

A RETROSPECTIVE STUDY OF ALTERATIONS IN CONSCIOUSNESS DURING SHAMANISTIC JOURNEYING AND MDMA USE

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IN RECENT YEARS, two of the most visible new methods of altering consciousness have been neo-shamanic drumming/journeying, and the drug MDMA. Interest in these altered states can be found in articles in transpersonal publications such as *Common Boundary*, *Shaman's Drum*, *Yoga Journal*, *Magical Blend*, and *ReVision*, as well as numerous texts. The following is a report on the results of a dissertation study that empirically researched these experiences to determine how people thought that these methods had altered their consciousness.

THE PURPOSE of this study was to compare how MDMA and shamanistic journeying were experienced by two groups of participants. Phenomenological scales and case studies were employed to assess and describe the two experiences.

Metzner's (1989) revised generalized set, setting, trigger model states that for all altered states and the ordinary reality state, the contents of consciousness that we experience are determined primarily by the set (internal factors, i.e., expectation, intention, personality, mood, values, attitudes, beliefs), the setting (external factors, i.e., context, physical and social environment, expectations and behavior of others present), and the trigger (in this case MDMA and the Harner Method of shamanistic drumming/journeying).

In the present study 40 volunteers between the ages of 33 and 67 were divided into two groups. Twenty members (10 males, 10 females) were practitioners of the Harner Method of Shamanistic Journeying. The other 20 members (10 males, 10 females) obtained and self-administered doses of MDMA to themselves. Members of both groups anonymously completed the Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory (PCI), the Mysticism Scale (M-Scale), the Experience Questionnaire (EQ) within 30 days of their last experiences. Two subjects from each group were chosen for case study interviews.

An overview of the findings underscore the importance of the set, setting, trigger model. The participants in this study were "serious" practitioners. That is, the subjects engaged the experiences of MDMA use or shamanistic journeying with intentionality. For the most part, subjects reported being well educated (advanced degrees), had previously experienced altered states induced through other means, and had a transpersonal quest of divination, spiritual emergence, and personal growth. Setting was also very important as subjects in both groups reported environments and rituals that were critical to maximizing and fully appreciating the benefits of their experiences. Finally, the MDMA or shamanistic drumming/journeying triggers were the catalysts that subjects preferred and had been using a minimum of six times in the past year. The findings showed that subjects had actually had many more experiences spanning a much greater period. Polydrug users and practitioners of other transpersonal methods were excluded from this study.

While there were many statistically significant differences between the two groups, the overall finding was that on almost all variables the means of both groups were very high, suggesting that while the two experiences may have been different in kind, they were similar in degree. Both groups showed high mean scores on variables of set (i.e., clarity of

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intent, premeditation, seeking an answer to a question), and setting/intention (creating an environment for healing, problem solving, and self-exploration).

MDMA subjects indicated that having a good time, and using MDMA for creative purposes were important elements of their experience. This both supports and extends the Watson and Beck (1991) finding that, "MDMA users are attracted to MDMA for two fairly distinct reasons: its alleged therapeutic/spiritual benefits and its reputed euphoric/sensual properties" (p. 263). It appears that the MDMA subjects in this research project have serious therapeutic/spiritual intentions, enjoy its euphoric/sensual properties, and use it for creative purposes.

MDMA subjects reported having high expectations and an experience that was in their volitional control. Shamanistic journeyers reported lower expectations than the MDMA subjects as well as significantly less volitional control and perceived creativity.

BOTH GROUPS reported voluntarily entering the altered state to develop intimate relationships either with humans (MDMA) or spirits (journeyers) in order to solve problems. Nevertheless, both groups reported positive changes in their intimate human relationships.

Interestingly, while it was expected that the shamanistic journeying subjects would report perceiving themselves as related to *shamans*, the MDMA subjects also made mention of shamanism with terms such as *warrior woman*, *medicine-man/woman*, and *shaman spiritual warrior*.

Subjects in both groups self-administered the MDMA or practiced shamanistic journeying in a lay setting suggesting that these serious practitioners do not need, or are not inclined to use a "guide" or "facilitator" to conduct the experience, although they may have guided others or were themselves guided on previous occasions.

High mean scores for mystical experience and religious experience were reported for MDMA subjects and shamanistic journeyers. Interestingly, religious experience scores were higher than mystical experience scores in each group. This was an unexpected finding and there

may be some evidence that would support cosmological mysticism.

The data showed that MDMA users did not meet the DSM III-R criteria for abuse and dependence. However, given that this was self-report data, caution should be exercised before weighting this finding too heavily.

WITH REGARD to side effects, MDMA users reported after-effects of high emotional well being and low physical energy in the 24-hour period following the MDMA session. The results suggest that there is a physical recovery period following MDMA use that often lasts as long as 1 - 2 days in duration. However, the vast majority of research subjects perceived that the after-effects and recovery period from MDMA use were never or rarely a problem.

In conclusion, it appears that when used with a mindset and setting of "serious" purpose, MDMA use and shamanistic journeying are potent triggers facilitating self-transformation. The practices may be precursors of what Needleman (1975) referred to as "new religions" (p. 220). Harlow and Beck (1991) call these MDMA practitioners "New Age Seekers," while Doore (1989) referred to shamanistic journeyers as the "New Shamans." In examining the role of psychoactive substances in shamanic transformations of consciousness, Metzner (1988) states, "The individual seeks a vision to understand his or her place, or destiny, as a member of the community." It seems that both the MDMA users and the shamanistic journeyers in this study are examples of Metzner's statement. This also bespeaks the notion of personal mythology and its importance in shaping a personal and collective vision. The MDMA users' and shamanistic journeyers' experiences suggest spiritual emergence and the development and maintenance of a personal mythology that is integral to their ongoing lives. •••

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