

Keynote Presentation:

Hearing Voices Movement as an activist learning community: questions, dreams, limits and contradictions

Is it really madness to hear voices or to experience psychological distress, when a traumatic event has happened to you or when you experience social exclusion/sexism/fascism? How could we define what is “mad” and what is reasonable? Are there distinct boundaries? Why is the "solution/treatment" proposed usually punitive physically, or even mentally, for humans with many devastating consequences such as stigmatization? What and how can we learn from each other about ourselves and the world by raising such questions?

Our experience at Hearing Voices Network in Athens has shown that through personal narratives, experiences and discussions between professionals and people with psychiatric experience, it is possible to create activist learning communities that open up to the world. Our meetings can act as a starting point for understanding the individual as well as the cultural, socio-political context, while proposing ideas for collective action against the dominant system. Active participation and strengthening of human relationships can be a guide to the course of recovery and emancipation.

In our presentation we will describe in a theoretical, but mainly experiential way, what an activist learning community means to us, we will explore the limitations and contradictions that arise, and we will try to connect and learn something about ourselves through getting to know you.

Bios:

Marina Lykovouniotti is a voice hearer since 2008, president and co-founder of the Hearing Voices Network Athens, promoting and supporting the development of HVN support groups. She currently co-facilitates a self-help group in Athens and provides training on the HVN approach. Her involvement in the HVN has changed the way she deals with herself and copes with the Voices, in the way that the Network's theory has shed light to the historicity of her life, causing her to further explore her experiences. Moreover, meeting other voice hearers was relieving. Presently, she works as a web developer and some of her voices are also good programmers.

Karatzafaris Lykourgos works as a psychiatrist and systemic psychotherapist at the Social Cooperative “Psyhi, Logos, Epi-koinonia”. He also attends a never-ending education at the Athenian Institute of Anthropos (AIA), which uses a Systemic - Dialectic Psychosocial Approach referring to a multi-level, multi-focal intervention model where “Anthropos” (human) is conceptualized as a biopsychosocial, open, information-processing, decision-making System. He is also a member and co-founder of the Hearing Voices Network Athens, promoting the development of HVN support groups and training seminars, and participates in a Greek activist movement called “Initiative for a Polymorphous Movement for mental health”.

Part A (Lykourgos)

There's a story that Genghis Khan wanted to know what was going on in the far reaches of his empire because, he says, it was the only way he could understand what was happening in the capital, in the centre of the empire. Don't we have a similar job to do if we want to know our "centre"? Arnold Mindell used to ask people to take care of themselves when entering an extreme state of consciousness through depression, madness, or drug use so as they come back and inform us. We don't want anyone to get lost.

But first let me introduce myself. My name is Lykourgos. I have the name of my grandfather, first child born in the bigger family. This created a lot of expectations. I was the boy. I was the one that knew what to do (even though this very often proved wrong). By birth I was given a privilege. But privileges are not stable and are context-determined. Moving outside the family system the privilege is lost. This means that other people don't understand you as a prince. Without realizing how and why I ended up studying medicine in Alexandroupolis, completed my specialization in psychiatry and a useless MSc degree on Mental Health Prevention. I am now a member of a Greek activist movement on mental health and continue a never-ending education at Systemic - Dialectic Psychosocial Approach according to which "Anthropos", is conceptualized as a biopsychosocial, open, information-processing, decision-making System. This approach evolves in the context of the 'whole' which emerges from the interconnectedness of processes at different levels. Above all, the Hearing Voices Movement became a part of my life and informed me that I am not only a psychiatrist. As a matter of fact, as my inspiring friend, voice hearer and activist Peter Bullimore, once said "You work as a psychiatrist. You are not a psychiatrist". Try to describe yourself without using any label, not saying "I am" and you will find interesting things.

I am a human being who at some point in my life have had experiences that I would prefer to describe, with the friendliest term to me, as altered or sometimes extreme states of consciousness. In my immediate environment there are people who have committed suicide, who have flirted or engaged with addictions, who were and are in and out of mental hospitals, who are systematically abused and very often experience very difficult situations. I live in a world where violence is fetishised, where brutal news claim space in our senses, which in turn are stimulated by a variety of crises. I grew in a, a so called, democratic, western society where, as the journalist Chris Hedge says, the extermination of those whose land we steal, whose resources we plunder and whose labour we exploit is coded within our DNA. Ask Native Americans. Ask Indians. Ask the Congolese. Ask the Kikuyu in Kenya. Ask the Herero in Namibia who, like Palestinians in Gaza, were gunned down and driven into desert concentration camps where they died of starvation and disease.

