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## Exploring Voice Hearers' Occupational Experience of Romantic and Sexual Relationships

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## Exploring Voice Hearers' Occupational Experience of Romantic and Sexual Relationships

### Abstract

*Background:* Limited research has been conducted that explores the occupational experience of hearing voices, including the impact it has on romantic and/or sexual relationships. This study aims to address this gap by capturing the experience of romantic and sexual relationships for those who hear voices.

*Method:* A phenomenological approach was used to gather data from a survey, electronic diaries, and interviews of three voice hearers who were interested or actively in a casual or serious relationship.

*Results:* All of the participants reported that the voices in some way impacted their past or current romantic and sexual relationships. The dynamic relationship between voices and occupation could directly or indirectly impact the experience of occupation with their partner. Voices with personas were found to have varying levels of participation in occupations, with some becoming co-occupations between the participant and their voices. Support from their partner was valued, though varied by participant, with some of the participants seeking outside support from peers with shared experiences.

*Conclusion:* This research challenges the idea of the individual having full agency during occupational performance. Because voices can actively participate during co-occupations, occupational therapists need to inquire about their voices during evaluation and include them during interventions.

### Comments

The authors report no potential conflicts of interest.

### Keywords

voice hearers, relationships, sexuality, occupational therapy

### Credentials Display

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The term “hearing voices” is not clearly defined in the literature. According to Craig et al. (2017), hearing voices, or auditory hallucinations, is the phenomenon of experiencing auditory sounds in the environment that others do not perceive. Although commonly thought to refer to auditory sounds alone, hearing voices is an umbrella term that encompasses experience through different types of senses, including visual, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory. These senses may occur one at a time or in combination (Hearing Voices Network, 2018). Those participating in peer support recovery movements have been found, typically, to identify as “voice hearers.” The lens through which people view their experiences are diverse, which is seen as a strength of such movements. Person-first language is encouraged when using clinical illness labels that have been shown to increase stigma. Voice hearer is a fairly neutral statement that has no association with pathology embedded in it, which may be why many people choose to use it and consider it recovery language.

For the purposes of this research study, the more inclusive umbrella term of hearing voices to describe multiple sensory experiences will be used. Hearing voices may be equally individual in terms of their identity, content, interpretation, and impact (Hearing Voices Network, 2018). In addition, hearing voices may or may not be associated with a mental health diagnosis, despite its previous association with diagnoses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and psychosis (Mental Health Foundation, 2018). Hearing voices has the potential to positively, negatively, or neutrally impact many aspects of daily life, including occupations (Craig et al., 2017).

The Ecology of Human Performance (EHP) was a guiding model for this study. The EHP model serves as a framework, which relates to the effect of context. Dunn et al. (1994) argued that a person does not exist in a vacuum; the physical environment and social, cultural, and temporal factors all influence behavior. In addition, the interrelationship of a person and the context determines which tasks fall in the person's area of performance in their occupation. According to Nelson (1988), the “term performance means to go through or to carry out something, and occupational performance means to go through or carry out the occupational form” (p. 634). Each person's contextual experience is unique, although many elements are shared among persons. The EHP framework shares the emphasis on examining the interdependent relationship between the person and the physical environment, and it expands the concept of context-environment to include physical, temporal, social, and cultural elements (Dunn et al., 1994). Employing a broader definition allows this research to make those elements explicit when investigating individuals' experiences of romantic and sexual relationships. Despite this model's emphasis on contextual features relative to performance components and performance areas, it has received little attention and is rarely addressed. Disciplines that address human behavior in a holistic manner, such as occupational therapy, must consider the effect of these contextual features on target behaviors. Some argue that a holistic perspective should replace simpler linear cause and effect thinking in therapeutic intervention (Dunn et al., 1994). This study aims to include context when conducting this study to gain a deeper understanding of individuals who identify with hearing voices and their unique experience of romantic and sexual relationships.

## **Literature Review**

Craig et al. (2017) were the first to publish a study in the domain of occupational therapy that explored the work-related experiences of people who hear voices, the impacts on their working lives, and their self-management strategies. Participants who had critical and distressing voices that demanded their full attention felt that their ability to work was disrupted. This particularly affected their ability to concentrate, communicate, and complete tasks in their work environment. Some participants reported that

their voices were neutral and supportive of their work. Meaningful experiences at work were found to decrease the negative impact some participants felt they had with their voices. In addition, participants reported a range of resilience strategies they used to manage their voices. These strategies included methods to interact with voices and various activities to engage or distract them. It is important for health care providers to note that not all voice hearing has a uniquely negative impact, as evidenced by participants' reports of their lived experience. While the Craig et al. study was the first to explore the dynamic relationship between hearing voices and work from an occupational therapy perspective, the researchers focused solely on work and did not explore the possible impact on other occupations, including relationships.

Few studies have explored the interaction between social relationships and mental health diagnoses. Notably, Macdonald et al. (2005) conducted an in-depth phenomenological study that explored the experiences of social relationships for young people recovering from their first episode of psychosis. Participants felt that other individuals perceived them differently after they had been diagnosed. While participants stated that they wished to resume at least some of their former friendships, they ultimately avoided contact with these friends, partly because of perceived stigmatizing attitudes to their diagnosis of psychosis. They also expressed that they preferred to spend time with people who shared similar experiences. They felt that these individuals not only understood them but also shared a mutual trust (Macdonald et al., 2005). While the experience of psychosis can be different from the experience of voice hearing, the stigma associated with individuals labeled with a mental health diagnosis can be similar. Therefore, the impact on relationships can be similar.

