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Cultures of Listening: Psychology, Resonance, Justice

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Abstract

Listening, as a general psychological capacity, is a key aspect of perception, communication and experience. However listening researchers frequently characterize it as a neglected, misunderstood and ill-defined phenomenon. This is a significant problem because questions of listening pervade social inequalities and injustices, as this paper demonstrates in the context of UK child protection practices.

Exploring concepts of listening within and beyond psychology, the paper illustrates how a lack of overall theorization can contribute to inequality and injustice within applied listening practices. To address this, the paper theorizes listening in the spirit of Whiteheadian process ontology, drawing on the work of Nancy and Bonnet. Based on this it develops the concept of ‘Cultures of Listening’ (CoL), which provides a tool for the critical analysis of troubled listening practices, indicating how they can be challenged and transformed.

Within CoL, listening is not a mere aspect of auditory perception or communication, but each instant of listening is considered as shaped by and expressing political, social and experiential circumstances, i.e. cultures. The paper demonstrates the theoretical, critical and applied value of CoL by offering a detailed analysis of the role of listening within troubled UK child protection practices.

Keywords: Listening, Process Ontology, Resonance, Child Safeguarding, Subjectivity, Justice, Sexual Offences

Given that listening as a general psychological capacity is a core aspect of human perception, communication and experience, it is surprising to note that scholars interested in listening have frequently called it a neglected and misunderstood phenomenon that is difficult to define and operationalize. This is particularly problematic because problems with listening are also considered key to social inequality and injustice (Back, 2007; Clifford, 1986; HENDY 2013). Our own interest in listening stems from experiencing and studying problems around listening within child protection practices, where professionals work to prevent, detect and prosecute child neglect and children's sexual exploitation (Motzkau, 2009; 2007; Lee, 2001; Lee & Motzkau, 2011). In this paper we explore and theorize the phenomenon/concept of listening, tracing it through the conceptual landscape of psychology and delineating a process theoretical (Whitehead 1927/1985) framework for it. Within this framework we develop the concept of 'Cultures of Listening' as an analytic tool to better understand practices of listening, what makes them problematic (i.e. where they promote injustice/inequality), and how we can transform such troubled listening practices.

Our work is situated within a feminist- critical- and discourse psychological framework (Holzkamp, 1985; Burman, 2017; Parker, 2002; Wetherell, 2012; Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 1992; Haraway, 1997). In this field there is a long tradition of problematizing the atomistic/mechanistic concepts of communication promoted by research in some parts of the social sciences as well as cognitive-, social and experimental psychology. Further, there is a long tradition of critically examining the concepts of 'voice' that imply that 'listening' or 'hearing' are unproblematic and passive, thereby obscuring the inherent complexity of speaking and listening which, it is underlined, always need to be considered in cultural-, political- and social context (e.g. Henriques et al., 1984; Steadman et al., 1985). Alternative approaches emphasize

that speaking, hearing and listening have long been understood as related to dynamics that produce or prevent inequality and injustice, highlighting the ways in which actual conditions of speech can entail and reproduce inequality. For example, Habermas (1981) presented an ‘ideal speech situation’ - where communication is not distorted by unequal power relationships - as an ethical standard against which to judge actual communication practices. Similarly, feminist critique of the concept of ‘voice’ suggests that practices and experiences of listening can never be modeled as a matter of passive hearing innocent of power relations. Yet such critique is increasingly overshadowed by recent political discourses about ‘voice’ and ‘agency’; and while listening is considered important in these debates, it has not been theorized explicitly, and tends to be implied or overlooked (Lipari, 2014).

We seek to address these issues by theorizing listening and developing the concept of ‘cultures of listening’. And while we build on feminist-, critical- and discursive approaches in psychology, by capturing listening in within a process theoretical framework (Whitehead, 1927/1985) we aim to go further in order to provide new ways of understanding the dynamic relationship between the subject/self, listening processes and practices, discourse and power. Herein our project is committed to the broader agenda of constructing a transdisciplinary psychology in the spirit of a Whiteheadian process ontology (Brown & Stenner, 2009; Stenner, 2017). Ultimately this paper prepares the ground for the emancipatory and relational concept of ‘listening with care’, based on Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2014) notion of care; this in turn supports the new critical analytic method of ‘dark listening’ introduced here, aimed at better understanding and transforming troubled listening in child protection practices specifically, and research practice more broadly.

Situating our work within transdisciplinary (Stenner, 2017) and critical discursive (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 1992) frameworks compels us to consider phenomena at their most complex, and as they emerge in a specific context, rather than stripped down, atomized and reduced to component parts. We therefore begin our case for the analytic concept of Cultures of Listening with a detailed exploration of the troubled listening practices in contemporary UK child protection. We argue that the crisis of UK child protection (Munro, 2011) is also a crisis of listening because it results from a system-wide lack of appreciation for the way emergent cultural, political and societal conditions shape the way government and media listens and responds to child protection issues; as well as how these responses in turn influence the way front line workers feel they can listen to, act on and collaborate around what children tell them.

Following this discussion of the case of child protection, we explore in detail the conceptual landscapes that frame listening to establish why listening is considered a neglected phenomenon, as well as difficult to define and research. In particular we illustrate the role of modern scientific psychology in promoting a narrow, sometimes unhelpful, model of listening. Appreciating the dominance, costs and limitations of this influence informs our own argument for a process theoretical framework for listening. Our aim in this paper is not to debunk existing theories of listening, but to provide a theoretical framework that can both contextualize and integrate such theories, and, in addition, contribute to a critical examination of their effects on listening practices in everyday life, such as to prevent or promote inequality and injustice.

We develop a process theoretical concept of listening by drawing on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy (2007) and Francois Bonnet (2016). Nancy's (2007) 'tonal ontology' explores listening to forge new ways of grasping the subject within process thinking. He develops his

notion of the ‘resonant self’, centered on the idea that sense, self and sound continuously and synchronously reverberate within-, and co-create one another via the dynamics of resonance. Drawing on Bonnet (2016) we further explore the relationship between listening, discourse and power. This provides the conceptual backdrop for our concept of ‘cultures of listening’. Returning to child protection practice, we illustrate the relevance of listening as process, and the concept of cultures of listening, by applying their analytical focus to one of the most prominent failures of child protection in the UK in recent times: the Rotherham case (Jay, 2014).

Cultures of listening in child protection practice

Back’s (2007) suggestion that “our culture is one that speaks rather than listens” (p. 7) is confirmed by efforts to improve child protection practices that have largely focused on evaluating and boosting children’s ‘voice’ and neglected the problem of how that voice is listened to (Motzkau, 2007; 2009a; 2017; Lesnik-Oberstein, 2011). For example, research has investigated whether children can remember accurately and speak reliably (Goodman & Clarke-Steward, 1991; Goodmann, 2017; Ceci et al., 1994), and in many countries measures have been implemented to amplify and project their voice (Plottnikoff & Woolfson, 2005; Motzkau, 2007; 2010). This is an improvement on the traditional view that children¹ are unreliable witnesses of their own needs and experiences since it recognizes their need and right to speak in matters concerning their welfare and justice (e.g. as granted in Art. 12 of the UN Convention of children’s rights); however, it neglects attention to how those voices are listened to (Motzkau, 2007; 2010; Motzkau & Clinch, 2017; Lee, 2001). In fact, as we shall show, progressive developments in practices of welfare and justice have remained wary about the evidential

¹ We use the term ‘children’ to include those between birth and 18 years of age, i.e. children and young people.

reliability of children's testimony (how best to elicit it, and what weight to give it), making attention to listening even more crucial.

The Crisis of UK Child Protection

There is little dispute that society has a responsibility to protect children from harm, including sexual exploitation. Yet despite decades of research and reform, the UK has seen recurring high profile failures to protect children.² Multiple reports indicate that it remains unclear why decades of practice reform, guided by research and 'serious case reviews', have not resulted in significant improvements (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary [HMIC], 2015; Munro, 2011; Munro, 2011a; Munro, 2019). Child protection has become marked as a system in permanent crisis.

Recent reports about the performance of justice (HMIC, 2015) and welfare services (Smith et al., 2015; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC], 2019) point to persistent and serious problems, particularly concerning communication between practitioners and children/families, as well as between different agencies, affecting specifically the recognition and prosecution of sexual exploitation. Further, the Office of the Children's Commissioner's (2015) reported that in England between April 2012 and March 2014, of an estimated 400.000 - 450.000 victims, only 50.000 were known to statutory agencies (that is 1 in 8); and prosecution and conviction rates remain low, and for sexual offences overall they have recently been decreasing (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2018). In addition, there has been a steep increase in the number of recorded sexual offences against children; the NSPCC (2020) reports that "there were 73,518 recorded offences including rape, online grooming and sexual assault against children in the UK in 2019/20 - up 57% in the 5 years since 2014/15" XXX

² The UK is not unique in this as other countries internationally report similar trends (Motzkau, 2020).

(NSPCC, 2020)³. The frustration about these disturbing findings and the state of the system was expressed by Lord Laming in 2009. Reporting on repeated failings of child protection practices, he queried what he considered to be the persistent non-compliance of practitioners with improved practice guidance, demanding in capital letters “NOW JUST DO IT!” (Laming, 2009, p. 73). The same sentiment is presented in a report by HMIC:⁴

“Understanding why evidence based, well thought through procedures and guidance do not result in good practice is a conundrum which requires further thought.” (HMIC, 2015, p. 75).

A contributing factor to the crisis has been the existence of a number of competing yet contradictory cultural discourses about the nature of childhood, which, as we will show, can bring paradoxical consequences.

Competing discourses and political inconsistencies

Child protection is underscored by strong and competing cultural ideas and discourses. These are on the one hand fuelled by ideas of childhood purity and innocence, which can promote an ‘urgency to protect’, a ‘rush to action’, as well as the implicit sense that children’s reports are to be believed unconditionally as their innocence is implicitly understood to mean they would never tell untruths (Motzkau, 2010). On the other hand, there are discourses around children’s cognitive-developmental immaturity, and their resulting inability to reliably report experiences or make choices, which in turn undermine the weight given to what children say (Lesnik-Oberstein, 2011; 1998; Burman, 2014; Motzkau, 2010; Lee, 2001). This paradox is

³ <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2020/child-sexual-offences-rise/> NSPCC’s CEO Peter Wanless indicates a clear link between COVID-19 lockdown conditions and the increase in cases and notes that despite government commitment at a conference in June 2019 to shortly publish “the first of its kind cross-government Child Sexual Abuse Strategy to improve the UK’s response to tackling this abhorrent crime”. The strategy has yet to be published” (Wanless, 8th October 2020).