I am trained as a psychiatrist in an era characterized by the close combination of a proliferation of therapeutic tools and new technologies of intervention, imaging and classification, where psychiatry has come to acquire an idealized notion of neutrality in its theories. I am working in a climate where mental health professionals tend to assume an elevated role in public affairs, often commenting on every aspect of human existence and, not infrequently, making policies about human experiences. I recognise that many of my questions are in danger of being obscured within what has been called scientific and/or technological psychology and psychiatry where priority is given to explanations through causal scientific models of disturbed subjects rather than to meaning, and where context is dispensed with, so that answers are provided through technological interventions based on (often dubious) scientific data.

In this setting I often feel resentful. Some nights I lose my sleep. But this sleepless night is useful to me in many ways. It helps me to maintain my critique of notions of neutrality, objectivity, and detached professionalism. It helps me hold on to that deep, inner sense that our work, as Vicky Reynolds (2011, p.16) says, matters with 'unmeasurable' outcomes. It helps me to love and deal with my own contradictions as dialectically as possible. Perhaps this would be a form of revolutionary love, which according to Freire, (1970, p.71) by definition "*is emancipation and creation in relation to further acts of love: it cannot coexist with abuses of power*". Wherever the oppressed are, the act of love is a commitment to their cause – the cause of liberation, our own liberation. And this commitment, because it is love, is also dialogical.

Part B (Marina)

Every concept, situation, feeling that exists in the world also has its opposite. When something is "born", discovered, created, it takes a position and its opposite the corresponding opposition! An unwritten rule that often calls us to choose a position by seeing things in black or white!

For several situations in my life and for some beliefs that I have, I have done it too! I choose and stay where I am and no one or nothing can shift me to the other side! Stubbornly perhaps, sometimes I might even be ignorant about the other side and still be against it! But that doesn't mean that side doesn't exist. In some other situations I am familiar with both positions, entering a dialectic process and balancing or walking the line in a grey zone between them or, depending on the circumstances I have to deal with, shifting from the position to the opposition and vice versa! One of these cases of position/opposition in my life is sanity and madness. I believe that there are distinct boundaries between them (despite the fact that they are confused as concepts and many times you don't know what is crazy and what is reasonable, while the switch from one to the other can be instantaneous) and I lie in the position of madness and support it as well. I don't know whether the concept of madness would exist, if the side of reason didn't exist, and the other way around. I am so glad that I am on this side of the river and not with reason! So glad because I'm starting to link reason with insensitivity and exploitation of certain circumstances between human beings, especially since I witness it happening around me; an injustice from sanity towards madness!

Madness for me, as a human condition, contains and describes all this psychological dysphoria, indignation, oppression and pain that I have felt in my life so far, but also all the ecstasy that I feel when I'm in love or when I get enthusiastic about good things and pleasant situations and events I have experienced! I've been hearing voices since I was 28 years old and some of my voices say they've been here, with me, forever! I have also received the diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder from these "reasonable" psychiatrists. When I think about this, what I really can't understand, even if I try to "steal" as much reason as I can, from across the river, is why the abuse, pain, poverty that I have experienced, also due to other people and social institutions, should come back to me as a diagnosis for my existence, made within an hour at the very most! I also don't believe that all of this can be treated with the use of suppressive, punitive methods or even psychotropic drugs! That's where I get even more mad, angry, indignant! How is it possible for an abused woman to be diagnosed as schizophrenic? After all, is she abused and something should be done about it, or is she a schizophrenic who will take a lifetime of medication, hospitalisation, etc.? How can a man who loses his job and society wants him to be a model of competitive worker and family man, not come to a conflict with his

existence and how exactly can unemployment be fixed with psychotropic drugs? Well, they will tell you to take a little [medication] now that you are emotionally difficult! And then we have to put this aside and cope with both the side effects and the unemployment, while the diagnosis and the subsequent stigma make it 100 times harder to find a job! I'm also racking my brain many times in finding out how these voices I've been hearing and talking with for years now, voices that tell me incredible things and stories, negative or positive, can be generated by brain neurotransmitter synapses and why this has to be something faulty, if indeed my head produces them. Aren't these voices just a different way of functioning and perceiving things? Normally the scientific community should be exploring this questioningly like "wow, does your mind make noises? sounds? pictures? and when you are awake?" (it's not that we know exactly how it happens when we sleep) but "how does this happen? Let's explore it"! But that's fine print! Instead, they hide and rise behind diagnoses, DSM, pharmaceutical companies and political and financial interests! I actually smiled when I read in the book "Marxism, politics and mental distress" about the term "psychopharmaceutical complex"! I was sure that something is wrong with them!

