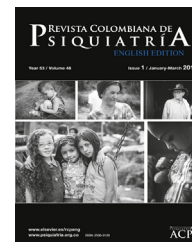




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## Original article

# Attributional biases in psychiatric patients, a religious, and a control group in the assessment of a hallucinatory experience: The “White Christmas Test”<sup>☆</sup>

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 1 October 2016

Accepted 29 January 2017

Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Hallucination

White Christmas Test

Schizotypy

Religion

Unusual perceptual experiences

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to evaluate the auditory hallucinatory experience in a clinical sample of patients with psychiatric symptoms (e.g. Schizophrenia), a religious group (e.g. Christians) and a “control” group (with no mental disorder and non-religious). The sample consisted of individuals of both sexes. The patient sample was recruited in two psychiatric hospitals of Buenos Aires City, the religious from an evangelical cult, and people with no religious beliefs or previous psychiatric symptoms (control group). The Hallucinatory Experiences Questionnaire and the Oxford-Liverpool Inventory Feelings and Experiences were the measurement tools used. The White Christmas Test was also administered in order to assess the degree of vivid imagery hearing based on a version of signal detection paradigm in which the subjects think that they hear a song in the background of white noise. The results showed that patients showed greater attributional bias (compared with evangelicals and the control group), but the religious group also tended to show greater bias (although less) than the control group. In addition, patients tended to show greater schizotypal and hallucinatory experiences compared with the evangelicals and the control group, but surprisingly, the control group showed higher negative schizotypy than the religious group, which indicates that religious practices could help reduce the negative effects of schizotypy.

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DOI of original article: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rcp.2017.01.010>.

<sup>☆</sup> Please cite this article as: Parra A, Maschi G. Sesgo atribucional en pacientes psiquiátricos, religiosos y un grupo control en el juicio de la experiencia alucinatoria: la tarea del White Christmas test. Rev Colomb Psiquiat. 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rcp.2017.01.010>

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rcpeng.2018.03.003>

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## Sesgo atribucional en pacientes psiquiátricos, religiosos y un grupo control en el juicio de la experiencia alucinatoria: la tarea del *White Christmas test*

### R E S U M E N

#### Palabras clave:

Alucinación  
*White Christmas Test*  
 Esquizotipia  
 Religión  
 Experiencias perceptuales  
 inusuales

El objetivo de este estudio es evaluar la experiencia alucinatoria auditiva en una muestra clínica de pacientes con historial psiquiátrico (p. ej., esquizofrénicos), practicantes religiosos (p. ej., cristianos evangélicos devotos) y un grupo control (sin trastorno mental y no religiosos devotos). La muestra estuvo integrada por individuos de ambos sexos. La muestra de pacientes se reclutó en 2 hospitales psiquiátricos de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, un grupo de practicantes religiosos (cristianos devotos) en un culto evangélico y un grupo de control no religioso y carente de síntomas psiquiátricos previos. Se aplicó el Cuestionario de Experiencias Alucinatorias y el *Oxford-Liverpool Inventory Feelings and Experiences*, y luego se administró el *White Christmas Test*, que evalúa el grado de la imaginación auditiva vívida con base en una versión del paradigma de detección de señal, en que el sujeto cree escuchar un tema musical en el trasfondo de un ruido blanco. Los pacientes mostraron mayor sesgo atribucional que los evangélicos y el grupo control, pero además los religiosos también tendieron a mostrar mayor sesgo (aunque en menor grado) que el grupo control. Además, los pacientes tendieron a mostrar más esquizotipia y experiencias alucinatorias que los evangélicos y el grupo control, pero sorprendentemente el grupo control mostró mayor esquizotipia negativa que el grupo religioso, lo cual indica que las prácticas religiosas podrían contribuir a disminuir los efectos negativos de la esquizotipia.

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## Introduction

Hallucinations are known not only to occur in individuals with disorders, as dysfunctional perceptual experiences, but also in the general population. There are cases where people who have no disorder experience a kind of hallucination, for example, a mystical-type one. Most people assume that everyone has the ability to discriminate between thoughts and images, or the things we see and hear. However, we do not know a priori if the perceived events are internal and generated in our mind or external and generated by other agents apart from the person.<sup>1</sup> The process of discriminating between these two types of events is known as source monitoring and was studied by Johnson et al. in a series of experiments with a non-clinical population.<sup>2</sup> The work of these authors, which focused on the source of memories, shows that we use a variety of clues when we discriminate between the memory of thoughts and the memory of real events.<sup>3</sup>

For example, contextual time information and spatial location can help a person determine whether or not an event “really happened”, as can the sensory qualities of the memory, the vividness and the detail and complexity. In addition, people can make use of the memories of certain cognitive operations. For example, a person is more likely to recognise an evoked event as a self-generated idea if he/she can remember the cognitive effort involved in generating the idea. If a person remembers performing an act that goes against natural laws or conflicts with what he/she knows about the world, he/she will realise that what he/she remembers is probably a fantasy.<sup>1</sup>

If judgements in source monitoring are influenced by the inherent possibility of perceiving events, this explains the role of culture in the “shaping” of hallucinatory experiences. It is more likely that an individual whose environment accepts the existence of ghosts or values spiritual experiences will attribute reality to the image of a deceased relative, than another individual whose world is more materialistic and scientific. The impact of external stimuli on hallucinations can also be understood in terms of the source monitoring hypothesis. The ability to locate sounds was assessed using a type of test in which the participants, surrounded by screens, were asked to state the location of the experimenter’s voice. Patients with reactive schizophrenia who suffered from hallucinations had poorer skills in locating sounds in space than the control patients.<sup>1,4</sup>

Morrison et al.<sup>5</sup> argued that monitoring abnormalities in patients suffering from hallucinations could probably be better detected if source attributions were measured immediately, rather than measuring the attributions based on memories of the previously presented information. It was possible to achieve this using the methodology proposed by signal detection theory (SDT). SDT is a mathematical theory of perception that proposes that the detection of the external stimulus (or signal) is a function that depends on two factors; the first, perceptual sensitivity, which refers to the effectiveness of perceptual systems; the second, the partiality of the response, which refers to the individual criterion to decide whether a perceived event is a real stimulus or an internal noise. SDT proposes several methods to independently measure sensitivity and bias involving a series of tests in which an individual gives a value to a signal in a noisy background.

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