⁴ A UK national body responsible for examining and improving police performance.

encapsulated in Lee's (2001) concept of 'childhood ambiguity', which notes that during legal process children are required not only to prove the validity of their respective evidence/reports, but also, through their performance, to address the generic doubt their 'being children' inspires (p. 22): they have the double burden of having to prove their reliability not only as witnesses but also as children. There is a clear tension between the persistent doubt about children's ability to report experiences accurately, and the assumption of their inherent innocence and vulnerability that drives the urgency to protect them.

These powerful and colliding discourses have fuelled media attention and contributed to polarized debates and scapegoating of front line workers. On the one hand, there is suspicion of any action to interfere with family life, for instance, by removing children perceived to be at risk, and on the other, huge attention and blaming of front line workers follows failures to protect children (Ruch et al., 2014; Motzkau & Lee, 2014). Scholars in the field highlight that policy developments in child protection have become driven by an intensifying narrative of blame and failure that is undermining workers' professional confidence, leading in turn to defensive practice (Munro, 2019; Parton, 2015; Featherstone et al., 2014). In addition, the blaming has occurred in the context of significant cuts to services that have substantially inhibited their functioning.

These contradictory dynamics are exemplified in a recent high profile case in the UK, in Rotherham⁵. The case centered on the sexual exploitation of large numbers of children by organized groups of mostly men over decades. It turned out that the exploitation had been known to some in the police and social services, as some victims had reported the abuse repeatedly, but it had not been investigated (Jay, 2014). In the aftermath the then Home Secretary Theresa May adopted the narrative of blame and failure, attributing the failure to investigate the cases and

⁵ Named after the northern English town the case occurred in.

protect the children to the “denial and inaction” of front line staff. As a direct consequence the decision was taken to extend “the new offence of willful neglect to those who work in children’s social care” (GOV.UK, 2015), meaning practitioners would risk imprisonment if found neglectful. This was intended to ensure, as then Prime Minister David Cameron put it, “that professionals we charge with protecting our children – the council staff, police officers, and social workers – do the jobs they are paid to do” (GOV.UK, 2015). Alongside this, in 2015, the government declared child abuse a national priority on par with terrorism, underlining the perceived seriousness and scale of problem.

Yet around the same time, Peter Wanless, CEO of the NSPCC (2014) highlighted that child protection services were experiencing growing pressure as a result of ongoing public sector cuts. The cuts had been implemented by Cameron’s 2010 coalition government as part of a policy of the austerity politics, and were intensified over the following decade under consecutive conservative governments. The police service alone lost 17,000 police officers from 2010 to 2015 (The Independent April, 2015). Later, in 2017 parliament was presented with a new children and social work bill with a clause which would have made checks on children’s rights and care non-statutory, allowing councils to skip them. The government presented this change as a move to “allowing ‘innovative ways of working’” (Munro, 2017, p.15). Ultimately the relevant clause was dropped after widespread protest (The Guardian, 2017). What is more, the shrinking budgets coincided with a significant increase in reporting of sexual exploitation, resulting in ever increasing caseloads for depleted services. Subsequently, during the 2019 national lockdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, services were reduced even further.⁶ In late 2021 the

⁶ Social Workers were often unable to visit families at all, doing so at considerable personal risk or resorting to phone contact only. In some areas it is now unclear if services will return to pre-Covid levels (Prof. Jo Phoenix, personal communication). See this research project led by Ferguson for more information about child protection during COVID-19 lockdown 2020 <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/social-policy/departments/social-work-social-care/research/child-protection-and-social-distancing.aspx>

case of a child who died at the hands of his father and step mother during the 2020 lockdown caught the media attention, once more feeding into, as Ferguson (2021) puts it, “a public desire to find professionals, usually social workers, to blame”.

In summary, UK child protection workers find themselves in a position where safe practice is becoming more and more difficult to provide, while failure to deliver it is now punishable by public pillory or imprisonment. These are the precarious conditions that shape what we will call the cultures of listening workers find themselves in.

The Relevance of Cultures of Listening

It is notable that in the Rotherham case the government seems to have taken individual professionals’ failure to investigate these cases without delay as an indication of professionals’ bad personal ‘listening performance’, with the implication that good listening would have led to good practice. This hints at something like a set protocol for ‘good listening’ that was simply not followed. In fact, there is no such protocol. Still, the belief of government officials that individual professionals involved are to blame for the failures is expressed in the extreme punitive measures the government took in 2015 to compel them to do so in future (i.e. criminalizing willful neglect). This underlines failure of listening was considered one of individual incompetence or inaction with solutions sought in training, criminal punishment or public pillory of the professionals seen responsible. This denies the economic, political and societal conditions operating on front line workers, and also, through the competing discourses around childhood, on the media and government responses. We suggest that this denial has resulted in a defensive listening culture gaining ground as part of a wider shift towards

‘defensive practices’ deployed by practitioners in response to personal blame and failure they anticipate.

McLeod’s (2010) paper “30 years of listening to children?” is an important reference in this context as it explicitly relates the longstanding crisis in child protection to listening. In line with our argument she notes that over the past decades the child’s right to be heard has been firmly established in law and policy, and governments have drawn on a growing body of research and guidance to implement this (Holland, 2009; McLeod, 2008; Lefevre, 2010; Fergusson, 2011; Holland et al., n.d.), yet “standards of practice in listening to children remain weak overall” (McLeod, 2010, p. 70). McLeod suggests that the reasons for the failure are multiple and difficult to unravel. Developing the concept of cultures of listening we have begun to illustrate some of those reasons, and indicated why failures in listening are indeed complex and difficult to unravel. We argue that the idea of ‘standards of practice in listening’ (which hints at a practice conducted by individual listeners), alongside the blaming of professionals in the wake of Rotherham and other similar cases, are both based on, and reproduce, an inadequate understanding of what listening entails. This illustrates that there is a system-wide lack of appreciation for the way emergent cultural, political and societal conditions shape the way government and media listen and respond to child protection issues, as well as how these responses in turn influence the way front line workers feel they can listen to, act on and collaborate around what children tell them; there is then, a lack of appreciation of cultures of listening. In this sense, we argue, the crisis in child protection can be understood as a crisis of listening.

We propose that there is a need to go beyond conceptions of listening as a simple matter that can adequately be assessed and managed on the basis of individuals’ listening performances.

Relatedly, it is necessary to go beyond some of the commonly used definitions of listening as e.g. an exposure to sound waves (Moore, 2003), the unidirectional transmission of information between two individuals (Bodie et al., 2008). We propose that, instead, listening must be understood as a complex and relational process that implies and demands firstly, continuous selection, ordering and interpretation; secondly, decisions on what to do with what is heard (e.g. how to act on it, record or share it); thirdly, the instant consideration (implicit or explicit) of risks and consequences (as anticipated and/or experienced) associated with what is done with the result of listening. As we will demonstrate later, listening is in this sense also a ‘doing’. For frontline workers in child protection, the listening process will therefore be affected by the specific context of policy and popular debate in which they must operate, and by the personal- and professional consequences they experience and anticipate within any given moment of practice; that is, by the cultures of listening they are embedded in.

The pervasiveness of narrow and inadequate understandings of listening follows in large part from academic conceptualisations, including in psychology, and the values that have variously been attached to processes that are categorised as active, intentional and subjective. We will examine these in more detail next.

Listening and Psychology: Self, Sense, Sound

Listening has variously been described as neglected (Thomlinson, 1997), “apparently modest” (Barthes, 1985, p. 260) and lacking a disciplinary home: because it “does not figure in the encyclopedias of the past, it belongs to no acknowledged discipline” (Barthes, 1985, p. 260). As noted earlier, Back (2007) suggested that our culture is one where listening has long been eclipsed by speaking. In line with this, communication scholar Lisbeth Lipari (2014) highlights

that while listening has always been implied as a given, i.e. a key function of communication, it has consistently been neglected, and positioned as the ‘other’ of speaking, as mere silence, and thus obscured by what has been considered to be at the heart of communication: speaking and language.

Psychology has always been interested in audio phenomena, building on theories and research into perception, psychophysics and physiology that predated the formation of psychology as a discipline in the late 19th century (e.g. Descartes, 1633; Fechner, 1860; Helmholtz, 1863). Yet initially the key focus for psychological research was not listening but hearing, while interest in listening emerged later. Contemporary psychological research into listening is traditionally associated with theories of information processing (Janusik, 2007), communication (Wolvin, 2010) or communication in clinical-, organizational- or educational contexts (Rogers & Farson, 1957; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). Researchers in these fields note consistently that listening remains difficult to define and operationalize, and in the past there has been little systematic research about it particularly in psychology (Bodie et al., 2008; Imhof, 2020). We suggest that to understand the difficulties of the topic, it is necessary to trace the conceptual landscapes of listening, while considering the relationship between notions of self, sense and sound.

Listening and Hearing in the Modern Territory

Tracing the etymology of listening via a range of dictionary definitions, Lipari (2014) highlights that ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’ are not simple synonyms in the English language. ‘To hear’ is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as “to perceive or have the sensation of sound; to possess or exercise the faculty of audition, of which the specific organ is the ear.”

(Lipari 2014, p. 50); while ‘listening’ comes from a different root in Middle English and is based on the idea of ‘attention to sound’, which includes ‘giving ear’, and ‘hear’ as in ‘obey’, but also as in ‘understand’. The distinction is more obvious in French where ‘entendre’ implies both hearing a sound and understanding a meaning, rather like ‘I hear you’ in English, a phrase that ambiguously also implies ‘hearing’ to be the outcome of successful listening. Lipari concludes that “‘listening’ comes from a root that emphasizes attention and giving to others, and is thus an active pursuit, while ‘hearing’ comes from a root that emphasizes perception and receiving from others ” (Lipari 2014, p. 50), including external sound sources, so is a passive phenomenon. This is an important distinction, broadly evident throughout common uses of the terms ‘hearing’ and ‘listening’, but also within research contexts as we will show. Notably, this common positioning of listening as ‘active’ and hearing as ‘passive’, often implies judgments about the quality of the information gleaned via hearing versus listening (Erlmann, 2010).

Erlmann’s (2010) analysis of the epistemological tropes emergent in early otology (study of the ear) also shows that both historically and recently hearing is often pitched against listening in a dichotic and hierarchical fashion. When hearing is associated with passivity (passive exposure to audio signals), it is also frequently considered more objective and natural, thus superior in terms of yielding factual information (but also characterized as distracted/incidental). When listening is construed as active, it is also considered subjective, i.e. related to affect/experience; this means it is considered as attentive/intentional, but also as generative, because the ‘subjective’ attention is taken to precondition how what is heard is processed/understood as part of listening. As a result, Erlmann (2010) elaborates, listening will often implicitly be considered inferior to hearing, less objective, not meeting standards of

modern scientific reason.⁷ Implied within this conceptualization of listening as more subjective is a specific understanding of the self that is listening (subject) and its relationship to what it is listening to, the object of their listening, sound.

