:       yeah  
291. Esme: I still believe there is  
292. JH:       yeah  
293. Esme: I don't believe that, you're just here for once in your life and that's it  
294. JH:       yeah, yeah  
295. Esme: I don't know, when they start telling you that when you die you've  
296.           gone to the astral plane and then you move up and this and the  
297.           other, I don't know, it's not something I would like to get totally  
298.           involved in

The extract begins with Esme historicising her interest in spiritualism. She does this partly through the reference to Ouija boards (line 288) – which represent a means of contact with the spirit world. This reference demonstrates Esme's openness in the past to the idea of a spirit world which it is possible to contact. In the context, Esme's use of "belief", for example, "I've always had a very strong belief" (line 287) means a belief in spirits/non-physical persons. Esme again emphasises the biographical nature of this belief – "I've always believed there's something...I still believe there is" (lines 288-291). Again she is not explicit about what this "something" is but she implies a non-physical world of spirits, some kind of afterlife. So what these comments do is to situate her experience of presence not only in the world of clairvoyants (seen earlier) but in a very personal sense of the spiritual (note the lack of others in these formulations "I've" and "I", lines 287, 288, 291, 293). Like Sarah, in this part Esme is talking historically about her faith/beliefs and how her experience of

presence has influenced these. She implies that it has strengthened them by the insertion, “even before this happened” (line 287).

Once this long-standing personal spiritual sense has been established, Esme then sets some limits to her spiritualism. She shows considerable doubts over the spiritualist teachings about different realms or “planes” where spirits go after death – “I don’t know” (lines 295, and 296). The slightly dismissive description, “and this and the other” (line 296) suggests a distancing from these metaphysics – she’s not involved in them enough to know the details. And her next comment – “it’s not something I would like to get totally involved in” (lines 297-298) – similarly implies an intentional distancing from some aspects of organised spiritualism. So although Esme uses spiritual ideas, she shows her limits as a ‘spiritualist’ – her spiritual sense is personal and strong but she does not follow the teachings of organised spiritualism devotedly. Thus Esme avoids identifying as a ‘Spiritualist’, and presents herself instead as a lay person with a spiritual curiosity.

### 7.2.3. Hypothetical Alignment

Some participants used spiritual metaphysics as a semiotic resource while at the same time distancing themselves from this activity by talking about the situation hypothetically. The next extract comes from near the end of Esme’s interview, and the reader may note a shift in her position from earlier in the interview;

#### Extract 18, Esme

1452. Esme: and it, it was almost like. And then you start thinking  
1453. (3.0)  
1454. If, if they a- if they are on these different planes supposed to be on  
1455. the astral plane and the something plane, maybe he hadn't quite  
1456. gone up yet, and you imagine sort of being in limbo, and he'd  
1457. JH: yeah  
1458. Esme: come to say to me, this is what I was thinking, maybe he's come to  
1459. say to me, "I've not moved on yet, so I'm just letting you know that  
1460. I'm alright and you can convey this information to the rest of the  
1461. family."  
1462. JH: yeah  
1463. Esme: And that could have been the message, if, if indeed that was the  
1464. case.  
1465. JH: yeah  
1466. Esme: That he really did come  
1467. (1.0)  
1468. or

The idea of an 'astral plane', that Esme expresses some doubt over earlier in the interview, is used here to account for why her father appeared to her *when* he did. She also conveys the meaning that her father's message has for her. This is not achieved directly but by using hypothetical formulations (what follows includes my emphasis) – “*if* they are on these different planes” (line 1454), “*if* indeed that was the case” (line 1463), and a discourse of possibility rather than certainty – “*maybe* he's come to say to me” (line 1458), “that *could have been* the message” (line 1463), “if...that was the case...that he *really* did come” (lines 1463-1466). Esme's formulation suggests that this kind of "thinking" (line 1452) is part of her imagination - she is exploring possibilities in her imagination rather than performing an exercise in logical-thinking. The result is that Esme is able to create the implication that her father did visit her with a message while at the same time dodging a 'spiritualist' identity.

The following two extracts show Aggie using the same method;

#### Extract 19, Aggie

536. Aggie: um (.) so I think if it is his spirit he probably feels guilty for kinda  
537.           leaving me  
538. JTB:    yeah  
539. Aggie: I don't know so ((clears throat))

#### Extract 20, Aggie

407. Aggie: mm so I don't know if- (.) like say it is his spirit (.) I don't whether he doesn't  
408.           kno:w who's got it ((the ring)) (.) dya get what I mean

The hypothetical formulations in both these extracts – “if it is his spirit” (extract 19, line 536) and “I don't know if- (.) like say it is his spirit” (extract 20, line 407) – allow Aggie to express the meaning that the voice has for her (messages from her boyfriend), but without doing so overtly. In expressing this lack of certainty Aggie works on her identity as a 'reasonable' person who is aware of other possibilities.

#### 7.2.4. Mundane Spirit Testing

In their book on verbal hallucinations Leudar and Thomas (2000) noted what they termed 'mundane reality testing' in people's talk about their own voices. This was not a cognitive exercise to determine the source of the voice but involved using everyday practical activities to work out whether the voice was a person speaking or not, such as turning round, or asking others if they had heard something. It seemed important for informants to describe these processes in their talk because it demonstrated that they could be both 'rational' and yet hear voices.

The same method was observed in some cases reported here. This process of 'spirit testing' involved informants demonstrating a rational process of either ruling out alternative sources for the experience of presence or finding out whether anyone else shared this. This was really a sub-variety of the strategy of orienting to and downgrading alternative explanatory resources. So for example Esther 'investigated' the flickering lights, ruling out an electrical cause when she heard from her son (extract 16). Aggie and Esme both 'tested' their experience of presence by going to a psychic, and thereby turn an individual experience into one shared with another person. Samira checked for a source of the cool breeze in the middle of the night;

##### Extract 21, Samira

- 78 Samira: and I'd woken up, like I'd got out of my  
79 JH: mm  
80 Samira: bed like thinking oh my god, what's just happened, and I put it down to,  
81 okay the window might have been open, or something. Window wasn't  
82 open, nothing was open, it was you know, I just thought okay, right, I'll just  
83 go back to sleep.

Isaac tested the existence of a spiritual world through actively seeking its assistance with a plug socket that had not worked for several years;

##### Extract 22, Isaac

180. Isaac: So the electric plug, this was in about  
181. (2.0)  
182. about two or three weeks after my father died  
183. (3.0)  
184. and I thought, "if there's anybody in heaven, if there's anybody anywhere,  
185. I'm going to put this plug in"- it's totally i: i: inane, and stupid, knowing that-  
186. and it worked. So I felt, like a rush of, there is something there!

Here Isaac shows that he wants to believe, but not without some kind of proof. He therefore creates some conditions for his belief – ‘testing’ the plug becomes ‘testing’ the existence of heaven. This mundane spirit testing represents a variety of internal-logic to his spiritualism – it gives him the proof he needs to feel “a rush...there is something there!” (line 186). The sequential implication is that candidates for this “anybody” (line 184) in heaven are his father and mother. So Isaac presents himself as believing in heaven/a spiritual world but he shows that it has a partially-rational basis.

To summarise so far, when using spiritualism and religion to account for experiences of presence, certain features of the talk indicate that informants orient to this as a problematic activity. The features so far have in common the fact that they allow a person to draw on spiritual/religious meanings while at the same time doing face-work as a ‘rational’ person. This implies that using spiritualism entails a risk of spoiled identity (see Goffman, 1968). There is what Goffman termed a ‘virtual social identity’ that must be oriented to and denied.

The next, and final strategy noted here for introducing spiritual meanings achieved a different kind of end. It did not work on ‘rationalist’ identities but instead exerted an interactional pressure on the interviewer to relate directly to a spiritual frame of reference.

### 7.2.5. Involvement Strategies

Tannen (1989) defined involvement strategies as linguistic devices that “reflect, and simultaneously create interpersonal involvement” (1989, p.1). In terms of telling stories, these methods develop vividness and encourage a deeper involvement from the listener/audience. Reporting dialogue in conversation (so-called directly-reported speech) is one such strategy of which we have seen several examples of use already: Isaac to tell a ghost story, Esther to tell the story of lights flickering, Esme to put across the psychic’s sentiments without directly aligning herself with them.

Three participants used another means that afforded a deepening of JH’s involvement in their spiritual lives. In these cases, the informants did some ‘live’ identity work to get JH to relate more directly to the ideas they had expressed. Here are two examples;

#### Extract 23, Clare 1

1031. Clare: Cos there’s other odd things that happen to me but I don’t know what they  
1032.           are::  
1033. JH:     okay  
1034. Clare: you know, when I’m talking to somebody people always say you haven’t  
1035.           got great eye contact but  
1036.           (2.0)  
1037.           I don’t know, I have a weird feeling in you(h)r hou(h)se!  
1038. JH:     do you?!  
1039. Clare: I not sure you wanna know that but as soon as I came in  
1040. JH:     eee::k!  
1041. Clare: yeah and cos I can kind of I don’t know what it is I need to look into it a bit  
1042.           more  
1043. JH:     heh=heh!

#### Extract 24, Esme

384. Esme: and, we had to look at auras, different people’s auras, I’m just looking at  
385.           yours now, nice, yes ((*nods*))  
386. JH:     a good aura, heh!  
387. Esme: yeah, I do it all the time now, it’s dead funny  
388. JH:     what is that, did you see  
389. Esme: it’s like=um, if you just, if you just look slightly above my head. Because I’m  
390.           sitting against a lightish wall, you’ll just see like a very faint grey shadow.  
391.           And it goes round.  
392. JH:     kind of just above your head?  
393. Esme: yes it’s like literally  
394. JH:     okay  
395. Esme: it’s almost like a slight shadow,  
396. JH:     okay yeah

Clare and Esme make their stories personal to JH, about where she lives (Clare), or about her (Esme). This gives the immediacy of the interview itself a spiritual atmosphere, and so exerts considerable pressure on JH to relate to this. JH does not dismiss the assessments (of a haunted house, or a good aura) but instead connects to their sentiment – reflecting her understanding with “a good aura” (extract 24, line 386), or reflecting spookiness and her fear with “eek” (extract 23, line 1040) and the nervous laughter “heh=heh” (extract 23, line 1043). JH is more or less obliged to take a stance on the sensitivity that is being demonstrated – but is she a believer or a sceptic? The technique is also a way of checking JH’s acceptance of spiritualism. JH responds in both cases with interest but avoids openly committing to a metaphysical position on the assessments that are being made. What’s more, both informants had previously worked-on their identities as spiritually/psychically sensitive people, and so these ‘live’ examples of such sensitivities underpin these self-presentations.

These are both examples of how the interview may be re-structured through the talk, specifically through changing participant positions. For example in extract 24, Esme's 'live' spiritual demonstration and JH's response to this transforms the interaction from one between an informant and a researcher, to one between a spiritually-sensitive person and an interested newcomer. But this comment on JH's aura (line 384) does not happen out-of-the blue either - Esme's joint-narrative with JH up until this point has prepared the ground for this comment on auras to not be noticeably strange.

The section has documented a range of methods used in the interviews to introduce spiritual ideas while promoting the identity of the informant as a considered and logical person. These included the orientation to alternative causal explanations for the experience of presence, showing a process of ‘spirit testing’, denying extreme religious identities, showing limits to one’s spiritualism, and aligning only hypothetically with a spiritual explanation of the presence. There were also methods of storytelling that performed ‘live’ identity work and prompted JH to connect to the spiritual. The techniques listed were not necessarily discrete but there was sometimes considerable overlap between them. There were also differences between informants in how they were used – some, such as Linda, used only one, while Esme used all of them, indicating a strong concern with self-presentation.

Overall, the way the talk is organised suggests a counter-normative nature to the practice of aligning with spiritualist and religious meanings<sup>46</sup>.

Or does the talk only reveal that the informants were talking to a psychologist? The impression management is no doubt going to be influenced by the identity of the interviewer. Nonetheless, the interviewing method was designed to minimise the pressure on informants to 'be psychological' - it aimed towards non-directivity, JH did not orient to religion and spiritualism as a problem, or in fact evaluate any semiotic frame in the interviews. In terms of participant positioning, JH, did not speak 'as' a psychologist, and was rarely engaged as a psychologist by informants, but as other things. For example, one person related to JH as a Christian despite the fact that she had conveyed none of her personal beliefs concerning metaphysics in general and certainly not of 'presence' in particular<sup>47</sup>. Despite this religious positioning of JH, this informant showed a high degree of impression management as a 'rational' person (Esther). The impression management would no doubt take different forms in alternative settings; for example, in talking to a vicar about the experiences, or a psychiatrist. Gathering data on this talk in different contexts would mark a worthy route of further study.

### *7.3. The influence of medical psychiatry on the talk*

Chapter 4 demonstrated that Julie did not use the psychiatric concept of 'hallucination' as an explanatory resource for her voice. However, this did not mean that psychiatric meanings were altogether absent from her interview. She showed that others did apply this concept to her experiences, and how within this semiotic frame, her voice was a symptom that warranted pharmacological treatment. A similar pattern – referring to psychiatric meanings but not using them to explain an experience of presence - was found in other interviews.

Sade for example, makes the term 'hallucination' relevant to her experiences of presence, but only to negate the appropriateness of the term;

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<sup>46</sup> The reader may also have noted the large number of 'false starts' in the talk around this subject which also hints at a high degree of impression management.

<sup>47</sup> JH was careful not to comment on her own metaphysical beliefs unless she was asked directly – this only happened in two instances – by Isaac and Esther (both at the very end of the interviews).



### Extract 25, Sade 1

308. Sade: there's only like a few times in my life where like (.) not hallucinations but  
309. for example like the smell of my Auntie and like seeing my ex-boyfriend,  
310. those are things which I'll all:: always remember  
311. JH: yeah

Sade acknowledges the possibility of this description, but denies its suitability in this particular case. Her experiences are “not hallucinations” (line 308) but are instead described in mundane terms as smelling her auntie and seeing her ex-boyfriend.

Inge, also makes psychiatry relevant to her experiences in her interview, only to deny its appropriateness. She does this by referring to something a psychiatrist had said to her;

### Extract 26, Inge

- 582 Inge: but do you think erm?  
583 (1.0)  
584 aer::  
585 (1.0)  
586 after a month=er::  
587 psychiatrist as well (.) um, and he says “usually (.) usually it gets better  
588 after (.) after a year around that it starts getting better” (.) but now it's been  
589 two years and it's still the same like  
590 (2.1)  
591 How long will this relationship go on?  
592 (9.0)  
593 Because after like, eight or nine months as well I was like, okay, so that's  
594 only four months left, not there's only three month left and it will be better.  
595 JH: righ::  
596 Inge: and then (.) it's a year and it doe(h)sn't become any better. (.) and now it's  
597 two.

Inge refers to a prognosis of grief made by a psychiatrist. This is presented as an 'average' prognosis, rather than a description of her case personally, but it is used to predict the end of Inge's intense grief. Inge contrasts this 'average' with her particular case - the duration of her intense state of grief has empirically denied the validity of this psychiatric prognosis. Inge's grief is evident in the here-and-now of the interview in the burning question – “How long will this relationship go on?” (line 591) - sandwiched in between two pauses, the second in particular of a considerable length. A related implication of the prognosis that Inge presents is that it defines her as not “usual” (line 587), not ‘normal’. This implication is reflected in the way Inge

introduces this prognosis – through a question for JH - “but do you think erm?” (line 582). This is a question that she does not finish but the description she subsequently makes implies she was going to ask JH something about the normalcy of her grief. This of course positions JH as someone with knowledge of these matters – it is not clear though whether Inge is making relevant her role is as a psychologist with access to theories or as an interviewer who has talked to many grieving people. JH in fact responds from the latter position (not shown here but visible in appendix 6).

So Inge uses her grief biography as a source of knowledge that counters this psychiatric prediction. Chapter 1 showed that in a medical framework, experiences of presence are identified as ‘hallucinations’ and possibly signs of mental illness. There were also times in the interviews where informants made a spontaneous reference to madness or psychopathology. In the following two cases this was done quite explicitly;

#### Extract 27, Aggie

635. JTB: yeah (.) but I’m interested in what you believe in so (.) so yeah  
636. Aggie: err I do believe it’s him because (.) it fee:ls (.) real (.) like real enough for  
637. me to (.) forget (.) um (.) an (.) nothing like that’s really really really  
638. happened to me before like (.) um: (.) that’s why it makes me think that it is  
639. him but  
640. JTB: yeah  
641. Aggie: you never really know anything  
642. JTB: no  
643. Aggie: so  
644. JTB: but there’s a realness in it for you  
645. Aggie: yeah (.) an I suppose it’s- it is for me so it doesn’t really matter  
646. JTB: he=he  
647. Aggie: what any(h)one e(h)lse thinks .hh:: they might think I’m a nutter but well  
648. he he he  
649. (1.0)  
650. JTB: yeah (.) I don’t think you’re a nutter he=he  
651. Aggie: hee hee oh:: ( ) I don’t care anymore (.) I just erm ( ) heh=heh  
652. ahem

#### Extract 28, Kelly

33. Kelly: it was just really weird that he’d kind of appeared and I don’t really believe  
34. in all that  
35. JTB: Hmm  
36. Kelly: Sort of stuff it was just weird how, how that had happened before I knew he  
37. had

38. JTB: Yeah  
39. Kelly: died (.) It was a bit strange but  
40. JTB: Yeah  
41. Kelly: Yeah so I was kind of thinking maybe I'm a bit crazy but, these things  
42. happen I guess

In the first example, Aggie introduces a particular social identity – “nutter” (extract 27, line 647) – that could be applied to herself. The reason she gives is because she believes that the voice of her boyfriend is indeed contact from him – i.e. she does spiritual accounting. As another person, JTB could be one such person who takes this view of Aggie – and so she responds to this by excluding Aggie from the “nutter” membership category – *she* does not “think” of Aggie in this way (extract 27, line 650). Note that JTB does not dismiss the possibility that others will see her in this way but speaks personally, and therefore more convincingly (she can't speak for others but this much she can say). In her next turn, Aggie then dismisses this concern – “I don't care anymore” (extract 27, line 651). This sequence is carried out with a considerable amount of nervous laughter, pointing towards the delicate nature of the topic.

The second example is different as Kelly is presenting “crazy” (extract 28, line 41) as a self-assessment rather than a possible other-assessment. She warrants this through reference to the strangeness of the event when she saw her grandfather floating above her at the moment of his death. She demonstrates an absence of an alternative explanation – “I don't really believe in all that stuff” (extract 28, lines 33-36) – denying a spiritual account. Her experiences were so contrary to her metaphysical attitude that she literally could not believe her eyes.

Kelly presents her tentative comment – “so I was kind of thinking maybe I'm a bit crazy” (extract 28, line 41) – as a possibility in the absence of a better explanation. However, the “but” (extract 28, line 41) and the comment that follows refutes the seriousness of this assessment. And indeed she does not show any consequences of this ‘thought’, such as worry or a visit to a psychiatrist, but lets the matter ‘rest’.

The following examples are a little different because the informants orient to madness, but in order to deny the relevance of this meaning. The next extract picks-up Sarah's interview just after she has talked about once talking to another person who had also experienced the presence of deceased loved-ones;

### Extract 29, Sarah

440. Sarah: and certainly like this other person, who's said (.) who volunteered that  
441. information, and I said well yeah, actually, that (.) happened to me, you  
442. know so [sort of]  
443. JH: [yeah]  
444. Sarah: that.  
445. JH: Yeah. like reciprocating [with your]  
446. Sarah: [yeah]  
447. JH: stories  
448. Sarah: and it helps them to know that maybe they're not going mad because other  
449. people [do]  
450. JH: [yeah, yeah]  
451. Sarah: you know, do feel that

Sarah describes an instance where she shares her experiences with another person who has experienced the presence of a deceased person in order to help the other person. This is not just any kind of 'help', but helping "them to know that maybe they're not going mad" (line 448). The background of her personal story implies that this possibility, madness, is not a personal fear: she has an alternative explanatory frame for what had happened to her (believing it was her son). But her formulation, "it helps them to know" (line 448) suggests she is aware of (misplaced) stigma attached to experiences like her own.