So from the age of 28 I saw my life turning upside down as they say! I had a hard time even taking care of myself in everyday activities! I fell into pieces! I entered a world, and I probably won't go back to the world of reason and may not even want to! I think that the world of voices is wonderful and gives me so many alternative opinions on subjects that I would not have had on my own! Some of them talk about mysterious things and challenge me to find out whether they are true or not! Others are connected to feelings and thoughts that I have, in a way that a certain thought or feeling I experience at that moment takes the form of a voice/sound with a different colour, gender, age than me! Others are there to remind me of experiences and past situations prompting a recycling, revival of traumatic, but also pleasant, experiences and memories! They say that just before you die you see your whole life flashing before you. This has also been reported by people who have been very scared or were very close to death. I read an article with reports of people who have experienced it even when trying to endure challenging mountain climbing or other daring activities! As for me, I saw my whole life flashing before me, when I really had to face very difficult complications in the personal, family and work environment in the form of voices!

At that hard time for me, I was lucky enough to attend a seminar of the Hearing Voices Network in 2010, which had only recently started taking its first steps in Greece. I really feel grateful to the people who started it and to those who came to Athens to convey the philosophy of an approach supporting, among others, the concept of voices and other similar human states and experiences being connected to the history of life and not suggesting that something is wrong with my brain! And the best part: You are not the only one experiencing something like this!

In the Athens Network, people with voice hearing experience, relatives/friends and professionals/workers in the field of mental health try not to develop frameworks and power relations (we all experience it enough in society) but to have equal participation and say in the actions and events of the Network. We exchange ideas, perceptions, knowledge, and experiences. We might disagree and differ from each other, but from these conflicts and "fireworks" that are thrown I believe that the best ideas can emerge. Our relationships take a step further in terms of understanding each and everyone's position and the visibility that an opposition/contrast claims!

The Hearing Voices Network is for me is a continuous process of mutual education, staying outside hierarchical frameworks and listening to different voices and needs with many variations. This is something that is unfortunately missing from our journey in other

social/work/family contexts, perhaps we have not learned it and it is very difficult to assimilate/master it. The philosophy of the Network often raises education issues and the ability to finally change the culture we share in our lives around the issues of mental health, relationships, and socializing. This philosophy can sometimes offer us a sense of generosity, while some other times it can be experienced as a challenge. In the end, we gain knowledge when something difficult happens and we also gain information about what it means when a person suffers psychologically, and this pain isolates them, and they seem strange or crazy in someone else's eyes! This knowledge/information is missing from society. Because no one ever talked to us at school about mental health issues the way they talk about physics.

A member of the Network once said that if there was education and another culture, the psychological state and the voices might not be so frightening to the person experiencing them and to those around them. She also said that all these experiences can build up to a gift for the person who experiences them, not in the sense of metaphysics, like guessing things, but as being able to have some awareness of what is happening and perhaps tools that would be useful to them in order to stand on their feet again.

I remember in the last difficult crisis I went through in 2019, members of my group and the Network, like Lykourgos, were there for me with actions and not just with words. The discussions we had were not about philosophies that could not be implemented or about impractical solutions. I was so distressed that I could not stay at home. If I left home, went back to my family and they saw me in this state, I probably wouldn't avoid an involuntary hospitalization. I haven't been hospitalized in all these years (I've avoided it several times) but I've seen people really suffer in mental hospitals and it scares me a lot. Lykourgos hosted me in his house for several days and I felt that the trust he and his life partner showed me, even on the matter of me having keys to their house, played an important role in overcoming this situation, and in the long run, in settling inside me what was happening to me once more. By the time I went back to my family, there was not all this tension and discomfort. I could actively claim "I don't want you to section me". It was a life lesson for me and seeing all these years other people coming in and out of difficult situations, I realized that we never know what context/environment/frame we may need to "welcome" the crisis, in order to overcome it in ways that are less painful than the ways of the dominant psychiatric system! I remember that I broke up with my life partner at the same time and it took two years to find the balance in our relationship again.

In closing, since we are talking about the knowledge that can come to us through madness, which in English shares the same term for anger, and this is indeed very interesting. I have learned from my personal lived experience with voices, listening to others, reading about the appearance of voices in ancient times and in history in general, but also in reports about psychological discomfort, pain and voices in literature, that what we call madness is rather a response, an expression of thoughts and feelings on anything that oppresses us, on what has been "written" on us, but also on what makes us fall in love, rejoice, lose heart and finally gain experience and ability to cope with adversities! Yes, our wrinkles, mental as well as physical, especially those that form when we are angry, finally matter and value, so let's respect them!

Part C (Lykourgos)

However, dialogue creates questions, and questions, usually, don't make us feel at ease. As member of the network, trainer, and activist here are some questions that arose last year. We promised questions, not answers, and we have achieved something:

- Is there a risk for us to become "authorities/experts of critical psychology/psychiatry"?
- What are we? Network and/or Movement?
- How does one cross the line and if one crosses it, does one come back and how? Is there a dividing line?
- What does the other person's gaze construct? Can extreme states of consciousness be a refuge?
- What is depression? What is melancholy? What is burnout? Is trauma healed?
- How does the sufferer's family go about their daily lives?
- Where is (my) limit?

