

Preface: Experiments in Listening

Eve

Anyone who knows me well will know I hate cleaning my bathroom, but the other day I found myself hastily pulling on some rubber gloves to scrub the bath, douse mouldy grout with bleach and scour away limescale from the sink taps neglected by previous tenants.

So, I was anxious. And I was procrastinating. I was *meant* to be writing this piece. And I wondered whether the anxiety I felt, and the fear at its root, might be less a symptom of an individualised problem, or pathology, and more a response to the task itself, and the space – both beautiful and treacherous – that speaking truth to power opens out to us.

Because the way we speak about distress *matters*. When we talk about what's going on for us in the dominant language of mental illness and symptoms, it's likely we'll be described by professionals as *having insight* into our experience. Whereas when we speak outside of these terms we'll be described as *lacking insight*.

The construct of insight and its relationship with mental capacity is complex and poses challenges for us all. Coercion and restrictive practice is more likely to take place in the absence of a shared language and understanding of distress, but being deemed to know *too much* can lead to institutional neglect. Our rights, and our lives, are at stake, but we're not equally under threat.

In the summer of 2019 I submitted a proposal to Bethlem Gallery to investigate the rights implications and relational costs of clinical decision-making about insight, the power and the danger of the stories we tell about distress, and the catastrophic impact of austerity, institutional racism, misogyny and discrimination in mental healthcare.

I proposed to hold a series of recorded conversations with people with lived experience of receiving and providing care, prioritising racialised and minoritised people, including people who are LGBTQ+ and neurodivergent.

I'd spent six years managing mental health services working in hospitals, prisons and the community, and I'd witnessed how the mechanics of clinical decision-making about insight and capacity *further* disadvantaged people who already occupied a troubled space in the system.

I proposed to work together to produce an audio library for justice, which would also inform the research produced by the Mental Health and Justice initiative led by King's College London.

Overjoyed when the gallery decided to fund this work, I began opening up conversations about insight and capacity, injustice and justice, with patients and staff across several inpatient units in London.

When the pandemic hit and this work had to be halted, I needed to rethink the project. I reworked its format to open up the opportunity to people across the UK, working largely remotely, and to include the facilitation of *peer-to-peer* conversations.

In addition, I decided to invite clinicians to sit alongside me as a *listener* of the stories, and to reflect on what they hear alongside their own experiences of navigating the system.

I released a video call out and was overwhelmed with support. The film was viewed almost 6,000 times on social media, prompting more than 60 requests to collaborate. It resulted in a challenging decision-making process about not only *who* to work with, but also *how* to pair up those people who wished to experiment with the *peer-to-peer* format.

I needed to confront difficult feelings about limiting the project, owing to budgetary and time constraints, to 9 people, and the denial of the opportunity to more than 50 people who wanted to be heard. I needed to stay alive to the power and privilege afforded not only by my whiteness, but also by my position as the *artist*.

What would happen if we created a listening space, together, to explore a multiplicity of subjective interpretations of insight? Can a construct that's too often weaponised be reclaimed? When we listen together, what do we hear? And is listening enough to counter injustice?

These are just some of the questions that have been bubbling around my mind while the ten of us collaborators have been working to explore issues of power and privilege in mental health services in Britain.

Three years since I began this journey, hundreds of conversations with more than 80 people and over 18 hours of audio recordings later, the ten of us have produced an audio book of listening experiments, along with a co-authored prologue and epilogue to support our audience to hear us listen, and to ask where these listening acts might take us.

An enormous thank you to Alex, Anon, Chloe, Florence, Hattie, Helen, Ninette, Sam and Shan for putting your trust in me; to John DeWinne for shooting and editing the promo film, and providing technical advice; to Charlie Blowers at Moving Pieces for the supervision; and to Merlin Evans for illustrating some of the themes raised during our listening.

Thank you to everyone who has influenced this work – especially the person with lived experience who inspired the punk, DIY approach to the recordings, the clinician who spoke with me about the violence of self-knowledge, and the clinicians who welcomed me onto their wards and safeguarded the space for me to listen.

Thank you to Bethlem Gallery for resourcing this work, without which it would not have been possible. A special thank you to Lucy, Sam and Sophie, to Heather for building a home for our work on the website and to Shetha for the administrative support. And thank you to Wayne and the team at King's College London for hearing, and being guided by, us artists and survivors.

This work has been painful, but it's also been joyous. Contained within our book are stories of rage, loss, despair, hopelessness, resilience, growth and revolt. These are our stories, and as you listen they become yours too.

This ongoing work is dedicated to the survivors whose voices we've lost, and to the voices we're yet to hear.

Bethlem
Gallery

Maudsley
Charity

Backing
Better
Mental
Health.

NHS
South London
and Maudsley
NHS Foundation Trust

mbj
Mental Health
and Justice

w
wellcome

KING'S
College
LONDON