Such dichotomies, and concomitant value judgments (hearing as objective and thus factual versus listening as subjective and thus not factual), are rooted within what Stengers (2008) called the modern territory; i.e. they follow the logic of western thought where the appreciation and evaluation of truth/evidence is predicated upon the distinction between the subjective (mind/experience), and the objective (matter/body). This framework is based on what Whitehead (1927-8[1985]) criticised as modern sciences' bifurcation of nature into objective causal nature, i.e. hard incorruptible matter, versus subjective nature, i.e. fickle/corruptible experience. Accordingly contemporary epistemological orthodoxies of scientific practice often imply a split into practices of matter (the physical world, including the body), versus practices of the self or subject (the mind, including experience), with the latter considered of inferior factual value.

This is why approaches operating within such modern scientific frameworks are likely to consider a focus on the sensation of 'hearing', or audio perception, to be more straightforward and thus preferable to a focus on listening. This applies to the emergent discipline of psychology, which during the early 20th century built its own scientific legitimacy by anchoring itself within the modern scientific framework. In this context it is key to appreciate how psychology, as a new discipline, came to define its subject matter as the 'individual psyche'.

⁷ For psychology specifically this same dichotomy, and separation into objective (hearing) and subjective (listening), can be traced back to the way early psychologists settled on the empiricist (going back to Locke's and Hume's work) notion that sensations are based within the physical realm. Sensations are then taken to provide the fundamental building blocks out of which all experience is constituted, i.e. perceptions. These in turn were considered the subjective response to a sensation, i.e. turning a physical stimulus into a psychological one (see Richards & Stenner, P. (in preparation)).

Listening and the Paradox of the Psychosocial

Key figures in the foundation of Psychology sought to resolve the individual psyche as its distinctive focus of investigation from within the host of social, economic, physiological and environmental relationships, which play a role in the generation and maintenance of individual's identities and autonomies, in so far as they possess them. Without this distinctive focus, the emerging discipline risked the surrender of research territory to competitor disciplines and, in extremis, dissolution. Stenner and Taylor describe the resulting "grounding paradox" (Stenner & Taylor, 2007) of psychology as rooted in the fact that the disciplinary boundaries that inaugurated psychology at the turn of the 19th century as distinct from other disciplines (e.g. Philosophy and Sociology) could only be drawn by artificially separating the social from the psychological, society from subject. This means these disciplines

‘came into being as a result of this relation between “society” and “subject”, but in functionally specializing each on just one side of this relation, they served to obscure the very relation that called them into being.’ (Stenner 2017, p. XX).

Abstracting from the social provides psychology with its defined subject area, but obscures the complex relational dynamics that, as we argue alongside Stenner, constitute this very subject.

Motzkau (2009) has captured the effect of this grounding paradox in research around suggestibility as the ‘paradox of the psychosocial’. Suggestibility (i.e. the degree to which someone can be manipulated) is interesting in the context of listening as it implies an apparent malfunction of the evaluation and sense making processes within listening. By highlighting potentially erroneous forms of listening/hearing, suggestibility also raises the question of what in turn would constitute ‘correct’ listening/sense-making. Both listening and suggestibility therefore

take us back to the two key questions at the heart of the paradox of the psychosocial: First, how do we relate to one another and our surroundings, while also remaining autonomous subjects, as modern scientific psychology would have us? Second, how do we know, how do we understand, make sense of-, and evaluate what we encounter through listening, while the rules/principles for such evaluation would also have to be accessed and calibrated via relating/listening, unless they were assumed to originate entirely from within the subject? Staying with the spirit of the paradox of the psychosocial, the following exploration of the conceptual landscape of listening in modern scientific psychology will show that listening continually raises three related ontological questions. First, the question of who is listening, i.e. how to define and differentiate the psyche/subject/*self* from that which it listens to, while still allowing for the subject to relate to what it listens to. Second, the question of what is listened to, i.e. *sound*, the matter of listening, and how we define sound vis a vis those listening and its sense. Third, the question of the effect of listening, i.e. the understanding we glean, its *sense*; because implied within the question of relating and knowing is the question of sense and its role for, or emergence through listening.

In the following we focus on the three ontological coordinates identified above (self, sense, sound) while exploring examples that help illustrate and trace the effect the conceptual framework of modern scientific psychology has for the way listening is understood more broadly.

Listening in Modern Scientific Psychology: Self, Sense, Sound

Moore (2003) provides a good example for the way much psychological research into hearing and audio-perception is situated within the modern scientific framework. In a core text

“An introduction to the Psychology of Hearing, fifth edition” Moore anchors hearing⁸ within the physical world of matter. He defines sound as consisting of “variations in pressure as a function of time” (Moore 2003, p. 51), confining it to an independent physical phenomenon and its material effect on the corresponding anatomy of the body (cochlear, middle ear/neurons). Here the subject, i.e. the listener/hearer, is implied as an individual body but otherwise not defined or explicitly considered as part of what this book terms ‘the process of auditory perception’; the same applies to the listener’s potential motives and what they make of the result of their listening. Importantly, the individual listener is implied to be separate from the sound/physical/audible world, which they encounter via the effects of physical forces on their anatomy. The implication is that the physical (matter) connects to the psychological (subjective experience) when the physical characteristics of sound energy meet the relevant anatomy and functional mechanisms of the ear.

A 2012 textbook, “Auditory Neuroscience. Making Sense of Sound”, that approaches listening from a neurophysiological perspective, takes up the same definition and describes this connection from the external world of matter into the subjective world of perception as ‘transduction’ (Schnupp et al., 2012). Sound is ‘transduced’ from a ‘physical phenomenon’ into “sound as perception” (Schnupp et al., 2012, p. 52). Both textbooks from their respective psychological and neurophysiological perspectives, operate within the modern scientific framework where matter and subject are separate, and define hearing/listening as initiated when external physical forces (sound/matter) impact upon the subject’s anatomy and are then transduced into, and experienced by the subject, as subjective sense.

We will stay with Schnupp et al. (2012) because they make a comment that illustrates our own argument. They observe, that there is an issue with the ‘transduction’ part of such

⁸ Interestingly the book barely mentions ‘hearing’, referring to audio perception instead.

definitions, noting that common definitions of sound at the origin of audio perception miss a key point.

“If you have read other introductory texts in hearing, they will most probably have told you that... ‘sound is a pressure wave that propagates through the air.’ That is of course entirely correct, but it is also somewhat missing the point. [...] these sound waves certainly do not describe what we ‘hear’ in the subjective sense.” (Schnupp et al., 2012, p. 1-2).”

Herein Schnupp et al. (2012) emphasize what we would consider a key conceptual issue: the distinction between objective matter (sound wave) and subjective experience (hearing the subjective sense), cannot be explained simply by pointing to the sound waves’ interference with the physical anatomy of the body. Crucially they add “...when we listen we do not seek to sense vibrating air for the sake of it, but rather we hope to learn something about the sound sources, that is, the objects and events surrounding us.” (Schnupp et al., 2012, p. 3). This observation goes beyond basic ‘subjective experience’, and alerts us to the idea of attention, i.e. the motives or expectations the subject may bring. This is one of the very few times Schnupp et al. (2012) use the term ‘listening’ in their book, and we argue that their explicit consideration of listening provides a valuable insight. The reference highlights that within this modern scientific framework we cannot learn much about the experiential and sense-making processes involved in hearing/listening, yet their importance still emerges, troubling these researchers to the point where they feel it appropriate to highlight them prominently as in this example (and even though they do not claim to investigate complex communication or sense making processes). Unsurprisingly, given the neurophysiological focus on their work, the conclusion Schnupp et al. (2012) draw from this observation is very different from our own. They conclude that to

understand how we are ‘making sense of sound’ (the title of their book), we need to look in even more detail at the physical properties of sound waves and the objects that generate them. This is where they argue ‘sense’ is to be found, in the objective realm of matter. Within their framework this is perfectly coherent, as here ‘making sense’ is defined as, for example, determining the location and material properties of an object that is falling. What they have to abstract from in their conceptualization is the self/subject. Nonetheless it is implied in that the location of the object presupposes the existence of a hearing subject whose own location (context, anatomy, attention) relative to the sound source is relevant to the coordinates of listening/hearing.

The quoted observation from Schnupp et al. (2012) highlights the key issue we argue the phenomenon of listening poses for modern scientific approaches. The assumption that the subject/individual is separate from the physical world they inhabit makes it difficult to explain how that subject relates to this world meaningfully (transduction), i.e. how they, as Schnupp et al. put it, “learn something about the sound sources, that is, objects and events surrounding us” (Schnupp et al., 2012, p. 3). For this reason, the hearing subject is implied but ignored, or set aside to be considered later, perhaps as part of a higher order concept. We argue that this focus on the physical properties of objects while abstracting from the subject, not only impoverishes the concept of ‘listening’, but also promotes a perspective in which the complexity of the relationship between listening, sense and subject is obscured.

Schnupp et al. (2012) underline the relevance of our argument in a light comment in the introduction to their book. They begin the book introduction by stating that “...every time you talk to someone [...] you are effectively beaming your thoughts into another person’s head [...]. Hearing is a telepathic sense that we take for granted...” (ibid, p. 1). ‘Telepathy’ and ‘beaming thoughts’ are not scientific concepts and this jocular remark intentionally highlights that the

authors do not see their work as relevant to such ideas. Their concerns are more serious as they seek to de-mystify exactly such ideas of ‘telepathy’, by offering what they consider the basic building blocks for explaining more complex communication phenomena (e.g. to do with the role of motivation and attention for sense-making). Still, the fact that they volunteer such ideas when they did not need to (they do not claim to look at listening or complex communication processes), highlights to us that ‘listening’ is always implied in its full complexity; it can neither be fully grasped nor excised from considerations of audio perception within the modern scientific paradigm, as it always already implies itself. In this context it evidently summons the idea of something magical happening: sense making as telepathy.

Importantly, our discussion of Moore (2003) and Schnupp et al. (2012) is not intended to dismiss the valuable insights provided by their research, for instance, into the anatomy of the ear and key aspects of sound processing (e.g. pitch and speech perception), pathologies of hearing, and psychoacoustics (e.g. hearing aid- or sound design). The problem lies not with the modern scientific framework itself, but with the degree to which the conceptual model for hearing/listening that is developed here (as exemplified with reference to Moore (2003) and Schnupp et al. (2012), and in cognitive psychology as we will show next), has dominated communication research overall. This conceptual model has promoted what Lipari (2014) criticizes as an atomized idea of listening, dissecting it into a series of disparate, often incommensurable functions, while reducing communication to a linear, unidirectional mechanism for the conduit of information units. This, Lipari (2014) notes, has made it impossible to appreciate the complexity and significance of listening processes for human existence as a whole.

