MIND and the OTHER – an interdisciplinary study on the interactions of multiple realities


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A vast array of research underlines the human tendency to believe in, and experience interaction with otherworldly agents, largely defined as supernatural in the contemporary West. However, according to philosophical, historical and cross-cultural research, various cultures maintain very diverse theories about the human mind. Theoretically, experiences of otherworldly agents challenge the boundaries between mind and the world, emotions and rationality, the self and the other and between life and death, which all make visible some central issues important in the understanding of the human mind, its acts and modalities. This diversity and the phenomena of the otherworld has been largely under-theorized or excluded from modern sciences and the philosophy of mind. This has consequences which make our study important. The theoretical assumptions of the human mind are made on a basis that has not been tested with boundary cases. We argue that the scientific exclusion is not a coincidence but a characteristic of the social system. The creation of order produces exclusion and outskirt which, according to Mary Douglas, is not removed but returning. In this interdisciplinary study, we focus precisely on “the returning” and the subjugated knowledge, which according to Michel Foucault is knowledge from below and written out of history, in our case knowledge from a multiplicity of social margins. The aim of this interdisciplinary project is to study the modes in which otherworldly actors appear to the mind without making truth claims. We ask how their agency and actions, as well as the interaction with them, are perceived, experienced and made meaningful. Our research design allows us to contribute to the understanding of the human mind concerning the cultural interaction and relationship with other worlds from pre-modern times to the present. This knowledge does matter. Our expected results are important for the study of the human mind because they contribute at a theoretical level to the mind-body assumptions. At a methodological level we contribute to an interdisciplinary multi-method approach. Our study enables cross-validation of the methods and the testing of the cultural analyses against neurophysiological research of the mind.

The social and ethical relevance and the results at policy outcome of the study are multiple. Our results will strengthen the agency and self-identity of stigmatized people and provide important information for multicultural encounters. Our results will illuminate how our culture shapes normative conceptions of ageing and death. Consequently, they give important information for the ethical discussions of good ageing, death and euthanasia.