The sociocultural construction of reality and psychosis

In a paper from 1984, the German psychiatrist Wolfgang Blankenburg argues that "cross-cultural psychiatry concerns the relationship between the intersubjective constitution of reality (within certain ethnic groups) and mental disorders. In a one-sided perspective, [...] the 'social construction of reality'". Despite Blankenburg being one of the luminaries of phenomenological psychopathology, this relationship that Blankenburg points to has not received much attention in phenomenological psychopathology.

In this talk, I will try to elucidate this relationship between sociocultural construction of reality and mental disorder—with a particular emphasis on psychotic experiences in schizophrenia. To do this, I will draw on recent work in (psychiatric) anthropology, especially research on cross-cultural voice hearing and religious experiences, which stresses the importance of the sociocultural background in relation to how certain atypical experiences are discerned and identified. In other words, the sociocultural background seems to influence the content, but also the very occurrence of experiences. Understanding this relationship between the sociocultural construction of reality and mental disorder may be crucial for clarifying the dissimilar trajectories of schizophrenia in different cultures, as well as the high incidence of psychosis among migrants. As such, understanding this relationship may be crucial for clinical practice.