We argue that psychology itself has inadvertently contributed to this problem. In its early move to seek legitimacy and authority through an alignment with the modern scientific framework, and later through the authority and dominance gained by some of its communication models, psychology has perpetuated the mechanistic and atomist idea of listening as a mere tool for conducting information. This has obscured the role of discursive and power dynamics that can lead to exclusion and injustice within listening, communication and sense-making processes. Again, the problem lies less with the modern scientific research framework as such, than with its implicit suggestion that the basic building blocks provided by it, if combined correctly, can explain complex communication and listening phenomena.

The Subject in Modern Scientific Psychology: Information Processing Model

We will briefly explore the information processing paradigm that emerged within cognitive psychology, as it explicitly focuses on the subject of listening, and its model still influences research on listening and communication well beyond psychology. In the first half of the 20th century, there were few empirical studies of listening. Bodie et al. (2008) suggest that this was a result of the early dominance of behaviourism in psychology. Behaviourism dismissed listening as a research topic because it could not be observed directly (Bodie et al., 2008); the perspective did not take account of a phenomenon that it considered to be entirely internal/subjective. However, listening became more important as a research topic through the cognitive revolution (Richards, 2010) and Broadbent's human information processing models (Broadbent, 1958). Cognitive psychology took over the task that had previously been side-stepped by audio perception research, seeking a better understanding of the subject of listening. We argue that this development further consolidated the modern scientific split between matter

and subject. Listening was “conceptualized as information processing and viewed as a cognitive activity involving the selection (attention, perception), organization (interpretation), and integration (storage, recall) of information” (Bodie et al., 2008, p. 105). This model was key for popularizing the mechanistic and linear model of communication criticised by Lipari (2014) i.e. a unidirectional progression through successive stages (usually three), concerning an individual as they encounter a discrete external sound source (including another individual) in a dyadic process (between two entities).

Witkin (1990) pointed out that for cognitive psychology the core conundrum remained the difficulty of empirically researching phenomena that could not be observed. The study of observable listening behaviours remained key, even though there was acknowledgement that these are not congruous with listening cognitions. Some research sought to solve this problem by using verbal recall as indicator for listening processes but this is also seen as problematic, as recall is then indistinguishable from memory processes so listening ends up being equated with remembering (Janusik, 2007). Researchers attempted to address this issue by correlating listening ability with other psychological processes, personality traits, cognitive abilities and styles of processing information including attention related phenomena (e.g. ‘cocktail party effect’ or ‘dichotic listening’) or affect perception (Bodie et al., 2008; Imhof, 2020). However, Bodie et al. (2008) note how these approaches have again undermined research, as findings ended up confounding listening responses with individuals’ level of literacy, critical thinking or ability to recall. Bodie et al suggest the underlying problem is the emphasis on measurement at the expense of theory building. Adding to critique from within the discipline, Janusik (2007) highlights that cognitive psychological research looks at the conditions or the outcome of listening (testing attention/perception or memory recall) but not the process itself, thereby

producing a multitude of incompatible theoretical perspectives. We argue that, despite a focus on the subject, these approaches locate the entire ‘scene of listening’ within that subject, which in turn is declared inaccessible. As a result listening remains a mysterious process operating within a subject in apparent isolation from its world.

In summary, psychological research that draws on the information processing model, considers listening to be an important, but neglected phenomenon that is difficult to operationalize, and lacks an overall theory. In line with Janusik (2007) and Bodie et al. (2008), Wolvin (2010) notes that in the past listening was never theorized systematically, leaving research with convoluted concepts and no solid foundation. “As a consequence” as Bodie et al. (2008) put it, “a fragmented and seemingly dizzying array of definitions, methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks has arisen.” (p. 104).

Despite these apparent issues with the information processing model, its mechanistic idea of listening as a linear and stage wise progression still dominates research in many related fields. For example it forms the basis for work in communication studies where listening is defined as successful retention of information presented orally, emphasizing the comprehension and memory aspect of listening (Bodie et al., 2008). It also informs the broader social science context where listening is defined as: “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages” (Wolvin, 2010, p. 9). Purdy (2010) criticized the unhelpful, and often implicit, dominance of the information processing model within communication and listening research as it ties research into the linear ‘sender-medium-receiver model’ which implies the individual as the sole receiver/interpreter of messages. This he points out, supporting our own argument, obscures the importance of listening as a relational, social, cultural and political phenomenon. Similarly others call for a shift of focus from the individual to

a more discursive perspective that, variously, examines the languages of listening in relation to global power structures and dynamics of marginalisation (Dutta, 2014; Footitt, 2018) and specific societal practices related to listening, including family court practices (Ramshaw, 2014; Ramshaw & Stapelton, 2020), music (Oliveros, 2005), decolonialisation and ex-colonial practices (Bignall, 2014), research interactions with children (Davies, 2014), sound art (Voegelin, 2010), and the human geography of environmental change (Revill, 2019). The variety of disciplines represented here is a reminder that there is no unified framework for research into listening, meaning work within disciplines remains insular. Indeed, Worthington & Bodie (2020) note that ‘listening’, due to the “general lack of cohesive theories specific to listening” (Worthington & Bodie, 2020, p. 2), is not a discipline but “best characterized as a field of study” (Worthington & Bodie, 2020, p. 2) comprising disparate approaches from across the sciences, arts and humanities. They hope that collating approaches to listening from different disciplines in a ‘Handbook of Listening’ (Worthington & Bodie, 2020) will help move the field toward interdisciplinary status. We argue that such efforts would be more effective if conducted within a coherent theoretical framework.

Clearly, within psychology there are models of listening that differ from, and go beyond the information processing paradigm (e.g. psycholinguistics explore listening as speech perception (Harley 2010)). Most prominently, there is the idea of ‘active listening’ (Rogers & Farson, 1957) considered key for psychotherapeutic processes (see also Freud, 1919; Kuhn et al., 2018), and that is also used widely in educational and organizational contexts. This area is beyond the scope of our paper, but interestingly Kuhn et al. (2018) note that research focusing on listening as a key element of responsiveness in this clinical field is still uncommon. While approaches in these fields offer the idea of synchronous or mutual information flows, and co-

constructed sense making, for many the emphasis remains on the inter-action between two discrete individuals within a private or circumscribed setting, thereby, we argue, abstracting again from the broader social, political or cultural context.⁹

All of these different models have merits and are not in our view problematic in themselves, until we note their potential influence on how listening is commonly understood, for example in child protection practices. There is a common implication that listening involves a circumscribed subject within a linear or dyadic listening process. The dominant concept is of listening as a mechanism for transmitting information via auditory code, and occurring between a fixed sound source and an individual psyche, or between two distinct psyches who are presented as ‘stable nodes’ within a linear exchange of information transmitted between them. This conceptualisation makes it difficult to imagine a problem with listening as anything other than an error in information transmission or decoding to be detected and corrected within the individual source or receiver of listening. In the context of child protection work, this suggests when a problem occurs, fault is to be found in the individual doing the listening and ‘remedied’ by training or imprisonment. And while relationships of power may operate, and be recognized, within that listening dyad, such models of listening make it hard to understand and challenge the broader conditions/dynamics that create and maintain power imbalances, and thus to imagine ways to analyse and address inequality and injustice resulting from them.

Listening/Psychology beyond the Modern Territory: Embodiment, Affect, Discourse

⁹ Dialogical approaches within psychology, drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1986) or Buber (1998) offer another interesting approach to communication and listening, this paper has no scope to cover (see Manusov, 2020). Still the dialogic listening seems to remain, on the whole, wedded to the idea of a dyad, an inter-action between two selves that can be co-constructive, in the moment, but is still anchored in the idea of connecting ourselves to discrete others and ‘otherness’ (Shotter, 2009).

Although we cannot provide a comprehensive account of psychological approaches beyond the modern scientific paradigm, the following sketch is offered to capture the broad conceptual landscape relevant to our own argument. Since the 1970s, psychology has seen a series of radical paradigm shifts that have offered researchers more contextualized positions, and admitted a politically/culturally aware conceptualisation of the subject as relational, co-creating knowledge, and impacted by power dynamics. Such ideas emerged for example from social constructionist approaches to psychology (e.g. Stainton-Rogers & Stainton-Rogers, 1992) and specifically the turn to language and discourse (Parker, 2002). These led to a proliferation of and possibly unhelpful dominance of discursive approaches that, by some arguments, obscured the importance of the body, embodied experience (Brown et al., 2011; Shotter, 2011; Sampson, 1998) and affect (Massumi, 1995). In an attempt to address these issues, some psychology researchers have drawn on Phenomenology to highlight the importance of experience and embodiment (Langdridge, 2018). In addition, a radical focus on ‘affect’ attempted to reconnect with claimed omissions, such as the raw, authentic processes of life and being-in-the-world supposedly edited out by modern scientific and discursive approaches alike. In this context, ‘listening’ and the internal forces of affect it signifies/transmits, have become central to more recent innovations in research methods within psychology and the social sciences (e.g. Bennet et al., 2005; Daza & Gershon, 2015; Gershon, 2018; Ratnan, 2017). We argue that neither affect theory nor phenomenological approaches quite manage to capture the issue continuously raised by the phenomenon of listening: the relationship between self, sense and sound. With regard to affect theory, Stenner (2017) highlights that in much affect focused research the subject is again evacuated, but rather than being split off from the object/matter, it becomes a swirling multiplicity where both object and subject are abandoned in favor of indistinct vibrations and

affections. Indeed, Stenner (2017) notes that the turn to affect has left the field fragmented and polarized, with ‘affect’ a variously omnipresent and diffuse entity, sometimes sacralised and sequestered, as Stenner puts it, “into a series of mysterious moments that remain forever virtual (Massumi, 1995)” (Stenner, 2017, p. 203). In phenomenological approaches to embodiment, the problem of the listening subject is re-organised (e.g. Lipari, 2014), but Kahn (2012) argues that such approaches end up anchoring object/matter and subject entirely within the subject itself, which consequently appears only to listen/relate and refer to itself, again isolated from its surroundings. In both areas of psychology we suggest, listening again is at risk of being mystified, this time not as telepathy, but as either the self-referential subject providing its own world/sense (phenomenology based approaches), or a subject jettisoned into the ineffable, a vibration that qualifies itself by being the unknowable, yet apparently authentic core of the subject (affect centered approaches). In our view, both types of approach risk inadvertently promoting a form of naïve empiricism, as they appeal to an apparently authentic yet unknowable core of being/knowing. They may also lack critical consideration of power dynamics, context and politics. Clearly this sketch does not do the phenomenological and affect-centred fields justice since both are diverse, have many merits and are constantly evolving. However, our critical positioning discussion explains why we consider critical discursive approaches to psychology the most promising backdrop against which to develop our own process theoretical framework for listening.