Samuel orients to the socio-medical category 'schizophrenia' in order to deny its relevance to his uncle. This extract shows the end of the interview where JH and Samuel are talking about people whom he knows that might be suitable for the study;

### Extract 30, Samuel 1

1250. Samuel: my uncle who probably wouldn't do it ((the study)) because, I just  
1251. don't think he'd do it, when he lost his dad he, my grandpa in 2003,  
1252. he really went, he really had lots of like, he said he could see him in  
1253. his bed and all sorts of things  
1254. JH: mm  
1255. Samuel: which we all thought was a bit weird but, again cos, because  
1256. somebody's been through a trauma I think you don't think of like  
1257. schizophrenia or anything like that, you just think, "gosh yeah, he's  
1258. really struggling to cope with this, and that's a reaction to it"

Samuel presents his uncle as an 'expert' informant on presence, perhaps better qualified than himself. He does this through the formulations, "he really had lots of

like" (line 1252), and he saw "all sorts of things" (line 1253). In fact, he saw so many things that his family, who Samuel had previously established as quite accustomed to these sorts of experiences, found this "a bit weird" (line 1255). Samuel implies that the frequency of these experiences is an important factor in their categorisation as 'normal' or otherwise. So was his uncle mad? Samuel formulates a denial of the relevance of "schizophrenia" (line 1257) – starting with the "but" (line 1255). His warrant is that his uncle was reacting to trauma (line 1256). So in formulating this denial Samuel implies that 'schizophrenia' may be relevant to these kinds of experiences, but only in the absence of a trauma.

The denial of schizophrenia however does not cancel the earlier assessment of his uncle as a "bit weird" (line 1255). In his talk, there seems to be an implicit difference between something being 'weird', and something being a sign of a mental health problem. There is a concern with these visions being stigmatising, but not necessarily via a concept of psychopathology - it may also be via notions of oddness/normality.

The reference to schizophrenia in this extract is not the only reference to psychopathology that Samuel makes in his interview – he in fact makes several implicit and explicit references. The next extract is an example of the former, and this time, he is referring to himself;

#### Extract 31, Samuel 1

812. JH: as you were talking, and=um::: (.) one of them I was gonna ask you, was,  
813. have you (.) talked to anybody else in your family about, any of the things  
814. that have happened like the vision or the  
815. Samuel: m=hmm  
816. JH: hearing a voice or the tastes  
817. Samuel: yeah I have done, erm, nobody seems um remotely concerned,  
818. everyone's interested but not concerned, everyone just thinks, you know  
819. it's, people instinctively think it's quite a normal, normal reaction to, a  
820. traumatic event and they sort of think, that erm, you know, if that's what's  
821. happening, as long as sort of l'm not upset about it, then, that's fine and  
822. um  
823. (2.0)  
824. my dad had a similar experience, he said he sometimes like heard a voice  
825. too  
826. JH: yeah  
827. Samuel: although no visions or taste or anything like that, erm, so. People have  
828. seemed quite relaxed about it, not really a source of anxiety to anyone

JH asks Samuel a question – has he “talked to anybody else in your family about, any of the things that have happened” (lines 813-814) – thereby making a social dimension relevant to his meaning-making. Samuel’s response is interesting because it brings into the foreground background assumptions about the experiences. These are the issues that Samuel makes relevant to the experiences: they may warrant concern (line 817), they can be a “source of anxiety” (line 828) to others, and cause “upset” (line 821) for the person experiencing them; they may be viewed as not “normal” (line 819). These relevancies are made in order to be denied, and JH does not imply them in her question.

Samuel also warrants his family’s lack of concern with three reasons suggesting that this *lack of concern is an accountable matter*. Firstly, it is seen as a trauma-response, and therefore understandable in terms of events in the person’s life. This is presented as an ‘instinctive’ (line 819) reaction of his family members and by implication not worthy of debate. The second warrant is that he is not upset by his experiences (line 821). The third is that his father had an experience of presence – so they are normalised locally within the family (line 824). Overall, Samuel’s references to psychopathology suggest that he does not dismiss psychiatric meanings entirely but rather disputes the universality of their application.

A significant number of informants then referred to psychiatric terms and concepts in their interviews, directly, or indirectly. But only one case, Kelly, used these to *explain* her experiences – and even then she used this in a minimal way without developing this line. The most common usage was to present it as an ‘other’-perspective on their experiences, and then to deny its appropriateness to the particular case in question. But why refer to ideas that are not useful? The answer seems to lie in the fact that a link between these kinds of experiences and madness is fairly pervasive and so prompts some kind of response – even if this is in the form of a denial - in the interviews. So Samuel twice uses ‘trauma’ as an exclusion criterion from the category of ‘schizophrenia’/madness. Aggie showed awareness that her experience could be viewed in this way although she does not. Another method was to show that an alternative description was the best fit for one’s experiences (Aggie, Sarah,

and Sade)<sup>48</sup>. Inge shows vividly that a psychiatric prognosis was invalid in her case. She was the only person other than Julie who reported using psychiatric services.

A final note on the people who referred to madness in their interviews – of the six in question, three were psychologists and one was a medic. It perhaps is not surprising that these people should be most influenced by medical and psychopathological meanings as a result of their specialist educations. However, the narratives of these informants did not read like textbooks of psychiatry or psychopathology. The references to this form of knowledge was scattered, and in most cases, the relevance of it was denied.

#### 7.4. Psychology

Psychological theories of voices, described in Chapter 1, can be divided into two broad types: those that explain the voice as arising from some kind of psychological mistake, and those that cite the voice as a dissociated part of self. Neither of these accounts appeared in Julie's story of her voice, but this was not the norm, as nine informants referred to psychological concepts in some way.

We have already seen some of these references. Some were used only to be downgraded (like the psychiatric ones) – so Linda talked about her 'conscience', and Samira and Esme both referred to 'wish fulfillment'. The purpose of the reference was not to explain the experiences of presence but to perform identity-work as a rational person who considers a range of explanatory resources. We also saw that Samuel used psychological ideas for identity management *and* for accounting for the experiences of presence – referring to the idea of a trauma-response to distance himself and his uncle from the category of 'schizophrenia'/mental illness. This involved Samuel drawing on psychological and biographical sources of meaning.

There were further examples in the interviews of informants using psychology as a causal explanation for their experiences of presence. Most of these appeared in chapter 1, and can be summarised as follows;

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<sup>48</sup> Stigma surrounding these experiences of presence was also visible in other forms in the interviews, not reported here: including when Clare related that she was very discerning about who she talks to about her own experiences (see appendix 2, Clare 1, line 1144).

*The experience is due to my memory* (n.b. Esquirol, Janet) – used by Tracey and Heena

*The experience is an expression of an emotional need* (akin to Freud, Parkes, and theories of the Continuing Bond) – used by Tracey and Sade

*The experience reflects my unconscious mind* (Freud, Janet) – used by Samuel

*The experience is a learnt behaviour/response* (behaviourism) – used by Samuel

*The experience is due to a mistake* (cognitive theories) - used by Samuel

*The experience is just a sensation* (akin to DSM definition of hallucination) – used by Samuel

*The experience is a coping-mechanism* (from cognitive psychology) - used by Samuel

These are brief descriptions of the range of explanations that were actually used. Some participants (for example, Samuel) used several, others used only one kind. But what did these references look like in situ? What does psychological accounting allow informants to do? The following sections document examples of the various functions the psychological source of meaning had in the interviews.

#### **7.4.1. Underpinning Continuity**

Just as spiritual/religious explanations allowed informants to reinforce the continuity of the relationship, so did *some* psychological concepts. This was achieved because these references allowed the person to show that the relationship is still a part of them, and so in a sense the deceased person continues to ‘live-on’ *within* them.

In the following extract, Samuel is talking about the times when he smelled and tasted his grandma’s cooking (also documented in chapter 6).

##### Extract 32, Samuel 1

349. Samuel: in a similar way as a child, and even like as a young adult I would’ve  
350. gone to her with all sorts of other issues, um, and she probably would’ve  
351. been there, it’s almost as though, I just learnt to, to like, invite or generate  
352. or induce like a presence, at times of stress, albeit unconsciously.  
353. JH: yeah  
354. Samuel: so yeah.  
355. JH: okay.



Samuel describes the presence as “almost” (line 351) a learnt response. The “almost” seems to lie in the fact that he is not aware of this learning – the smells and tastes are not voluntary but spontaneous and surprise him. He uses the concept of the “unconscious” (line 352) to account for this. The rationale for the learnt response comes from the biographical reference - he used to go to his grandma for help with personal problems (line 350, but previously established at the beginning of the interview, see Chapter 5). The here-and-now setting provides the stimulus, “stress” (line 352), and the learnt response follows by association – his grandma’s cooking associates with both his problems and comfort from her (see Chapter 8 for more on the function of experiences of presence). Samuel describes the smell-taste as a learnt-response, the stimulus for which is stress, and the consequence is that the feeling of comfort and support continues. He does this by using the naturalised language of the discipline of psychology, using terms originally from behaviourist and psychoanalytic theories. This psychological source of meaning in the way that Samuel uses it provides an alternative form of continuity to that afforded by the spiritual source of meaning seen earlier in this chapter.

Tracey does not reproduce an existing psychological theory to account for her experience but introduces a novel way of explaining the smell she experiences, using a psychological concept but in a different way to how it is used in academic psychology;

#### Extract 33, Tracey 1

681. Tracey: so yeah but overall. There’s obviously something there. But () is it  
682. because they’re dead or is it because you just () they’re not there sort of  
683. thing. Would it still be there if you’d divorced?  
684. JH: mm.  
685. (2.0)  
686. is it being apart or is it the death in particular?  
687. Tracey: yeah. I don’t know, I don’t know. it’s a really difficult one.  
688. (1.5)  
689. so  
690. (1.2)  
691. but you love someone like that and, (.) there’s gonna be some after-effect  
692. isn’t there?  
693. JH: yeah  
694. Tracey: so that’s how I  
695. JH: yeah  
696. Tracey: it comes out really

The extract joins Tracey at a point in the interview where she is speculating on the reason why she sometimes smells her husband so vividly. The explanation that she provides is that it is an “after-effect” (line 691) of intense love. She draws on her (emotional) biography to provide this – “but you love someone like that ..” (line 691). There is not, so far, an emotional after-effect theory of experiences of presence (or of voices, for that matter) but it resonates with theories of the continuing bond (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996) and the concept of a ‘perceptual after-effect’. The latter is used to define a situation in which the effects of a stimulus exceed the duration of the stimulus itself, or happen after its removal (Reber and Reber, 2001)<sup>49</sup>. It is a psychological form of continuity. The term is usually applied to visual perceptions, and undergraduate textbooks on perception are full of pictures designed to produce these effects if stared at for long enough. Tracey applies this principle instead to a smell and the cause is emotional rather than strictly perceptual. In common with Samuel then, Tracey’s psychological account does not reduce her experience but draws on the richness of their shared life and love. Both use concepts from psychological theories creatively to account for their experiencing.

This was not the only psychological concept used by Tracey in her interview. Just before the following extract Tracey has been talking about a friend of hers who has spiritualist sympathies. She has told Tracey that she thinks her husband is still in the house;

#### Extract 34, Tracey 1

131. Tracey: but she’s she’s been into my house and I’ve got a dog which I got about a  
132. year ago. And the dog goes to this one corner of the room, and sniffs  
133. around, and will not move away from it, it doesn’t bark, there’s no reason  
134. for the dog to be in that corner of the room, and my friend’s there and she’s  
135. like, “it because Paul’s sat there watching you.” And I’m like “no no”. and,  
136. every now and again the dog just goes there and she’s like  
137. JH: right  
138. Tracey: “yeah it’s dogs, animals, they sense them”. I’m like “yeah”. But I don’t feel  
139. it, but she does, so he’s obviously around, but I personally think it’s just  
140. inside you that,  
141. (1.0)  
142. JH: okay  
143. Tracey: you, your memories, just sort of trigger something that they’re, that they’re  
144. (.) the smell might be because I’ve been with his mates and then I’ve been  
145. thinking about him  
146. JH: okay

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<sup>49</sup> Are these ‘perceptual after-effects’ then like Jaspers ‘false perceptions’? No, because they relate to a stimulus that has preceded them and do not arise arbitrarily.

147. Tracey: and, the smell comes, I don't know whether it's=a, it's=a chicken and egg  
 148.            thing you know  
 149. JH:     yeah, yeah  
 150. Tracey: is the smell there because he's there? or is it because I've been thinking  
 151.            of him because I've been with his mates?  
 152.            (1.2)  
 153. Tracey: because they're talking to me about him or, he's come up in the  
 154.            conversation or whatever but it is really bizarre that that's the only time (.) I  
 155.            smell him,  
 156. JH:     yeah, only with them.  
 157. Tracey: yeah

Tracey makes a psychological interpretation for her experience of presence but she only does this after orienting to a spiritual possibility. She introduces what her friend said, suggesting this is relevant to the smell she experiences - after all, if her friend senses him in the house, why wouldn't he be behind the smell? In quoting her friend, she shows that she is aware of more than one possible explanation for the smell. However Tracey downgrades this idea; "I don't feel it" (lines 138-139), and psychologises the experience of presence "I personally think it's just inside you that" (lines 139-140). This creates the space for an alternative account – one in terms of memory. According to this explanation, being with her husband's friends and talking about him triggers memories of being together, including how he smelled. Tracey therefore uses several sources of meaning together to explain what happened to her. Psychological ideas are not used in a reductionist way but they combine with the immediate setting for the smell, and Tracey's shared biography with her husband, to give the smell meaning as a memory that replays in the present.

Tracey, however, does not rest on this interpretation, at this point of the interview at least. She introduces doubt over the causal relationship in question – "I don't know whether it's=a...chicken and egg thing" (line 147), before formulating a dilemma – is her husband "there" (line 150) or is his smell there because she is thinking about him (lines 150-151)? In other words, is it a continuation of person or a continuation of memory? She gives the latter idea more attention, but is not conclusive here – ending this part by stressing the "really bizarre" (line 154) fact that it only happens with his friends. If talking and thinking about her husband induce the smell then why would it not appear at other times she is doing this (which, as she relates elsewhere in the interview, are frequent)? Tracey suggests that the gestalt of her memories, and the presence of her husband's friends in the right situation, continue her

husband. In this sense, the presence of her husband, the deceased, completes the situation by being necessary to the sense of it – she is only meeting these particular friends because he once lived. Her husband was the *raison d'être* of Tracey's relationship with the people she has seen. But her formulations also imply that this memory-account is not entirely sufficient - some aspects of the experience still confuse her and defy explanation.

Another variety of 'memory account' appears in Heena's interview. She accounts for hearing noises of her grandfather after his death as relating to a "stressful" memory;

Extract 35. Heena

262. Heena: And like I, yeah like I said, I don't even know if it's just a dream or, whether  
263. I was actually hearing it, It's always sort of, but I think my attention was  
264. always drawn to it  
265. JTB: Hmm  
266. (14.00)  
267. Heena: And that was something that I think always sort of, I, I got that a few times  
268. which I always, I don't know I just sort of put it down to the fact that I was  
269. just, it was just a stressful memory or something  
270. JTB: Hmm  
271. Heena: Yeah that's, they're the only two that really really stick out, but I just  
272. remember having that feeling a lot  
273. JTB: Hmm  
274. Heena: And like being, I probably had like heightened awareness to any noise I  
275. suppose but  
276. JTB: Yeah

Heena expresses uncertainty about what description best fits her experience – 'just a dream?', or 'actually hearing it?'. However there's one thing she can be certain of, and that is that the experience relates to a "stressful memory" (line 269), and a "heightened awareness to any noise" (line 274). This points to something else in the thematic field – she established earlier in the interview that her grandfather had drinking problems and she would sometimes hear him drinking in the night. So Heena uses psychological accounting to give the sounds meaning as a continuation of a stressful aspect of their relationship. This 'stress-response' is akin to Samuel's concept of 'trauma response' seen earlier.

So as these cases demonstrate, psychological sources of meaning could combine with the biographical to give the experience sense as a continuation – of action and association, of memories, and of emotion. This consequence – underpinning continuity – we have seen before in spiritual accounts. It is the *mode* of continuity

that is different; through spirit, or through an internalised other. These cases demonstrate that a psychological account does not have to be reductionist in character or be used in this way. Psychological accounting does not have to be used to negate the phenomenal qualities of the experience, including the personification of the presence. Psychological concepts may be used in harmony with the biographical source of meaning. However not all psychological resources were used in this way as the next section documents.

#### 7.4.2. Cancelling the reality of the presence

Samuel used a number of psychological concepts in his interview, but not all of these had the function of reinforcing the continuity that had been established through the biographical references. The next extract shows Samuel talking about a different experience, in fact set of experiences, where he caught glimpses of his grandma in public places after her death;

##### Extract 36, Samuel 1

190. Samuel: So, we could be, um, (0.8) especially if we were in like  
191. a public place where there's a lot of people, and sort of like just  
192. glancing in the corner of my eye and she'd always be sort of like  
193. smiling and I'd I'd, I wou:, e:,  
194. (1.0)  
195. it's hard to explain but I did honestly like I'd seen her  
196. JH: yeah  
197. Samuel: physically. Although, I didn't actually believe she was  
198. really there, so, there's that sort of conflict came back really  
199. JH: yeah  
200. Samuel: that I talked about before  
201. JH: yeah, so it's like your immediate reaction is, "she's there" but  
202. then you think about it? and then you? you're not sure or?  
203. Samuel: my immediate like instinct reaction is, "oh there's  
204. grandma" and it lasts like a split second even, even less maybe.  
205. JH: kay  
206. Samuel: and then I'm like, "it can't, it can't be". And then, by that time, she's gone.  
207. So  
208. JH: okay  
209. Samuel: I knew like it, I assumed like it was, looking back I assumed it is, just my  
210. mind playing tricks on me and stuff  
211. JH: mm:  
212. Samuel: really stressful at home and er, it was on my mind a lot and obviously I,  
213. just (.) probably, imagined it

Samuel uses a psychological account to explain these happenings, although different to the ones we saw him use before. These visions of his grandma are, retrospectively, “just my mind playing tricks on me” (lines 209-210) and situated in imagination (line 213). These descriptions are more akin to the concept of ‘hallucination’ in cognitive psychology – the experience arising from an error in discriminating imagination from reality. However the conception of hallucination he uses is not as a random event unconnected from other psychological concerns, as Samuel refers back to the “stress...at home” (line 212) he established previously in the interview (see Chapter 5), that was “on my mind a lot” (line 212). So Samuel once more refers to stress as a causal trigger for what happened.

The psychological accounting Samuel uses here, unlike that he did previously, does not refer back to his past life with his grandma. The description is ‘thinner’ in this sense. Samuel also shows a change in his description over time; it is narrated from different positions – how it seemed at the time and how it seems to him retrospectively from the moment of the interview. This shift is visible in the false-start, where he changes tense; “I knew like it, I assumed like it was, looking back I assumed it is” (line 209). In the same false start however he also makes an epistemic switch just before the switch in tense, swapping ‘knowing’ for ‘assuming’. This downplays the certainty of his explanation. In the moment of the experience, Samuel also describes a “conflict” (line 198) between ‘seeing’ and ‘believing’ (lines 195-198) – what he saw was very real, but whether he believed his grandma was there, was another matter.

The overall effect of Samuel’s description in the moment of the interview downgrades the reality of the visions he experienced. Therefore, some psychological explanations were used to cancel out the continuity rather than to underpin it, as the next extract, also from Samuel, demonstrates;

#### Extract 37, Samuel 1

244. Samuel: sometimes, I’ll just spontaneously, especially if I’m stressed or worried,  
245.           be able to like taste some of the, some of the sorts of food that she made,  
246.           almost as though, it was in my mouth, although again, with no belief that it  
247.           actually is  
248. JH:     mm  
249. Samuel: just a sensation  
250. JH:     mm

This time Samuel is talking about the smell-taste of his grandma's food. We saw that later in the interview he explains this as a learnt-response, which linked to their past life together and so underpinned the continuity of the feeling of his grandma's care. However in this description, from earlier in the interview, there is an absence of biography - he introduces it as "just a sensation" (line 249). This is reminiscent of the traditional definition of hallucination as a sensation/perception with no corresponding object (chapter 1). The description means that the reality of the experience is downgraded, temporarily at least. In the context of his interview as a whole though, Samuel's experiences were not reduced to the psychological but he drew on several sources of meaning – and his descriptions could change (more on this in section 7.5. of this chapter).

Samuel is an academic psychologist, and so has a range of explanatory resources available to him<sup>50</sup>. He draws on this knowledge and applies it to his own experiences. However, he does not use any theory in its pure form, but uses concepts that become naturalised in a particular linguistic context; the context of his personal story. No one theory described his experiences adequately without reference to this story.

### 7.4.3. Stressing the absence

Some psychological accounts functioned to stress the 'break' in the bereaved's life, rather than the continuity. Tracey, for example, accounts for the smell as the result of longing for her husband;

#### Extract 38, Tracey 1

1318. Tracey: Cos you're trying to, find a way round, (.) this, (.) hole really.  
1319. JH: yeah. Yeah  
1320. Tracey: and that's the biggest issue  
1321. JH: yeah  
1322. Tracey: and that might be why the smell comes out because I come away feeling  
1323. this longing for him being there

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<sup>50</sup> Although Samuel has never studied experiences of presence, or 'hallucinations', as they are commonly termed in psychological theories.

