

Paranormal Phenomena and Psychoactive Drugs: Fifty Years of Research



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Following on from my article for the *Bulletin*, Summer 2004, the MAPS-funded project to review the literature on research into paranormal experiences with psychoactive drugs is now complete.

It incorporates more than 200 scientific papers spanning fifty years of research and is due for publication in spring, 2006 as a chapter in *Advances in Parapsychological Research* 9, edited by Stanley Krippner et al., and published by the Parapsychology Foundation (www.parapsychology.org). The chapter borrows widely from anthropology, ethnobotany, psychiatry, psychotherapy, and not least from parapsychology, but this multidisciplinary approach also owes much to the non-academic explorers of parapsycho-pharmacology, be they psychonauts, occultists, or shamans. While consideration is given to a range of paranormal phenomena the review is primarily concerned with what is known as extrasensory perception (ESP)—telepathy, precognition, and clairvoyance—as well as out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and near-death experiences (NDEs). The report includes psychedelic/neurochemical models of paranormal experience; field reports of intentional and spontaneous phenomena incorporating anthropological, anecdotal, and clinical cases; surveys of paranormal belief and experience; and experimental research. There also includes a methodological critique with recommendations for further experimental research.

Since their earliest popularization among the intelligentsia, psychedelics, above all other psychoactive substances, have been noted for their potential to induce ostensibly paranormal phenomena, for a plethora of reasons. Much of this reasoning is owed to the time-honored observation that paranormal experiences such as ESP or psychokinesis, collectively termed *psi*, largely occur during altered states. Alterations in the perception of self, space, and time available through the use of such substances are of particular value to parapsychological concepts, which defy the usual rules governing these factors. In a less immediate sense, psychedelic drugs are also capable of broadening ideas about reality on an ongoing and durable basis, opening people up to the possibility of all kinds of transpersonal experiences. Perhaps more obviously, neurochemicals are doubtless involved in subjective paranormal experiences and there exist some well-evidenced and reasoned conjectures about the role of tryptamines, β -carbolines, and ketamine in the function of OBEs, NDEs, and apparent psi

experiences (see Jansen, 2001; Roney-Dougal, 1991, 2001; Strassman, 2001).

Pooling reports from a variety of sources, the literature is replete with accounts of the spontaneous occurrence of ostensibly paranormal phenomena with the recreational, clinical, and experimental use of psychoactive drugs. Most of the clinical observations come from psychedelic-assisted psychotherapeutic sessions, rather than from psychiatric reports, and at one time it was estimated that ESP occurs with good supporting evidence in about two percent of such therapy sessions. Considering all the sources, a whole range of paranormal phenomena are often found to manifest in unusual and unexpected ways, and the most prominent feature of these reports is that they tend only to occur with psychedelic, rather than other psychoactive drugs. This finding can be found rooted in the traditional divinatory and shamanic use of entheogens reported in historical, anthropological, and ethnobotanical studies and is further echoed by several surveys conducted among modern urbanites. The surveys indicate that people who report paranormal experiences are significantly more likely to have used psychedelic drugs, with those reporting more frequent use of these drugs being more likely to have an experience.

Of those reporting the use of psychedelics, 18–83% reported psi experiences—most commonly telepathy but also precognition—actually occurring during drug use. Perhaps surprisingly, only rarely were psychedelics found to be related to the occurrence of psychokinesis, but they were cited as a fairly common cause in out-of-body experiences, a phenomenon that seems to occur with most every drug of this type, but particularly with dissociatives. Furthermore a weak but consistent relationship was also found between the reported use of psychedelics, paranormal experiences, and kundalini experiences, widening the debate on the natural role of endogenous drugs such as DMT. Belief in the paranormal and a reduced fear of the paranormal were also found to correlate consistently, although quite weakly, with the use of psychedelics, begging further investigation of their use in breaking down fears of the unknown.