Theorising listening in process

We argue that the way in which the phenomenon of listening continually raises the question of the relationship between self, sense and sound indicates that these are relational and processual

phenomena that should be theorized and researched within a process theoretical framework. Such a framework requires that an exploration of listening must start with an assumption not of independent and discrete psyches, but of mutually affected selves/subjecthoods, in formation during listening that takes place in contexts that exceed the individual. In the following discussion we will refer to ‘self/selves’ following Jean-Luc Nancy (2007), who distinguishes between ‘self/selves’ and ‘subject’. He defines the subject as the occurrence of the self, the ‘taking place of the self’. This analytic distinction and relationship between self and subject is significant for Nancy because, in this process theoretical perspective the world is seen as constituted through a continuous succession of instantaneous configurations of matter. Hence mind, sense, self and matter are not separate ‘entities/substances’, but are mutually emergent in ongoing processes and practices of relating. Human social and psychic existence is then continuous with a wider nature, which can itself be characterized in terms of the experiences and expressions of coordinated events (see also Stenner, 2017; Motzkau, 2011; Lee & Motzkau, 2012). Consequently listening, alongside all other forms of relating, rather than a form of interaction, is better captured by the notion of intra-action (Barad, 2007).

“That is, human bodies, like all other bodies, are not entities with inherent boundaries and properties but phenomena that acquire specific boundaries and properties through the open-ended dynamics of intra-activity. Humans are part of the world-body space in its dynamic structuration.” (Barad, 2007, p. 172).

This does not deny notions of ‘self’ and ‘matter’, but it re-organises the way we understand their efficacy and how they configure themselves, i.e. as emergent, relational and processual, rather than e.g. as static, essential. In the following discussion we will unpack these

claims by providing a detailed account of listening in process drawing on Nancy's (2007) book 'Listening'. Kane (2012) views this book as an attempt to see how the question of the subject can be posed anew, to move from what Kane (2012) calls the phenomenological subject "of representation who constitutes the objectivity of things by its inherent yet unrepresentable power of representation – to a subject that is listening to the infinite renvoi (reference) of meaning, sound and self." (Kane, 2012, p. 446). Nancy (2007) arrives at the concept of the 'resonant self' by developing his 'tonal ontology', which systematically sets out the mutually generative relationship of sense, sound and self as emergent through listening. We will delineate these synchronous processes consecutively, starting with sense.

Sense, Hearing and Listening

Nancy (2007) defines listening through the special relationship that he proposes exists between hearing and sense. He proposes that sense resonates within all hearing, because hearing is always already contextualized, embedded into a rough grasp of what a sound might be about. Hearing therefore comes enveloped with sense, here defined as a set of emergent meanings. Nancy declares that hearing is always a 'hearing say'. There is no pure/essential 'taking in' of sound followed by decoding; instead, regardless of the type or origin of sound (e.g. spoken or beep/noise), it is always already embedded within-, and delivers its own sense making framework. The phrase 'hearing say' underlines that the sound comes equipped with its own 'spoken expression' of meaning, as if the sound 'said' itself.

"... 'to hear' is to understand the sense (either in the figurative sense, or in the so-called proper sense: to hear a siren, a bird, or a drum is already each time to understand at least the rough outline of a situation, a context, if not a text)," (Nancy, 2007, p. 6).

Listening, Nancy argues, differs from hearing merely in that listening goes further; it strains towards a meaning beyond this immediate sense, and crucially, it is aimed at, but also triggered by, the way sense and sound resonate: Listening “aims at, or is aroused by, the tendency where sound and sense mix together and resonate in each other, or through each other.” (Nancy, 2007, p. 7). As we will see, the notion of resonance is key here, as it expresses the processual but also liminal nature of the convergence/co-emergence that characterizes the relationship between the self, sense and sound that is at the heart of hearing/listening. Importantly for Nancy, this means that there is no essence of sound independent of sense or the listening self (and thus no ontology of sound, as we will see).

“to be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning [...] as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin...” (Nancy, 2007, p. 7).

Ultimately, in Nancy’s theory, speaking, hearing and listening converge or are conditional upon another. “As if in all hearing there was a hearing say. In all saying there is a hearing and in hearing itself there is a listening.” (Nancy, 2007, p. 6). It is in the same sense that Barthes (1985) notes that ‘listening speaks’: it speaks in that it brings an anticipated meaning to the listening situation already, evokes certain meanings and not others¹⁰. But if, as Nancy claims, there is no purely physiological encounter of the auditory system with sound, what then is the nature of sound vis a vis listening, what is the matter of listening?

Sound, the Sonorous

¹⁰ This is captured within the concept cultures of listening in that e.g. a police officer listens differently to a social worker as a function of their own professional function, which means what is allowed to speak in their listening is specific, as well as the way they listen to the social worker, which opens up different potential consequences.

In stark contrast to, for example, Moore's (2003) definition of sound, Nancy outlines that sound, or the sonorous as he calls it interchangeably, is neither a thing in itself, nor an object that is present, and nor is it entirely independent of the listener as there is no essence of sound independent of listener¹¹/sense. Still, Nancy reminds us, that there is an immediacy and physicality to our encounter with the sonorous. It does not just appear in front of us, but it lures us in as the "sonorous presence arrives – it entails an attack" (Nancy, 2007, p. 14). Crucially the sonorous as a presence is less a being than a sonorous event, a "coming and a passing, an extending and a penetrating [...] it is a present[sic] in waves on a swell, not in a point on a line" (Nancy, 2007, p. 13). In these respects, the sonorous exemplifies the key qualities of what Deleuze (1986) calls a becoming.

"The sonorous [...] outweighs form. It does not dissolve it but rather enlarges it; it gives it an amplitude, density, vibration or undulation, whose outline never does anything but approach. The visual persists until its disappearance; the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence." (Nancy, 2007, p. 2).

According to Nancy then, our experience of the sonorous exemplifies the processual nature of all things in the world, making palpable the core principle of process ontology. Listening/hearing offers a particularly clear experience of something that is present and efficacious, yet also permanently impermanent, or 'fugitive' as Bonnet (2016) put it, always either approaching or fading; never existing statically. It is important to note that we are not proposing that other senses are any less processual (e.g. touch or vision). However, the way listening brings that processual nature of being to the fore offers an especially productive model for countering and inverting the modern scientific 'matter versus subjective experience' split; a split that is also built on an implied primacy of vision as the most objective sense (Daston &

¹¹ This includes non-human animals.

Galison, 2007). Yet again, the sonorous has no essence in itself, it subsists in relation to sense (as outlined above) and the self.

Nancy highlights that the encounter with the sonorous is immersive because our bodies are not equipped to interrupt such a “sonorous arrival/event”. Ears have no ‘earlids’, and while we can ‘tune out’ of hearing certain things as a matter of choice or as a result of unconscious processes (including those that make sure we are not deafened by the noise of our own blood flow), the sonorous nonetheless envelops, or ‘attacks’ the self, as Nancy outlines.

Nancy reminds us that sound is omnipresent. It propagates across space, across obstacles and through the whole self, as well as from within the self, so we cannot ‘turn away’ from it in the same way we might, for example, evade visual impressions/light or direct physical touch. Importantly, this inability to exclude holds for the body/self of the one who emits the sounds, meaning they hear the sound they emit as they emit it, as well as what resonates back to them. “...sonorous emission is always also its own reception” (Nancy, 2007, p. 15). (What is more, the movement of the cochlear hair cells when engaged by this sonorous arrival also makes a sound: otoemission. This implies that, even at this level, we might indeed listen to our own listening.)

As we have outlined, much of the modern scientific psychological research on listening asks us to imagine more or less stable nodes (individual psyches or other sound sources) between which independently existing sound carries meaning that is then decoded more or less reliably, thus fostering the more or less efficient interaction between these nodes. In contrast, Nancy’s ‘sonorous’ asks us to imagine listening as a process taking place amongst elements in intra-action that relationally produce sense, self and sound, enabling sense and self to continuously dissolve and re-form in relation to the sonorous.

Self as Resonance: Listening as a Methexic Dynamic

Resonance commonly is understood as the relationship between different bodies vibrating at the same frequency, their ability to affect one another. Nancy takes this concept further by including the ‘frequencies of sense as they resonate and echo within the self’ into the definition of resonance. Listening, Nancy outlines, occasions a reflexive dynamic, a resonance, as it is about both that which is given-to-be-heard, and the listener, who is always at the origin of this process.¹² So when Nancy considers what it means “to be listening, to be all ears, to be in the world” (Nancy, 2007, p. 5), he finds that “to be listening will always be to be straining toward, or in an approach to the self” (Nancy, 2007, p. 5). It is while straining for a relation to self that the auditor reveals herself to herself as ‘being listening’, and thus by default highlighting herself as ‘being in process’. This, Nancy calls an infinite referral (*renvoi*) or echo.

“When one is listening, one is on the lookout for a subject, something (itself) that identifies itself by resonating from self to self, in itself and for itself, hence outside of itself, at once the same as-, and other than, itself, one in the echo of the other, and this echo is like the very sound of its sense.” (Nancy, 2007, p. 9).

Herein listening is not just a metaphor for access to self, but the reality of this access occurring, a denominator for this occurring in process.

“[Listening]...can and must appear to us not as a metaphor for access to self, but as the reality of this access, a reality consequently indissociably ‘mine’ and ‘other’, ‘singular’ and ‘plural’, as much as it is ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ and ‘signifying’ and ‘a-signifying’.” (Nancy, 2007, p. 12).

¹² Listening is the “occasion for, or activation of, a reflexive process in he or she who always lies at the origin of listening: the auditor” as Bonnet puts it (2016, p.76).

So listening is, on occasions, what can be described as a paradoxical or liminal dynamic, with the ear, as Bonnet (2016) puts it, a liminal organ. Listening summons at once a sense of mine/other, singular/plural, inside/outside etc to the point where listening as access to self, or self-assertion (or self-becoming, a superject, in Whitehead's terms),¹³ at once becomes self-dissolution, "a fit of self, or a crisis of self" (Nancy, 2007, p. 9).

This resonant self is at the core of Nancy's tonal ontology: While sound is captured as pure resonance, a presence in flow that emerges in resonance with (co-dependent with) the listener, the listener herself is, via her listening, enveloped in the sound's 'attack', and consequently carried away into what Nancy describes as a methexic movement. This methexic movement is a dynamic of contagion, interpenetration, participation and sharing between elements, instants of time and inside/outside; here they start to resonate along with sound and language (we will return to the role of language). Listening then delivers sense and hearing, as well as the taking-place of the self as a subject. It produces the subject as an inflection, a rhythm or a folding/unfolding; allowing it to emerge through listening, in a tension towards the self, and as part of the liminal dynamic of resonating inwards and outwards at once.¹⁴

Timbre and Communication

Alongside resonance, timbre is another key term for Nancy. For him it expresses the uniqueness of each listening event. Timbre is commonly defined as the 'colour of sound' (Klangfarbe in German), and understood to be dependent on the materials a resonating body consists of, its shape, or how it is set in motion or indeed played, where a musical instrument is

¹³ This is a good way into understanding what Whitehead (1927-28/1985) means when he says the subject is in fact a superject, coming into existence as the satisfaction of an occasion of experience. That is why it makes sense both to say that 'listening delivers meaning/hearing' and 'listening delivers the subject'. The subject is the auditor who hears after listening. But the subject is also that process of listening which yields itself: its superject.