While few studies explore the relationship between social occupations and mental health diagnoses, even fewer studies look specifically at individuals who hear voices. Mawson et al. (2011) studied the relationship between the individual and their voices and the individual and other social beings. Many participants expressed that their sense of self-worth was affected by the stigma of hearing voices. They felt that this view was strengthened by social acquaintances. In addition, many participants reported that their voices attempted to change their emotions and behaviors during social situations. Participants also believed that social isolation caused their voice hearing to occur in the first place. This made them place great value on social relationships. Without the support of family and friends, participants felt that their ability to cope, both in daily life and with their voices, was compromised. Some participants believed that they needed friendships to cope with their voice hearing. However, they felt that these relationships were difficult to maintain. Lastly, some participants expressed that their voices made them feel distrusting and paranoid about others. This made it challenging to develop and maintain close relationships (Mawson et al., 2011).

Whitton et al. (2013) explored whether involvement in committed dating relationships was associated with university students' mental health (depressive symptoms and problem alcohol use, including binge drinking) and whether these associations differed between genders. A study they reported from Lewis and Butterfield (2007) found that spouses look after one another by encouraging healthy behaviors that promote emotional well-being (e.g., good eating habits, regular exercise) and discouraging unhealthy ones (e.g., heavy drinking, drug use). From a sample of 889 undergraduate students 18 to 25 years of age, Whitton et al. discovered that involvement in a committed relationship, compared with being single, was associated with fewer depressive symptoms for college women but not for men. In addition, they found that committed relationship involvement was associated with less problematic alcohol use for both genders. Overall, their findings suggested that not only did involvement in these types of relationships

serve to be protective to college student mental health, but also that healthy relationships benefitted overall student well-being (Whitton et al., 2013). While this study solely focuses on the general mental health of college students instead of focusing on individuals who hear voices, it is evident that healthy intimate relationships can positively impact negative symptoms of mental health that may be prevalent for individuals who hear voices.

The impact on sexuality for individuals who hear voices has rarely been explored. McCarthy-Jones and Davidson (2013) examined the role of love in the experience of hearing voices. McCarthy-Jones and Davidson argued that a lack of love is likely to play a causal role in voice-hearing experiences. A study they reported from Rees (1971) found that “13% of bereaved people had heard the voice of their deceased spouse. The longer the marriage had been the more probable hallucinations of all forms were” (McCarthy-Jones & Davidson, 2013, p. 370). In addition, they demonstrated that a lack of love is central to the distress and dysfunction often caused by hearing voices. They found that stigma, social isolation, and discrimination can lead to the loss of social relationships and love. Lastly, they showed that love plays a central role in recovery (McCarthy-Jones & Davidson, 2013).

Because of the variable experiences individuals who hear voices have, the impact on occupations varies as well. While some individuals feel that their voices create barriers in their ability to participate in various occupations, others may feel that their voices promote their engagement. Through the use of phenomenological studies, researchers have explored this variability through individuals' lived experience. Because of the integral role social relationships have in our overall health and well-being, it is crucial to explore its impact for individuals who hear voices through the lens of occupational science and occupational therapy. Occupational science is the study of humans as occupational beings and views engagement in occupation as part of the essential nature of being human (Yerxa et al., 1990). Occupational science has the potential to generate new understandings of occupation, which has the “potential to expand the scope of traditional practice, beyond disability” (Hocking & Clair, 2011, p. 34). At the time of this study's publication, the Craig et al. (2017) study is the only research in the domain of occupational therapy that explores the occupational impact for the population of persons who hear voices. To the researchers' knowledge, there is currently no research that solely focuses on the impact of voice hearing on people's romantic and/or sexual relationships and their occupations. This is a significant gap in the field of occupational therapy and occupational science. This study will address the gap by building on the research from Craig et al. (2017) by exploring how hearing voices may impact romantic and/or sexual relationships. This research aims to answer the research question: What is the experience of romantic and sexual relationships for those who hear voices, and how do those experiences impact occupations?

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

The design of the study was influenced by Craig et al. (2017) by adopting a phenomenological approach (Smith, 2007) with an interpretivist paradigm (Willis, 2007). The purpose of this design was to understand the nature of hearing voices and lived experiences, which are individualized and subjective. This research explored multiple meanings and interpretations of individual's occupational lives “where truth is understood to be ‘relative’ to the individual” (Craig et al., 2017, p. 708).

### **Participant Selection and Recruitment**

#### ***Sample Description, Sampling, and Recruiting Procedure***

Six adult participants in both the US and the Republic of Ireland were recruited for the study. The participants were recruited from a convenience sample of individuals who were affiliated with the Bay

Area Hearing Voices Network (BAHVN) and Heart and Soul Inc. Hearing Voices Support Group. The researchers emailed an outline of the study and recruitment flyer to the gatekeeper at each organization. The flyer was displayed during their bi-weekly meetings for 1 month and was sent to their members through email. The researchers gave a brief presentation of the study at the BAHVN and a Heart and Soul Inc. meeting. The participants were also recruited from a convenience sample of individuals that the researchers and faculty advisor for this study personally knew. The recruitment flyers were also posted on approved designated public bulletin boards at Dominican University of California. Three participants were omitted because of either the exclusion criteria or a desire to withdraw from the study because of time. This study included three adult participants.

### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

The inclusion criteria required participants who were interested or actively in casual or serious relationships (e.g., may include dating, marriage, single), identified as hearing voices at some point in their life, and were at least 18 years of age. The exclusion criteria included individuals who were not interested in exploring romantic and/or sexual relationships, were younger than 18 years of age, and have not heard voices at some point in their lives. Only individuals who were fluent in English were included in this study, as there were insufficient resources for language translation. There were no enrollment restrictions based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or preference, or geographical location.

### **Data Collection**

Our triangulation of data consisted of the participants' responses based on the survey questions, electronic diary entries, and one semi-structured interview.

The purpose of the survey was to provide the researchers with demographic information about the participants and an understanding of their current and past romantic and/or sexual history. A list of questions (see Table 1) were given to the participants prior to their participation in the study. The survey asked the participants about their romantic and/or sexual history and their current dating or relationship status.

The electronic diaries served to provide an understanding of day-to-day experiences of hearing voices while interacting with others. The method of electronic diaries was influenced by the Craig et al. (2017) article. Diary writing allows time for the participant to reflect on responses, is cost efficient to researchers and participants, and encourages more open disclosure (Markham, 2004; O'Conner et al., 2008; Woll, 2013). The participants were asked to write weekly diary entries for a duration of 6 weeks on a Google form. A list of prompts (see Table 2) were given to the participants once they agreed to participate in the study. The prompts had guidance notes to focus the participants' writing. The participants had the option to decline individual diary entry submissions during the study if they felt they did not have anything to write. The participants submitted individual diary entries completed through a Google form to a secure password protected email address owned by the researchers.

The interview gave an opportunity for the researchers to ask follow-up and clarifying questions about the diary entries and provided a space in which the participants could reflect on their overall experience during the course of the study. Semi-structured interview questions were prepared in advance and were used when relevant to the participant's experience (see Table 3). Interviews with the participants took place in person in a private room at Dominican University of California over video and the phone. The interviews lasted 90 to 120 min and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The researchers hoped that this triangulation of data would add rigor, richness, and depth to the study.

## Data Management and Analysis

Once data were collected, the researchers used a software program called Temi to transcribe and a data analysis software called Dedoose to organize data and codes. Data analysis was influenced by Craig et al. (2017) and followed the principles of thematic analysis for the survey, electronic diaries, and interview (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This inductive approach involved identifying explicitly apparent themes in the data supported by interpretation from the researchers. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data collected through the survey, electronic diaries, and interview by transcribing, reading and rereading, and noting initial ideas. Second, they generated initial codes in a systematic fashion across the entire data set. Third, they searched for themes by collating codes and gathering all data relevant to potential themes. Fourth, they reviewed the themes by generating a thematic map of the analysis. Fifth, they defined and named themes through ongoing analysis, refining specifics, and generating clear definitions and names for each theme. Last, they produced the report by selecting extract examples for each theme and relating it back to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researchers used reflexivity, also influenced by Craig et al. (2017), by searching for alternative interpretations and examining personal biases throughout the data analysis (Carpenter & Suto, 2008). Member checking strategies ensured the participants' accounts were accurately understood, thereby enhancing credibility. Triangulation of data by including the survey, electronic diary entries, and interview strengthened the credibility through this convergence of information from multiple sources (Carpenter & Suto, 2008).

## Table 1

### *Survey Questions*

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This survey aims to provide an understanding of current or past romantic and/or sexual history. Completion of this survey should take about 10–15 min. All information will be kept confidential in a highly secure Google account.

#### Questions:

1. Do you identify as hearing voices regularly?
  2. If you answered no, when was the last time you experienced them?
  3. If you answered yes, when was the last time you experienced them?
  4. Who do you currently live with?
    - Long-term partner (boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.)
    - Spouse
    - Parents
    - Family or relatives
    - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  5. How many people reside with you?
    - 1
    - 2
    - 3
    - 4
    - 5 or more
  6. Are you currently in a relationship?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Maybe
    - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  7. If you are involved with or seeing someone(s), please describe how you met him/her/them and how long you have known him/her/them for.
  8. Please describe your past or present relationships (e.g., how many relationships have you had, duration of relationships, etc).
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**Table 2***Guidance Notes to Focus Participants' Writing*


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I am interested in your **day-to-day** experience of socializing with others (this can include casual or serious dating, relationships, marriage, single, etc.; please say which). What is it like to interact with others romantically and/or sexually and hear voices? You can write as often as you like, daily, weekly, or whatever suits you.

Here is some guidance that may help focus your writing.

- Some people choose to tell their partner(s) about their experience of hearing voices. Some people choose not to. Please write about your experience about choosing to disclose or not.
- Please tell us about the activities that you engage in when you are dating or with a partner(s). How are these activities impacted by hearing voices (e.g., qualities of the activities, duration, frequency, choice of which activities)? Please include these experiences in your writing.
- What are the environments in which you engage in with your partner(s) (environment can be physical, social, virtual, etc.). Do qualities of these environments impact your experience of these activities?
- Research suggests that some people develop ways of managing hearing voices while interacting with others. Some people find it difficult. Please write about your experiences.

When you are writing, if you can, please include what the voices say and if they are quiet or loud and how often they talk to you. If possible, please describe how this makes you feel. Did the voices encourage you or make it difficult for you to do the things you needed to do while interacting with others? Don't worry about language here. Whatever you hear, it's okay to write it down.

If you can think of anything else that you think would be helpful for other people to understand about your social experiences please write about this.