Tracey poignantly accounts for her experience of presence as the result of her intense longing for her husband to be there – “you’re trying to find a way round this hole” (line 1318). However this is presented as what “might” (line 1322) be causing the smell rather than a definite interpretation. Sade also uses a similar explanation in her narrative;

#### Extract 39, Sade 1

369. Sade: obviously like doing psychology I’m like, not obviously like analysing myself  
370. or whatever but you’re kind of like just like, they’re normal experiences  
371. which you for example seeing my ex would be kind of like a normal  
372. experience of (.) having a loss and (.) you know, comforting yourself or  
373. whatever, the smell thing still weirds me out though cos it happened the  
374. day, at the time when she was (.) I was just like, that was, that was weird. I  
375. don’t know, hm:::

Sade accounts for her experience of presence in one of her bereavements, that of her ex-boyfriend, as “comforting yourself or whatever” (lines 372-373). In doing so she stresses the normality of this response to loss, repeating the description “normal experience” twice (lines 370 and 371). In making her identity as a psychology student relevant, she implies that this is the position from which she makes her assessment. This participant positioning does two things. Firstly, it accounts for her reflection on the experiences, because it is an area of interest. Secondly, it gives her activity of normalisation the basis of an ‘expert’ judgement.

Sade and Tracey’s explanations for their experiences of presence as due to an emotional need are similar to Freud’s theory of wish fulfillment - the experience of presence is an attempt to fill a gaping hole in the person’s life. By accounting for the experience of presence in this way, informants highlighted a paradox to the it – the (brief) continuity is there only because of the (huge) discontinuity, the loss, “the hole” (more on this ‘absence’ in Chapter 8).

#### **7.4.4. Expressing bereaved identities**

Psychological references were not always used to provide a causal explanation for the experience of presence, but were sometimes used in the interviews to shape some other aspect of the experiences. An example of this comes from Inge. The



reader may remember that Inge and others occasionally used religious and spiritual references to express their feelings of grief. Interestingly Inge used a psychological reference for the same purpose;

Extract 40, Inge

- 932 Inge: But I borrowed a book=er::: I wanted to read (.) what is it called?  
933 Something=like (.) Is it “staring at the sun”=er “the terror of the”  
934 JH: by Yalom.  
935 Inge: yeah and, a friend of mine came to ( ) and he said, “arh you’re afraid of  
936 dying?” “no, no no I’m not afraid of dying I’m just afraid it’s going to hurt.”  
937 So it’s very=um, the thought of dying is very comforting (.) because then  
938 will we, then I can be together  
939 JH: be reunited.  
940 Inge: mm=hmm  
941 JH: yeh.

Inge refers to a book by an existential psychotherapist, Irvin Yalom, in order to introduce her own attitude to death since the death of her boyfriend. The book is about ‘death anxiety’, and in it Yalom (2008) argues that a fear of dying is universal and in fact is at the root of all psychological problems. Inge uses this to convey that she has the opposite of the ‘normal’ relationship to death – the thought is “very comforting” to her (line 937). The reason she gives is that it is only through her own death that she can be “together” (line 938) again with her boyfriend. Note that Inge here begins this formulation with “we” (line 938) but then changes the pronoun to “I” (line 938). This false start implies that it is she who will be “together”, or a whole person, again. Although we cannot discount the possibility that this unusual phrasing is due to the fact that Inge is not using her first language in the interview.

So this concept from psychotherapy is used in concert with the idea of ‘heaven’ (remember that this resource is already in the background of her story, extract 8). The way this works is that she does not have the former, death anxiety, because of the latter, a belief in heaven and an intense longing to be with her boyfriend. This resonates with Sarah’s story; she emphasised her absence of fear over her own death because of the reunion that would follow. Inge thus works on her identity as a bereaved lover whose life is saturated by this grief. Indeed her narrative as a whole was one of tragedy, heartbreak and loss of meaning (see appendix 6 for full transcript).

This section documented the spontaneous use of psychological accounts by several informants to the study. These accounts were varied and could be used to;

1. Express a mode of continuity of the relationship, thereby enriching the meaning of the experience established through other sources of meaning. Psychology could provide an alternative to the continuity afforded by a spiritual account.
2. Cancel the reality of the presence - reducing the meaning of the experience, cancelling the continuity.
3. Stress the absence of the deceased and the bereaved person's longing for them – this was used as a causal explanation for the presence, or to express a grieving identity (Inge).

Analysis of the use of semiotic resources has so far revealed that seemingly polar explanatory resources – psychological versus spiritual – can in fact be used for the same functions: underpinning continuity and expressing bereavement. By observing not only which ideas are used but how they are used by informants in situ we can see that the methods are different but they may result in the same ends. The methodological and analytical approach has allowed this to become observable.

### ***7.5. Flexible use of semiotic resources***

It should be clear by now that informants showed a high degree of flexibility over the way in which they used semiotic resources<sup>51</sup>, such as the psychological theories, or religious teachings shown in this chapter. Flexible, in that participants showed they had a choice over what resources they used and how they used them. Esme for example selected particular spiritualist teachings and used them according to her own spiritual sense (as well as according to the progression of the interview with JH). Samira used some Hindu beliefs, but not others, to frame her experience. Many participants showed that psychiatric categories were available to them but they did not choose to use them to explain their own experiences.

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<sup>51</sup> This idea of resource follows from Costall and Leudar's (1996) discussion on how plans are used as resources in a flexible way, and from the idea in discourse analysis that discourses can be used flexibly to support activities and ways of thinking.

The orientations to the different understandings of what had happened did not occur mechanistically – they were not *determined* by participants' backgrounds; their knowledge; their cultural influences; their religion. However, this did not mean that their backgrounds did not influence the range of resources that were *available* to them. Many of the informants exercised epistemic pluralism in so far as they were not constrained to particular resources, but drew on different semiotic frames to perform particular activities. Such activities included: explaining some experiences of presence using one semiotic frame, and others using a different frame; using different semiotic resources to refer to different bereavements; or demonstrating a change in their explanatory resources over time. Although the analysis points towards some dominant paradigms (e.g. psychiatric/madness), informants live in a pluralistic world and these influences were also visible in the interviews.

Samuel was a good example of this – not only did he draw on his psychological knowledge differently to account for different experiences, but he also dropped the use of this knowledge in order to account for just one of his experiences in an alternative way. In the following extract, Samuel is describing the vision of his grandma that happened at the time of her death;

Extract 41, Samuel 1

169. Samuel: and that was really the first thing that was relevant to, to what you're  
170. doing although, even though I saw her, and I really did see her, on the one  
171. hand, there was no doubt in my mind that she was sitting in the couch, on  
172. the other hand, I realised that, you know, I was worried my mind might be  
173. playing tricks on me and stuff so it's not like, I didn't exactly believe, that  
174. she was sat there at that moment  
175. JH: yeah  
176. Samuel: but at the same time I did see her and it's quite difficult to  
177. reconcile the logical and the illogical, the emotional and the you  
178. know,  
179. JH: mm  
180. Samuel: but over time I've actually chosen almost to believe that,  
181. you know, I did see her, and that was like saying goodbye.  
182. JH: yeah

Samuel accounts for this particular vision separately to other visions he had in the weeks following his grandma's death. In this extract, the ontological status of his grandma is in flux – on the one hand he emphasises the fact that he “really did see her” (line 170) several times. But he also “didn't *exactly* believe, that she was sat

there at that moment” (line 173). The way he uses the terms here implies a difference between *him* seeing her, and *her actually sitting there* at that moment.

So the problem for Samuel is that he is seeing someone who he knows is not there. This puzzle can be solved in different ways and with reference to different epistemic resources as an aid. These include those we have seen already: 'she is there spiritually, but not physically'; 'it is my imagination'; 'it is stress that causes me to see her'. Samuel shows such an orientation to different explanatory resources in the extract, and his dilemma can be formulated as the following – was it my mind playing tricks on me, or my grandma saying goodbye? The former cancels the initial significance of the experience and situates the event in his mind (a method we saw him use before). The latter is a much ‘thicker’ description that places the vision within the context of her illness/death, their relationship, and the spiritual, as a direct communication from her. The thematic field (Gurwitsch, 1964) Samuel creates is different in each description. Samuel shows that in fact having two 'fields' is possible – and that the dominance of one over another is not automatic, nor static, but can change with time. He presents this as the exercising of a choice (line 180), and he has chosen the 'thicker' over the 'thinner' description. Note though that he presents this as “almost” (line 180) believing, and “like” (line 181) saying goodbye. It is not a formulation of unwavering certainty, and as we have seen, this expression of doubt was common in the interviews, in both psychological and spiritual accounting. The interpretation he chooses is that his grandma was saying goodbye – but this comes with a qualification – this is how he chooses to explain it on the occasion of the interview (and there is of course a life beyond the interview!).

Tracey illustrated this point when, by the second interview, she showed she had started to interpret the smell of her husband differently. Her use of psychological accounting disappeared when she described a new experience. This occurred when she experienced the powerful smell of her husband after a new bereavement had happened in the family;

#### Extract 42, Tracey 2

73. Tracey: it calmed me really down because I felt really stressed and everything  
74. that'd been going on and Jack ((her son)) was a bit, wobbly. .hh and, it just  
75. really calmed me down just knowing that he, his, he was there, I felt as if  
76. he was actually there because it was such a strong sense of smell.

Previously, Tracey had used two psychological accounts to explain the smell (extracts 33 and 34, this chapter). This time, these accounts are absent. Tracey instead uses the vividness of the experience (rather than spiritualist metaphysics) to merit her “knowing” (line 75) and ‘feeling’ (line 75) that “he was there” (lines 75-76).

Clare and Sade both talked about more than one person who had died, and both accounted for their experiences of presence of each person differently. Clare used spiritualism to characterise both her grandma and her little cousin, Isabella, as ‘angels’. But they were different kinds of angels - her grandma was a ‘guardian angel’ figure, but Isabella was not. This made direct sense in terms of the continuity it underpinned – in life, grandma was a caregiver to Clare, but Clare was a caregiver to Isabella who was only a little girl when she died. Sade, as we have seen, used psychological accounting to explain the visions of her ex-boyfriend, but implied that something else caused the smell of her auntie (extract 39). She did not offer an account for the smell, instead concluding that "it weirds me out" (line 373).

Informants also occasionally used additional cultural resources in order to foreground some other aspect of their experiences. In Julie’s case, this was a storyline from a TV soap. In others, this included a book (Jude), and opera, and a song (Inge). Unfortunately there is not the space to show examples here, but they were all used to express something about their relationship with the deceased and their grief after the death.

What these cases demonstrate is that informants are never constrained to using a particular accounting resource. They can drop it, change it, show they are aware of it but it is not relevant, or simply not use any semiotic resource and let the reported phenomenal qualities of the experiences speak for themselves. They do not have to exercise a ‘false’ consistency in their presentations to other people. They also do not have to be certain of exactly what happened to them in order to find the experience emotionally compelling and significant.

## 7.6. *Spirits or Symptoms? Use of semiotic resources in the interviews - Conclusion.*

Semiotic resources were used in the interviews to provide accounts for the experience of presence – accounting for how it happened (and sometimes accounting for *when* it happened). This was not the only kind of use, as occasionally they were also drawn upon in the interview to perform other activities, including expressing intense grief. Informants did not have to produce an ontological account of their experience of presence, though most did.

The teachings of organised religions were used very little. Not all religions were represented in this group of informants, but at least three were (Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism) and yet informants did not, for the most part, use these formal discourses in working on the meaning of their feelings and senses of presence. Two people demonstrated a change in their personal beliefs since the deaths. This change was towards religious faith, rather than away from it. None of the informants discussed becoming less religious since their bereavements. Julie was the only person to express anger towards her god, not so much about the death but about her continued suffering at the hands of the voice. The faith-transformative nature of experiences of presence has certainly been noted previously (see Klass, 1992) and this appeared in some but by no means all of the stories reported here.

Spiritualist or so-called ‘folk’-religious resources appeared much more commonly than references to formal religious teachings/practices. These were used to give the experience of presence meaning as a continuation of the soul, or spirit of the deceased. These were not the extraordinary, scary, or even violent spirits that are often found in films and books, but were ‘everyday’ spirits. Even the spirits who resembled poltergeists in their mode of communication, causing lights to flicker or appliances to switch off (the spirits in Esther and Jude), were not related to as frightening or hostile presences. The spirits did not give the informant special knowledge or powers, but rather did and said quite ordinary things. This however did not mean they could do all the things that an ordinary person could do – for example, Aggie’s boyfriend could ask her ‘where’s the ring?’ but could not go and find it himself. Spirits can’t wash the dishes, or make the bed. Most of them are better described as *relational spirits* – their purpose is to communicate.

This chapter also documented the careful use of these spiritual accounts, visible in the high concentration of rhetorical devices in the talk. This suggested that informants were treating this activity as controversial. Resonant with the Conversation Analytic literature on disclaimers (see Hewitt and Stokes, 1975), and Wooffitt's (1992) analysis of accounts of anomalous experiences, these were methods of accounting that allowed informants to dodge certain undesirable social identities.

Concerns about social identity are seemingly reflected in the curious use of psychiatric/medical sources of meaning in the interviews. It was frequently present in the accounts, although with one exception, it was not used to account for experiences of presence. This showed that medical and psychiatric relevancies were in the background for many interviewees, and needed to be dealt with for identity reasons – to distance themselves from the discourse of illness, symptoms and madness. This was an example of a semiotic frame that was frequently used, but not *useful* for informants in characterising their experiences. If a frame appears, but is not useful, it is likely to be there for reasons of self-presentation.

The way in which these two semiotic resources – psychiatry and spiritualism – were introduced in local circumstances, pointed to the mutually-constitutive nature of accounting for experiences and managing social identity.

Psychology appeared in varying forms – those theories that are most popular in academic theories and research paradigms (the concept of 'hallucination' as a cognitive mistake) appeared infrequently, despite the presence of a handful of psychologists in the study. The unpopularity of this kind of accounting seemed to be due to its consequence of downgrading the person's experience. To use it, informants would have to cancel out the vivid qualities to the experience, and also deny the continuity with their biographies that it affords. The downgrading would, in effect, erase much of the established thematic field of the experience. One person created a new concept in her accounting – the 'emotional after-effect'. She used this to convey her love for her husband and its continuation through the experience of presence, his smell. The openness of the interviewing method allowed participants such creativity in their use of sources of meaning and did not confine them to existing psychological paradigms.

The analysis has demonstrated the eclecticism inherent in the accounts – most informants oriented to one or more competing explanatory frames and many used more than one. This showed that the use of a semiotic resource, any semiotic resource, is not mandatory but varies according to the informant's activity. It was necessary to look at the local circumstances of the talk in order to understand the relevance of the semiotic resource and how it interacts with others.

Finally, the use of semiotic resources most commonly foregrounds the importance of the biographic source of meaning. The psychological and spiritual references most often had the same function – to support the continuity already established through biographical references to the shared life before the death. Often, not only did they complement the biographic relevancies previously established in thematic field, but they were used in concert with references to the shared-life with the deceased before the death.

So were the experiences of presence described as symptoms, or spirits? The answer is, in most cases, neither. The concept of symptom reduces the experiences too much and dismantles immediate connections to other sources of meaning (such as the biographical). Some 'presences' were accounted for as spiritual, but these spirits were of a particular kind: relational. More accurately, the meanings tended to be far more ordinary than either of these terms suggest. The 'presence' most often reflected a form of ordinary life shared with the deceased.



## Chapter 8 - Does an experience of presence mitigate pain and loss in bereavement?

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Previous research has suggested that far from being pathological or 'maladaptive', experiences of continuing presence may help a person to cope with their bereavement (Glick et al, 1974; Parkes, 1972; Conant, 1996). However, this question has not until now been the focus of enquiry, nor has it been examined with reference to a variety of cases. This chapter will address this question with reference to the narratives of informants to the present study.

This chapter will follow the last in examining experiences of continuing presence in all its variety – voices, visions, smells, tastes, pressure and touch, feelings, and other signs of presence. Chapters 5 and 6 showed how these experiences came to be linked to the deceased as signs of them. This involved referring to the here-and-now setting in concert with biographical references to show the link with the deceased's agency. Chapter 7 documented the accounts people made for this presence. This included the consequences of using various semiotic resources. Meaning and function are inextricably linked, so rather than being a whole new enquiry this chapter shifts the focus of the investigation to ask a different question of the interviews – do the experiences of presence mitigate pain and loss in a bereavement?

Thus the focus of this chapter will be specifically on the function that these experiences have in these stories of bereavement. By looking at a number of cases, we will see that the answer to this question is not a simple 'yes' or 'no', but is highly dependent on the bereaved person's circumstances at the time the presence is felt or 'sensed'.

### *8.1. Soothing presences*

There were many examples in the interviews of experiences that were narrated as helpful or soothing for the bereaved in some way. Within these I have identified two broad functions: experiences of presence that focus on the bereaved's current

activity/problem, and those with a primary focus on the relationship itself, the grief. Within these themes there is of course a significant variety in terms of the circumstances as well as the nature of the 'help' that is offered, variety that I will illustrate now through the cases.

### 8.1.1. Focus on a current activity, problem or dilemma.

In these cases, the experience of presence was narrated as either helpful or soothing in light of a current predicament that the bereaved person faced.

#### **Sarah**

Just before the following extract, Sarah has been talking about being asked to read part of the Good Friday story at a church service. It is the part where Mary is watching her son, Jesus, die (this example was also shown in chapter 6, extract 12). This was a particularly difficult passage for Sarah to read because her own son died about twenty years before, when he was still a very small baby.

#### Extract 1, Sarah

87. Sarah: but it was just, .hh:.....: I thought, "can I do this?" heh=heh  
88. JH: Yeah  
89. Sarah: Erm, anyhow, I thought, "well, I'm just gonna have to do it!" So I did it, and,  
90. but it was really, really really difficult. And towards the end I was only  
91. just holding it together.  
92. JH: mm::  
93. Sarah: So I went back to my seat, and I was almost physically shaking with the  
94. effort of having to, to do this and remain (.) together while I was doing it.  
95. And, at that point, I felt, I had, almost like, a some sort of a not, a, a  
96. pressure on my shoulder, there, and I just thought well, ah, that's Benjamin  
97. and he's saying ((claps)) "Mum, you've done it,"  
98. JH: mm::  
99. Sarah: you know, and it was (.) so strong that I, I put my hand up to feel (.) his  
100. hand  
101. JH: aww::  
102. Sarah: there, which was (.) incredibly powerful, and has never happened, never  
103. happened before  
104. JH: Yeah  
105. Sarah: And that really sort of, you know, said to me (.) that he's, he's with me  
106. JH: Yeah  
107. Sarah: and he was, he was there with me at that particular  
108. JH: Yeah  
109. Sarah: very difficult (.) moment  
110. JH: Yeah  
111. Sarah: and afterwards.

112. JH: Yeah  
113. Sarah: Erm, and that was incredibly helpful and comforting  
114. JH: Yeah  
115. Sarah: to, to have  
116. JH: Yeah  
117. Sarah: experienced that

Sarah emphasises the emotionally-gruelling nature of this task in several ways: with the sigh (line 87) conveying the effort, with the 'directly-reported' speech ("can I do this?", line 87), through repetition of "really" (line 90), and through details of the story such as she was nearly falling apart (lines 90-91), and "almost physically shaking" (line 93). This is the emotionally-demanding context in which the pressure she feels on her shoulder is received not only as extremely vivid (line 99) but also as "incredibly helpful and comforting" (line 113). Narratively then, Sarah creates a problem, and the experience is invoked to resolve it. The comforting quality comes from the clear meaning this has for her – that her son was present with her through this difficult moment, but also in a general way, all the time; "he's with me.....and he was there with me" (lines 105-109). The feeling of Benjamin's presence offers Sarah strength and encouragement in her story of bereavement. Note though that this 'help' does not come during the problem – she faces it alone – but rather comes after she has gotten through the ordeal, at the moment of relief. "Mum, you've done it" (line 97) refers back to something she has overcome.

Sarah's case shows that a person may only begin to feel the deceased's presence many years after their death. It also shows that the deceased that is sensed may not always be 'fixed' as they were at the moment of their death - the actions of the presence in Sarah's case are appropriate to a grown man rather than a baby. It is as if her son has grown along with her, which contrasts to Janet's description of these experiences as 'fixed ideas'. So Sarah's experience is not only helpful to her because of its timing, but because of the 'grown-up son' position from which this help comes from - the experience implies that her son has 'lived-on' in some way.

We saw in chapter 6 that this example of Sarah's was typical of the other experiences of Benjamin's presence (chapter 6, extract 12). They happened at times when her grief for him was foregrounded in some way. The experience of presence, through touch or a general 'feeling', mitigated her sense of loneliness and loss in such circumstances. The presence always helped her cope with intense emotions,

rather than with the accomplishment of a specific task (unlike some instances of voices, see below)<sup>52</sup>.

### ***Esme***

The experience of presence in Esme's narrative also functioned to help her with feelings of loss, this time for a father. Esme's story also follows the narrative format of defining a problem that contextualises the experience of presence.