¹⁴ "Listening...: the sharing of an Inside/outside, division and participation, de-connection and contagion." (Nancy, 2007, p. 14).

concerned. Yet again Nancy takes this concept further to capture the unique, unrepeatable experience emergent each time a sound co-emerges vis-à-vis sense and self, and that therefore is not reducible to the physics of the instrument or its surroundings. Rather timbre is the ‘surprise’ (Gritten, 2017) that reverberates in the body and exceeds what is listened out for. So timbre “does not yield to measurement and notation” (Nancy, 2007, p. 41).¹⁵ It is something we all experience, and for Nancy it captures the unique nature of the continuous reverberation/evocation of sense within sound/listening. It thus marks the unique instances of the resonant ‘taking place of the self’, i.e. the subject constituting itself as an ever approaching, asymptotic, emergent yet fugitive presence, via which the self is at once continuously formed and destabilized.

Timbre is the resonance of sound: or sound itself. It forms the first consistency of sonorous sense itself under the rhythmic condition that makes it resound (even a simple monotone sustained contains rhythm and timbre). Sense here is the ricochet, the repercussion the reverberation: the echo in a given body...” (Nancy, 2007, p. 40).¹⁶

For communication this finally means that:

“Communication is not transmission but a sharing that becomes subject: sharing of as subject of all ‘subjects’. An unfolding, a dance, a resonance. Sound in general is first of all communication in this sense.” (Nancy, 2007, p. 41).

¹⁵ Timbre “does not yield to measurement and notation” (Nancy, 2007, p. 41), and where something relating to it is found within musical notation for example, it is always written out as a phrase indicating to the player a mood, experience or expression that, other than the speed or pitch at which a note is to be played, cannot be measured ‘objectively’. Such instructions include: ‘lighthearted’, ‘happy’, ‘with gravity’, ‘melancholic’, ‘jaunty’. All of these rely on cultural expectations and assumptions and only ‘work’ in the moment and for the listener if these are shared.

¹⁶ To illustrate this idea of timbre, resonance and the taking place of the self Nancy suggests that the subject could be considered something like a ‘diapason’ (i.e. a tonal grouping of large organ pipes, e.g. those sounding out a main chord or an octave) that expresses a specific resonance/timbre each time they sound together: “...a diapason-subject. (The subject a diapason? Each subject a differently tuned diapason? Tuned to self – but without a known frequency?)” (Nancy, 2007, p. 16-17).

Nancy's account clearly takes us beyond a model of communication as conduit or transmission of information. Nancy presents communication as the 'sharing of a self as it takes place', i.e. a collusive, contagious, shared co-emergence of a subject in its becoming in resonance with others, differentiated in each occasion by their unique timbre. Expressed as an 'unfolding, a dance, a resonance', this is a notion of communication that integrates an idea of synchronous, processual, intra-active, contagious, unfolding of co-constituting subjects, sharing in their becoming. This is the concept of communication at the heart of cultures of listening, and we argue in the remainder of this paper that it offers a new understanding of problems in communication during child protection practices.

Language, Sense and the Sonorous

It is important to appreciate what Nancy's tonal ontology means for the relationship between language and the sonorous. His tonal ontology implies an unusual proximity, or overlap even, of sound with sense, sign and language. As we said, in his approach there is no 'essence' of sound as the pure, independent datum that meets the ear to be further processed as signs/language. But for Nancy sound is co-emergent with sense/self; it is characterized by the dynamics of reference (renvoi). Similar to that, he posits that sense, sign and language all consist of references (renvois), or more precisely, they all consist of the event of referring. This means both language and sound are equally made of resonance, which in turn is characterized by methexis, i.e. the dynamic of interpenetration, participation, sharing, and contagion taking place between elements, between instants of time, as well as between the inside and the outside. As a result, as Siisiäinen (2017, p. 24) puts it succinctly, neither sound nor language can be objectified, they cannot be put in front of a subject, but listening itself is an event where the

listener is carried away into the methexic movement and starts to resonate along with the resonance of sound and language. The same applies to writing and sound, which Nancy considers to be in alliance, i.e. complicit with another, rather than in opposition, because “to write is nothing other than to make sense resonate beyond signification, or beyond itself. It is to vocalize a sense that claimed, for classical thought, to rest deaf and mute...” (Nancy, 2002, as quoted in Siisiäinen, 2017, p. 24). This means in the occasion of writing sense is made to resonate through words and beyond their meaning, i.e. letting them speak and reverberate where classical thought assumes them to be static signifiers that ‘rest deaf and mute’ irrespective of the occasion of their invocation in writing, i.e. their timbre.

It is worth noting that Nancy’s own tone and use of language may appear floaty, pretty, even circular at times (at least this is the impression we get from the English translation). This is in keeping with the processual nature of what he is capturing/expressing conceptually. Nancy is exploring emergent/synchronous phenomena via the apparently linear means of written language, while simultaneously alerting us to the resonant expressive dynamics of language itself (just as we experience it). This makes his propositions more akin to reverberating echoes than to statements (wherein sense would ‘rest deaf and mute’). But we are aware that to some readers Nancy’s language might suggest a sense of a decontextualized, ‘nothing matters’ attitude; one in fact reminiscent of the non-committal and experimental concepts we critically hinted at in some work around affect (e.g. Massumi, 1995). Yet, as we show in more detail, Nancy’s theorization of listening supports the concept of cultures of listening. Further, Nancy’s theorization of listening offers a new perspective on communication in the complex and high stakes context of child protection practice. Following Nancy we can for example think of a child talking to a social worker about the experience of being sexually exploited not as giving a statement, or as giving

evidence, but as occasioning a semiotic echo that reverberates well beyond the specific instant of speaking-listening, ricocheting in ever different, overlapping, resonant and dissonant ways, depending on what personal, professional or contextual sense making structures it bounces off. It is clear then why what is said is not so much a 'piece of information' to be decoded and passed on correctly, but something that is dynamic by default. What is said carries ambiguity and uncertainty. It cannot easily be pinned down and controlled, but will reverberate through the various legal- social work and family cultures of listening in an unpredictable manner. This listening can be like standing next to someone at the top of a church's bell tower when they suddenly strike the large bell: it can be all enveloping, disorienting and resonant, physically and semiotically, for all those involved. Captured this way, it is clear why the child or the social worker cannot easily control or disambiguate into a stable piece of information that warrants specific future actions, what is really the ebb and flow of a polysemic echo. Yet the expectation that this should be done weighs heavily on them.

Nancy's language, and through it his theoretical framework, offer a more dynamic, nuanced, and less individualized, mechanistic and polarized way of grasping what constitutes listening in child protection practice. However, it has the limitation that it does not provide a clear sense of how specific contextual and power dynamics operate within these methexic dynamics. We therefore turn to the work of Francois Bonnet (2016) to explicate the relationship between the sonorous, the audible, the auditor and listening in relation to discursive power. This brings another shift in tone.

Listening and the Discursive

Bonnet (2016) differentiates the sonorous from the audible, which he states is generated through listening, i.e. the audible is sound that is listened to, read, communicated. Still, like Nancy, Bonnet does not postulate an essence of sound independent of listening. Bonnet uses the term ‘sonorous’ to indicate something that is subsisting within, yet exceeded by, the audible. While broadly in line with Nancy, this conceptual distinction between the audible and the sonorous allows Bonnet to trace in more detail the workings of desire, power and discourse as expressed in listening.

Bonnet (2016) criticizes Nancy’s concept of the resonant self for the apparent absence of context/discursive power. The resonant self, Bonnet argues, appears to emerge from the pure dynamic of turning outwards (to the given-to-be-heard) and inwards (as being-listening), implying a decontextualized, de-socialised subject devoid of history or future. Still, Bonnet underlines the importance of what he calls ‘Nancy’s pure stance of an auditor zero’, because it displays a “listening that is stripped bare, abstract, a simple thread stretched out between an auditor and that which his or her perception intends.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 77). Bonnet (2016) suggests that herein Nancy shows the ear to be a liminal organ at the pivot point of the inside/outside that enables intersubjective rapport. Importantly, this pure stance of the auditor’s intending towards her object, Bonnet argues, alerts us to the role of desire and overvaluation; it reminds us that the audible “tells us things, evokes, and makes us feel something beyond the sonorous” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 80). Bonnet calls this a “listening drive” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 145), a “pure tension towards an audible” and highlights that ultimately

“...the object of listening, the audible, [...] [exceeds] the sonorous in so far as it overvalues it, is itself sound overvalued, embellished with values and powers of

evocation that it does not possess, but which are lent to it precisely when it is constituted as an object.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 163).

The evocativeness of the audible feeding the listening drive is important because it defines in more detail the relationship between the audible and the sonorous, and offers an insight into the discursive powers at work.

“Sound as overvalued sensible form, is a vehicle, a bearer of sense that aggregates around regimes of discourse, embedding itself in them. Overvaluation is nothing other than that ‘driving principle’ that ushers the sonorous into the audible, a kinetic principle that drives the sensible into discourse.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 164)¹⁷

With this expansion, Bonnet offers an enriched description of Nancy’s methexic movement as not so much a pure, abstract dynamic, but as part of the continuous pulse, or ebb and flow, between desire as funneled through the evocative nature of the audible, and the ordering powers of discourse.

In this context, Bonnet suggests a reversal of Nancy’s stance that ‘the sonorous... outweighs form’ (as quoted earlier). When focusing on discourse, Bonnet finds, form outweighs the sonorous. Bonnet argues that it is form, i.e. the power of language, “...that, through listening, outweighs the sonorous, drawing it toward the audible” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 319) while not dissolving it. So while sound/the sonorous is always fugitive, it is through the trace it leaves via listening that it is made to speak. The audible then is the trace that the sonorous leaves in discourse.

“In this sense listening is a writing of the audible onto sound, like a sort of palimpsest.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 319).

¹⁷ “Listening in so far as it is driven by the desiring activity of the auditor, is, like any enterprise of overvaluation, subject to tensions that push it into a crest line where sensible manifestations and mental productions can no longer be distinguished from another. And so when audition suffers the turbulence of desiring tensions, it becomes liable to produce the very object of its listening.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 166)

This is why the sonorous always escapes. It cannot itself be grasped or communicated, and it is only through the trace the sonorous leaves via listening that it is made to speak (and thus made permanent).

“The only sound that can speak is that targeted by listening. It is listening that makes sound speak. [...] it is listening itself that establishes sound within discursive power.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 139).

In this sense listening can be seen as the capture of sound within discourse, as this is where it becomes stabilized. However, Bonnet outlines further, that where dogmatic discourses are involved this stabilization can take extreme forms, turning into validation and verification. Taking a Foucauldian perspective Bonnet (2016) reminds us that listening does not just proceed via anchoring, fixation, objectivation, but listening turns to discourse to go further; discourse is a means through which the structures of objectivation operate.