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**Table 3***Semi-Structured Interview Questions*


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This interview will give an opportunity for the researchers to ask follow-up questions and provide a space in which participants can reflect on their overall experience during the course of the study. The researchers will ask the participants to elaborate on electronic diary prompt entries and to provide examples. The researchers have listed possible questions below:

- “In this day of your diary entry of \_\_\_\_\_, you wrote \_\_\_\_\_. Could you further elaborate?”
- “What was really important for you about this part?”
- “Is there something we did not ask in the diary that you would like to share?”
- “Other participants mentioned this. Do you think this is relevant to you or not?”

Because of the open nature of the electronic diaries prompt, participants have the option to answer the guiding questions or write about their own reflections. The researchers may ask those participants who did not directly answer the guiding questions on the electronic diaries prompt a second time if they feel the answer is pertinent to the research findings.

- “Some people choose to tell their partner(s) about their experience of hearing voices. Some people choose not to. Please describe your experience about choosing to disclose or not.”
- “Please tell us about the activities that you engage in when you are dating or with a partner(s). How are these activities impacted by hearing voices (e.g., qualities of the activities, duration, frequency, choice of which activities)?”
- “What are the environments in which you engage in with your partner(s) (environment can be physical, social, virtual, etc.). Do qualities of these environments impact your experience of these activities?”
- “Research suggests that some people develop ways of managing hearing voices while interacting with others. Some people find it difficult. Please describe your experiences.”

The researchers will also take this opportunity to clarify and member check.

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## Results

Six voice hearers expressed interest in the study and received information and consent forms. One person declined to participate, one consented but did not return any data, and one participated by submitting one entry and completing the interview. However, this last participant did not fit our inclusion criteria because their experience occurred only once in their life and they did not report any influences on their relationships; therefore, they were omitted from the study. The three remaining participants submitted weekly electronic diary entries over 6 weeks. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants. The participant and voice characteristics are reported in Table 4. The findings from this research indicated that individuals who identified as voice hearers each had their own unique experience and that the voices were considered to be either positive, negative, or neutral. In addition, all of the participants reported that the voices in some way impacted their past or current romantic and sexual relationships. Analysis revealed three main themes: (a) the correlation between voices, occupations, and relationships; (b) the value of support and understanding from partners; and (c) the experience of hearing voices and contextual barriers that impact relationships. Main themes and subthemes can also be found in Table 5.

**Table 4**  
*Participant and Voice Characteristics*

<b>Pseudonym, age (years), gender</b>	<b>Duration and current frequency of voice hearing</b>	<b>Voice characteristics</b>
Melody, 28, female	First heard voices at 10 years of age and began seeing things, such as lights changing in the blinds and things written on papers that weren't there. During her most difficult time at 24 years of age, felt like she was on a TV show for a few months and thought she had died and been reborn; still hears voices almost daily, the same three or four day-to-day with distinct personalities and needs; in times of heavy stress, she hears more voices who are unrecognizable, sounds like door bells or chimes, and hears a particularly unpleasant voice; she might see things like bugs, flies, children, all that are not visible by others, in addition to feeling bugs crawling on her skin.	<b>Voice 1:</b> "pseudonym" - "preteen to teenage"; "negative"; likes to write. <b>Voice 2:</b> "pseudonym" - "younger like a kid"; "gets panicked when [boyfriend] leaves"; likes music. <b>Voice 3:</b> "pseudonym" - "grown up"; "good at navigating adult things"; likes to advocate. <b>Other experiences:</b> dissociative episode
Salvatore, 44, male	First heard voices at 16 years of age, but intermittent now, once every few years; "snap hallucinations" described as a "judgement of others separated in time" that occur once every 4 to 5 months; the experience of hearing auditory voices occurs less frequently than the experience of visual hallucinations, since the last time he heard voices was 7 years ago.	<b>Other experiences:</b> visions, sometimes of colors and bright light
Lisa, 30, female	Heard voices with personas; "inaudible kind of groups of voices" and "clear ones, but I don't know them" that are intrusive, but doesn't hear them anymore; currently hears motivational voices intermittently.	<b>Other experiences:</b> altered states, disorganized thinking

**Table 5**  
*Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subthemes
1 Correlation between voices, occupations, and relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Influence of voices on occupation</i></li> <li>● <i>Influence of occupation on voices</i></li> </ul>
2 Value of support and understanding from partners	<i>None identified</i>
3 The experience of hearing voices and contextual barriers that impact relationships	<i>None identified</i>

### **Correlation between Voices, Occupations, and Relationships**

Analysis revealed that the participants' voices and occupations influenced one another in various reciprocal ways that had a direct or indirect impact on their partner or relationships.

