

## Psi-chedelic Science:

### An Approach to Understanding Exceptional Human Experiences

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**One of the best known** ancient examples of psychedelics and exceptional human experiences concerns the Oracle of Delphi in Greece. The oracle, or seer, would sit atop a stool, where she would prophesize in a delirious altered state. Some researchers have identified the trigger of this state as psychoactive hydrocarbon gases issuing from the underlying rock fissure. Another group holds that the psychedelic plant henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) was used at Delphi, because the ancient Greeks once called the plant “pythonian” in honor of Python: the visionary serpent goddess venerated by the temple seers, who were themselves called the *pythia*. According to Greek mythology, an envious Apollo slew the goddess and took her place, after which henbane became sacred to Apollo and his followers.

Such prophecies, if they were accurate, are what parapsychologists call “precognition,” which, along with “telepathy” and “clairvoyance,” comprise “extrasensory perception” (ESP). Their accuracy determines whether they are “psychic events” or merely “psychic experiences.” An “event” is objective while an “experience” is subjective. The difference can be illustrated by an experience reported by the anthropologist William McGovern in his 1927 book *Jungle Paths and Incan Ruins*. McGovern ingested yage a psychoactive brew, along with tribal members in a Peruvian rain forest. Suddenly, several of the natives described what was transpiring in a tribal setting hundreds of miles distant. McGovern entered these details in his diary and, when he reached that tribe, discovered that the account had been completely accurate. It is not always possible to determine whether an experience described an event, but in this case, McGovern was able to do so because he had kept precise records.

Although they might not always qualify as events, ESP experiences are frequently reported today by people under the influence of psychedelics. A trawl through the pertinent literature reveals that occasional experiences of PK or “psychokinesis” (the purported direct influence of mind on matter) and, more frequently, ESP – both of which come under the umbrella term “psi” – are reported by between 18% to 83% of people surveyed. The wide range of percentages reflects group differences and the methodology of the study. For example, if someone is asked, “Did you experience telepathy during your LSD session?” the affirmative responses would probably be larger than if someone were simply asked, “Tell me what you experienced during your LSD session.” How-

ever, less than 2% of people describing their experiences with non-psychedelic psychoactive agents (such as alcohol, heroin, and cocaine) report any type of psi.

This dichotomy is also mirrored in the folklore surrounding these substances. There is virtually no tradition, ritual, or culture concerning the occurrence of presumptive psi phenomena with the use of alcohol, coca, or the opiates. However, psychedelics are very often accompanied by such expectations in both the traditional societies that have used them and in the contemporary psychedelic subculture.

Just as explorers of other cultures have returned with stories of the indigenous use of one or another psychedelic plant for some psi (or “psychic”) purpose, many psychedelic

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explorers in recent times frequently took an interest in the use of psychedelics for inducing psi. Albert Hofmann, the inventor-cum-discoverer of LSD, had an out-of-body experience on his first (and accidental) LSD trip, and later helped parapsychologists search for psychedelics suitable for ESP and PK research.

The celebrated author Aldous Huxley believed that psychedelic substances led to a switching off of the brain's "reducing valve," thereby giving the participant access to both psychic and mystical states.

Having supervised Huxley's first mescaline trip, which led to his writing *The Doors of Perception*, the psychiatrist Humphry Osmond coined the term "psychedelic" ("mind-manifesting") in communication with Huxley. Osmond himself wrote articles on the use of psychedelics for the scientific study of psi, a field termed "parapsychology." He was joined in these speculations by his Saskatchewan colleagues Duncan Blewett and Abram Hoffer; the three of them reported instances of purported psi among their patients who were undergoing psychedelic psychotherapy.

The discoverer of the Mazatec psilocybin mushroom cult, R. Gordon Wasson, claimed to have witnessed psi phenomena during mushroom ceremonies in Mexico, and in one of them obtained valuable information about his son, which was verified on his return home. Timothy Leary and his Harvard colleague Richard Alpert (Ram Dass) visited Duke University to meet the founder of modern parapsychology, J. B. Rhine. They conducted informal ESP and psilocybin experiments with staff members of Rhine's laboratory. In their classic book *Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*, Robert Masters and Jean Houston included several examples of psi experiments they conducted, some successful and some off the mark.