#### Extract 2, Esme

85. Esme: Yeah. Anyway, that was that and we thought, we must go back to Granada  
86. because, if we don't go, we might never go, and even though it didn't  
87. actually happen there, it's an association, that that's where it all went  
88. wrong, and there was a bench in the garden. And he used to sit on this  
89. bench, and as soon as I got there, because my mum was coming with my  
90. sister, but, a couple of days after us. .hh, as soon as I got there and I  
91. looked at the bench, that was it, I, you know, started bawling and  
92. everything. Anyway, the night before they arrived, it was a house with a  
93. bed, one bedroom upstairs and two downstairs and the master bedroom  
94. was upstairs and my husband was snoring like mad, and it was just the  
95. two of us, and I thought, "d'you know, he;s doing my head in, I'm going  
96. downstairs to sleep", I went downstairs and, I was lying in bed and, I was  
97. sleeping and I felt like, literally somebody lying on top of me, and I tend to  
98. sleep on my stomach, and it was somebody and they were like pressing  
99. me down like this

The problem that Esme sketches is that she is back in the place where her father fell ill, and this association is upsetting her (line 103). The problem is the loss itself, and it is symbolised by the bench - where he once sat, and which now stresses his absence (line 103). Chapter 5 shows in detail what happens next – there is a feeling of pressure and then a voice with the message, "I'm fine, thank you" (see chapter 5, extract 4). Although this experience is initially presented as shocking and alarming (chapter 5, extract 5, lines 114-115), this has the 'final' function of addressing her loss – she takes on board the message that her father is fine as reassuring and comforting. For Esme, the problem is the fact of the death itself; the pressure at first alarms her but then the voice appears and helps Esme with her grief. The function of Esme's voice in this respect is similar to Sarah's experience of her son. But the linguistic source of meaning within the biographical context (see chapter 5, section 3)

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<sup>52</sup> This 'help' is meant in the direct sense - helping her with emotions may of course help indirectly with specific tasks she has to accomplish.

allows the function of Esme's experience a wider scope – the voice explicitly addresses the welfare of the deceased in the afterlife – he is dead, but he is "fine" (chapter 5, extract 4, line 116). This implies her father's peace and acceptance with this state of affairs, and the rest of Esme's story showed how this helped her to reach the same sense of acceptance about his death.

### ***Samuel and Clare***

Samuel and Clare both felt the presence of their respective grandmothers at times of anxiety or worry and experienced comfort from this. Before the deaths, both of them had been extremely close to their grandmothers and had gone to them for help with worries and troubles. The following example comes from Samuel. It may also be seen in chapter 6, extract 6, and is an example of Samuel's smell-taste. JH asks Samuel to give a specific example of this after he had introduced the happenings in a more general way.

#### Extract 3, Samuel 1

280. JH: can I ask you, erm, about the last time that one of these things  
281. happened? Like first of all, perhaps the taste? Can you remember  
282. back to the last time that happened?  
283. Samuel: yeah, it was probably, erm, it was after Christmas so it was only in the last  
284. sort=of three, three months or something, and=erm,I had a meeting with  
285. Matt erm, and I was just a bit worried about it cos I hadn't seen him for like  
286. quite a while before Christmas and had like, quite a lot of work to get done,  
287. and it was late at night the night before the meeting and I was like quite um,  
288. .t! I think it was in January then I was quite worried  
289. JH: mm  
290. Samuel: but it was late January because Matt was away for most of January, and  
291. um, I was just sort of tried to pull this paper together which I finally  
292. managed to do and, I was just, it was late at night it was like gone, gone  
293. eleven probably. Or maybe later. And then it started actually with a smell of  
294. like this, this meatballs that she used to make  
295. JH: yeah  
296. Samuel: which were quite gorgeous  
297. JH: mm  
298. Samuel: and um, I was, I just remembered sort of smelling it and thinking "oh god  
299. it's starting." Not in=a in=a kind of worried way like "oh god it's starting" but  
300. just like, "that's really interesting." And, it was a very strong, powerful smell.  
301. Which, I knew wasn't in the room but I could definitely smell it none the  
302. less. Erm, and, erm, sort of a few seconds after that, I could really taste like  
303. JH: mm  
304. Samuel: the food

Samuel orients with ease to JH's request to relate the last time he smelt and tasted his grandma's food, and like Sarah, he begins this part of his narrative by setting up the problem situation. It was late at night, he is alone, working hard to finish something and feeling anxious about a meeting with his boss the next day (lines 284-293). He in fact upgrades the worry from "I was just a bit worried" (line 285) to "I was quite worried" 4 lines later. Only after Samuel contextualises the experience in this way does he introduce the smell of meatballs. These were not just any meatballs, but specifically the ones his grandma used to make for him, which were "quite gorgeous" (line 296). So the smell, and the taste that followed, we could say are intrinsically pleasant experiences for Samuel. Like Sarah's, the experience brings an emotional comfort after he has faced a difficult task and begun to resolve it – he says, "which I finally *managed* to do" (lines 291-292, my emphasis). This shows that it does not appear during the task itself, but soothes him afterwards (presumably, some worry about the meeting with the boss remained as he does not imply otherwise). This follows directly from the nature of their relationship before the death – his grandma could not help him write his papers but could be there afterwards to comfort him and make him a nice meal, which she did regularly (see chapter 6, extract 7). This relationship to his grandma is presupposed in this sense – she offers a standard role of comforter and consoler, both in life and now through this experience of presence. The feeling therefore continues an ordinary engagement between them. The discursive structure makes the smell and taste consequential to the struggle, but the presence of his grandma also redefines the struggle retrospectively – he was not alone, they are still a team. This is very similar to the meaning Sarah gave to her experience of Benjamin - "he's with me....and he was there with me" (extract 1, line 105). The difference in Sarah's case is that her son in the role of comforter cannot be presupposed - this dynamic is new, and surprising.

So how did Samuel see his experiences? JH asked him more about this in the second interview, in which Samuel said "It does always happen with worry though, it never happens when I'm relaxed, I don't think" (see appendix 3, Samuel 2, line 29). A little later in the second interview, JH asked him more about how this experience works, in direct response to Samuel's statement that smelling and tasting the food "maybe take the worry away" (line 59).

#### Extract 4, Samuel 2

58. Samuel: I see it just as erm, (.) a coping mechanism, something like that, just  
59. something which maybe takes the worry away, but it's unusual.
60. JH: mm::  
61. (4.0)  
62. Does it take the worry away, sort of, because it's such a sort of soothing  
63. thing?  
64. Samuel: Yeah, I think so, erm  
65. (1.5)  
66. It just  
67. (1.5)  
68. it also distracts from whatever I was worried about, so it's like, "Oh! I've got  
69. a meeting, a bit later on", and, "oh, I'm really panicking", and then, you  
70. know, I am quite an anxious person I think anyway, so (.) I'm always  
71. worried about something, but like, whatever the sort of stimulus is, it  
72. sometimes happens, erm, I mean, oft - I mean nine times out of ten it  
73. doesn't happen because I suffer with it happening anyway, and, I mean  
74. constantly walking around with it, but if I'm, like, really worried about  
75. something specific, then it, maybe it's more likely to happen, and erm (.)  
76. Yeah, I just think it distracts me from that worry and makes me almost puts  
77. me back on to what's important, which is living and family, for me anyway,  
78. and so it makes me think that oh, whatever this worry is, it's not, it's not  
79. that bad, *((engine noise and reversing beep from outside))* so, you know,  
80. it's part of how it works.  
81. JH: right, erm  
82. Samuel: yeah

JH uses Samuel's phrase "take the worry away" (line 59) and asks for more information by way of a suggestion – is it "soothing" (line 62)? Samuel responds in a 'preferred' way by initially agreeing, but then goes on to specify exactly how this smell and taste 'works' on the worry. Firstly, the food distracts him from whatever it is he is worried about (line 68, line 76), and secondly, it puts the situation he is worried about in a different perspective – in relation to family, and living (line 77), the worry loses its power. Weaved into this account is identity work that characterises Samuel as "quite an anxious person" (line 70). By using this term, along with "coping mechanism" (line 58), and "stimulus" (line 71), Samuel appears to be drawing on his knowledge of psychology in making this account.

So all in all Samuel also presents benefits to his experiences of smell-taste – they can mitigate his anxiety at times of stress. As in Sarah's narrative, the experience of presence comes after a gruelling or difficult task, at the moment of relief, which begs the question, is this always the case?

Clare's narrative was similar to Samuel's in that she felt her grandma's presence at times when she was worried or upset about something; in her case through hearing her voice or smelling her familiar perfume. This also comforted her, helping her to overcome this upset. However, the difference between Clare's case and the others reported so far is that Clare felt this presence during the problem, rather than afterwards.

Extract 5, Clare 1

166. Clare: if I'm I've been really upset o:r I feel that she knows that I need her to be  
 167. there then yeah I more often than not smell her perfume and the last time it  
 168. happened was m=hrm was outside in the nursery and e:rm I was outside  
 169. supervising the children and I was just really upset about something I just  
 170. must have been down about something and the guy that I worked said are  
 171. you alright and I just felt really strange I think before it happened I got a  
 172. weird=  
 173. JH: =weird [feeling]  
 174. Clare: [feeling] as if something's (.) the matter but you don't know  
 175. what and erm yeah and then I could smell my Nana's perfume outside and  
 176. it was that strong and I was looking everywhere and I thought there's only  
 177. three children there that are anywhere near me and I was smelling the  
 178. children and I thought you know there's nobody around that it could have  
 179. come in the wind you know and I said to the guy that I work with "god I can  
 180. really can" you know and he said "what's wrong" "I really smell my Nana I  
 181. can really" you know it was really strong and I said "can you smell  
 182. anything?" and of course he can't he couldn't smell anything [but for]  
 183. JH: [right]

Clare begins with a summary formulation of instances where she has smelt her grandmother's perfume. In this summary, there is a problem, and then her grandma's smell appears. Unlike Sarah and Samuel, the type of problem is not that she has a difficult task to accomplish, but it is specifically emotional - it involves being "really upset" (line 166), and feeling a "need" for her grandmother to be with her (line 166). The smell appears "more often than not" (line 167) in such circumstances. This smell then deepens the meaning of Clare's "need" to "feel that she knows that I need her" (line 166). It introduces her grandmother's intention to soothe her.

Clare then gives a specific example of this type of situation. The problem she narrates is that she is at work feeling "just really upset about something" (line 169), and feeling very "strange" (line 171). The detail that this is visible to her colleague emphasises this upset. It is then that the smell appears (line 175) – note that this time the experience of presence starts during the problem rather than on its



resolution. This is in keeping with the slightly different nature of the problem – it is not a task she has to achieve that her grandmother could not have helped with like Samuel, but is a predominantly emotional problem, and just the sort of problem her grandmother would help her with in life. Like Samuel's smell-taste, the function of this presence presupposes their relationship before the death. Clare then narrates a process of looking for a source of this smell, of which there is none in her surroundings (lines 176-179). The implication from the way she introduces this episode is that this is an example of her grandmother appearing just when she needs her – like Sarah and Samuel, the message seems to be that she is not alone through this adversity.

### ***Aggie and Tracey***

Two further cases presented helpful aspects to experiences of presence in coping with current problems. Aggie heard the voice of her boyfriend who died, and as chapter 5 documented, this voice said a variety of things to her. The way she narrated this had aspects in common with other cases we looked at so far, as the following extract shows.

#### Extract 6, Aggie

52. Aggie: things he would say if he was here like sometimes (.) he says he really  
53. misses me an (.) like I was really quite ill  
54. JTB: mm  
55. Aggie: erm (.) last year (.) like I had bad depression an everything  
56. JTB: mm  
57. Aggie: and he'd kinda say to me (.) "I'm really proud of you you're doing (.) a lot  
58. better an (.) keep on trying I know you don't want to but k(h)eeep on going"  
59. (.) erm (.) like he'll say stuff to me like (.) when he died I had long dark hair  
60. down to there ((*points to half-way down her arms*))  
61. JTB: mm  
62. Aggie: an now I've got short blonde hair  
63. JTB: mm=hm  
64. Aggie: he says "I absolutely love your hair and I hated the thought of you getting it  
65. cut (.) but it's nice"

The narrative format is familiar, Aggie starts by defining a problem – being “really quite ill” (line 53) and having “bad depression” (line 55), before introducing the experience of presence, a voice, as a summary formulation rather than a specific utterance - "he'd kinda say to me" (line 57). The voice provides encouragement to her during these emotional problems. In this sense, the experience of presence has

more in common with Clare's, in that it helps during an emotional problem rather than on the resolution of a more concrete task that the bereaved must achieve. Aggie also relates another function to the voice – to compliment her on changes she had made to her appearance. Although this is not defined as a 'problem', like Samuel and Sarah the experience of presence occurs after the event in question (the haircut). As chapter 5 implied, it functions to continue his 'liking' of her hair. Aggie even says explicitly that these comments continue the relationship – they are “things he would say if he was here” (line 52). The 'help', encouragement and compliments, is of a kind that is appropriate to the girlfriend/boyfriend relationship. The concreteness of the experience increases the potency of the help – the level of comfort involved in hearing his voice now, versus remembering what 'he would have said if he were here', would be quite different.

Chapter 6 documented how Tracey experienced her husband's presence since his death through the spontaneous and powerful smell of his aftershave on a few occasions. In the second interview, her narrative followed the same format as those cases above – she defined a problem, which was a new bereavement in the family, she felt stressed, and her son was upset about this. She explained how the subsequent appearance of the smell helped her with this problem;

#### Extract 7, Tracey 2

72. JH: and you say you felt his presence?  
73. Tracey: no, I think it was just the fact that I could feel his smell and it calmed me  
74. really down because I felt really stressed and everything that'd been going  
75. on and Jack ((her son)) was a bit, wobbly. .hh and, it just really calmed me  
76. down just knowing that he, his, he was there, I felt as if he was actually  
77. there because it was such a strong sense of smell.

The extract starts with JH asking a clarifying question (line 72) and Tracey rejecting the assessment that she 'felt' a presence (line 73). She goes onto warrant this rejection, as is customary in 'dispreferred' answers, by saying what she did experience. It was "his smell" (line 73), and this calmed her down, and helped her to feel less alone (lines 76-77). She mentions her son's upset - "Jack was a bit wobbly" (line 75) - and this stresses her status as a single parent. She was not only dealing with her own grief, but also his grief, and furthermore, she was doing this alone. The smell, in invoking her husband's presence, gave her a sense that she was not alone,

and that her husband was sharing in their problems. Like Clare and Aggie, this experience of presence happened during the problem, rather than on its resolution.

### ***Isaac and Samuel***

Both Isaac and Samuel heard a voice that was focused on a very practical concern, and directly helped them to solve it. Isaac is Samuel's father, and, chapter 5 documented the remarkable fact that they heard the voice of the same person (Samuel's grandmother, Isaac's mother) helping them with the same problem, on separate occasions. Here is a reminder of how Isaac presented his experience in the interview.

#### Extract 8, Isaac

67. Isaac: yeah, I, I, ah, I- erm  
68. (2.0)  
69. she has, er, she had, in the sink,  
70. (1.0)  
71. what's it called now? I'm, the, the name's gone, er  
72. (2.0)  
73. you get rid of your rubbish  
74. (1.0)  
75. JH: waste [disposal, yeah, yeah]  
76. Isaac: [waste disposal, sorry, waste disposal] ((sips drink)) and erm ((sips  
77. again)) I was always, forever fixing it for her, she'd put down something, a  
78. spoon or whatever, and it broke  
79. (1.2)  
80. anyway, my sister said can you come across, and when you come can you  
81. fix the (0.2) waste disposal  
82. JH: mm=hmm  
83. Isaac: so I said OK, yeah.  
84. (2.0)  
85. and like, there's a button, at the back (0.8) which I know now (0.8) but I  
86. didn't remember it as of the time. And as clear (0.8) as  
87. (1.0)  
88. I'm speaking to you  
89. (2.0)  
90. JH: mm  
91. Isaac: It sung, "keep going Isaac, it's there"  
92. JH: woah

Isaac's experience of his mother's presence, through hearing her voice, helps him to solve a problem for his sister. As discussed in chapter 5, section 3, his narration embeds this task in a past routine shared with his mother – "I was always, forever fixing it for her" (line 77). Isaac positions this household chore as familiar, yet, this did not mean that he knew about the "button" (line 85) – he needed reminding. He

narrates this episode from two positions – before he knew about the button (line 86), and after (line 85), and this sets up a dramatic gap for the voice to fill by giving him this knowledge (line 91). In his narrative the voice intervenes, and encourages him to continue towards the solution (line 91). This voice intervenes *during* a problem that needs to be solved rather than on its resolution, but unlike Clare, Aggie and Tracey, the problem is more straightforwardly practical in nature.

Samuel's account had some strikingly similar features – he heard his grandma's voice which guided him towards the same button. However, he defined the problem slightly differently and as we know from chapter 5, the voice used different words, as the following extract shows.

#### Extract 9. Samuel 1

218. Samuel: the waste disposal in the house wasn't working, my grandpa was like  
219. getting quite stressed about it because, erm, (.) he couldn't, that's what (I'm  
220. on about), he really sort of like caved in a bit and tiny little things like the  
221. waste disposal not working the television maybe like going, on the blink  
222. for like a second, .hh or, like half a day or something, really really like ( )  
223. would stress him, and sort=of=like bent down to  
224. (1.0)  
225. look for the waste disposal, and I heard my grandma say, "it's at the back,  
226. it's at the back". And, just, I just heard her say those words, and as I looked  
227. towards the back I could see there was like a, thing that needed, needed to  
228. be turned, so it was as though like, she sort of guided me to fixing that thing

The narrative structure of these examples from Samuel and Isaac are very similar – they both are helping someone else with the same household problem and the voice of grandma/mum intervenes to help. However unlike Isaac, Samuel situates the problem in his grandpa's grief-stricken state at the time – specifically his panic about seemingly trivial household hitches (lines 220-222). The words of the voice are also different – in Samuel's case they more clearly guide him in the direction of the button; in Isaac's, the words advise him to continue a course of action he is already taking. The type of 'help' offered is therefore subtly different, although results in the same solution. What is the source of the 'helpfulness'? Partly, it seems to be that the voice in these two examples fits so perfectly into the situation at hand. The 'presence' does not 'fix' things for the bereaved person directly, but facilitates the bereaved person's current intention.

It seems so far that an experience of presence can not only help a person by way of encouraging them or comforting them in difficult times, but may also intervene more directly to help with a task at hand. These experiences could all be regarded as helping a person to cope with something their life without their loved-one has challenged them with. They are, at the very least, facilitative of the person to continue with their immediate activities and life. In all cases, the presence is helpful, precisely because the relationship that is presupposed *can* help with this particular problem *or part of* the problem. However, in one case, despite being focused on the bereaved person's here-and-now, the presence brought something rather more mischievous.

### **Jude**

Extract 9 in chapter 6 showed Jude talking about 'signs' she had experienced from her brother since his death. What follows is an extended version of this extract.

#### Extract 10, Jude

152. Jude: we've had a few things it's really funny because mum and dad have  
 153. experienced them as well, and we kind of know that it's him trying to tell us  
 154. something, he um, he's made my dad's car, refuse to start a couple of  
 155. times, his old car but, due to the nature of what my brother was involved  
 156. with and because my dad had been down there and could obviously, er  
 157. >when he went missing<, could obviously give information and things like  
 158. that, we were quite concerned that you know, someone might come=an or,  
 159. things would happen, so we had a panic alarm, a couple of panic alarms in  
 160. the house. So I was sitting there one day just reading, and the phone rang  
 161. and I said=er:: and they said "it's \_\_((name of town)) police here, erm, are  
 162. you alright?", "yeah, I'm fine!" .hh said "well your panic alarm's gone off  
 163. we're sending a patrol out I said, (.) "no I haven't (.) touched the panic  
 164. alarm" and=er, they said "well you must've done something" "no I'm  
 165. nowhere near the panic alarm, no-one's been near it, it's just gone off" and  
 166. the same thing happened about twelve hours later, it was about four in the  
 167. morning, "we're sending a patrol out, is everything alright?" I'm like "what's  
 168. going on?" "your panic alarm's gone off" "no. no. we haven't touched it,  
 169. everyone's in bed asleep, no-one can do anything" .hh:: and=um, another  
 170. time I was up at the (.) young offender's institution, and (.) the alarm went  
 171. off, in the young offenders, and there was all these=er, ( ) and  
 172. everything, running round and, it'd just gone off for no reason I thought,  
 173. "that's him. He's doing that." .hh and he, he had this huge TV and it sits at  
 174. mum and dad's and it sort of stares. And often I'll be sitting watching it and  
 175. it just switches itself off. Sometimes it'll work fine for ages and other times  
 176. it's just ((clicks fingers))  
 177. JH: m  
 178. Jude: and you just, and you know it's him and I just said to him, and I'll just say to  
 179. the TV, "it's not funny"

180. JH: eh=heh=heh=heh=heh!  
181. Jude: huh=huh=heh! Huh=huh=huh! And you were irritating when you were alive,  
182. and you're still irritating now. hhuh!=heh!