#### ***Influence of Voices on Occupation***

All of the participants described how their voices could have various levels of participation that influenced the occupational experience with their partner. The participants reported that voices influencing occupations were characterized by preventing occupational engagement in their relationship or disrupting the quality of the occupation with their partner. For some of the participants, negative voices affected their ability to build trust and rapport while dating:

There was an element of my, uh, journey with mental health challenges that, um, made it very difficult to trust people. Like anybody. Even if I didn't have, like, a logical reason to, I was, like, paranoid and, um, you know, I was thinking, like, people were hacking my phone and my email and tracking me, videotaping me. So, um, that was difficult for many of my relationships. (Lisa, interview)

Dating was also impacted by voices. For Lisa, her difficulty to date in the past was indirectly impacted by an accompanying paranoia that comes with being someone who hears voices. For others, the presence of encouraging voices impacted the feelings of potential partners:

I remember a time when I was in college and I was sitting beside someone and I just heard 'that's a person you can get to know. This person you can love and cherish and, you know, you stand a great chance because she likes you'. And then, the voice in the head taught me to do something when I resisted. And in that small moment, something happened. There was a neglect or something she felt. And she said, 'if you're going to listen to the voices, just listen to me.' And then, we didn't end up together. (Salvatore, interview)

When asked about what the voice taught him, Salvatore responded, "What the voice basically taught me was that I was not to resist" and that the voices had power over him. The voices also had the ability to interfere in a potential connection. Salvatore expanded on the situation saying:

It appeared the voice (or power associated with it) stacked the girl up to me for the taking and then ripped it away just to prove it was the powerful one in my life, not me, that I couldn't seduce a girl

if my life depended on it, but with this complication of the voice it's hardly likely I'll be in a fit state to employ myself to the best of me, something needed in relationships. (Salvatore, interview)

This incidence demonstrates the power that the voices have in determining how Salvatore engaged in dating and how much control he has over the situation. This feeling of powerlessness impacts his ability to have the skills needed to have a relationship or the likelihood that he will initiate a connection in the future.

The participants also reported that voices could have varying levels of participation by collaborating, contributing, and being present during the performance of occupations. One participant, Melody, is in a band with her boyfriend and shared about their meaningful occupation of making music together. Music making was not always just between Melody and her boyfriend. When asked if one of her voices, who enjoys music, participates in music production with her boyfriend, Melody stated:

Music making part definitely. Cause, um, she has, like, kinda different ideas and I don't know, like, we get a lot of compliments about how unique our music is, and she really likes sound design and uh, like, different, like syncopated rhythms and things like that. (Melody, interview)

Music making, therefore, was a co-occupation, an occupation that is shared between two or more people, between the participant, the partner, and the voice, with each actively contributing in the process. Voices contribute to occupations and also have the ability to take over occupations. For example, when Melody's grandmother was in the hospital, she had the responsibility to take care of her while also taking care of her little sister. This situation was difficult to navigate because she feels uncomfortable being in hospitals, and she reported that one of her voices "took over" the responsibilities and fully participated. While she shared how her voice's full participation in this situation was useful, she felt drained at the end and needed additional support from her boyfriend, friends, and support group:

By the time I got home I can tell I was walking that thin line toward feeling suicidal. I had to reach out to my boyfriend, my friend group chat called 'the coven,' and my online mental health support group on Facebook. I wasn't able to reach anyone until the morning, my friend made me feel better. (Melody, diary entry)

The participants reported that negative voices could prevent meaningful occupational performance with their partner. After arguing with her family about the seriousness of her band and how much money they earn, Melody reported that she was unable to engage in a meaningful co-occupation with her boyfriend after having a dissociative episode, despite the support he gave her:

I start to not feel like myself, the world is spinning, I can't stop crying, I start hurting myself, my voices are so loud and I'm so out of it, I cannot recall most of what happens. My boyfriend helped me through this, but I was so hurt and triggered that I couldn't focus enough to make music. We still ate dinner with my family, then we went to my room to calm down. (Melody, diary entry)

While Melody was able to cope from this experience with the help of her boyfriend, she was still very much affected by what she had just gone through. She was unable to follow through with her plan to

make music with her boyfriend and opted out of her participation. In addition, negative voices had the potential to interfere with the quality of occupational engagement with their partner: “My ex [used to] force me to have sex and then my voices would start telling me that my boyfriend only wants to use me for sex WHILE we were in the middle of having sex” (Melody, diary entry).

The presence of voices, whether positive, negative, or neutral, were found to influence the quality of engagement and duration of occupational performance. Not only were voices found to directly influence social communication and sexual occupations with the participants’ partner, they could also influence everyday activities, which could indirectly impact the participants’ relationships.

### ***Influence of Occupation on Voices***

For some of the participants, participation or lack of engagement in occupations had an influence on how prevalent the voices were, the intensity, and the impact they would have on the individual. The participants reported that engagement in a meaningful co-occupation with their partner could help to manage or alleviate some of their “symptoms”:

I feel like I’ve had an increase in symptoms lately, not so much hearing voices but confused thinking and maybe just some random noise in my head. More like loud self talk than hearing voices. I’ve been slacking on my exercise, which may be why I’ve had an increase in symptoms, too. My husband and I went on a hike today and I felt much better. (Lisa, diary entry)

Lisa identified the powerful impact that exercise can have on her voices and well-being. For one of the participants, the absence of or decrease in communication with a partner increased the presence of negative voices:

My perception of regular things becomes distorted. Him not calling me while he’s [out of state] turns into my voices weaving a story of all of his family crowding him in a room, explaining why I am bad for him, why he needs to break up with me. And I think all the points they are arguing to him is [sic] true. (Melody, diary entry)

The participants reported the various ways that the dynamic relationship between voices and occupation affected the quality of engagement with their partner. While it was found that voices could influence occupational performance and engagement, occupations themselves could influence the quality, duration, and frequency of hearing voices. Engagement in certain occupations, like exercise and making music, can positively impact the participants’ experience of hearing voices, while the absence of participation in occupations, like social communication with a partner, can negatively impact their experience of hearing voices. The participants reported that they have learned about these causal experiences over time.