It became apparent among psychotherapists at that time that the use of these substances in the therapy room led to an increased incidence of psychic experiences, which in some cases were verified by the therapists themselves. Stainslav Grof, even while acknowledging that there was a danger of data contamination and a difficulty of verification, contended that reports of ESP were relatively frequent in psychedelic psychotherapy, especially the recall of "past lives." Many other therapists, including Emilio Servadio and

Margaret Paul, commented on the capacity of these substances to induce psychic experiences.

Looking at the relationship between psychedelics and psi from the other perspective, parapsychologists have often commented on the large number of reports they receive concerning ESP and PK occurring in altered states of consciousness, especially dream and drug states. But what is the link between psychic experiences and psychedelics? Perhaps psychedelics evoke profound qualitative shifts rather than just quantitative changes in consciousness. Further, the reported transcendence of space and time may be conducive to atemporal, non-local information transfer. Long-term changes to a person's worldview following the use of psychedelics may also make psi experiences more prevalent; factors such as one's belief in the possibility of psi and one's openness to such experiences seem to be related to the number of ensuing reports. Just as seeing is believing, believing is also seeing; hence psychedelics may precipitate a more positive philosophical outlook towards psi, one that leads to its greater occurrence.

Personal accounts of psychic experiences, and first or second hand observations of these experiences, are of some value. However, they rarely offer much concrete evidence that a psychic event has taken place. What is required to validate a reported psychic experience is solid experimental data in which coincidence, faulty memory, and sensory clues have been controlled for and can be eliminated as counter-explanations. Such attempts have been made, of course, and prior to the termination of research into psychedelic substances in the 1960s, a number of experimental projects were conducted. This research was conducted by both parapsychologists and psychedelic researchers alike.

The success of these experiments varied, most likely in relation to the methodology involved. The most successful experiments tended to utilize participants experienced with the use of psychedelics, using what parapsychologists call "free response" testing procedures. In a free response test, participants describe their mental imagery while they are attempting to obtain information about a hidden picture or a distant location. In "fixed response" experiments, participants attempt to identify specific "targets" such as

numbers, letters, or geometric shapes. In retrospect, it is easy to see how the latter projects were unlikely to sensibly test for anything, let alone psi, once the inexperienced participants began succumbing to the more engrossing mystical rapture of their first trip. Nevertheless, some of the studies using psychedelically experienced participants provided promising results, albeit with an inadequate degree of rigor by today's scientific standards.

Currently, there is very little psychedelic parapsychology research being conducted, largely due to the doubly taboo nature of this line of scientific inquiry. The only study we are aware of is an ongoing experimental field research project being sponsored by the Beckley Foundation into the use of ayahuasca to predict future events, an investigation being conducted by the first author of this article.

While research in the field of what might be called para-psychopharmacology is still very much nascent, it may become important in helping science to discover the underlying neurochemical processes involved in mediating psi and other exceptional human experiences. Any discoveries about the neurochemistry of these experiences will be of value whether or not the psychic experience being studied turns out to be a psychic event. Moreover, there is a wealth of information to be learned from the indigenous shamans who have been using psychedelics for millennia and who are well practiced in navigating the altered states they produce.

The complexity of psychic experiences calls for a taxonomic approach so that scientists can determine which substances, under which environmental conditions, and for which people, best activate a particular sort of experience; that is, what experiences arise out of a combination of substance, setting, and set? Furthermore, such research can help map out the ontological terrain of the psychedelic experience; if experimental research can establish which experiences are also events, the data will have something valuable to contribute regarding the wealth of other extraordinary experiences induced by these substances. What we might call "psi-chedelic science" could well play an important role in describing, explaining, and understanding both psychic experiences and psychic events. •