



A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Values, Beliefs, and Sense of Coherence in Psychedelic Drug Users

summary of findings from a MAPS-funded study

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INTRODUCTION

Past research has linked the use of psychedelic substances to profound spiritual change (Pahnke 1966; Doblin 1991). In a high-dose psychedelic experience, users may claim to encounter God, to merge with the cosmos or undergo death and rebirth. Reports from many users resemble Buddhist or Hindu descriptions of self-realization, *satori* or enlightenment. This mystical experience is said to have a universal aspect that transcends cultural context. If psychedelic drugs can produce mystical experiences, then the values and beliefs of psychedelic users should differ in crucial respects from those expressed by users of other illicit drugs such as cocaine or heroin. Further, the values and beliefs of psychedelic users should be similar across different cultures. The present study tested these hypotheses by examining different types of drug users in Israel and Australia, specifically comparing the values, beliefs and sense of coherence (an index of physical and mental well-being) of users of psychedelic drugs with users of non-psychedelic illicit drugs (marijuana, heroin, cocaine, etc.), and with non-users of illegal drugs.

METHOD & SUBJECTS

Participants were considered to have had a psychedelic experience if they reported at least one high-dose “trip” or “overwhelming experience” on a psychedelic drug. A total of 183 subjects participated in the study. Participants included 41 Israeli psychedelic users and 47 Australian psychedelic users (a total of 88). Other illegal drug users included 18 Israelis and 11 Australians (a total of 29). The non-users of illegal drugs were 51 Israelis and 15 Australians (a total of 66). Groups were divided on the basis of the *Drug Use Questionnaire* (DUQ) responses indicating history of substance use.

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MATERIALS

Life Values Inventory (LVI; Crace & Brown 1996): measures 14 core life values, or global orientations that influence behavior and decision making.

Sense of Coherence Scale (SOCs; Antonovsky 1987): measures the health-related ability to cope with life stress in terms of the cognitive dimensions of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness.

Mystical Beliefs Questionnaire (MBQ; derived from Pahnke 1966): uses 4-point Likert scales (a measurement method that allows answers ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) to rate mystical beliefs such as a universal soul, a spiritual or transcendental dimension to existence, and oneness with God, nature, and the universe.

Emotional Empathic Tendency Scale (EETS; Mehrabian 1994): measures one’s ability to feel and identify another’s emotions.

Drug Use Questionnaire: assesses use of illegal drugs such as marijuana, MDMA, cocaine, amphetamine, heroin/opiates, and psychedelics (LSD, mushrooms/psilocybin, peyote/mescaline, etc.) as well as demographic information.

PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited by notices posted in areas frequented by drug users, and by word of mouth (snowball method), in Israel (Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem) and Australia (Nimbin, Byron Bay, Melbourne, Gold Coast). Interested drug users contacted the researchers, who sent them a questionnaire packet and a self-addressed stamped envelope for return of the completed forms. Any incomplete forms that were received were discarded.

DISCUSSION

Findings were largely consistent with predictions. The main finding was that regardless of culture of origin, users of psychedelic drugs had higher scores than users of other illegal drugs and non-users of illegal drugs on the *MBQ*, a measure of mystical beliefs such as “oneness with the cosmos” and a belief in the “divine within.” Effect size in this analysis was high (.46) suggesting a strong degree of association between psychedelic use and *MBQ* scores. These results are consistent with the findings of Pahnke (1966) and Doblin (1991) of a profound and lasting spiritual influence of the psychedelic experience. Users of psychedelics also scored higher than other illegal drug users on life values thought to be associated with spiritual or mystical beliefs, such as concern for environment, concern for others, creativity, and spirituality. In addition, psychedelic drug users scored significantly lower on financial prosperity than both control groups. Surprisingly, none of the measures differentiated Israelis from Australians.

Additional support was reflected in the empathy questionnaire (*EETS*) findings that psychedelic drug users reported significantly higher levels of empathetic tendencies than both other illegal drug users and non-users of illegal drugs. Interestingly, data analysis revealed that both illegal drug user groups were more empathetic than non-users of illegal drugs. The present results suggest that the effects of psychedelic drugs may be more important than the cultural differences between Israel and Australia in influencing the life values and spiritual beliefs of drug users in these two countries. Contemporary research has suggested that psychedelic experiences can modify one’s worldview, produce long-lasting changes in personal beliefs, and can be responsible for personal transformations that alter the future conduct of one’s life (Shanon 2003).

If the psychedelic mystical experience does induce lasting positive changes in attitude and behavior, it was hypothesized that differences would be evident in the psychedelic drug user’s subjective sense of health and well-being. Evidence of such differences was obtained in the present study. A score on the *SOC* scale is assumed by Antonovsky (1987) to reflect one’s position on the health-illness continuum in terms of both physical and mental health. The higher a subjects’ *SOC* score, the more available are resources to deal with life stressors that can affect our physical and mental health (Antonovsky 1987). Psychedelic users were characterized by significantly higher levels of meaningfulness (one of the three *SOC* sub-scales) than both the other illegal drug user group and

the non-user group. In addition, psychedelic drug users exhibited significantly higher scores on manageability and on the total scale than the other illegal drug user group. The findings suggest that psychedelic users perceive life as more meaningful than other illegal drug users and non-users of illegal drugs, consistent with the assumption of a profound mystical experience.

There are two competing explanations for such profound differences in life values and beliefs between groups in the present study. It is possible that the higher levels of spirituality and associated values in psychedelic users were due to inherent pre-drug spiritual tendencies. If psychedelic users were more spiritually inclined to begin with (that is, pre-drug), then psychedelic drug use may be seen as a by-product of such an orientation rather than the cause of a change in values. Alternatively, previous experimental findings suggest that the psychedelic experience itself can reshape values and beliefs (Doblin 1991; Pahnke 1966; Shanon 2003). According to this view, such changes in values and beliefs stem from a subjectively real, vivid, and transformative experience. The “God within,” cosmic unity, and other concepts associated with such states of mind are often dismissed as sub-cultural slogans that have nothing to do with reality. Yet the similarity in values and understanding between people from vastly different backgrounds who have entered extreme altered states of consciousness is often striking, whether they are yogis, psychedelic drug users, Zen Buddhists, or mystics from different religions. Different metaphors are used to describe what may be the same inner journey of the soul. Accordingly, many religious figures and psychedelic seekers who experienced those realms of consciousness may speak the same inner truth. •

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