### ***Value of Support and Understanding from Partners***

Varying levels of support and understanding from partners influenced the quality of occupational engagement in their relationship with their partner. All of the participants reported how important support was when choosing and selecting a partner. The support they wanted and needed from their partner looked and felt differently for each individual:

[My husband] didn’t notice anything was wrong, probably because he was tired and he usually doesn’t say anything if he does notice I might be feeling off. He will usually just hug me or something. I felt comforted when he got in bed with me and I felt a little more relaxed. I feel

like when I experience hearing voices the best possible thing is to be with someone who is not talking. The worst is being with people that are talking and the middle option is being alone. At least this is how I experience it. (Lisa, diary entry)

Because voices had the potential to influence the quality of and engagement in occupations with their partner, the participants reported how valuable communication was in their relationships. When Melody would feel unsure about the truth of what her voices were telling her, she would rely on the support from her boyfriend by asking for reassurance:

Well, I feel really, like, vulnerable because I think 'Once I say it out loud to him, like, do you want me to leave?' Like, I know it sounds ridiculous once it comes out and, but then, and then he has to, like, you know, be like, 'No, I don't want you to leave. Why are you saying that?' (Melody, interview)

While Melody reported how important having open communication was with her boyfriend, she still felt reserved about the frequency of asking for reassurance. Having a strong foundation of trust and rapport was important for Melody, and she was able to establish this with her current boyfriend because of his shared experience of hearing voices through his younger brother:

My boyfriend is really great, he understands me because his brother was diagnosed with schizophrenia. He knows how to talk to me, how to listen, how to be there for me. He doesn't judge me or think I'm weird and when I've had bad dissociative episodes where my voices come out and my mind feels blank and I don't remember anything, he is there to calm me down and be with me without freaking out. (Melody, diary entry)

Finding a partner who could support and understand them was important for all of the participants. Melody shared that just because an individual may have a shared experience and understand them, it does not necessarily mean that they will be a positive support: "[My ex] heard voices too, which was why I thought I could trust him, but he turned out to be abusive in all sorts of ways, he never hit me though" (Melody, diary entry).

Through her involvement in peer support groups, Melody felt she could have full faith in her ex-boyfriend because of their shared experience. She shared that the trauma she experienced in the past would occasionally impact her current relationship with her boyfriend. In addition, finding a partner without a shared experience can be challenging because they may not necessarily understand:

I've noticed that when we're talking about voices, number one, they won't understand. I'll try and explain it . . . [they will either] sort of, uh, not understand, you know, or understand one way but not understand maybe my way, but I've learned that, um, it's more about appreciating that someone has their own experience. It's harder to, for me to sustain or maintain a stable relationship with someone who is not, uh, of the same circumstances or kind of problems, that like cause these, um, these symptoms. So, uh, they have the same symptoms. (Salvatore, interview)

The participants reported that the amount they chose to disclose to their partner was influenced by the amount of understanding from their partner.

My husband sometimes does not respond to my calling out randomly to soften the noise in my head. I think he's used to it and, come to think of it, I don't think he knows why I do it. Sometimes he questions it, like, he says 'what?' but I don't think I ever told him why I did it other than 'I'm just talking to myself'. It doesn't matter though because it doesn't seem to bother him. (Lisa, diary entry)

When the amount of support and understanding from a partner would not be enough, some of the participants sought other individuals or organizations because of their shared experience and understanding. After her boyfriend visited family out of state, Melody attended a peer support group, spoke with a friend, and had the opportunity to talk to a supervisor to alleviate the negative voices she was experiencing: "Well, I think actually I could probably talk to, like, my supervisors about the, um, if I had like a really hard time because they're peers as well" (Melody, interview).

### **The Experience of Hearing Voices and Contextual Barriers That Impact Relationships**

Identifying as an individual who hears voices could involve unique contextual barriers. Contextual barriers that could be experienced included financial, societal expectations, and/or the medical system. These barriers may have impacted the participants' relationships because they need more support or reliance on their partner.

Work occupations and financial income influenced the difficulty of finding a partner and increased reliance on the partner for more support. For example, Salvatore felt that the amount of money that he made annually from his job would not be enough to find a partner:

I'm a low earner, less than €20k pa [per annum], a woman typically seeks a man of wealth, 80% of them. The result of this is, I believe, it's too late for romance or sexual activity and I had better concentrate on other things. (Salvatore, diary entry)

Melody shared that she felt it was too difficult to work full time because she hears voices. Therefore, she experienced a lot of financial guilt and burden from her boyfriend supporting her by paying her bills and credit card debt. She stated:

I'm scared I'm always going to be a broke money black hole, those in my life are always going to have to take care of me and I'm going to cost them a lot of money and they will want to leave me for someone who costs less to take care of. (Melody, diary entry)

While Melody shared that her boyfriend genuinely wanted to support her financially, she felt that it was difficult to navigate this imbalance in their relationship. In addition, some of the participants reported that their living situations affected the quality of their relationships or ability to find a partner:

I don't live alone. So it means that when I, I can't invite someone back really without getting permission . . . my other living arrangements in the past, like I was in a hostel for a, which is a, a lower support than the hospital . . . what if they found out you were from the hostel, uh, the stigma around that would put them all off after. (Salvatore, interview)

Salvatore reported how his "mental disability" status identifies him as a "vulnerable adult" in Ireland and makes it challenging for him to find a partner because of protective laws around sex with vulnerable adults. For him, being a vulnerable adult had indirectly impacted his freedom to engage in sexual occupations with partners:

Some people might think or might arrive at the conclusion that, um, uh, vulnerable adult doesn't know how to consent or what he wants . . . people are afraid if they, if, if they like a vulnerable adult male and they get close to them, or like kissing or caressing, that it can come back on them because in some regard, there's less of an emphasis on the consent of the vulnerable adult if you know what I mean, because they might be saying consent, consent is immaterial. This is a frustrating fact about it because, um, you know, it diminishes my consent, it diminishes, um, my myself. (Salvatore, interview)

In addition to financial and societal barriers, another contextual barrier that was experienced was the medical system. While those who hear voices may or may not choose to take medications, the participants who chose to take them experienced side effects that impacted their sexual occupations in their relationships. Along with reports of a dulling sensation from feelings of happiness, sadness, and even sexual sensations, Melody reported:

When I was on respiradol it was really dry during sex and I felt no sensations. Not only was it painful to have sex with my partner whom I have a great sex life with otherwise, it was really triggering. (Melody, diary entry)

Salvatore reported that taking medications reduced his sex drive. When he tried to share his experiences with his sexuality, he reported that most professionals felt uncomfortable discussing that topic with him:

Even my health professionals say that, that's just personal . . . In Ireland, it's so taboo, that it's just that if you don't have it cornered yourself, it's just it's hard to, but, well, it is a problem and it is my problem in the sense that it has to be, it makes me a clandestine lover of myself, you know what I mean? (Salvatore, interview)

Last, navigating the medical system can be challenging, which may require the individual to rely more on their partner for help. For example, Melody recalled a time when she felt frustrated and helpless at a psychiatrist office and her need of support from her boyfriend impacted their relationship:

I'm not allowed to advocate for myself inside of a doctor's office, which should be the right of any patient of any sort. Um, which is kind of also why I do so much advocacy work outside of it. Cause I'm coming to find that I'm not allowed to advocate for myself when I step into the doctor's office, now I need to, like, take all this energy somewhere. Um, and it puts a strain on my relationships because they have to deal with, you know, the fact that I can't receive adequate care on my terms from the medical system. (Melody, interview)

While she felt that she had all the skills needed to successfully represent and advocate for herself, Melody shared that having this unique experience limited her rights. Despite how independent or dependent voice hearers can be in their daily lives, being labelled as a member of this community puts them in a system that decreases their autonomy and freedom.

### **Discussion**

What is the experience of romantic and sexual relationships for those who hear voices, and how do those experiences impact occupations? Data analysis revealed that when exploring voice hearers' experience of romantic and sexual relationships, there is a dynamic relationship between voices and

occupation, value for support and understanding from the partner, and contextual barriers that can impact relationships. Our findings provide a new insight into the ways individuals experience and manage voice hearing in their daily lives.

Voice hearing is a uniquely individualized, complex, and dynamic experience. Our research of hearing voices and relationships was consistent with the research of Craig et al. (2017), which revealed that voices and occupations impacted one another in various reciprocal ways. Engagement in meaningful occupations had a substantial influence on voice hearing. Our research of hearing voices and relationships was consistent with the research of Craig et al. (2017), which stated that meaningful experiences of work could alleviate the negative impact of voice hearing. This study also adds to the literature by highlighting that meaningful occupations beyond work were found to influence the negative impact of voices for our participants. Lisa reported that engaging in hiking as a meaningful occupation with her partner can help to manage or alleviate some symptoms. For Melody, consistent communication with her partner decreased the presence of negative voices. She reported that engaging in meaningful occupations, such as making music with her partner, can help to manage or alleviate her voices.

In addition, the participants in our research also described how their voices could have various levels of participation that influenced the occupational experience with their partner. For Lisa, negative voices affected her ability to build trust and rapport while dating, therefore impacting her ability to form a relationship. Melody's voices affected her occupational performance by their level of participation. Melody found her voice Athena to be "useful." She became "grown-up" when Athena took over to interact and navigate with caregiving demands. This experience relates to the research of Mawson et al. (2011) that highlighted that participant's voices were personified and often reflected "real" people and the belief about voice hearing affected their self-identity. For Melody, one of her voices was self-identified to accomplish grown-up things by becoming an adult. The level of voice participation also varied depending on the voice's occupational interests. Melody mentioned her voices had their own interests and different occupations in which they liked to participate; Melody shared the same interests and choice in occupations as her voices.

The level of participation of the voices also took the form of shared or co-occupation. Co-occupations are defined as occupations "which by their very nature, require more than one person's involvement" (Zemke & Clark, 1996, p. 193–203). Humphry (2005) expanded on the idea of co-occupation, suggesting that "during a shared occupation the elements of doing it and defining meaning are distributed between the participants resulting in new performance patterns and experiences of meaning" (p. 38). Melody and one of her voices are engaged in a co-occupation when there are syncopated rhythms in music making. Melody and her voice are both bringing their diverse ideas and skills to the occupation of music making, making this a collaboration. The meaning is shared between them both and the occupation of making music is a co-construction and effort. Co-occupation was only seen with persons who had distinct identities for their voices and was not the case for the participants whose voices were indistinct or who experienced altered states. The participation of voices in a relationship is a critical factor that can influence the individual's occupational performance with a partner. Our research added to the findings of Craig et al. (2017) by providing insight into the reciprocal nature of the participants' voices in a relationship.