The narrative structure of Jude's account of the presence is different to the others so far – she does not begin by defining a problem for the presence to intervene – the 'problem' *is* the sign of presence. She in fact introduces a list of problem-presences;

1. two instances of her dad's car refusing to start
2. two instances of the panic alarm going off at home
3. the panic alarm going off at the young offenders institution she worked at
4. frequent instances of the TV switching off while she's watching it

These instances are grouped together in her narrative on the basis that her brother's intent is behind all of them. For example, she states clearly that "*he's made* my dad's car refuse to start" (line 154). Regarding the alarm in the young offender's institution, she says "I thought, 'that's him. He's doing that.'" (line 173), and with the TV says "you know it's him" (line 178). But how does Jude know that these particular 'mishaps' are caused by her brother? Chapter 6 documented the link between the 'staring' TV and her brother - it was his (extract 9). The panic alarm is there because of the danger to Jude and her family after her brother was murdered. It is less clear from Jude's story why the alarm at the young offenders' institution related to her brother, or indeed what the link was with her father's car. It is possible then that Jude attributes all such electrical/mechanical faults to her brother.

Note that she introduces these problems as shared with her parents, speaking as "we" and "us" (lines 152 and 153), and as meaning her brother is "trying to tell us something" (lines 153-154). Her formulation suggests that such communicative signs are seen as normal within her family.

It could be said that this presence provides Jude with the opposite of 'help' in her life now. Yet, it has a paradoxical function – the interference is annoying on one level, but comforts her simultaneously. This comfort seems to lie in the fact that this kind of mischief is distinctly the kind that was favoured by her brother in life (line 181), and that there may be some message for them from him in this mischief (lines 153-154). Jude also conveys the more comforting elements to this by the significant humour

with which she relates this (lines 178-182). Like the other narratives so far, the nature of the presence is appropriate to the relationship before the death. However Jude is an exception, because the comfort comes not from any 'help' with her current circumstances but from the hindrance itself.

So despite the fact that Jude's brother's presence actively interferes in her current surroundings and causes her more troubles<sup>53</sup>, she takes comfort from this that he is still his old mischievous self, somewhere at least. If his presence suddenly became benign or even supportive, this would no doubt seem much more strange to her.

This section has documented those experiences of presence that have helped the bereaved by being focused on a current activity or concern. The 'presence' intervened to help the person achieve a goal, or to help soothe their upset feelings. Some of these, at face value, may seem more like hindrance than help (Jude). It was only in the biographical context that the emotional helpfulness of Jude's experience became clear. The next section documents further cases where the presence was found to be helpful. However the 'help' seemed to act more directly on the relationship with the deceased.

### **8.1.2. Focus on the relationship or the grief**

In the examples given so far, the relationships with the deceased were not 'problematic' in that they were able to be presupposed in the experiences themselves as supportive/loving (or cheeky, in Jude's case). This was not the case all of the time. Aggie, for example, had some 'unresolved business' with her boyfriend before his death. Part of the way the voice can help her now is through working on the meaning of this.

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<sup>53</sup> Jude sent me an email after the birth of her baby saying; "Unfortunately we had a bit of a bad time so we are a bit all over the place. You will be pleased to hear that my brother's presence was felt and he caused the machine that was monitoring the baby to malfunction!!". Mother and baby were both well on last contact.

## **Aggie**

### Extract 11, Aggie

277. JTB: and when he responds (.) um, will it be sort of completely new things that  
278. you never heard him say (.) when he was alive (.) or: do you think it is (.)  
279. sort of (.) chunks of things that you heard him say before  
280. Aggie: erm (.) some of it is um (.) things (.) that I would easily hear him say  
281. JTB: mm  
282. Aggie: but things like “I’m sorry” an “now I understand why things happened” (.) he  
283. never said that heh heh  
284. JTB: heh heh  
285. Aggie: he never properly apologised for everything  
286. JTB: mm  
287. Aggie: so: (.) because the last part of the relationship (.) went quite badly, like he  
288. knew he was dying an he pushed me away  
289. JTB: mm  
290. Aggie: an I just thought (.) that he just didn’t care anymore (.) an then just before  
291. he died he broke down and got real upset and said “I want to be with you,  
292. blah blah blah” an then like “what did I do?” (.) because it had been like six  
293. months  
294. JTB: yeah  
295. Aggie: of: (.) a complete nightmare (.) an (.) he never said sorry for it (.) really (.)  
296. like not properly said sorry (.) an: like he- he’s- st- telling me he  
297. understands why everything I’ve done, why I did it (.) an he never  
298. understood nothing (.) three four years he never understood anything (.) so  
299. (.) mm (.) heh (.) so

The voice in this example has a different function to the example shown earlier in this chapter (extract 6) – the voice of her boyfriend here does not refer to Aggie’s current problems but refers back to past problems in their relationship, and helps to resolve them. Previous literature has pointed towards this function of continuing relationships with the deceased (Klass, 1992; Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996), but close analysis of Aggie's case shows exactly how this may take place through a concrete experience of presence.

The extract begins by Aggie responding to JTB’s question concerning whether the voice ever said novel things to Aggie (things her boyfriend had not/would not have said when alive). Aggie starts by saying what these new things were, before situating this in a particular way – that before his death, he hadn’t told her he was dying and instead had broken-off their relationship (lines 287-288). Like the previous example from Aggie, it is clear that the very concreteness of this experience, the apology, is important and powerful – it helps her to resolve the “complete nightmare” (line 295) of the last six months of his life. The function of the voice in this example is



conciliatory and healing. Aggie uses it to make sense of the hurt that happened – as due to the fact that her boyfriend “never understood anything” (line 298) before. The voice thus seems to resolve significant confusion about the meaning of their relationship. The voice also offers her understanding, and she hints that this may involve some kind of forgiveness at her own actions (line 297) although what these may have been she doesn’t state here<sup>54</sup>. The voice helps Aggie because it makes the reconciliation with her late boyfriend interpersonal – she could not do by herself what she can do with the voice.

So Aggie’s narrative here is slightly different to the others we have looked at so far and even from her own earlier in her interview (extract 6). The ‘problem’ is in the relationship itself, and the voice helps to resolve this problem. In fact, it is only her boyfriend that *can* help with this particular difficulty – a friend or therapist could only say what they think her boyfriend would have said: that he probably was sorry for the upset he caused her, and that he would have forgiven her for the things she’d done. Through the voice, Aggie hears these healing sentiments straight from ‘the horse’s mouth’. Once more then, the variety of ‘help’ offered by the presence is entirely appropriate to the relationship.

Aggie’s experience also shows how continuing presence can be a means for (therapeutic) self-transformation – the voice allows her to forgive herself. This function was previously documented by Huang in three case studies (Huang, 2008), and Aggie shows how this worked for her in the next extract;

#### Extract 12, Aggie

355. JTB: mm (.) so when- when you hear his voice an he says he’s sorry (.) after all  
356. of that that you went through in those last months how does that make you  
357. feel?  
358. Aggie: erm (.) less guilty (.) erm () cos he got incredibly upset with the stuff that  
359. was happening to me  
360. JTB: mm  
361. Aggie: cos I’ve had pff I’ve had a lot going on for ye(h)ars ha ha and not much of it  
362. positive (.) but I’ve just (.) and some experiences when I was little or some  
363. are his experiences when he was little  
364. JTB: mm  
365. Aggie: an (.) an something came up an I had to be involved with the police an stuff  
366. and that made him incredibly set- upset an he ended up in hospital

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<sup>54</sup> Others have noted previously that a continuing relationship can be a medium for resolving guilt and for changing the meaning of the relationship post-death (see the case of Ann, in Huang, 2008).

367. JTB: mm  
368. Aggie: so it was kinda- not like an asthma attack but it's like (.) he can't breathe an  
369. his er chest was tight<sup>55</sup> an  
370. JTB: mm  
371. Aggie: so he needs attention like he really needs steroids or whatever  
372. JTB: yeah  
373. Aggie: so I put him in hospital for that so for a long time I felt "oh I've killed him"  
374. cos it was only (.) six weeks, two months after (.) like before he died when  
375. all that happened so (.) I kinda blamed myself for a lot of things but (.) I'm  
376. kinda letting go of a lot of that now

The interviewer, JTB, thematises 'feelings' related to the apology of the voice (line 357). Aggie refers to the past with her boyfriend to warrant how the voice makes her feel "less guilty" (line 358). It turns out that before the voice offered her forgiveness, she blamed herself for his death (line 373). She conveys this through her story of what happened two months before his death, and the 'directly-reported' thought, "oh I've killed him" (line 373). This is an intense weight to have on one's conscience, and the interaction with the voice has enabled her to reach a state where "I'm kinda letting go of a lot of that now" (lines 375-376). It has initiated a process of self-forgiveness. This response to JTB's question fleshes out Aggie's reference earlier in the interview to "he's telling me he understands why everything I've done, why I did it" (extract 11, lines 296-297).

The close analysis of Aggie's case shows exactly how experiences of presence can be so powerful in resolving 'unfinished business' with the deceased, and so shows them at their most healing and transformative. Her story also demonstrates that there can be a variety of functions to these experiences even within one person's story (not all of her experiences were helpful, as we shall see in section 2).

In this section on 'soothing presences' we have seen that an experience of presence can help a person in a variety of ways. Whether this be by intervening in a practical chore, providing comfort after an arduous task, helping with an emotional problem (including the grief itself), resolving 'unfinished business', or even 'causing' a minor

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<sup>55</sup> Aggie's boyfriend died of a congenital heart problem. He kept this problem a secret from her and she was not aware that he was dying.

problem, the nature of the ‘help’ was entirely appropriate to the relationship in question.

However, not all instances of presence were narrated as helpful to the bereaved. A number of instances did not follow this pattern and a number of reasons for this emerged in the analysis. We will now turn to these, starting with those experiences of presence that were accompanied by intense feelings of grief.

## *8.2. A sense of presence, a feeling of absence*

### **Aggie**

We have seen that Aggie found that sensing her boyfriend’s presence after his death was helpful to her, and that there were three broad functions to this voice;

1. to encourage Aggie with difficulties she faced
2. to compliment her on changes she’d made to her appearance
3. to help her to resolve ‘unfinished business’ in her relationship that had been very painful.

The voice, was on the whole, a useful and comforting influence. However, Aggie’s narrative showed that there could also be another, less beneficial side to this experience. The next extract shows how she introduced this;

#### Extract 13, Aggie

93. Aggie: so it’s kind of comforting but- (.) like once (.) I like (.) really really really  
94.           thought he was there like could literally feel him  
95. JTB: mm  
96. Aggie: and could hear him and then I woke up and turned round an I jus:t (.)  
97.           couldn’t stop crying an I was like “oh god” heh heh (.) so it was a bit (.) cos  
98.           it feels like it’s actually  
99. JTB: mm it felt so real  
100. Aggie: yeah yeah (.) so: (.) mm (.) heh

Aggie makes a general comment to sum-up the experience of presence, but notably downgrades the comforting elements that she had shown so far in the interview, by prefacing it with “kind of” (line 93). She then qualifies this by describing an exception to this – and a significant one at that. In this example, the vividness of the experience

is emphasised – through repetition “I...really really really thought he was there” (lines 93-94), and through the use of “literally” (line 94), as well as the added fact that she was feeling him there as well as hearing him (lines 94-96). This description suggests that there was a different quality to the other occasions which felt somehow less ‘literal’; Aggie in fact accepts JTB’s formulation “so real” (line 99) at the end of this extract (line 100). This presence is then followed by extreme distress as the realisation, that he is dead, hits her – Aggie “couldn’t stop” crying as a result (line 97). The intense state of grief is also captured with the exclamation “oh god” (line 97), the seriousness of which is hedged with the laughter - “heh heh” (line 97) – that follows. This contrasts with the narrative format of previous occasions where the feeling of presence helped Aggie with a problem – this time, the presence *is* the problem. It is followed by a gaping absence, which provokes shock and grief of a magnitude that almost repeats the bereavement.

Aggie talks more about this feeling of absence later in the interview;

#### Extract 14, Aggie

593. Aggie: I don't know sometimes I do get a bit freaked out by it  
594. JTB: mm  
595. Aggie: heh! mm  
596. JTB: freaked out because  
597. Aggie: it shouldn't be happening he=he! basically but (0.2) .hh:: it is a comfort but  
598. sometimes (0.5) it will feel so real that  
599. (1.0)  
600. it will really upset me  
601. JTB: mm  
602. Aggie: because I forget everything  
603. JTB: mm  
604. Aggie: I'm like I'll forget where I am (.) and I forgot- (0.4) forget what happened  
605. (1.0)  
606. an I think still think (they're) there and then I'm like “well you're not”, know  
607. what I mean

Aggie again orients spontaneously towards the difficult side of the experience of presence, one consequence being that she can get “a bit freaked out by it” (line 593). “Freaked out” implies heightened emotion, perhaps in the form of fear, shock or confusion. JTB starts the sentence “freaked out because” (line 596) which acts as a request for Aggie to explicate this on her next turn, which she does, giving her reasons for “freaking out” – firstly, he is dead, and so he “shouldn't” be appearing to her (line 596). This implies a violation of the normative processes of everyday life.

Secondly, the experience sometimes “really” (line 600) upsets her – this refers back to the specific example she gave (extract 13). Sandwiched in between these reasons is a reference to the beneficial side to the experience – “it is a comfort” (line 597) - once more emphasising its paradoxical nature. She characterises the upset further – it causes her to “forget everything” (line 602), implying that she forgets that he is dead, she forgets her grief, she forgets that she is living without him. The experience in all its vividness brings him back to life, and as a result she has to symbolically kill him again. She shows the force with which she has to do this by the switch to 'directly-reported' speech – “well, you’re not” (line 606). All in all, Aggie suggests that when the experience is too vivid, it takes away the good functions listed above and instead simply foregrounds the loss. Her case shows that the experience can vary in intensity and reality and therefore have different consequences even for the same person.

### **Isaac**

We saw previously that Isaac’s very practical voice helped him to fix the waste disposal. However, another time he experienced his mother’s presence, the function was very different.

#### Extract 15, Isaac

928. JH: do you, you, you said as well you sometimes see your, your mum?  
 929. [can you tell me? about that? yeah, Okay]  
 930. Isaac: [yeah. Yeah. well, when she first died, my dad was still living] (0.2) mum  
 931. was five foot  
 932. (1.0)  
 933. one, if she was that, and she had grey, white, greyish white hair, she was  
 934. eighty-odd. And you could sometimes see. .hh  
 935. (1.0)  
 936. er, there's a, there's a Jewish area, which has=a, couple of cafes, a bread  
 937. shop .hh, and which everybody uses, it's not just, [not just Jewish,]  
 938. JH: [yeah]  
 939. Isaac: it's everybody. And, I remember going on the  
 940. (1.0)  
 941. to pick up the Friday breads, with me Dad. My Dad sat in the car though,  
 942. and I walked round (0.2) and I thought, "oh, that's Mum, >Mum's there!< (. )  
 943. °No, it can't be, it's just terrible.°"

The narrative structure is similar to the example shown above from Aggie – a feeling of absence follows the experience of presence. In Isaac's case, this is a vision of his

mother. The extract starts by JH topicalising these visions that Isaac had mentioned earlier in the interview, and Isaac responds by making particular settings relevant to the experience. These include the fact that it is soon after the death, and his father is still alive (he died six months after her death). Isaac then provides a brief description of his mother – “five foot...one if she was that”, “grey-ish white hair” “eighty odd” (lines 931-933) – which conveys a classic ‘little old lady’ image. The environment, the Jewish shops, are familiar to Isaac, and the activity is routine – “the Friday breads” (line 941)<sup>56</sup>. The implication though is that this is not only somewhere familiar to Isaac but also somewhere that his mother would often be found in life. Isaac is on his own when he sees his mum. By implication, he sees the five foot one, grey-ish white-haired woman he has already described.

His initial excitement at seeing her is rapidly followed by the realisation that she is not there, because she “can’t” (line 943) be there. Using 'directly-reported' thought (lines 942-943) to convey this shows the speed at which one feeling was replaced by the other, as well as emphasising the contrast between the two. The contrast is also expressed in the way these words are delivered “oh, that's Mum, >Mum's there!<” (line 942) is said quickly and with energy, “no, it can't be...” (line 943) is notably quieter and slower. The rhetorical effect is that the interviewer more directly ‘witnesses’ this moment where Isaac re-lives the shock of the death. The function of this vision at the time, far from mitigating the feeling of loss, seemed to emphasise it by bringing it into his immediate focus.

Isaac’s narrative, like Aggie’s, shows that there is variation in the function of these experiences in individual cases – in both, the feeling of absence only follows one concrete example of a presence. But this does not lessen its significance, because the consequences for both of them involving re-living the event of the bereavement. The person they are grieving is restored to them, only to be taken away again.

A similar process happens in Sade’s account of seeing her ex-boyfriend after he died.

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<sup>56</sup> This routine hints at preparation for the following day of the week, the Jewish Sabbath.

## **Sade**

### Extract 16, Sade 1

347. Sade: things like that, will stick in my head and like, when my ex died, I would be  
348. walking down the street, and everyone I saw, not everyone but everywhere  
349. I looked, I'd kind of see him like walk into a shop or, going down the road  
350. or, you know, driving in his car, or see his car, things which obviously he  
351. wasn't driving or, he wasn't there. And that lasted about a couple of weeks  
352. as well. And then, kind of disappeared and I didn't see him anymore. And  
353. it'd be like, "oh my god I've just seen Jack. Where's he going. Oh no he's  
354. not here anymore, okay, then it obviously can't be him". But being a car-  
355. and it was like, those were the two main times which really, or something  
356. which obviously wasn't there, being there  
357. JH: yeah  
358. Sade: like, had an effect on me.

Sade is describing here a group of instances, rather than a specific time she saw her ex-boyfriend. These happen over a period of a couple of weeks, starting after the death. During this time, the world was as if Jack was still there – he was “everywhere” she looked (line 348) when she was out in public. This included not only seeing him walking, but also spying his car – an aspect of his ‘material self’ (James, 1950; 1890). Sade, in common with Isaac and Aggie, reports her stream of consciousness to express her reaction to this at the time – starting with the moment of presence (“oh my God, I’ve just seen Jack”, line 353), followed by a fairly ordinary wondering (“where is he going”, line 353), before remembering the death (“oh no, he’s not here anymore....”, lines 353-354). This knowledge cancels the experience of seeing Jack – “it obviously can’t be him” (line 354). However Sade does not just dismiss what she saw as a mistake. The experience has too much emotional significance – after all, it marks his death. In fact, Sade had already introduced these episodes as highly meaningful - “things like that, will stick in my head, like when my ex died....” (line 347), contrasting these times that “had an effect” (line 358) on her with other times she had heard or sensed something that was not there (which she described earlier in the interview). She does not say here what the significant “effect” (line 358) these times had on her was but the rest of her narrative implies that this involved grief for her ex-boyfriend (and possibly anger as it was a suicide). The function of the experience of presence in Sade’s example is to make her realise the death in the early days of the bereavement.

In all three of these narratives, the presence appeared at a time when the bereaved person is not thinking about the death, or feeling intense grief. In these instances, the presence brings the lost-person and their death into the awareness of the bereaved and creates a feeling of shock, followed by absence and loss. The presence in these examples certainly does not mitigate pain and loss, but on the contrary, it highlights it. This is shown in extreme form in Aggie, who was inconsolable following the experience. Further, the feeling of absence may happen in those cases where the presence is otherwise very helpful (Isaac and Aggie). It is notable also that the three cases cited here occur relatively early in the bereavement – a matter of days or weeks in two cases (Isaac and Sade) and within the first six months in the third case (Aggie). This is a time when one could expect great shock concerning the death.

The feeling of absence is similar in function to the 'saying goodbye' experiences documented in chapter 6. It may be recalled that this was when a sign of the deceased appeared in some way at the time of the death. This had the clear (retrospective) function of informing the person of the death, and beginning their bereavement. The feeling of absence, in foregrounding the loss is similar to this, although the timing is different - it is a reliving of the initial power of the grief.

There are implications here for theories that cite the experience of presence as form of denial, or wish fulfillment (e.g. Freud, Parkes, see chapter 1). These examples show that the exact reverse may be true in some instances. It may have the function of foregrounding the death and bringing the bereaved closer to realising it. Conant (1996) suggested that the experiences may provide a 'safe' place for coming to terms with the reality of the death. But these examples do not indicate such 'safety'. Rather, they can mimic the shock of the original bereavement. They are experiences of a particularly high emotional charge.

