Hearing Voices in San Mateo, Accra and Chennai

Psychiatric scientists often assume that the hallucinations associated with schizophrenia are uninteresting byproducts of an organic illness. This talk presents data from interviews with 20 patients each in San Mateo, Accra, and Chennai which suggest that in fact, there are significant differences between the voices associated with schizophrenia in different cultural settings. These basic psychiatric symptoms appear to be shaped by local theories of mind. While the term ‘theory of mind’ has a specific meaning in developmental psychology, anthropologists have begun to question whether ideas about minds are in fact universal, or whether they are local ideas rich enough to be considered ‘theories.’ This research suggests that indeed there are such local theories, and that they are powerful enough to shape perceptual experience in schizophrenia.

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