The findings reveal that the EHP model used in this research has limitations and does not provide the best fit for the phenomena of engaging in relationships and sexual occupations with individuals who hear voices (Dunn et al., 1994). In EHP, the focus is on the person (singular) as the main contributor to



tasks and does not leave space to acknowledge the potential role of a person's voices as an active agent. This individualistic perspective does not sufficiently take into account the various levels of support and participation that voices, as distinct from the person, have during occupations. Dickie et al. (2006) contended that occupation "rarely, if ever, is individual in nature" and that it may be "more useful to researchers and more productive of knowledge to have definitions and concepts that extend the purview of occupation beyond the limits of the singular person" (p. 83–85). This phenomenon of hearing voices adds on an additional person in the EHP model, the voice(s). EHP would be more inclusive of voice hearers' experience if it acknowledged the transactional (reciprocal) relationship between the person and their voices that influence both their occupations and relationships.

Supportive relationships were key to the participants' experience of hearing voices. The participants valued having open communication and support from their partner. Melody noticed the absence of or decrease in communication with a partner increased the presence of negative voices. In Craig et al. (2017), participants wrote about hiding and disclosing their voice hearing with significant others, and they invariably felt they were not understood, which prompted feelings of loneliness. Similarly, not everyone in this study was able to find support from a partner. Salvatore felt that finding a partner without a shared experience can be challenging because they may not necessarily understand. However, during the interview he mentioned he had a large circle of friends who he found relatable and who could understand him, which provided an outlet for socializing. Similar to the findings in Mawson et al. (2011), the participants also found their voices and accompanying distrust of others made it difficult to create and sustain close relationships that could be supportive. The participants in this study were able to create trust and find support from peer support services where they had the opportunity to openly confide in a group who could understand their experiences. If an individual who hears voices requires more support from their partner who may not fully understand, they may seek other individuals or groups to fulfill their needs, including peer support services. The participants felt that while partners without their own lived experience of voice hearing may provide varying levels of support, they may never truly understand what it feels like for their partner to live with voices.

### **Implications for Practice and Research**

This study challenges the idea of the individual having full agency while engaging in occupations, as voices can play a crucial role depending on their level of participation. It is not only vital but necessary for occupational therapists to ask their clients about their unique experience and the potential influences their voices may have during occupations. By failing to inquire about their voices, occupational therapists would not be able to fully understand critical factors that influence their clients' occupational experience. Therefore, therapeutic interventions for their clients would not be client-centered or holistic. This finding indicates the necessity for occupational therapists, who work in any and all settings, to ask their clients about their unique experience with hearing voices in order to create and implement individualized intervention plans.

Acknowledging and building on the occupational strength of voice hearing may contribute to addressing challenges in other areas (Craig et al., 2017). By recognizing and embracing positive qualities and characteristics of voices, occupational therapists can create client-centered intervention plans that incorporate voice participation and use their strengths to affect change in occupational performance.

While Craig et al. (2017) researched the impact of work occupations, this research focused on the impact of sexual occupations and relationships. Further research needs to be completed on individuals who hear voices and how their unique experience influences other areas of occupation. Occupational

science is a good fit to explore this area because of the discipline's emphasis on the occupational perspective and the aim to create new understandings of how occupation is experienced in diverse populations, which, in turn, can inform occupational therapy practice (Clark et al., 1991).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This research is limited by the nature of the sample, which may be considered vulnerable to some, based on their diagnoses or by identifying as hearing voices. Participant recruitment was a challenge, possibly because of the stigma that continues to be a reality for many individuals. A sense of fear, shame, and/or ambivalence to disclose by potential participants may have limited our ability to recruit more individuals. As a result, the sample size was small and involved individuals who were highly involved in peer support groups, which may have an impact on their recovery, because of both the type and amount of support they receive. The participant characteristics and sample size may not allow for transferability between persons or populations. It is possible that a more diverse population may have been identified if participants were recruited through advertisements in general public settings rather than peer support groups.

While the researchers capitalized on the advantages of the diary writing in their triangulation of data collection, some spontaneous responses may have been lost because of the lack of direct questioning likely to be generated from strategies such as interviews. In addition, the amount of freedom given to write with few prompts yielded responses that did not target our research question and produced generalized responses. Although a semi-structured interview was included and conducted to bridge the gap and ask follow-up questions to the diary entries, it also had its limitations. Individuals were given autonomy on what platform they would like the interview to be conducted (i.e., phone, skype, or in-person) and the gender of the interviewer (i.e., male vs. female); however, there may still have been some hesitation to answer questions because of the personal nature of our study. Perhaps more detailed writing prompts are needed and only phone interviews should be used to increase comfortability. In retrospect, building stronger rapport with the participants before the interviews were conducted may have yielded further trust and communication between both parties. The experience of hearing voices is unique and subjective, making it difficult for another person to fully understand; therefore, experiences such as “snap hallucinations” or “altered states” may not be fully captured, only described, by the participants' words.

Finally, this study allowed individuals to participate in the research if they identified with hearing voices at one point in their life and met all other inclusion criteria. This may have influenced our findings and could have made it more of a retrospective study since some of the participants are not currently hearing voices on a daily basis. Relying on memory or recall of events has the potential to decrease the accuracy of events or give the participants a new perspective after they have had time to reflect on the situation.

One strength of the study included the thoroughness used in generating narratives, which included active member-checking with the participants from the beginning to the end of the study to make sure the researchers were accurately representing each individual's unique experience. By including the participants throughout the study we believe that it added rigor, richness, and depth to our research.

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