The next section of this chapter addresses three further cases of presence that are by no means helpful to the bereaved.



### **8.3. Continuing fraught relationships**

The instances of presence we examined so far have been mostly helpful, and when they have not been, the presence itself has been fairly benign even if the consequences sometimes are not (i.e. the feeling of absence). This was not true of all cases. This part will document the narratives of three people whose experience/s of presence caused them problems most, or all, of the time. There seemed to be a common strand running through them, concerning the nature of the relationship with the deceased before the death. All experienced rejection from the presence, but this took place in a variety of ways, which the following analysis aims to address.

#### **Julie**

Chapter 4 documented Julie's story, in detail. It may be recalled that Julie began her interview by contextualising her voice in a series of relationship problems with her mother, which included;

1. her mother's favouritism of her older brother
2. feeling rejection at her mother's deathbed
3. feeling guilt for acquiescing to the process of ending her mother's IV sustenance
4. being named after the woman that her father had an affair with.

The voice seemed to magnify, and crystallise in words, this hostility in the relationship (and Julie's feeling of guilt). It called her by the name she hated (the name associated with her father's lover), insulted her, and commanded her self-destruction.

Julie also described a feeling of presence on one particular night (shown in chapter 6) that was hostile and foreboding. The experience had something in common with Esme's (extract 2) in that both felt the presence of the deceased intensely in the night. But the experience had very different consequences for Julie than it did for Esme. Esme was able to take reassurance from the experience, and also sought further contact with her father (through a clairvoyant, chapter 7). Julie did not want the contact with her mother. In her narrative, the voice and the feeling of presence instead continued the problems in their relationship from when her mother was alive.

But the experience of presence caused Julie additional problems too. She told JH that her preferred response to the voice was to shout at it, telling it to "F-off!" (chapter 4, extract 5). This implies that the voice made Julie feel not only rejected, but very angry. But where does this anger come from? The abuse suffered by Julie through the voice, or the rejection she felt from her mother when she was alive? It is impossible to say, as the agency is continuous. Chapter 4 suggested that it is a possibility that one function of the voice is for Julie to express the conflict with her mother that was always left unsaid.

Other consequences of the voice for Julie were also very difficult. She told JH that sometimes she felt like acting on the commands it gave, to take her own life. The voice seemed to feed self-doubt, and a desire for self-destruction. Julie also gave examples of how the voice hinders her day-to-day life, including tasks at work. The voice clearly contrasts in function with Samuel and Isaac's 'helping' voices. This contrast seems to lie in several sources of meaning. Firstly, the language of Julie's voice is abusive, and the pragmatic functions are insults, commands and summons. This contrasts to the informatives/instructions of Isaac's and Samuel's voices. Secondly, is the question of how these voices fit with the hearer's immediate activities: Julie's does not fit and distracts her and causes her problems. But the contrast also relates to what the voice brings from the past - in Julie's case, it certainly did not bring a loving and supportive relationship.

All in all, the 'presence' in Julie's story is not helpful in any way; it does not help her with grief, it does not solve any problems, and there is a complete absence of comfort. Rather, the voice has other functions; it insults and abuses her, it identifies her with her father's 'mistress', it distracts her from her immediate duties, and it encourages self-destruction. Unlike Samuel, Clare, and others in the section 1 of this chapter ('soothing presences'), a loving and helpful relationship cannot be presupposed in Julie's case. The voice is not inappropriate to their relationship before the death, but in effect it seems to magnify the hostile elements of it.

Nor did the voice provide a means for *resolving* the 'unfinished business' between Julie and her mother, like in Aggie's case. The voice did not relieve Julie's guilt, or tell her that she was loved despite their past problems. Rather, it crystallised the

rejection she felt in abusive words and a hostile presence and re-newed this rejection in novel situations<sup>57</sup>.

### **Linda**

Linda also experienced a presence that she would rather have forgotten. Her husband died suddenly, 5 years prior to the interview, and she talked about hearing his voice since. Chapter 5 documented the sources of meaning that contributed to the voice's significance as a continuation of her husband's agency. Here the focus is on the function that the voice had in Linda's life.

#### Extract 17, Linda

69. PT: so what what sort of things would would he say to you (1.34) [in those  
70. circumstances?]  
71. Linda: [((coughs)) erm] I've got to think of an instance (0.40) uhm I can remember  
72. (0.26) there was quite some occasion I wasn't sleeping very well (0.46) and  
73. I would start (0.25) missing him and thinking of him (0.56) a:nd (0.52)  
74. remembering occasions where we were happy together (0.30) looking for  
75. comfort from him (0.38) But he would come and he would say "you're being  
76. stupid, it never was like that" (0.53) "you're being" erm (0.33) "you're not  
77. being a proper mother" (0.28) "you're neglecting things" (0.35) e:rm "you're  
78. a mess". it would be very derogatory to [me]  
79. PT: [ri:ght]  
80. Linda: you know he'd he'd say things like "your fat and your ugly" and, 'your hair's  
81. a mess" things that I really didn't want to hear at that time, 'cos I was  
82. hoping for some form of comfort from him.

Linda responds to PT's question by talking about a group of instances where she had a problem – she was not sleeping well, would remember the happy occasions of their marriage and would miss him (line 74). She indicates that on these occasions, she sought contact with him, as she was needing something in particular – some comfort (lines 74-75). The voice obliges in so far as it appears, but brings her the opposite of what she needs. It insults her, and she gives many examples of these here (lines 75-81) – giving the impression of a torrent of insults, like in Julie's account. Note that the insults, although obviously unwelcome, are in terms of their subject, appropriate to the husband-wife relationship – they relate to parenting, and her appearance, and attractiveness. The voice also addresses the meaning of their

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<sup>57</sup> In this respect, the case is very similar to that of voice-hearer, Violet. She heard the voices of managers who had bullied her in a workplace. The voices crystallised the bullying in words that had not been spoken by these managers in the past (see Hayes, Leudar and King, in preparation).

relationship, and undermines Linda's reminiscences of the happier times – "it never was like that" (line 76). Linda's voice, like Julie's, brings hostility and enhances the troubled side of their relationship.

Linda does not say it here, but elsewhere in the interview she referred to the nature of their marriage before the death – they "weren't the happiest of couples" (see appendix 8, line 250), "he used to have a terrible terrible temper" (see appendix 8, line 662), and this is what she says about this temper early in the interview;

Extract 18, Linda (shown also in chapter 5, as extract 25)

56. PT: so what sort of things does Geoff tell you not to do?  
57. (2.06)  
58. Linda: well, it changes. Initially, just after he died, it was always, it was like a  
59. comforting voice I thought (0.43) thought initially perhaps that was me  
60. projecting (0.23) wanting him to comfort me (0.63) but then he would do it  
61. in anger (0.30) and he he was a very angry man (0.54) and he'd be angry  
62. and irritated by me and he'd say "you're being stupid"

Linda indicates here that her experiences of her husband's continuing presence have not been wholly bad (unlike Julie's), but she suggests that these 'good' bits may have been her own 'projections' (lines 52-53). This implies that this comfort was not something that her husband would be likely to provide – it could not simply be presupposed as part of their relationship. This changed to her husband being present "in anger" (line 54). Chapter 5 in fact concluded that Linda presents the voice as a continuation of her husband's anger. Perhaps a deeper analysis might conclude more accurately that the voice was a continuation of her husband's unpredictability. The voice is not always hostile, but neither is it usually supportive - what Linda 'needs' from it is not usually what she gets. Her husband's volatility in the past is hinted at with her references to "temper" (appendix 8, line 662) and "anger" (extract 18, line 54).

The voice in Linda's account typically insults and undermines her, and functions to continue directing the volatility, and mostly anger, of her husband towards her. Although Linda's narrative follows the familiar format of problem-followed by-presence, the presence does not help with the problem like others have (see 'soothing presences') but in fact worsens Linda's situation by telling her things "I really didn't want to hear at that time" (extract 17, line 81).

## **Matt**

It may be recalled from chapter 5 that Matt also heard a very critical voice that continued a dynamic between him and his father after his father's death. The next extract shows one instance of this.

### Extract 19, Matt

43. Matt: Um (.) I was on an assault course for one of my army qualifying courses  
44. and I fell off a wall, a ten foot wall and subsequently I slipped some discs  
45. and was in quite a lot of pain. If I'd have left the assault course and not  
46. have completed it I would have failed the course which would have meant  
47. that I wouldn't be able to qualify. And I was lying on my back at the base of  
48. the wall in quite a lot of pain and he said, my father said to me "You're a  
49. loser don't even bother carrying on" and he was just telling me that I  
50. wasn't ever going to get to the army anyway, that I was doing it for all the  
51. wrong reasons. But then I realised I wasn't and so I got up and even  
52. though I had slipped disc I finished the assault course.

Matt contextualises the presence within a problem. He has fallen off a wall, has badly injured himself, and is in pain. He outlines a dilemma – if he could not continue, he would fail the whole assessment and be unable to achieve his aim of joining the army (line 28). He repeats twice that he was “in quite a lot of pain” (line 26 and line 29), and the added detail that the wall was “ten foot” (line 25) highlights the severity of the accident. This sets up a dramatic tension – what can he do next? This is when the voice intervenes – and it is not encouraging at this low point. Instead, it is insulting and critical, “you’re a loser” (lines 29-30), and discouraging, “don’t even bother carrying on” (line 30). Matt uses 'directly-reported' speech at this point which adds vividness to the criticism in the narrative, before tagging on the other undermining comments which he narrates as a 'gloss'. The next part of the story could have gone in a very different direction – the voice could have had the effect of encouraging his failure. But the consequences are different – “but then I realised” (line 32) implies that Matt may have been gripped by these criticisms for a moment, but then considered their worth and disagreed with what the voice said. Through Matt's mediation, the critical voice is turned into the impetus that allows him to finish the course. This is presented as against all the odds; he did it “even though” (lines 32-33) he had a significant back injury.

In his interview, and in common with both Julie and Linda, Matt spoke about how this

critical dynamic had continued from how his father was when he was alive (chapter 5).

Extract 20, Matt (also shown in chapter 5 as extract 26)

80. AG: How do you react to him asking you questions like that?  
81. Matt: I become very defensive because when he was alive he um (.) was very  
82. threatened by me because although he was a very successful person in  
83. his own right (.) uh (.) he felt that because I'm academic and other things  
84. that he wasn't, I was a great threat to him. So, I get very defensive when  
85. he asks me these questions because I know he's going to try to pose his  
86. values on me (.) um (.) which I'm not prepared to let him do.

The interviewer asks Matt about his reaction to the voice when it asks undermining questions of him (line 73). Matt responds by saying he becomes “very defensive” (line 74). He warrants this by reference to his father’s nature when he was alive – he was jealous of Matt, and tried to impose his values on him. Putting someone’s criticism down to jealousy has the consequence of invalidating it – it situates the cause of the criticism not in Matt’s actions but in his father’s emotional issue. The way Matt narrates this suggests that he sees the critical voice too as resulting from his jealousy and so is not to be trusted – the logical structure is “I become very defensive” (line 74) now, because of his jealousy when he was alive. It is clear that Matt sees his father’s intention behind the voice through the language he uses; “he asks me” (line 78) the questions, and “he’s going to try to pose his values on me” (lines 78-79). The effect is that the voice carries through this jealousy and imposition, as well as Matt’s reaction to it – his resistance to his father’s will.

So this difficult dynamic is continued through the voice, but the function is paradoxical. The voice introduces doubt of Matt, during a problem that he is facing where he needs the opposite of this – self-belief and determination. In this sense it was very different in character to the other presences that intervened during a problem such as Isaac’s voice of his mother, which encouraged him to “keep going” (extract 8, line 91). But the doubt does not seem to translate into self-doubt, unlike in Julie’s case. This is because in Matt’s case, the doubt is voiced by his father, and so brings with it his instinctual reaction to this from the past – rebellion. Through Matt’s mediation, and the meaning that their relationship had in the past, the potentially destructive voice becomes a source of motivation.

## **Summary**

The voices of Matt, Julie, and Linda, all continue a difficult relationship beyond the death. These relationships afford rejection and hostility, as others had afforded comfort or help. It is noteworthy that in this investigation of a variety of 'modes' of presences - 'senses' and signs – all of the three cases in this section experience the continuation of problems through the means of a voice.

There are, however, differences between the three cases of a voice. Matt is able to presuppose the jealousy of his father; Linda, that her husband was angry. It is less clear what Julie can presuppose about the relationship with her mother, other than her own feelings of rejection. Overall, the consequences of the presence for Julie are more detrimental - she begins to consider herself in the voice's terms. Thus the three cases are similar in some respects, but the variations are important. The difference between Matt and Julie's voices, in particular, highlights the importance of the meaning the relationship had in the past for how the person copes with the voice now. Matt was able to put the voice down to 'jealousy' and turn a destructive energy into motivation.

There is one final case where an experience of presence was unhelpful because of what it continued. This case was different to the above three in that it continued one problematic aspect of what was narrated as an otherwise good relationship. Of course, relationships are very rarely wholly 'good' or 'bad', but this distinction has been made on the basis of the way informants narrated them.

### ***8.4. Misrepresenting a 'good' relationship***

#### ***Heena***

Heena heard a variety of noises and a voice without words, which related to her deceased grandfather (documented in chapter 6). Only one of these kinds of experiences was related as a problem. This was the noise she heard in the night of a

bottle being opened, which she related to her grandfather drinking a lot towards the end of his life. Chapter 7 (extract 35) documented how she put this experience down to a "stressful memory". In the next extract, JTB topicalises Heena's feelings at the time of this experience;

#### Extract 21, Heena

277. JTB: Yeah (.) So what sort of feelings would it bring up when you heard it?  
278. (4.0)  
279. Heena: Erm Not nice ones really I suppose just because I had such a good  
280. relationship with him  
281. JTB: Hmm  
282. Heena: And that was like the only downside to anyone's relationship with him  
283. really  
284. JTB: Yeah  
285. Heena: Erm and that like, I think it put a lot of strain on my family as well or a huge  
286. strain on my family so I suppose that's like, (.) I dunno if it's an upset or  
287. stressful or kind of a bit angry  
288. JTB: Hmm  
289. Heena: Err feeling, but yeah it's definitely kind a kind of negative one and  
290. JTB: Yeah  
291. Heena: And I think when someone dies all you really do is reflect on the good  
292. JTB: Hmm  
293. Heena: And you look back and like your fond memories which I always did like, I  
294. never really look back in a negative way but there'll be those little instances  
295. that you can't really recall as positive at all  
296. JTB: Hmm  
297. Heena: Because they just weren't so.  
298. JTB: And it was all kind of a reminder of  
299. Heena: Hmm and it's like I suppose you know how everyone always says don't  
300. speak ill of the dead? It's like you don't want to think ill of them either  
301. JTB: Hmm  
302. Heena: You just, I just didn't want to think about those bits

Heena's summary formulation of her relationship with her grandfather, "such a good relationship" (lines 279-280), contrasts with Julie, Matt, and Linda's descriptions of their past relationships with the deceased. The problem for Heena is that this sound that she hears, of the bottle cap being removed from the bottle, is a reminder of the "only downside" (line 282) to their relationship – her grandfather's drinking. This 'downside' is presented as a collective matter - it was the only downside to "anyone's" (line 282) relationship with him. This family problem is upgraded from "a lot of strain" to "a huge strain" (lines 285-286). Heena presents this experience of presence through sound as interfering with her wish to think well of her grandfather. In doing so, she accomplishes identity work - she is someone who likes to think 'positively' (lines 293-295) about other people and the past. Her experience of



hearing this sound militates against this identity - it causes her to think about what was wrong with the relationship. She indicates the experience also reminds her of "upset" (line 286), 'stress' (line 287), and 'anger' (line 287) towards her grandfather's actions.

The function of this experience of Heena's is to foreground an aspect of her relationship with her grandfather that she wished to forget. In Julie, Linda, and Matt, the voices they experienced were in some sense 'typical' of the relationship in the past before the death (or 'stereotypical' in so far as they may have exaggerated elements of it). It is not the noises themselves, but the meaning they bring that is 'untypical' of Heena's relationship with her grandfather. The experiences are unwanted and she presents them as a misrepresentation of the relationship as a whole. Heena's case shows a latent potential in these experiences to change the meaning of the relationship with the deceased, and not necessarily for the better, through reminders of very particular parts of it.

So far, we have seen several cases of presence with clearly defined functions - those that have helped or soothed, those that have emphasised the grief, those that have continued a problem in the relationship, or a problem relationship. The remaining cases do not have clear functions. They may be considered as 'outliers'. These are just as important as those with a clear function, as they show that it is possible that some experiences will not have a clear meaning or function yet may still be meaningful experiences.

### ***8.5. What does it do? – cases of ambiguity***

#### ***Samira***

Samira's case is striking because she did not narrate any grief or pain of her own concerning the event of the death. This was because she did not know the person who had died, her uncle, who lived in another country (India), all of Samira's life. Yet,

as chapter 6 documented, she felt his presence in her room the night after her family received the news of his death.

#### Extract 22, Samira

48. Samira: so this was the first time I've really sort of heard about death, and I think  
49. that's very important. Okay, so.  
50. JH: so your first encounter with it  
51. Samira: yeah  
52. JH: in your whole life  
53. Samira: and all I know is just my mum being very distressed and stuff.  
54. JH: okay  
55. Samira: okay, so, we must have gone to sleep that night and um, as I was going to  
56. sleep, I just kind of felt,  
~~25 lines omitted, Samira describes the presence, included in chapter 6, extract 14~~~  
81. Samira: I just thought "okay, right, I'll just go back to sleep." Erm, the next morning,  
82. I talked to my mum, and um, before me even telling her, this is what  
83. happened last night, cos you know, she was in a bit of a state, cos her  
84. brother's just passed away  
85. JH: m  
86. Samira: she said to me, "oh I had this dream last night", and um, I was like, "okay".  
87. She was saying er, now we've got three floors in our house, we've got um,  
88. the first floor which is like the living room and everything, the second floor  
89. which is where all the bedrooms are, and the third floor which is bed, bed,  
90. like a loft conversion, so she had this dream, that her brother, who'd  
91. passed away, came down from the second stairs, s:, second lot of stairs,  
92. and my mum was sort of guarding my room, and um, she was saying, he  
93. was saying, "ah I just wanna go say bye to her", as in bye to me  
94. JH: right

This time, the 'problem' that precedes the experience of presence is her mother's grief, rather than her own (n.b. Esme). She conveys the intensity of this through the phrase "*all I know* is just my mum being *very* distressed" (line 53, my emphasis).

This suggests that this fact is the only thing she can be certain of in the whole episode. There is a distinct absence of her own grief, however she mentions the detail that this was her first encounter with death and positions this as highly significant (lines 48-49). She does not say why this is important but a first contact with death implies possible consequences such as shock, feeling strange, awareness of mortality and perhaps in her case, a heightened awareness of her connections to a wider family in a different country. Suffice to say that the first contact with death, and her mother's intense grief, form the context for the experience of presence that she goes on to narrate (shown in chapter 6, extract 14).

It is later, the next morning, that the presence becomes significant, and is linked to her uncle. This link is made through her mother's dream (line 86). In this way,

Samira's night-time experience gains meaning retrospectively as a feeling of her uncle's presence, and further, this is a shared feeling. The remarkable nature of this is emphasised by the switch to telling the story through 'directly-reported' speech at this point ("oh I had this dream last night", line 86). Remember that this collective nature to the experience of presence appeared in Jude's account, and a little differently in Isaac and Samuel (who do not cross-refer to the other's experience). In Samira's story the fact that these co-ordinated experiences happened to two independent people in the same night adds credibility to the idea that it was indeed her uncle.

In common with several other cases so far, the experience of presence is preceded by a problem, but in Samira's case, this 'problem', her mother's distress, is not resolved by it – the function of the experience, if there is one, is fairly unclear. Unlike the other cases we looked at so far, there is no grief *of her own* in Samira's narrative – it cannot therefore 'lessen pain and loss' if there is none there to begin with. Her very lack of relationship to her uncle is in fact expressed in the vagueness of the presence – there is no distinctive voice, or smell, that we saw in other narratives, but the breeze and the blur could be almost anybody. But can you grieve someone you did not know? Many grieved Princess Diana when she died. It is difficult to say in Samira's case - she certainly does not talk emotionally about her uncle's death.

It is the link to the dream that gives the anonymous breeze and blur the character of her uncle. The details of this dream further suggest possible candidates for what the presence was about - it could be her uncle saying goodbye to her (line 93), and further, he may have posed some sort of danger to Samira that warranted her mother to guard her door (line 92). The narrative as a whole seems to imply that Samira's experience functioned to express her mother's grief, as well as to mark the strangeness involved in her own first encounter with death. These are possibilities but not certainties. The experience, however, does have a clear *rhetorical* function in the interview – it warrants the reality of the feeling that her mother had. We saw in chapter 7 that the experience had the additional function of foregrounding Samira's relationship to traditional Hindu ideas about spirits.

