



Exploring a possible relationship between voices and schema modes

What did we want to find out?

Research has indicated that the experience of hearing voices can often be a highly distressing experience. This distress is largely associated with the negative content that voices often express. Currently, the factors which determine the content of voices are not fully understood. Recent research has suggested, however, that voice-hearers may often experience dysfunctional *schema modes* - which are sets of unconscious and negative patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaviour. In Schema Therapy, there are 10 distinct schema modes which each represent distinct parts of the self. These include the Punitive Parent Mode (the part of the self that punishes and criticises one's mistakes), the Vulnerable Child Mode (the part of the self that feels overwhelmed, scared, or helpless), and the Healthy Adult Mode (an adaptive part which is involved in regulating distress and rational thinking). A very small number of previous studies have proposed that negative voices (which may often criticise the hearer or command them to harm themselves) may represent heard manifestations of the Punitive Parent mode. However, prior to the present study, the idea that voices may represent heard manifestations of schema modes had not been thoroughly investigated.

What did we do?

This exploratory study aimed to investigate whether the content expressed by voices may overlap with descriptions of the descriptions of schema modes provided within Schema Therapy literature. To do this, seven voice-hearers were recruited to each engage in individual interviews regarding the content and characteristics of the voices they heard. Interview recordings and transcripts were reviewed several times and the descriptions participants provided about each of their voices were compared to the definitions of the 10 core schema modes.

What did we find?

Results suggested that many of the voices participants heard were consistent with a schema mode. All participants experienced at least one voice that appeared to be consistent with a Dysfunctional Parent mode (which are highly critical, blaming, demanding, and punishing). Several participants also experienced voices that appeared consistent with a Healthy Adult mode (which is thought to be the part of the person which is able to soothe strong emotions, think rationally, and solve problems). Other modes also appeared to overlap with voices. These findings provide preliminary support for further exploring Schema Therapy as a framework for understanding and treating distressing voices.

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