

Letter to the editor

Visual perception in schizophrenic patients

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Since the 1960's schizophrenic patients' sensitivity to non-verbal stimuli has been recognized and researched. These patients show difficulties in differentiating between what they "do" see and what they "should" see. It is possible to explain the sensitivity and restlessness that schizophrenics experience in regard to certain stimuli as related to life experiences and social conditioning or to more basic pathophysiological deficits. Indeed, R Cooper in 1960 demonstrated significant differences between schizophrenics and normals in objective measures of perception.

One of the robust parameters differentiating paranoid versus non-paranoid schizophrenics is the extent to which they scan the surrounding in search of stimuli (Silverman, 1964). His studies used a design wherein paranoid and non-paranoid were tested on a scan-control task. Briefly, the subjects had to adjust a circular patch of light to each of three handheld disks of varying sizes. Paranoid schizophrenics significantly used extensive scanning while the non-paranoid evidenced minimal

scanning. Further studies (McCormick and Broekem, 1978), demonstrated that paranoid schizophrenics underestimate the size of visual stimuli. We feel that these lines of investigation converge in a manner by which the extensive scanning produces a false decrease in the perceived size of the visual stimuli presented to the paranoid schizophrenics.

Recently, Aharonovich *et al* (1993) tested the hypothesis that hemispheric dysfunction varies between paranoid and non-paranoid schizophrenics. Their results were interpreted as indicating modality-specific (visual) associations of paranoid schizophrenia with left hemisphere dysfunction. However, the stimuli used to test the subjects did not take into account the body of evidence pointing towards the role of scanning and size estimation in such patients. It is to be seen whether the various studies focusing on visual perception in schizophrenics will yield a coherent theory. Until that time, design of experiments should not fail to take into account the parameters of scanning and size estimation in order for clearer interpretation of results.

Aharonovich E, Karny N, Nachson I. Visual field processing in paranoid and non-paranoid schizophrenics. *Eur Psychiatry* 1993;8:301-7

McCormick D, Broekem V. Size estimation, perceptual recognition and cardiac rate response in acute paranoid and non-paranoid schizophrenics. *J Abn Psychol* 1978;87:385-98

Silverman J. Scanning-control mechanism and cognitive filtering in paranoid and non-paranoid schizophrenia. *J Consult Psychol* 1964;28(5):385-93

* Correspondence and reprints.

Agenda

European psychiatry: a force for the future joint congress, London 7-12 July 1996

The 8th Congress of the Association of European Psychiatrists (AEP) will be held in London, 7-12 July 1996, and will be combined with the Annual Meeting of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. The AEP has increasingly become the main forum for scientific exchange amongst psychiatrists from the different European countries, and the last congress, held in Copenhagen in 1994, attracted over 2,500 psychiatrists. It is anticipated that the 8th congress in London will be even more successful.

The congress will have organised symposia, free com-

munication and recent research symposia, round table debates, and poster presentations. In addition there will be an extensive social programme. Also, there will be the opportunity for psychiatrists from different countries to join together to discuss the areas of mutual interest concerning the development of professional issues in different countries, and the semi political issues concerning psychiatry in various countries.

Further information can be obtained from the AEP Congress Secretariat, Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG, UK. The deadline for abstracts for the congress is January 1996. Those wishing to make other suggestions for the scientific programme should contact Prof R Murray, Chairman of the Scientific Committee, at the Congress Secretariat.