## **Tracey**

Earlier in this chapter it was mentioned that Tracey was helped on one occasion by an experience of her husband's presence to feel calmer at a time of grief. However, the presence in her narrative did not always have such a clear function - chapter 7, section 5, documented that the metaphysical meaning to her experience changed over time. In her first interview in particular, Tracey emphasised the strange nature of the smell.

### Extract 23, Tracey 1

83. Tracey: occasionally, erm, if I'm with Paul's friends,  
84. (2.0)  
85. this sounds really bizarre, if I'm with Paul's friends cos they all stayed really  
86. good friends because they've got kids the same age, and they stayed  
87. really good friends he had a really good group of friends that he'd known  
88. since he was, twelve thirteen years of age  
89. JH: right  
90. Tracey: and I still see them quite a bit  
91. JH: yeah  
92. Tracey: erm:::, I'll come away and I'll smell him.  
93. JH: right  
94. Tracey: and I'll smell his aftershave, which I know none of them wear  
95. JH: right  
96. Tracey: and I'll be in the car (.) and all I can smell is him.  
97. JH: right  
98. Tracey: and that is very sort of like, wow  
99. JH: yeah  
100. Tracey: freaky  
101. JH: yeah  
102. (1.5)  
103. Tracey: cos you're like, (.) "where's that [come from]  
~~~~~9 lines omitted~~~~~  
113. Tracey: it's only when I'm with his male friends, and I'll come away, and I can  
114. smell him, and it's really bizarre  
115. JH: yeah it seems like it really bewilders you  
116. Tracey: yeah, it's as if like,  
117. (2.0)  
118. cos I would never have seen his male friends without him, being there  
119. when he was alive, we would've gone as a couple, so for me to go on my  
120. own and to come back it's like, we're still a couple, and his smell's there  
121. JH: yeah  
122. Tracey: and it's really bizarre  
123. JH: yeah  
124. Tracey: that is a freaky, sort of (.) bizarre thing

Tracey contextualises the smell as appearing "occasionally" (line 83), after she has been with her husband's friends. However unlike the example she gave in interview

2, this is a group of experiences rather than a specific one, and importantly, Tracey does not define a 'problem' to precede the smell – in fact, they are a “really good group of friends” (line 86) and variants on this formulation are repeated twice more (line 87). This emphasises their closeness as a group, shared history, but also implies that they are 'good' people<sup>58</sup>.

The smell of her husband's aftershave is introduced as happening after she has left their company, when she is on her own in the car (chapter 6, extract 8). The experience has the character of the extraordinary – she in fact uses the word “bizarre” four times (lines 85, 114, 122, 124) in this extract, as well as “freaky” (line 100). “Bizarre” is used in two different ways. The first use (line 85) orients directly to how this may sound to the interviewer and coming before the story, warns JH to suspend her disbelief – interestingly Tracey uses this word less in the second interview. The other kind of use more directly characterises the event; although it is not clear whether this bizarreness is in the lack of a source for the smell, in the fact that it only happens under these circumstances, or in both. The repeated uses of “bizarre” and “freaky” also accomplish identity work - positioning Tracey as someone unused to such extraordinary happenings. Note though that despite the fact that there is not an obvious consequence to the smell, it is made partly understandable through the reference to being with the friends – it “only” happens then (line 113).

JH comments on Tracey's confusion on line 115 - “yeah it seems like it really bewilders you” and Tracey accepts this formulation on her next turn, “yeah” (line 116). She then begins to expand on the nature of this confusion/bewilderment with “it's as if” (line 116) before hesitating. This adds tentativeness to her next suggestion that a consequence of the smell is that it is “like, we're still a couple” (line 120). The “like” suggests there are some aspects to it that continue their life together, but that it may lack other aspects. Whether continuing to be a couple in this manner lessens the loss, or reminds her of it, is not stated – it is simply surprising and strange (lines 122-124). This implies that the continuity of relationship it affords is not 'wish fulfillment' in these circumstances.

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<sup>58</sup> It could be said that there is a problem here – the fact she is seeing this great group of friends without the common link between them – her husband. But this is not the way that Tracey frames it – she does not say openly that she was missing her husband nor does she imply it.

This experience of Tracey's seems to partially continue their relationship as a couple, however, it is not clear whether this 'helps' her with anything in particular, unlike the example she gave in the second interview. Her case shows that the function of the same presence (the same smell) may change over time – with the function possibly becoming clearer. Her example contrasts with the others examined so far in this section on 'unclear functions' in that it does carry a distinctive quality of her husband inherently within it, but is not a 'collective' presence with other family members. The next example of a case where the continuing presence does not have a clearly beneficial function is also of this lone type.

### ***Inge***

Chapter 5 documented in detail how Inge heard the voice of her late boyfriend (extract 1). In the early days of her bereavement, she actively created circumstances in which she could feel that his presence was close. This afforded a strong continuing relationship, although whether this helped her cope with the bereavement, or with other aspects of her life at the time of the interview, was unclear, as the following extract shows.

#### Extract 24, Inge

222. Inge: I suppose it would be useful to stop being together, e: (.)  
223. JH: to?  
224. Inge: st[op being] together er I just don't know how.  
225. JH: [stop it]  
226. (3.0)  
227. so you feel it would be useful for you? To stop being together.  
228. Inge: er::, it's it's like a little bit difficult to (live) life when you're still  
229. JH: okay  
230. Inge: its=like  
231. (8.0)  
232. it's not that it's constraining me in any er::, in any way really  
233. (.) apart from=a: (.) I feel I'm stuck somewhere, and I can't=e:::  
234. (.) I can't get out of it.

Inge implies that the relationship with her boyfriend still continues – they are “together” (line 222) – but the usefulness of this state of affairs is questioned. JH's reflection of Inge's words on line 227 signals that she wants Inge to expand on this, which she does on her next turn. Note, however, that JH uses the word “feel” (line

227) whereas Inge uses “I suppose” (line 222) suggesting that this might be a question that Inge has come to on reflection rather than a distinct feeling. Inge shows considerable ambivalence over the continuing relationship. On the one hand, it is not “constraining...in any way” (line 232), but on the other, it is a “little bit difficult to (live) life” (line 228) with it, and she feels “stuck somewhere” by it (line 233). Her narrative presented a greater deliberateness in inducing this in her past, and it seemed to offer her some comfort and relief from pain (see appendix 6). But she suggests that now she is being somewhat captured by the experiences of presence, and that this involuntariness is a real problem – she “can’t” (lines 233 and 234) leave the relationship. The implications are that this places emotional constraints on her, and in her narrative she linked this to her emotional absence with a new boyfriend.

Inge shows that a person’s feelings about experiences of presence may not always be plain, and that the experiences can provoke great ambivalence. As we have seen in the previous cases in this section – Tracey and Samira - the experience of presence may not always have obvious consequences. To return to our question – does an experience of presence mitigate pain and loss in a bereavement? – these cases show it may be a mixture of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, or simply confusing and strange. However despite not always having a clear function, the experiences of these women are still meaningful – and this meaning relied on several sources. The experiences were relevant to family, friends, culture, religion, and immediate circumstances at the time the presence is felt.

### ***8.6. Does an experience of presence help the bereaved?***

This chapter has aimed to address whether experiences of continuing presence are presented as helpful to the bereaved, or not. We have seen that the answer to this question is not a simple one. In many cases, the presence is beneficial, and this ‘help’ may come in many forms – ranging from engaging with the distressing ‘unfinished business’ in Aggie’s relationship, to fixing the waste disposal for Isaac and Samuel. This help may come during a problem, or act as a comfort after its resolution.

Just as significant, however, were those times where the presence caused the person further difficulties – this centred around two broad consequences. The first, termed here ‘a feeling of absence’, was when the presence actively pronounced the grief and the loss. It highlighted the event of the death, rather than the relationship. This appeared to occur most often early in the bereavement, which is a pattern worthy of further enquiry. The second reason was that the sense/feeling of presence could bring the difficult and undermining aspects of the relationship from the past into the bereaved’s present. These examples undermine theories that relate experiences of presence to ‘yearning’ for the deceased (e.g. Parkes, chapter 1), and to the fulfillment of a wish (e.g. Freud, chapter 1). However, neither could these experiences be reduced to memory as Julie’s story showed that the voice said different things to the person-analogue.

The descriptions of ‘soothing presences’ and these ‘toxic’ presences’ had a narrative format in common; problem-followed-by-presence. The difference was, in the former narratives, the presence solved the problem. In all cases, the functions were appropriate to the relationships in question – whether it was the ‘type’ of help on offer, the ‘type’ of interference, or the ‘type’ of insult, they were not out of the blue. The answer to this question concerning function therefore cements the importance of the biographical source of meaning that has already been established in the previous four chapters. It is this source of meaning that gives the continuation its form, as well as its function.

Three cases also showed that the consequences of the experience of presence are not always clear, but that this does not make them meaningless happenings. In fact, all narratives showed that the experiences, whatever their function, had potent emotional significance.

This chapter has illustrated that it is not accurate to make blanket statements about whether continuing presence is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in bereavement, ‘enabling’ or ‘maladaptive’. This is because even within one single case there can be huge variation in the consequences of the presence, as Tracey, Aggie, Isaac and Samuel all pertinently illustrate. One implication is that cases need to be examined in detail



to determine whether the experience has benefits or otherwise, as well as to understand the changes in this, both temporally and situationally.

## Chapter 9 - Discussion

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This chapter considers the broader implications of the findings reported in the empirical chapters. It begins with a summary of these findings and then moves to consider their theoretical and practical implications.

### *9.1. Summary of findings*

The empirical findings of this thesis may be summarised as follows;

1. Variety in form of the experiences - The scope of the investigation was not confined to particular experiences such as voices and visions, and so revealed previously undocumented forms to the experiences, such as taste.
2. Variety in circumstances of the bereavement - Past studies have investigated these experiences after the death of spouses, or children. This study has shown that these experiences can happen in a variety of relationships. These tended to be family relationships, but in one case the deceased was a close friend of the family. The study has also demonstrated that experiences of presence may happen after both sudden, and expected deaths, and in association with harmonious, or fraught relationships with the deceased. The experiences may happen soon after the death, or many years later.
3. Meaningful experiences - In all cases, the experiences of presence had rich meaning and significance to the bereaved informants. This meaning relied on several sources. Biographical details were of particular importance in the thematic field of these experiences. Specifically, these biographic references were often to a form of life shared with the deceased before the death.
4. Communicative signs - Experiences of presence were often experienced as communicative signs from the deceased. This was particularly the case with the voices heard by informants. Biographic references were used to give the language of the voice significance as communication - and to support the

meaning that the voice was a continuation of some aspect of the deceased's personhood.

5. Indexical signs - In the case of visions, smells, tastes, touch, and other signs, these were linked to the deceased in varying ways. All of these experiences, like voices, relied on contextualisation for their meaning as signs of the deceased. Some were linked to the deceased entirely indexically (e.g. touch).
6. Feelings of presence as situated emotions - Feelings of presence have not been a focus of psychological enquiry since William James (1902). Chapter 6 concluded that these experiences are a type of situated emotion, and that they often occur alongside experiences of presence related to the senses (e.g. a voice or touch).
7. Use of semiotic resources - Some participants used semiotic resources to give their experiences particular meanings. These most commonly included spiritual and psychological ideas. The most common use of these resources was to use them in harmony with biographic references, in order to show that the experiences were a continuation of an aspect of the deceased's personhood.
8. Psychiatry and identity concerns - The interviews showed that the psychiatric episteme was widely available to informants, acknowledged in the interviews, but not used to account for their experiences. This semiotic resource often appeared in the interviews as an 'other'-assessment of the experiences. This was most commonly denied as relevant to informant's personal experiences. Rather than supporting biographical continuity, this semiotic resource seemed to underpin stigma in some cases, and isolation in Julie's case (chapter 4).
9. Relational spirits, and face-work - Many informants used spiritual accounting for their experiences. The spirits in these accounts were of a particular kind - their main purpose was to relate to the bereaved person. Such accounting was moreover accompanied by careful identity work where the bereaved presented themselves and their activities as spiritual yet rational. The study was the first to

look at accounting methods for experiences of presence, and has demonstrated that these go hand-in-hand with identity work.

10. Reductionist accounting as rare - Occasionally informants used semiotic resources to cancel the 'reality-qualities' of their experience, although this method was uncommon.
  
11. Diversity of function - The study was the first to find that the functions of the experiences are varied. Many found the experiences to be helpful, some, or all, of the time. This help could centre on an everyday problem faced by the bereaved, such as fixing a kitchen appliance, or the help could sometimes be with the relationship itself - the 'unfinished business' with the deceased, sometimes resolving conflict or guilt. However the experiences could also be very difficult for the bereaved. Sometimes, they resulted in a profound grief, a 'feeling of absence'. Others caused problems of living for the bereaved when they continued the strife of a relationship. These were usually in the form of a voice, and could magnify the hostile elements of the relationship with the deceased, including any past rejection or jealousy.

## ***9.2. Implications for the research area***

Methodologies constrain and shape findings. As documented in chapter 1, experiences as complex as voices and other kinds of 'presence' are very sensitive to context. It is the task of the researcher to develop methodologies that are open and flexible enough to allow a deeper understanding of these experiences and how they may change in different times and places.

Here, an ethnomethodological approach has enabled a detailed description of the properties of experiences of presence. This is because the method does not impose a straight-jacket on the variety of the experiences. The empirical chapters mapped the experiences of presence from the perspectives of informants to the study and in doing so displayed the richness and intricacies to these phenomena. Such variety needs to be taken into account when any theory of these experiences is formulated.

The investigation supports previous evidence summarised in chapter 1 that meaning is crucial to understanding experiences of presence and their consequences. It may be recalled that these studies concerning voices documented that meaning determines a person's response to their voice (Leudar et al, 1997), levels of distress (Birchwood and Chadwick, 1997; Close and Garety, 1998; Jones et al, 2003) and distinguishes those who have problems of living from those that do not (Romme et al 1992; Honig et al, 1998; Pennings and Romme, 1996). Voices in particular have been shown to have a relationship to a person's social experiences and gender (Hayward, 2003; Legg and Gilbert, 2006). The ethnomethodological approach used in this study has enabled us to see *where* this meaning comes from, as well as to see exactly *how* this meaning relates to consequences of the experiences.

The investigation has demonstrated the importance of a methodological approach that allows us to investigate 'thick descriptions' of the experiences and the methods used to accomplish such descriptions. The flexibility of the narrative-biographic interview, and its emphasis on informant-structuring of the occasion, allows 'thick' and 'thin' descriptions of experiences of presence. Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis tracked these descriptions and the interviewer's influence on them throughout the interviews.

As a general point, the current study has demonstrated the difference between understanding and explanation that was highlighted in chapter 1. Past literature on this subject has too often explained experiences of presence at the expense of understanding them from participants' perspectives. It is these theories to which we now return.

### **9.2.1. Theoretical Implications**

This section evaluates theories of hallucinations/experiences of presence (shown in chapter 1) in light of the research findings reported in this thesis. We shall see that none of these theories on their own can account for all instances of presence in bereavement.

### **9.2.1.1. Are experiences of presence symptoms of psychopathology?**

Chapter 1 documented the conception of hallucinations that is in use today in medical psychiatry. Within this definition, hallucinations are false perceptions, lacking in sense and meaning. They find meaning only as symptoms of an underlying mental illness.

Yet, this investigation has found that experiences of presence are meaningfully connected not only to the concrete environments in which they happen, but also to a person's past, and specifically to their relationships with others. In addition, some of these experiences were linguistic, and thus inherently meaningful, and others were iconic representations of the deceased. The experiences were highly emotionally-charged and of deep personal significance. They were not random happenings lacking in sense but found a neat fit with the ordinary lives of the bereaved informants. Experimental psychological research ignores all of this.

Furthermore, the experiences of presence were not, most of the time, a problem (as chapter 8 highlighted). Where the experiences were difficult - for example in Julie, Matt and Linda in particular - the problem was not that informants were 'hallucinating' or 'relating to a dead person', but dwelt in the relationship to the deceased. This meaning is entirely over-looked if these experiences are explained only as symptoms of psychopathology. This study also joins others in demonstrating that such experiences as voices and visions can happen to persons free from serious psychological problems. The conclusion is that medical psychiatry impoverishes these experiences by abstracting them from ordinary life and relationships. It cannot, therefore, explain them - whatever it claims to be explaining are not experiences of presence.

### **9.2.1.2. Are experiences of presence cognitive mistakes?**

Chapter 1 described a family of theories in cognitive psychology which state that the person who experiences a presence makes faulty judgments about the sources of their experiences, confusing internal events for external. The findings of this thesis challenge this theory. This is for several reasons.

Firstly, the ontological categories favoured by informants did not encompass this internal/external dualism. Informants did not refer to their experiences as internal or external to themselves but in rather more mundane terms as, for example, 'my grandma', or 'my husband'. This did not mean that our informants' worlds were an indiscriminate jumble of experiences and perceptions - they did not believe that the deceased still lived. A careful analysis of their use of language revealed they made distinctions between the deceased person when they were alive, and their presence as it has continued since their death. These discriminations were subtle and only visible through close analysis of informants' speech.

A second problem with the ontological basis of the reality-mistake theory is that the experiences of presence were not 'all in the mind' in a practical sense. They had immediate and meaningful connections to the activities and environments of informants (concrete and social). This would make the experiences difficult to attribute simply to the 'internal' realm. This investigation has established that it is not only physical space that is relevant to the experiences but *concurrent space*, including the person's current conversation or activity, and *meaning space* (different times and places, and emotional significance).

Indeed, informants rarely downgraded their experiences to a 'mistake', precisely because they would have to cancel many of the phenomenal qualities of the experience. To make their experiences fit with the theory, informants would have to ignore the concurrent space, and meaning space, in other words they would have to disregard the relationship of their experience to the deceased and ignore the emotional significance of this. The theory also ignores the function to the experience. These aspects of the experience are not elaborations, but constitute the thematic field and thus the gestalt.

### **9.2.1.3. Are experiences of presence fixed-ideas?**

Pierre Janet's theory described voices as 'fixed-ideas'. These were memories that were split-off from ordinary consciousness, and were simple and repetitive. Yet Chapter 5 documented that even with respect to the linguistic form alone, the voices heard by the bereaved changed in their form and were sometimes linguistically

complex. The majority of voices reported in the study were therefore incompatible with Janet's description.

It will be remembered though from chapter 7 that two participants did use the idea of 'memory' in accounting for their experiences. These two kinds of experiences – Tracey smelling her husband, and Heena hearing the sounds of her grandfather in the house – did echo the past quite closely, in contrast with those voices which said new things, such as Aggie's. However these 'memories' were not split-off from the informant's consciousness but were made sense-of in new circumstances, e.g. the circumstances of the person's death and the informant's bereavement. The experiences also had a vividness and involuntariness that separates them from ordinary remembering.

Another problem for Janet's theory is that experiences of presence did not resist psychological integration, but in contrast often fitted particular situations in the way a hand fits a glove. For example, the voice Inge heard completed her love declaration with a response. Isaac's vision of his father completed the synagogue scene. The experiences often had, to use another of Janet's terms, a 'reality function' – they fitted with the bereaved's everyday lives and activities. They were experiences that were easy to integrate in contemporary lives.

#### **9.2.1.4. Are experiences of presence wish fulfillments?**

Sigmund Freud's theory of hallucinations was summarised in chapter 1. Freud stated that these experiences were an unconscious response to un-met needs – a means by which a 'wish' may be fulfilled, if reality disappoints. This description could fit some experiences of presence where the effects are beneficial and intended, for example, where the bereaved person is longing for the deceased and that need is briefly met. The 'feeling of absence' could be accounted for as akin to the disappointment faced by someone waking from a wonderful dream. Freud's theory also situates the experiences partly in a person's biography and emotional needs, which is a direction validated by the findings of this thesis.

However, this theory cannot account for those experiences that are unwanted, for example, Julie's abusive voice. A psychoanalyst may argue that this abusive voice is



due to an unconscious wish in Julie to punish herself. But this rather distorts Julie's words and the thematic field in which she understands her experiences. It also distorts the functions that these experiences have for Julie, which as chapters 4 and 8 documented, are somewhat problematic and destructive.

There is another problem for Freud's theory. According to this, wish fulfillments that occur in adults who are not asleep, indicate a psychopathological process; neuroses or psychoses. As stated above, most informants to the study did not indicate serious psychological problems. Freud's theory could arguably be another straight-jacket for these experiences.

#### **9.2.1.5. Are experiences of presence part of a continuing bond with the deceased?**

Continuing Bond studies have suggested that experiences of presence are just one aspect of a continuing bond with the deceased. Their purpose is to sustain the bond, help the person to adjust to their new life, and also to help them resolve any 'unfinished business' with the deceased.

This study has specified precisely how these relationships to the deceased may continue. It has shown that these relationships *cannot* continue in the same way as before the death. The deceased is no longer physically, or legally there. The relationship therefore has to be transformed, and continued within certain boundaries. For example, although Samuel can smell and taste the meatballs his grandma used to cook, he cannot actually eat them. Tracey may smell her husband in the car after seeing his friends but her husband cannot drive her home. Sarah may feel her son next to her in the church but she cannot leave the church with him beside her.

