Thinking about thinking: the diversity of people's inner worlds

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I was recently asked to do two seemingly straightforward tasks that I completely failed at. The first was to draw an image from memory as part of an icebreaker, the second was to visualise items on a familiar journey as a memory aid. The reason I never stood a chance with either is that I have aphantasia. Simply put, aphantasia is ‘mind blindness’ or having little/no mind’s eye: I couldn’t draw something from memory because I have virtually no visual memory; and I couldn’t use the memory aid strategy because I couldn’t visualise a journey. Only recently aware of my aphantasia, I’ve now been able to understand why I have difficulties with facial recognition, why I don’t enjoy books with lengthy visual descriptions, and why I photograph so much of what I do. But it also made me reflect on what assumptions I may have made about other people’s inner worlds and abilities without knowing it. This article considers two common assumptions that people may make about other people’s thinking: firstly, that we all visualise to the same degree, and secondly, that we all have similar internal monologues, before considering – as a former probation practitioner and lecturer on the PQIP programme - what this may mean for probation work.

The diversity of the ‘mind’s eye’

Aphantasia has been recognised as a phenomenon since at least the 1880s, though it was only named and subsequently embraced by researchers around 2015 (Clemens, 2018). Some people are born with aphantasia but it has also been observed following strokes or brain lesions, and may sometimes have psychological origins, though this is more speculative (Thorudottir et al, 2020; Zeman, Dewar, & Della Sala, 2015). The degree to which people can form mental images varies widely and may also differ depending on whether their eyes are open or closed. With my eyes open for example, I can sense visual information is in my head somewhere and will be able to recall some facts about it, but I only have elusive shadows or smudges on the periphery of my mind’s eye. With my eyes shut I see nothing but a kaleidoscope of blackness and phosphenes. To reflect on your own mind’s eye, you could think of a close relative or friend and consider how clearly you can imagine the exact contour of their face, head, shoulders, and body using the following scale (Marks, 2020):

1. Perfectly clear and as vivid as normal vision
2. Clear and reasonably vivid
3. Moderately clear and vivid
4. Vague and dim
5. No image at all, you only “know” that you are thinking of an object
People with aphantasia seem to get on with life well enough. However, there is an increasing body of literature indicating that their aphantasia may impact them in a range of ways. For example, it seems to influence how they learn, their ability to envisage future scenarios, their autobiographical memory, and possibly how they experience emotion and trauma (Watkins, 2018; Thomson, 2016; Dawes, Keogh, Andrillon, & Pearson, 2020; Zeman, Dewar, & Della Sala, 2015; Wicken, Keogh, & Pearson, 2021; Aphantasia Network, 2019). All these issues are of particular relevance to the probation context.

The diversity of internal monologues

Although in possession of a highly limited mind’s eye, I am the owner of a frustratingly active inner voice. Inner speech is also more varied than many might assume though, and people differ in both the frequency of inner speaking, with some people having no inner voice at all, and in the nature and phenomenological experience of the voice (Hurlburt, Heavey, & Kelsey, 2013). For me, my inner speech sounds like my own voice, only without actual sound, it’s mostly located in the front of my head, seems pretty persistent, and feels like a mix of speech over which I both do and do not have control. Hurlburt, Heavey, & Kelsey (2013) however observe that some people experience the speech as taking place generally in their heads, some in a specific part of their head, some in their chests, and some are just aware it is happening but have no clear sense of where. They further note that some people are aware they are the ‘creator of the words’, whereas some experience the speech as ‘just happening’, and that while most people seem to have their own voice most of the time, there can be anomalies such as experiencing their own voice but ‘a bit different’ or experiencing someone else’s voice entirely. People may also experience the speed of their inner speech differently compared to ‘real life’ speech, for example their inner speech being much faster.

What might this mean for probation work?

There are a few elements of probation work where these issues might most obviously pose challenges. Some cognitive-behavioural work could be especially challenging. Using visualisation as a relaxation technique and answering the ‘simple’ question of “What were you thinking...?” may pose real difficulties for people with aphantasia or those without an inner voice. While some people can mentally enjoy immersive, technicolour beaches and meadows, others are stuck in soupy greyness or nothingness; and while some are very aware of their inner voice, others are living in relative peace. More future-focused work could also present challenges: asking someone to imagine the possible consequences of their actions, to mentally rehearse possible events, or to visualise where they see themselves in 5 years’ time are all likely difficult for someone with aphantasia. I also know colleagues who have been frustrated by someone’s ‘inability’ to articulate their inner voice, and I can easily imagine the reaction of a group facilitator if someone on a programme revealed that their inner voice seemingly had a personality of its own.

Someone’s account of an incident may also seem problematic, perhaps because they would have little or no visual memory for it or because they would struggle to articulate their thinking at the time. In the probation context, this may risk them being labelled evasive or unhelpful. They could also struggle with work such as life mapping, perhaps knowing basic facts about themselves (semantic memory), but struggling with detailed, event-specific episodic memories.
Our visual and verbal inner worlds are notably linked to our sense of self. Our inner dialogue is often seen as “what makes us aware of our own existence: ‘I’m alive and well; I’m a unique person with an identity; I have goals, aspirations, and values”’ (Morin, 2003, cited in Hurlburt, Heavey, & Kelsey, 2013). Some have also questioned whether aphantasia detracts from the value a person can take from life and limits their sense of self (Fox-Muraton, 2021). For example, people with aphantasia cannot ‘relive’ their memories in the same way as others, which raises the possibility that they will feel less connected to their lives and other people. They also may not see the point of doing rewarding activities given that once the event has ended, it essentially vanishes for that person. Again, this raises important implications for identity- or goal-based work.

Concluding thoughts

The research on these individual variations is still in its infancy, so the extent and nature of their impact, positive or negative, and how to best work with people affected, remains unclear. Perhaps for now we should see these issues as the tip of the iceberg and use them to serve as a reminder that avoiding assumption should be a part of daily life. This isn’t always easy, but trying to keep an open mind and listening, learning, and asking questions are likely all important in working effectively with people who may be experiencing similar issues to the ones described above.

References


Thomson, H. (2016). This man had no idea his mind is ‘blind’ until last week. Accessed: This man had no idea his mind is ‘blind’ until last week - BBC Future


