

MALS 70000: Inventing the Self
Fall 2013
Professor Jason Tougaw

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*Agnes's Jacket: A Psychologist's
Search for the Meanings of Madness*

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Research Proposal Workshop

Motivating Questions

What if the mad are trying to tell us something? What if their “ravings” contain important information? Just because they’re difficult to decipher doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try to make them out. (xiii)

Rather than starting with the idea that some people have “broken brains” and some don’t, what if we assumed that everyone rises (to varying extents) to the challenges that confront them? The the question becomes: What fosters the ability to cope? (xxi)

But can we be so sure that suffering people have nothing useful to offer about their own experience? (xxii)

Argument

For years I had been claiming—to psychology students at Mount Holyoke and to colleagues in the talks and papers I had given—that the ideas of mental patients could reframe fundamental psychological issues. First person accounts, I argued, were essential to understanding seemingly “irrational” phenomena like delusions or phobias. But the existence of an organized Hearing Voices Network went far beyond anything I had imagined in offering a systematic perspective on psychosis and treatment derived entirely from first-person experience. I suddenly saw how published patient narratives, oral histories like those in the Testimony Project, the artworks in Hans Prinzhorn’s collection, and hearing voices groups were all essentially saying the same thing: Madness is more code than chemistry. If we want to understand it, we need translators—native speakers, not just brain scans. (xix)

Argument #2

After talking with hundreds of voice hearers and intensively studying the phenomenon for two decades, Marius Romme wrote, “Hearing voices is not primarily an incomprehensible symptom of an illness but more a way of coping with personal problems. When the self is not strong enough, an outside power can enable the person to take some distance. In a hopeless situation with no way out, a spiritual solution often arises. We see this in religious inspiration and in voice hearing.” (48)

Methodology

Helen: “I want to be rid of them completely. They have never said anything remotely pleasant. I think I recognize that they are just projections of my own very fragile self-esteem and don’t reflect my true nature, but this doesn’t make them any easier to deal with. I know there are people who say they would miss their voices if they went away completely. I’d open a bottle of champagne and celebrate.” (12).

Andy starts talking about the importance of establishing a relationship with the voices. “They need to listen to you, not just order you around,” he says. Barbara leans forward, her hair falling across her face, practically obscuring it. “People call me the Mad Witch of Kilburn,” she’d said when we met in the lounge earlier; and she certainly looks the part.

“I think there are a lot of levels to this voice hearing business,” Barbara says pensively. “I mean, think about somebody like Virginia Woolf.’ She straightens up, smoothing her hair. “She took the voices she heard and turned them into characters in her novels. They ended up being of use to her” (28).

Stance

Polly brushes ashes off her shirt and asks, “How’s your book goin’?”

“Okay,” I say, surprised that she remembers what I said months earlier. “Writing is hard. I’m just trying to keep going.” Could she sense how conflicted I felt at the moment? I’d spent the whole week struggling to figure out where to place myself in the narrative. Who am I exactly? An observer? A witness? A critic? An advocate?” (27).

Stance #2

Marius and Sandra—admirers in HVN always pronounce their names together in a rush, as if they were one word—had each been married to someone else when they met twenty years ago. Now it's hard to imagine either one without the other. Their charm, willowy good looks, and obvious happiness together are so at odds with their unorthodox ideas that people often find themselves taken in by a viewpoint they would never otherwise have considered. Sandra epitomizes the frank open-mindedness for which the Dutch are famous. Marius has the elegance and charm of an elder statesman. When he twinkles his cobalt eyes and she smiles that broad grin, they're irrepressible. (38)

Workshop

1. Summarize my feedback for the group—in your words.
2. Describe your response to my feedback. What resonates? What confuses you? What new ideas may have emerged in response?
3. Ask the group: What are my motivating questions? Are they clear and cogent? Are they manageable?
4. Do I have the right sources? Will my sources allow to address my motivating questions productively? Do I need new sources or new motivating questions (or a little of both)?
5. Ask the group: How readable is my proposal? Is the prose clear? Is the format engaging?
6. Ask the group: What do you see as the most significant tasks for my revision of the proposal? Make a list of these.