Supporting the anecdotal reports, the relationship with paranormal experiences, belief, and fearlessness tended to be either reduced or reversed with respect to cocaine, heroin, and alcohol. That there is virtually no recorded folkloric use of these substances for psychic purposes compared to the widespread shamanic use of psychedelic substances for such means is a further testament to the

unique power of this class of drugs for inducing subjective paranormal experiences. While it is recognized that subjective reports are not scientifically rigorous in establishing the veridical nature of these experiences, they do enhance our understanding and offer a rich phenomenological spectrum of evidence around which to orientate further research. Furthermore, the similarity in reports between those occurring spontaneously in exploratory, therapeutic, and accidental contexts and those induced intentionally in the traditional ritual context gives further credence to the shamanic use of these substances for paranormal purposes. Regrettably, very little of the survey research has considered the paranormal phenomenology of differing drugs but has instead generally just considered psychedelic drugs as a whole. In response to this I am currently analyzing data from my own survey into differing trends in drug-induced paranormal experience conducted with the help of the *Bulletin* readers, who I would like to thank, the results of which should be published soon.

In consideration of the real efficacy of psychedelics to induce ESP the review also evaluates the contribution of more than a dozen experimental projects that have been conducted, primarily with LSD or psilocybin, but also with mescaline, marijuana, *Amanita muscaria*, and, recently, ayahuasca. The results of these experiments, which began in the 1950s, varied in the degree of their success, most likely in relation to the methodology involved. The most successful experiments tended to utilize participants experienced with the use of psychedelics, and also utilized free-response testing procedures, rather than forced-choice scenarios where participants often reported becoming very bored with the repeated tasks. In retrospect it is easy to see how the more naïvely-designed projects lost any chance of sensibly testing for anything, let alone psi, once their inexperienced participants began succumbing to the mystical rapture of their first trip.

Despite the fact that working with tripping participants and using quite involved methodologies can be challenging, the results to date are very promising of the possibility of stimulating psychic abilities with psychedelics experimentally, although further research with better experimental controls and improved methodology is necessary. Nevertheless, experience dictates that factors of set and setting are fundamental to the psychedelic experience and future researchers should consider integrating aspects of the shamanic use of entheogens into their work to ground it. Researchers may even consider conducting fieldwork within traditional scenarios and other naturalistic environments of psychedelic use. Other possible experimental techniques advised include hypnotic procedures to stabilize or re-induce the experience, paired voyages with emotionally-bonded participants, the use of electrophysiological measures of non-cognitive psychic awareness, and first-person precognition test procedures that marry the subjective and the objective and can be conducted solely with the experimenter as participant.

Psychedelic research into parapsychology also has the potential benefit of identifying psychological and methodological factors conducive to the apparent expression of ESP through the magnifying effect of these substances. Some debate still exists as to the reality of psi, though most from critics working outside of the experimental research and it is becoming increasingly more difficult to explain away the growing evidence. Meanwhile, psychedelics could be helpful in better understanding the process of psi and the psi experience. For instance, the curious dearth of reports of psychokinesis in this review apparently indicates something about the expression of 'pharma-psi', inviting virgin research into the nature of psychic healing with shamanic plants.

Weaving the many investigative stands of this research together it is clear that psychedelic and parapsychological research have much to share in exploring the rich tapestry of human potential. There are also obvious implications for aligned fields, and in informing psychiatric and psychotherapeutic professionals of the capacity of these drugs to induce subjective paranormal experiences it is advised not to assume that these experiences are delusional, although this may sometimes be the case. Going beyond any a priori prejudices against the exceptional, it may be of great benefit to see paranormal experiences, particularly those induced chemically, as meaningful insights into the experient's personal growth. At the transpersonal juncture between what has been considered as either medicine, madness, or magic, such 'psi-chedelic' experiences are perhaps best considered holistically in relation to the concepts of spiritual emergence and holotropic states, within the framework of Stanislav Grof's 'psychology of the future' (Grof, 2000).

Sources

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