Someone once brought a Halli Gibran's poem, where the poet asks:

"Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that
was burned in the potter's oven? And is not the lute that soothes your spirit,
the very wood that was hollowed with knives?
When you are joyous, look deep into your heart
and you shall find it is only that which has given
you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When I realize the dilemmas my first sensation is a choking feeling. The choking softens, softens, softens and even becomes a joy which calls me to move "against the pessimism of reason, for the optimism of action". On a first level, for me, action means keeping the dilemmas/questions open. I want to be aware of the dilemmas, seeking ways to open them up and unravelling them, rather than covering them up, so I think I need to move beyond the dominant interpretive schemes. This may mean that:

- I seek to move beyond the univocal reading of individual resilience and embrace resistance as well. I aim directly or indirectly to a therapeutic process/practice which involves an intersubjective condition within which two subjects resist a change which threatens their autonomy. Gabriel Cammarata (2022) supports that "in mainstream Psychology, [...] the concept of resilience seems to hold, in itself, all that is needed to recover from a crisis, disturbance/violence/abuse, power struggle, while resistance instead is seen as something to dismantle. This approach seems to serve the narrative of a forever resilient and adaptive human being, who at the same time is seen by governments as "so fragile" and "irresponsible" as to have to be controlled at all times for their safety and wellbeing".

- I accept the other person as a responsible being who can take responsibility of his/her own recovery and thus, the pain of resistance acquires a political meaning. The collective experience of pain, especially within a group, opens up a new possibility for action beyond the neoliberal exhortation to happiness which calls for the pain's suppression at its onset and depoliticizes it by turning it into an individualized medical affair.

- I look for alliances, "affinities" (Day, 2004), for momentary points of connection where we meet each other and something happens that is transformative and consistent with our collective ethics of justice-doing (Reynolds, 2011).

I think about all this while recognizing that I am already talking about the ways the dilemmas themselves are emerging in an era where easy answers are proclaimed or are even mandatory. People, often, especially when experiencing a crisis or fear, ask me for something "to be healed", an "instruction to get through the pain" or a remedy, a diagnosis. I don't see the

instruction, the medicine and the diagnosis univocally. If I have a good advice, I can give it when someone asks for it. But I find it consistent with an emancipatory perspective to seek ways to view the crisis – which often permeates and fragments any sense of identity and personal formation – in relation to the crisis of the contexts that contain the subjects in question and in relation to my own crisis, which I experience as a professional accompanying (to a certain extent) other human beings on their road to recovery, as a member of a cooperative in crisis, as part of a social crisis (Karatzafaris, 2023).

I acknowledge that I am part of a world of threats and abuses by which subjects "in sickness" feel oppressed, and the crisis of these subjects is my crisis as well. I need to move towards all possible levels. I need to move from my ego to the world, from the "therapeutic relationship" to our relationships within the Hearing Voices Movement, from the personal to the political, etc. One action that will light the way is to open up the questions, to discuss the problems that have arisen from our collaboration with each other, to see the political implications of these problems, to self-institute practices and functionalities that serve our needs and transcend the dilemmas/questions. I think of this action, like all the meetings within our Movement, with partners or treated subjects, as a prefiguration of desired worlds. According to Richard Day (2008, as cited in Souzas, 2015, p.18) social and political movements are characterised by "prefigurative politics" where prefiguration is not just a performative process but contributes to the creation of a collective memory. It is much more a form of action that illuminates, signifies and inspires, by its very paradigm, aspects of desired worlds.

In conclusion, it is important for me to be constantly alert to the next set of dilemmas, which I suspect are inherent in the ones I began with: love and death, question and answer, process and purpose, chance and necessity. Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher from Ephesus (near modern Kuşadasi, Turkey) who was active around 500 BC, propounded a distinctive theory which he expressed in oracular language. He is best known for his doctrines that things are constantly changing (universal flux), that opposites coincide (unity of opposites), and that fire is the basic material of the world. I hope that we succeeded in presenting a part of this constant change and of our intense internal battle of opposites.

Finally, it is this dialectic of the opposites that the technology-control-security complex threatens to eliminate by ordering the seeking of eternal life and sustainable development, the elimination of ambiguity and of our inherent restriction to fully understand (by imposing algorithmization and artificial intelligence), the subservience of all to the need and purpose of production at the expense of dialogicality and play. In this respect, every crack we create with our questions and contradictions, every micro-possibility for action we create could have an impact on the macro-level and let the light in.