“In this way discourse – as a structure applied to sounds and listening -- thus becomes an instrument for the evaluation, validation and legitimation of auditory perception.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 202)

Where this goes too far, Bonnet observes, the methexic movement of listening becomes unidirectionally locked in a motion of validation and verification.

“when listening becomes nothing more than verification, decoding, and reading, it loses its primal function of hearing everything that presents itself, everything that appears, and no longer captures anything except that which speaks to it. Subjected to discursive bombardments, to the extent that the discourses that make use of it are dogmatic. Herein listening becomes a function of authority.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 204).

Bonnet herein re-anchors Nancy's resonant self within its lived history and context, where the evocativeness of the audible drives a listening infused by powerful and sometimes dogmatic discursive dynamics, i.e. 'discursive bombardments', fuelled by and permeating the cultural, political, economic and social landscape.

Cultures of Listening in Child Protection: The Rotherham Case

Our concept of Cultures of Listening captures such circumstances where listening has become a function of authority; i.e. a series of 'discursive bombardments' that reduce listening, or modes of listening, to a unidirectional form of validation, rather than the multidirectional mode of exploration it could be. In a constraining context, listening serves to assert what the dominant discourses allow to speak in listening to guarantee the reproduction of dogmatic values. Herein the concept of cultures of listening also helps to distinguish and characterize authority driven cultures of listening from others. We would like to illustrate these points by returning to the specific issue of child protection practice in the UK, for a more detailed look at the Rotherham case.

The Rotherham case has been described as the biggest child protection scandal in UK history. A report by Jay (2014) found that between 1997 and 2013 a total of 1400 children and young people (all female and most white British) had been victim of sexual exploitation at the hands of an organised group of 19 men (most of them British Pakistani)¹⁸ and 2 women (all convicted in 2016/17). Even though some of the victims had repeatedly reported their exploitation to police or social services, information had not been passed on, the claims were not taken seriously, or not investigated appropriately. In some cases the young women had

¹⁸ We report on the ethnicity of those involved in the case only because ethnicity became an issue for stakeholders as the case unfolded.

themselves been classed as offenders for antisocial behavior or prostitution, and were prosecuted on this basis.¹⁹ These are very complex cases we cannot discuss in detail here, but in the aftermath issues to do with class, race and gender were highlighted. It was for example noted that there had been fear amongst officials that investigating the cases could lead to allegations of racism as all the key suspects had a minority ethnic background. It was feared that official action could damage community relations. Further the Jay report (Jay, 2014) noted that sexist attitudes towards the victims on the part of professionals had meant the complaints were not taken seriously, as the victims were blamed for- or seen as complicit in their victimization; ultimately some professionals reported that they had been told by superiors it was not a priority to investigate allegations of sexual exploitation (see Jay, 2014).

What happened in these cases reminds us that victims' reports are not static, immutable, singular statements but are more like echoes (in Nancy's sense), reverberating periodically (always approaching and then fading) through the various agencies involved (e.g. legal, social work, family). Thus as such they do not automatically constitute clear effective evidence. Underlining this, in the Rotherham case we see that apparently clear evidence/reports of sexual exploitation (i.e. explicit complaints that should raise suspicions) were not acted upon in the way we might expect (i.e. by authorities actively passing on and investigating the validity of such reports). This indicates that even though evidence in such cases consists largely of what children/young people report, i.e. their voice, this evidence does not in and of itself have a specific effect. To become effective, their evidence needs to be acted upon by the professionals listening. In these cases what the professionals (social workers, police) were able to hear, i.e. what was allowed 'to speak in their listening' (Barthes, 1986), did not result in further

¹⁹ For example one young woman damaged her abuser's car in retribution, and in another case the police treated a victim as an offender as they assumed her evident association with the men was her choice and thus constituted prostitution.

investigations or support for the young women. This was because the dominant discourses that shaped these professionals' listening (to do with race, gender and class vis a vis the fear of personal public blame and exposure), made inaction or treating the young women as offenders the most certain, indeed, the safest way of understanding them within the relevant contexts. This means that those receiving the evidence were caught up within cultures of listening, i.e. exposed to what Bonnet termed 'discursive bombardments', that allowed only very specific things to speak in their listening, meaning they were left decoding and verifying the dogmatic values of such dominant discourses. Let us unpack the nature of these cultures of listening in more detail.

The practitioners' cultures of listening were shaped by a number of dominant discourses, including: *First*, there were the discourses related to the practitioners' and council leaders' precarious relationship to issues of race and ethnicity, which for them meant protecting community relations so that the fear of being seen as racist was more pressing than investigating allegations of sexual exploitation. *Second*, there were those around a complex gendered perspective of female teenage victims of sexual exploitation, meaning that the young women who reported being victims of sexual exploitation, were predominantly considered as agentic, as trouble-makers, and thus as making choices about their sexuality. As a result the young women did not fit neatly with the taken for granted ideas of victims of sexual exploitation, i.e. young, pre-sexual, dependent, helpless, innocent, compliant (Motzkau, 2020), and it was easier to encounter, and listen to them as offenders than as victims. A *third* point is that the exploitation happened against the backdrop of those broader discourses of blame and failure that put practitioners on a defensive footing as they deal with decreasing resources and increasing case loads in a context of intense public and political scrutiny where individual scapegoating and criminalization of professional failure are prevalent.

Clearly this is not a comprehensive list of the meanings and discourses that constitute the specific ‘discursive bombardment’ any one professional may have been exposed to when listening to the victims in this case. Still, this brief summary gives an indication of the multiplicity and complexity of the societal and political, but also personal and experiential discourses and considerations, that may implicitly and explicitly have reverberated and fed into the culture of listening that formed around and guided each practitioner as they listened to the young women’s allegations. Such cultures of listening shaped the results of practitioners’ listening and what they felt able to do with it as a result.

Looking at this from the perspective of cultures of listening we can note and move beyond suspicions of individual incompetence (which may be relevant but are far from the whole story), and attend to the context in which listening takes place. The above discussion shows how listening is always a ‘doing’ that carries risk as it means managing a multiplicity of reverberations. Understanding ‘listening as doing’ means we can see that listening contains, and is part of, the active use of personal and, in this case, professional discretion and curiosity within a present context. The cultures of listening approach alerts us of the need to include actions emergent from the listening (in this case investigative ones, but also communication between individual professionals and agencies). Once we consider listening as a ‘doing’ in this way (a doing framed by specific cultures of listening), the Rotherham case serves as a stark reminder that this listening comes at a distinctly personal cost for those engaged in it: it is time consuming for individual professionals and inevitably raises the prospect of future risk and effort, personally and professionally. Further, the context this happens in, and the way professionals understand their own position within it, steers their listening and understanding of risk.

We can then see listening as a finite resource each practitioner will have to manage carefully and in context. Context in this case means for example that they are not just faced with dwindling resources and ever growing case loads, their own implicit/explicit considerations around race and gender, as well as the reputation of their council and services; but they also operate amongst the colliding discourses underlying child protection (urgency to protect the innocent versus doubt about children's ability to report experiences accurately, which is even more ambiguous where pubescent girls are concerned who may appear to be, or are, sexually mature) (Motzkau, 2010; 2020). In addition to that practitioners face the narrative of blame and failure that traditionally informs policy developments meant to improve their work and that has in the past been blamed for compelling workers to practice defensively (Motzkau, 2007). In the context of this problematic culture of listening, inaction, or treating a victim solely based on their easy classification as a young offender (a route which involves less ambiguous institutional operations), appears as a safe, defensive, response.²⁰ Motzkau & Clinch (2017) offer a more detailed analysis of police officers' paradoxical, or indeed liminal positioning vis a vis child witnesses, and the cost at which they manage the resulting ambiguity.

²⁰ The decade running up to 2012 was characterized by rising fears about false allegations of abuse and children's suggestibility and inability to be reliable witnesses. This all changed completely with the case of Jimmy Savile (a prolific child abuser who was never prosecuted) becoming public in 2012. What followed in 2014 was a case (Operation Midland) that grew similarly notorious to the Rotherham case, for the incompetence of police and other services to investigate cases of child exploitation, but here it was ultimately found there had been no victims at all. Here we can observe the same effects of defensive practice but with a diametrically opposed outcome. 'Operation Midland' started in 2014, and in the wake of the Rotherham case and on the back of the Jimmy Savile scandal which also surfaced in 2012 both revealing the embarrassing truth of serious sexual offences being left uninvestigated for decades. Jimmy Savile was a DJ, children's entertainer and TV presenter who came to fame during the 70's as a TV DJ, and presenting shows like "Jim'll Fix It" a program where he granted children wishes, and as a very successful fund raiser for children's hospitals. Celebrated as a 'national treasure' throughout his lifetime it was only after his death in 2012, and despite rumors circulating for decades, that he was revealed to have been one of the UK's most systematic and prolific child sex offenders. This case was another example of sexual exploitation having gone unchallenged despite complaints having surfaced frequently. Operation Midland started in the wake of the Jimmy Savile scandal and the Rotherham case in 2014. It investigated allegations made by an adult witness the police declared early on they considered credible, who claimed that as a child he had been a victim of a pedophile ring operating in central government political circles in London. Based on his evidence allegations of serious sexual abuse and three cases of child murder were leveled against high profile politicians including former MPs and former prime minister Edward Heath. The investigation was pursued aggressively raiding suspects' homes with what later turned out to be invalid search warrants and failing to thoroughly check the key witness' background and evidence. No reliable evidence emerged and the investigation had to be wound down in 2017, with police in serious trouble for their conduct. It turned out that their key witness was himself a child sex offender who had previously attempted to fraudulently pass himself off as a victim of Jimmy Savile. He was convicted to 33 years in prison in 2019. As a result child protection professionals suspect child victims of sexual abuse are now less willing to come forward as they are met with more suspicion again. The cultures of listening swing both ways.

In order to address this crisis of listening in UK child protection practice, we should not focus on the potential lack of training, misconduct or obtuseness of individual practitioners, attending to cultures of listening means to focus in detail on the ‘discursive bombardments’ (Bonnet, 2016) that shape their everyday listening experiences and practices. But how to address this, how to transform such practices? Returning to Bonnet, we can see that this is an example of listening becoming a function of authority: here listening has lost its “primal function of hearing everything that presents itself” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 204) and captures only “that which speaks to it. Subjected to discursive bombardments, to the extent that the discourses that make use of it are dogmatic.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 204). In this distinction, Bonnet is hinting at an alternative process linked to the primal function of listening. His key contribution here is to highlight an opening for transformative and even emancipatory dynamics that remains even under dogmatic circumstances: the nature of the sonorous means that it, by definition, escapes inscription into the discursive as it subsists within such dogmatic cultures of listening (a line of flight as Deleuze & Guattari, 1990, would have it). So despite being incommunicable from one auditor to another, the sonorous always subsists within sensible experience and plays the role of an organ of communication with the world. Yet it is not figural but fugitive. It is not an object but objectile (Deleuze, 1993); it is what Nancy termed *timbre*, and *timbre* provides an opening for transformative or emancipatory dynamics.