The current research has also revealed that what continues beyond the grave *varies* with each relationship. The continuation is selective and may even magnify or distort just one element of the relationship before the death. Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis have enabled a specification of exactly what continues in each case. The methodology has also revealed the resources that may be used to maintain this continuity. The concept of a 'continuing relationship' is a valid one as

long as this variety, and the necessary transformation of the relationship, and are not ignored.

Furthermore, theories of the continuing bond have suggested that these experiences primarily help the bereaved; to adjust to the loss, or with unfinished business. This describes the functions of many experiences of presence, as chapter 8 demonstrated. However, the consequences are far more open than this theory suggests. The 'feeling of absence' that followed some experiences cancelled the beneficial aspects of the experience and merely emphasised the person's loss. Some experiences continued aspects of a relationship against a person's explicit wishes.

The experiences of presence afford diverse possibilities - from resolving unfinished business, to increasing self-doubt - and only by looking at the detail in individual cases can we understand what these possibilities are.

#### **9.2.1.6. Are experiences of presence expressions of trauma?**

Some theories have suggested that voices and visions are dissociative<sup>59</sup> responses to trauma. Close analysis of the accounts of experiences reported in this study established that informants largely drew on a biography of everyday life, rather than a traumatic event in their past, to give their experiences meaning. That is not to deny that voices, visions and experiences of presence can relate to traumatic events in a person's life, such as abuse. These connections are documented in numerous personal accounts (see Romme et al, 2009). Many women and men who end up with a serious psychiatric diagnosis have been abused as children (Meuser et al, 1998). The empirical chapters have established that other kinds of links to the past are possible, and commonplace, and that these should not be overlooked in the pursuit of a traumatic cause<sup>60</sup>. Death is certainly a problem, but not necessarily a trauma.

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<sup>59</sup> The term 'dissociation' in psychology usually refers to a profound splitting of the psyche. In some theories it is the root of psychopathology.

<sup>60</sup> This recommendation of course also depends on the definition of trauma that is in use. Could Julie's situation of a mother's rejection be described as traumatic? In her story it was not a single event or a series of horrific events but was a distressing pattern in a relationship over time. Are there other words that may be used to describe her situation? Accumulative trauma? Toxic relationships? It is for the reader to decide which terms may capture the damage done to a person.

As discussed above, the experiences of presence reported in this study were well integrated in the lives of informants. It was the death itself that was narrated as the 'break', or dissociation, in these lives. The experiences are thus more accurately described as continuations than dissociations.

#### **9.2.1.7. Theoretical Implications - Conclusions**

This section has reviewed many of the most popular theories of experiences of presence in light of the findings of the research reported here. It has found that many of these theories, in the pursuit of reduction and causal explanation, neglect crucial aspects of these experiences. Some theories, such as Freud's idea of wish fulfillment, may account for *some* features of *some* experiences. Theories of the continuing bond, with an emphasis on meaning and personal relationships, capture many more of the properties of experiences of presence. But these may also neglect the diversity of the consequences of the experiences. It is therefore recommended that theories of continuing relationships are developed in order to encompass; 1) transformations in relationships as well as continuations, and 2) consequences to the experiences which may be unique and personal.

#### **9.2.2. *Hearing voices in and out of bereavement***

This section considers the relationship between the findings of this thesis, and hearing voices in other circumstances, unrelated to bereavement. It considers the similarities in the experiences including that they are meaningful experiences and often rely on complex sources of meaning. It also discusses differences in the experiences due to the circumstances of the voice. Finally, non-bereavement voices are considered with respect to the concept of 'continuing relationships'.

### **9.2.2.1. Hearing a voice, and hearing a voice during bereavement**

It may come as no surprise to the reader that non-bereavement voices have many properties in common with the bereavement voices reported here, as demonstrated through past research. This includes that non-bereavement voices have pragmatics (Leudar et al, 1997; Leudar and Thomas, 2000), are contextualised in the hearer's immediate environment (Leudar, Hayes, and Turner Baker, in preparation; Hayes, Leudar and King, in preparation), have varying social meanings (Watkins, 1998; Leudar and Thomas, 2000), and often link to events in a person's past (Davies et al, 1999; Romme et al, 2009). Furthermore the content of the voices is often mundane, rarely violent, and the hearer's response to their voice is most often mediated by their reason and morality (Leudar and Thomas, 2000). In other words, voices, whether in the circumstances of a bereavement or otherwise, are not simply false perceptions, nor do they fit common social representations of the experiences.

Yet there are obvious differences in the circumstances of the two kinds of voices. Firstly, the identities of voices in bereavement are more likely to be aligned with a person known to the hearer - none of the voices reported in this thesis were anonymous (as those voices reported in Leudar et al, 1997). This provides the bereaved voice-hearer with an immediate niche for making sense of their experiences - the relationship with the deceased, and the grief. For example, the voice Matt heard was of his father, and Matt was able to make sense of this voice as 'jealous' because of his past relationship with a jealous father. The connections with a person's biography are fairly clear and pervasive. In the case of non-bereavement voices, connections with biography and other people in a person's life may be less obvious, even symbolic. For example, a voice may sound anonymous but on closer inspection may be pragmatically aligned with someone in a person's life.

Secondly, the bereaved voice-hearer has a wider range of semiotic resources available to them in making sense of what is happening. These are the meaning resources in our society that relate to death, which we saw in use in the interviews. They include, amongst others things; the idea of heaven, the practices of mediums who talk to the dead, and the idea that death is a 'stressor' and so may lead to strange experiences. These resources may help the bereaved person to come to

terms with their experiences and cope with them. The availability of these resources also has implications for stigma (see below, section 9.3.)

A related point is that the bereaved often have more social opportunities to make sense of their experiences. Although in the interviews these were not public situations, like the ones in which shamanistic healers talk about their voices, or in which Socrates discussed his demon (chapter 1), they were social. A common setting for making sense of the experiences was the family, but others also appeared; a funeral parlour, discussions with clairvoyants and the spiritually curious, and talking with others who disclose experiences of presence. These social opportunities are rarely available to those who hear non-bereavement voices<sup>61</sup> and these experiences are often notably private (Leudar, Hayes, and Turner Baker, in preparation). However, one bereavement case, Julie, demonstrated that psychiatric involvement could preclude the opportunity to talk about bereavement voices in social situations.

#### **9.2.2.2. Voices, continuing relationships, and dual relationships**

The idea of a 'continuing relationship', with the qualifications given above, may be useful in understanding other kinds of voices. In particular, those voices that are prosodically and pragmatically aligned with persons in the hearer's life, past or present. This idea from bereavement studies may be useful in determining how voices relate to social relationships, what they continue, and what they transform or exaggerate. For example, 'Violet' (reported in Hayes, Leudar and King, in preparation) was a voice-hearer who heard the voices of two managers in a workplace who had once bullied her. She no longer had contact with those managers, but her experiences of voices continued the abusiveness of these relationships. Like Julie's voice, this was in a somewhat transformed way - one way in which this changed was that the voices said abusive words to Violet that the persons did not.

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<sup>61</sup> One exception is the Hearing Voices Network, which organises self-help groups for voice-hearers.

However, the difference in the use of the term 'continuing relationship' under such circumstances is that the voice-analogue has not died. If they are persons that the hearer still has contact with then the situation may better be described as a 'dual-relationship' rather than a continuing relationship. It is possible that the relationship can change through interaction with the voice-analogue, as well as through the voice. This may have quite different consequences for the hearer as they try to manage the intersections between the two modes of relating.

### **9.3. Stigma**

Past studies have suggested that experiences of presence in bereavement may be stigmatising experiences (Rees 1971; Grimby 1998). The ways in which many informants spoke of their experiences in this study indicated that they remain stigmatising. Some informants carefully managed their 'face' in order to deny the relevance of 'hallucinations' or 'schizophrenia', and in order to demonstrate an identity as a rational person. Some informants said they avoided talking about their experiences in certain situations, and this hints at a risk of 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1968). These situations included a religious setting, in one case (Julie). So stigma may not only occur through medical concepts and media representations but also via some religious faiths that teach that such experiences are the work of evil.

Indeed the consequences of the 'hallucination' concept may be similar to the demons-devils conception of experiences of presence (as shown through a case study, chapter 4). Both ideas suggest there is something inherently wrong with the person, and both may confound the isolation of the bereaved person. Bereavement is often a lonely experience, with arenas and timescales for talking about grief normatively limited. Bereaved persons experiencing presence have an increased risk of emotional and social isolation as the result of social stigma.

However, there are certain factors that may mitigate the effects of this stigma. They relate to the social resources discussed above that may be available to the bereaved, and were used in the interviews reported in this thesis. The first factor is the family. Experiences of presence are often discussed with family members. Other family members may also have had such experiences of the deceased which they

may then share. This has a normalising effect, at least within the local setting of the family. There were numerous examples of this in the interviews including Samuel sharing with Isaac, Clare with her mother, and Samira with her mother. These were sometimes co-ordinated experiences, occurring for more than one person at the same time. Such co-ordination reduces the fear of madness.

Secondly, clairvoyants offered an arena where continuing 'contact' is not only normalised, but actively encouraged (albeit through a medium). A 'spoiled' identity in one situation may be celebrated as a 'spiritually sensitive' one in this situation. Perhaps it is not surprising that some of the bereaved are so drawn to visit clairvoyants in light of this rare opportunity for normalisation and validation.

### **9.3.1. How can stigma be challenged?**

Stigma is a serious matter. Along with it comes fear; others may fear the person and their experiences, the person may start to fear themselves. Stigma has documented self-alienating consequences (Leudar et al, 2008; Fanon, 1968; Goffman, 1968). This thesis recommends that stigmatizing representations of voices, presence, and those that experience them – i.e. those that present these experiences as 'mad' and 'dangerous' - continue to be challenged, in terms of their distortion of the vast majority of such experiences. These representations may be in the news media, TV soaps, chat shows and documentaries. They may be in films or literature. Instead the inclusion of diverse narratives of experience should be promoted – like the ones from films and literature presented in the vignettes at the very beginning of this thesis. It is true that these experiences then might lose their propensity for drama if the more 'mundane' versions start to replace the spectacular and violent. But perhaps a shift from main drama to sub-plot is needed.

Professionals, when speaking in public, are encouraged to avoid colluding with ideas that those that hear voices or see visions are by default psychopathological, and in need of diagnosis and treatment. Platforms where people may share their personal

experiences of 'presence', such as the Hearing Voices Congress<sup>62</sup>, should be promoted. Personal experiences in all their variety should be given space.

Also recommended is the further development of self-help groups such as the Hearing Voices Network (H.V.N.), where voice-hearers can work on the meaning of their experiences with others. The H.V.N. also provides a source of public education about such experiences through its publications. It is advisable that specialist groups are set-up to help bereaved people in particular who are struggling with what is happening to them. With careful facilitation the diversity of such experiences may be respected and given space. This may lead to educative publications and leaflets that can help family, friends and the general public keep an open-mind to 'presence' in bereavement, and hearing voices in general.

Finally it is recommended that some religious denominations avoid the assumption that these experiences relate to evil forces, and concentrate on alternative ways to support the bereaved in coping with their experiences.

#### **9.4. *The spiritual lives of the bereaved***

Are experiences of presence spiritually transformative? There was little evidence for drastic spiritual transformations in the interviews, but there certainly was a shift towards greater spiritual curiosity in many informants. For example, Esme and Aggie started to visit clairvoyants, and Samira began to entertain Hindu spiritual ideas. The spiritual curiosity was fairly selective, and was focused on ideas and practices that helped the bereaved to cope, or to account for the continuation through the presence. No-one became less religious or spiritual following their experiences – despite Julie's anger at her god she did not turn away from Christianity *per se*.

Formal religion was not often used openly in providing accounts for the experiences. However, ideas from religions, such as an 'afterlife' or 'heaven', were background presuppositions in some of the interviews. These were used to underpin continuity in the relationship with the deceased. However the nature of this continuity was not dictated by these religious resources, but instead by the person's emotional and

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<sup>62</sup> An annual international conference of voice-hearers, academics and mental health professionals.



practical needs. Informants were selective of those beliefs and practices that could account for their experiences and fulfill their needs.

It is also possible that the spiritual effects of the experiences of presence were downplayed due to face-work; the study found that even religious people used spiritual resources with hesitation (as with Esme, chapter 7).

One thing we can be sure of is that the death itself was personally transformative, even if the experiences of presence were not always. Sarah in particular presented her son's death as shaping her faith and her life's work from that point onwards. All informants narrated the death of someone close to them as a huge change in their lives and their ways of seeing the world.

### **9.5. Therapeutic Implications**

Experiences of presence are not, by definition, a problem. In fact the healing *potential* of such vivid continuing relationships is great, as the case of Aggie demonstrated. The experience of presence may be a way of working out the meaning of a relationship. But their destructive potential is also great, as Julie poignantly related. In all cases, this potential depended on the meaning of the relationship with the deceased in the past, and with the 'presence' now. This thesis has established that the bereaved seem to have more trouble with voices, than presence of other kinds. This may be due to the importance of language in regulating our activities and in making sense of our worlds (Vygotsky, 1962; Bruner 1990). The voices in this study were speech acts with pragmatic implications for the hearer.

As Leudar and Thomas (2000) concluded, voices are not necessarily pathological. Some are, some are not, just as some kinds of thinking or imagining can be pathological. But no-one would say that thinking in general was pathological. The same applies to experiences of presence. However if a person seeks therapy for their experiences of presence, they are defining them as a problem.

Chapter 8 of this thesis demonstrated that meaning is central to whether these experiences are a problem or not. The use of semiotic resources in the interviews suggests there is a huge variety in meaning-making. Chapter 7 also established that

these meanings were not rigid, but people showed flexibility in the ways they made sense of their experiences and in the resources they used. Their experiences could come to mean different things over time. There is a good possibility for meaning-change and this indicates a role for therapy.

We have learnt from the cases that the problem with a voice lies in what it continues; rejection in Julie's case; hostility in Matt's case; anger in Linda's. It therefore makes sense to work on the relationship to the deceased, and the meaning of this. We learnt something particular from comparing Matt with Julie. Matt coped with his voice because he put his father's hostility in the past down to jealousy. He used the same resources for coping with his father in the past for coping with the speech acts of the voice, and was able therefore to reduce their potency. Julie did not understand the rejection in the past, and seemed to make a more direct internalization of it. Perhaps Julie and others like her could cope with a voice by working on the meaning of the relationship with the deceased. If Julie was in a position where she could feel that her mother's rejection was not due to her own unworthiness, but due to her mother's problem, the words of the voice may not have such powerful consequences. This could transform her relationship with the voice.

So the task of therapist and client together could be to work on the meaning of the relationship with the deceased in the past. But another route could be to work more directly on the relationship with the voice in the present, helping the client to feel more able to cope with its pragmatic force.

Therapists are advised to be aware of any fear around sanity that is invoked by these experiences, and to be prepared to reassure clients where appropriate that experiences of presence are common in bereavement and that they do not indicate insanity.

Some words of caution however. It is advised that therapists and professionals of all kinds keep an open-mind when working with clients and patients who are experiencing presence, and do not assume that;

1. The experiences are inherently pathological – do not try and mend something that is not broken
2. The experiences are always related to a traumatic event

3. That one existing theory can explain the experiences in all cases
4. That a client should take on board the therapist's preferred theory for what is happening to them.

In particular, it is important that professionals avoid imposing a theory or concept on the bereaved client that is hard for them to integrate. This includes any theory that requires many aspects of the experience, including its emotional potency and links with the past, to be cancelled. It is advised that professionals use as a starting point the meanings that the client brings with them and has lived by at the start of therapy. Finally, it is also important that a therapist does not have meaning-agendas, such as convincing the bereaved client against spiritual or religious meanings. This would exert a strong pressure for self-presentation, which the interviews showed was present even when the interviewers displayed no position on spiritual and religious meanings. Such a strong pressure for self-presentation could seriously affect the quality of the therapeutic relationship.

In light of the importance of the biographic source of meaning, a therapeutic approach that does not reduce sources of meaning seems to be appropriate in most cases; for example, person-centred (Rogers, 1951), narrative (White and Epston, 1990), and existential approaches (Cooper, 2003), and the voice dialogue technique (Stone and Stone, 1998). In these approaches the focus is on client meanings. In some cases, a reductionist approach could be appropriate if the client's tendency is towards treating their experiences as a mistake. If this does not work, the therapist may want to encourage the opening-up of emotional and relational meaning. This could begin with an exploration of the pragmatics of a voice, and the consequences of an experience of presence in the concurrent environment. In any case, the therapist needs to listen carefully to the client's story and pay careful attention to the sources of meaning that they are using.

### ***9.6. Limitations of the project, and future research***

Originally, the plan for this study was to track several participants over the course of a year in three interviews. Unfortunately due to initial problems with recruiting participants and the time-consuming nature of the interview approach and

transcription, follow-up interviews were only taken with a small number of informants. The longitudinal aspect of the study is therefore limited.

The study was not intended to be a representative statistical survey, but I would have preferred to have been able to recruit informants from a wider range of backgrounds; including religious, class, and gender. This is to ensure that a broad variety of experiences is analysed and documented. This may be easier to achieve in a future study with more resources available – which would enable a researcher to establish more contacts in places of worship, and to advertise more widely, therefore reaching a greater diversity of people.

The research project reported in this thesis is the first in-depth investigation of experiences of presence. It is therefore only the very beginning of the story. Future research could develop the findings of the research in many different directions. I shall outline just a few of these here.

Experiences of presence are contextually sensitive experiences and one route for further study could be a cross-cultural investigation. The experiences could be studied in different countries, asking the question; how does cultural atmosphere affect the meaning of the experiences of presence, and consequences such as stigma?

A second route could be to examine therapy for those with problem-presence. This could aim to investigate the question; how does the therapy change the meaning of the client's experiences of presence, and with what consequences? This could be a comparative study of different therapeutic approaches and thus may teach us something about the therapies as well as the experiences of presence.

Thirdly, chapter 6 of this thesis suggested that the 'feeling of presence' may be more like an emotion than a semiotic sign. Further research could be done in this area in order to extend my findings on the properties of the feeling of presence and how it becomes linked to a particular person. This could involve a comparison of feelings of presence that are anonymous, with those that are of familiar persons, such as those documented in this thesis.

### 9.7. Some final words

There is a preoccupation in Psychology with physical presence, consistent with a positivist research agenda. But anyone who has ever loved anyone else will know that relationships and relating do not end when the person leaves the room. Imaginary conversations may happen continually in the background of life; arguments can continue; the warmth of a hug may be felt long after. In such situations, relationships continue, but in altered ways. Experiences of presence seem to be a very concrete form of this.

William James (1890) argued that the stream of thought is sensibly continuous. This thesis has examined how our relationships may be continuous. The experiences reported in this thesis demonstrate pertinently that the here-and-now is never an isolated moment but is structured by other times, places, and people.

In 1990, Jerome Bruner, an architect of the cognitive 'revolution', made a call for Psychology as a discipline to return to a concern with meaning. This thesis answers this call by cataloging this meaning, but also develops it using inspiration from Ethnomethodology - "the study of peoples' methods" - to show ordinary peoples' methods for making their social lives meaningful.

We saw in the empirical chapters that the powers that experiences of presence may hold *depend on meaning*. The discipline of Psychology needs to re-think its marriage to experimental methodology in order to understand voices, visions, and experiences like them.

In Memoriam A.H.H.

XV

If one should bring me this report,  
That thou hadst touch'd the land to-day,  
And I went down unto the quay,  
And found thee lying in the port;

And standing, muffled round with woe,  
Should see thy passengers in rank  
Come stepping lightly down the plank,  
And beckoning unto those they know;

And if along with these should come  
The man I held as half-divine;  
Should strike a sudden hand in mine,  
And ask a thousand things of home;

And I should tell him all my pain,  
And how my life had droop'd of late,  
And he should sorrow o'er my state  
And marvel what possessed my brain;

And I perceived no touch of change,  
No hint of death in all his frame,  
But found him all in all the same,  
I should not feel it to be strange.

(Tennyson)

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# Appendices

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(Available on attached disc)

Appendix 1: Julie

Appendix 2: Clare

Appendix 3: Samuel

Appendix 4: Aggie

Appendix 5: Esme, Isaac, Esther

Appendix 6: Inge, Jude, Sarah

Appendix 7: Tracey

Appendix 8: Linda, Matt, Samira

Appendix 9: Heena, Sade, Kelly