“It is without mark. It makes no territory but twists territory, contests it, refuses to condone its perennality” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 323).

It does this because, at heart, listening is experience in process and not a confirmatory mode of perception.

“Listening is the experience of sound appearing; of its appearing and its diaphaneity. It is not an anticipation of signs that will come to confirm a world view and to draw jouissance, order and authority from it.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 332).

So by default the sonorous continually unsettles the audible, permanently infecting it with uncertainty. And while this is not in and of itself an emancipatory or transformative dynamic, it provides entry points for such dynamics to operate. Clearly, these can be ignored or dismissed, but they need not be if they are carefully explored as part of an analysis of cultures of listening.

Like Nancy, Bonnet concludes that there is no essence of sound and therefore no ontology of sound. As we have illustrated earlier, it is precisely the search for-, or assumption of such a static essence, or truth, of sound vis a vis the subject (i.e. the problematic ontological split between ‘objective matter’ and ‘subjective experience’), that ties listening into the reproduction of discursive authority and turns listening into a tool for validation and a function of authority. When appreciating this, we can imagine a listening that is no longer compelled to verify or validate a discourse, but one that instead confronts the imperceptible, and becomes the auxiliary of an experience of uncertainty rather than the function of legitimation. It is in the same vein that Barthes (1985) demanded listening should ‘release’ and in this sense ‘open up to panic’.

“...free listening is essentially a listening which circulates, which permutates which disaggregates, by its mobility the fixed network of the roles of speech: it is not possible to imagine a free society, if we agree in advance to preserve within it the old modes of listening: those of the believer, the disciple and the patient.” (Barthes, 1985, p. 259).

Bonnet (2016) is confident that those cultures of listening firmly tied into the modern territory are coming to an end; and that what he calls the ‘open ear’, or what Barthes (1985) called ‘free listening’, will soon assert itself.

“There can be no doubt: the listening that understands, reads, hears, the listening that explains itself and explains the world has had its day.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 332).

To enable this Bonnet suggests that the ear must come back to what it is: the privileged organ of fear (as Nietzsche put it). “To have open ears is to open oneself up to experiences and experiments, to uncertainties.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 332). Crucially, this type of listening aims not at an imagined essence of sound or true meaning, but at the interstices, the previously unheard, that which escapes- or is obscured by dominant cultures listening.²¹ This is the emancipatory/transformational vision at the heart of Bonnet’s book (2016).

Conclusion and Outlook: Listening with Care and Dark Listening

Let us sum up what we take from Nancy and Bonnet for our own argument. The methexic, or dichotic/liminal dynamic of listening as we described it earlier, that seems to surge towards polar opposites at once (as the sharing of an inside/outside, division and participation, de-connection and contagion) can be characterized as follows. On the one hand, the audible is in itself evocative and makes us anticipate things beyond the sonorous; there are no ears innocent of history, context and expectation, and we cannot will away history, context and expectation or ‘shake them off’; desire and overvaluation are the kinetic principles that drive the sonorous into the audible, or indeed the sensible into discourse, as here it becomes subject to the discursive power

²¹ “But neither does this other listening aim at a pure nature of the sonorous or at sound itself. It releases the interstices within which sound is unmarked, where it goes off the map, assumes its character as a phantom island, advocates for a territorial limit-existence, a veritable temporary autonomous zone.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 332).

which defines what is allowed to speak in listening. On the other hand the sonorous itself always exceeds the audible, escapes attempts at discursive coding, as it cannot be fixed or inscribed into discourse; it thus remains at large, as the ineffable that by default and continuously destabilizes the audible, surprises us, makes the audible uncertain and threatens its disappearance. Thereby it undermines its inscription into discourse, and presents at once as a confirmation- and a crisis/dissolution of the self. Barthes captures this liminal character of listening when he says that:

“...[listening] is finally like a little theatre on whose stage those two modern deities, one bad and one good, confront each other: power and desire.” (Barthes, 1985, p. 260).

The unique, emergent, dynamic expressions of what happens on the stage of this ‘theatre’ is what Nancy calls *timbre*. As listening is the simultaneous movement of both of these dynamics, Nancy, but more clearly so Bonnet and Barthes, see a way for listening to be restored to its open/free modes, engendering emancipatory dynamics. Yet, how exactly we are to embrace this open- or free listening, remains vague in their work, and this is a problem.

Considering Bonnet’s idea of ‘free listening’, i.e. listening freed of the “need to understand, read, explain etc” (Bonnet, 2016), in the context of child protection practice, we find it is at risk of re-iterating the abstract yet vaguely swirling conceptual invocations Stenner (2017) criticized in Massumi’s (1995) work on affect. Indeed, when thinking about Bonnet’s ‘open ear’ or indeed Lipari’s ‘ethics of attunement’ (Lipari, 2014) in the context of the challenges faced by child protection workers, ‘experimental’ listening and ‘opening oneself up to experiences and experiments’ (as Bonnet suggests), or listening freed of expectations and prejudice (as Lipari encourages), seems unrealistic or even naïve. The reverberating echoes and the dynamic

uncertainty loom large in practitioners' work and the powerful cultures that frame their listening are not only hard to shake off, but produce significant risk for anyone attempting to free themselves of that context. Bonnet does appreciate the risk inherent in the 'open ear' (he associates the concomitant uncertainty with fear or panic), and Lipari (2014) does mention how onerous and difficult the complete self-disavowal demanded by such personal self-transformation can be. But both authors seem to imply that this is a matter of personal choice and to be embarked on individually. Taken at face value those approaches offer little consideration for the emergent relational, cultural, political context any one listener may bring and encounter (e.g. the specific political and societal contexts child protection workers are operating within and are listening through at any one point in time), and the personal, material and affective risks and stakes faced by those involved in this kind of listening. As the contexts and these risks and stakes cannot be removed, mitigated, jettisoned at will, or even fully anticipated, they need to be considered explicitly and proactively when analyzing, challenging or 'opening up' existing cultures of listening. In the same vein we argue that this task needs to be faced collaboratively, not putting the onus on individuals' self-transformation (Lipari, 2014) or their readiness/ability to open your ear and actually listen (Bonnet, 2016), but offering interventions practitioners can engage in collaboratively.²²

To reframe such an idea pragmatically and in the spirit of Cultures of Listening, we suggest that to listen 'freely' is to listen relationally, and within a process register, to listen intra-actionally (cognizant of the dynamic human non-human relations, matterings and boundaries emergent through listening), while trying to be aware of one's own and others' cultures of listening; as well as considering the structural/discursive risks and stakes that position and frame

²² While particularly Lipari's (2014) notion of an ethics of attunement is inspiring, we feel there is a risk that the way it is formulated inadvertently suggests a de-contextualised form of naïve empiricism, where the authentic and 'open' individual, having freed themselves of all prejudice and expectation, will gain direct access to the generic truth of others' suffering. This is just as unhelpful as Bonnet suggesting we could 'experimentally' open our ear to 'actually listen'.

us as we relate. We suggest the best way to frame this mode of risky and attentive relating is the notion of care developed by Puig de la Bellacasa (2014) drawing on Haraway, (1997) and Stengers, (2008). This means we suggest ‘listening with care’ as an exacting, risky practice which opens us up to allow what we are interested in to move us in unpredictable ways. The notion of listening with care is developed in more detail elsewhere by Motzkau (in preparation). Here we argue that mobilizing this specific notion of care in relation to listening offers a clear way to capture and appreciate the intra-actional nature of listening, but also the material, relational and affective constraints and implications that surround listening practices and those involved in them; it adds a backdrop of relational/processual ethics that is alive to the specific risks and costs of being part of such listening practices, taking an interest in them, or aiming at transforming them, while appreciating the inevitable conflictedness and ambiguity of the motives and expectations emergent as part of such processes. Ultimately it means to appreciate the need to persist while engaging collaboratively with issues as they emerge and to ‘stay with the troubles’ (Haraway, 2016; Stengers, 2008) even when a solution, an ideal outcome to aim for, does not become evident. Crucially, the idea of ‘listening with care’ implies that this must not be left to those who find themselves captive of dogmatic cultures of listening, but that they need support and collaborators to create interventions that open up spaces for transformation. This notion of ‘listening with care’ is the driving principle at the heart of the emancipatory method of ‘dark listening’ Motzkau is developing, and that aims to realize the emancipatory potential inherent in the concept of cultures of listening. There is no room to elaborate on this here, but we want to conclude with a brief outlook on this method.

The method of dark listening is inspired by the British artist and poet Lavinia Greenlaw, who presents the notion of dark listening as part of her artwork *Audio Obscura* (Greenlaw,

2011).²³ Greenlaw defines dark listening as ‘listening to what you cannot hear’. The idea behind her work is an “exploration of the point at which we start to make sense of things; an attempt to arrest and investigate that moment, to separate its components and test their effects” (ibid, 2011, p. 7). Motzkau (in preparation) shows that artificially suspending, arresting, our motions of sense making during listening, can alert us to those motions, and thus to the cultures of listening they are embedded within. It can thereby open up those cultures of listening to scrutiny. The method of dark listening (piloted by Motzkau in 2016/2017) proceeds by asking research participants (e.g. social workers/police officers) to self-record audio diaries, reporting in short sound bites about their day-to-day experience of listening to children/families/colleagues. Selected excerpts from all diaries are then turned into anonymized audio-collages. Anonymization is achieved by having actors speak and re-record the chosen data excerpts. In collaboration with a sound artist, these are then used to create audio collages along the lines of those presented as part of Greenlaw’s *Audio Obscura* (Greenlaw, 2011). These audio collages form the key focus of listening workshops attended by all participants who come together and discuss the collages.

In the spirit of *Audio Obscura* and dark listening this participatory method is designed to allow workers to collaboratively, yet anonymously, review and reflect on selected aspects of their own and others’ data. Ultimately the aim of these listening workshops is to work with practitioners in the field (e.g. social workers and police officers) to collaboratively develop and share new ways of exploring what they do with what they hear when listening to families, children and colleagues. Further it is to explore the experience of listening while acknowledging the personal risk and effort involved in listening in a context where the stakes for front line workers in child protection are ever increasing, while working conditions have become more and more precarious

²³ To learn more about this artwork, please follow this link <https://soundcloud.com/artangel-2/lavinia-greenlaw-audio-obscura> [last accessed November 2019]

(due to austerity and increased case loads). The aim of ‘dark listening’ is to collaboratively explore and challenge problematic cultures of listening to find ways to transform troubled listening practices.

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