

Stanislav and Christina Grof:

Cartographers of the Psyche

By Mason Schreck



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WHILE STRUGGLING TO ENVISION a psychotherapy that would afford greater therapeutic benefit to his psychiatric patients, Dr. Stanislav Grof had a chance encounter with an experimental substance from the Swiss pharmaceutical designer Sandoz. This exciting and mysterious molecule was LSD-25.

At the time it was thought that, due to its unique ability to radically shift human consciousness, experiential observations of the LSD state might offer clinicians new insights into the symptomatology of psychoses and schizophrenia. Led by his desire to know more intimately the inner life of his patients and to develop new treatment protocols, Grof opted to receive psychedelic training in “experimental psychoses” induced by LSD. The numinous visions that emerged from this initial experience redirected Grof’s professional career and forever altered both psychiatry and psychology. [1]

Following this early encounter with LSD, Grof noted that for him, human consciousness was immediately the most compelling subject of study. [1] It demanded his attention. He went on to work in a psychedelic research program at the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where he was a Principal Investigator during the 1960s. He then served as Chief of Psychiatric Research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center and as Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland. Later, he would become a Scholar-in-Residence at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. [2]

In their 50 years of experience studying the healing potential of psychedelics and non-ordinary states of consciousness, Stan and his wife Christina have contributed immeasurably to the fields of psychology and psychedelic medicine.

Through his work with psychedelics, Grof has redefined non-ordinary states of consciousness, revolutionized our view of the human psyche, and ushered in a psychology of the future.

Abraham Maslow, the founder of humanistic psychology, noted that Grof’s work is one of the most important contributors to personality theory. [2] The preeminent religious scholar Huston Smith proclaimed Grof to be one of the most influential people of the 20th century. [3]

Western academic psychology and psychiatry had been developed from experiences and observations derived from ordinary (rather than non-ordinary) states of consciousness. With the exception of dreams, non-ordinary states were (and often still are) seen as pathological conditions, and the goal of treatment was to suppress or eliminate them. The notions that such states could have therapeutic value or could contribute to understanding the psyche were largely beyond the scope of analysis. [4]

It was in this restrictive milieu that Grof conducted his first careful clinical observations and developed descriptions of non-ordinary states from thousands of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy sessions. [5] His synthesis of these findings offered psychology not only a new vision of the therapeutic potential of the psychedelics and non-ordinary states but also

greatly expanded our view of human consciousness.

Over the course of his career Grof conducted more than four thousand individual psychedelic sessions, so developing both a personal and professional understanding of psychedelics as “nonspecific amplifiers” of the human psyche and tools for unveiling deep aspects of personhood. Believing that “psychedelics, used responsibly and with proper caution, would be for psychiatry what the microscope is to the study of biology and medicine or the telescope for astronomy,” he dispelled the initial view that these profound states of consciousness were reducible to psychotomimetic occurrences. [4]

The impression that the LSD state was just a simple break with reality was reinforced by the dramatic emotions, vivid changes in perception, and psychomotor excitement evoked by LSD. These behaviors stood in sharp contrast to the relatively rigid state of psychotherapy that encouraged civil erudition and rigid free-association. From the perspective of mainstream psychiatry, the intense activity that emerged from non-ordinary states violated basic therapeutic principles. Academic psychiatry and psychology were limited to a model of the self informed only by biology, postnatal life history, and the individual unconscious. [4]

Grof’s observations offered a new vision of consciousness and human psychology. It became clear that the unconscious material arising spontaneously in the LSD state could more fully explain numerous emotional and psychosomatic disorders. From this new perspective, it became possible to differentiate between certain forms of psychosis, discover more effective mechanisms for healing and transformation, and develop new therapeutic techniques and strategies for self-exploration.

With this new perspective came a radically new theory of mind. Evidence from LSD psychotherapy sessions suggested that individuals were encountering realms of experience that lay beyond just personal biography and

individual unconscious. Grof proposed that the traditional model be expanded to include two additional levels of the psyche: the perinatal (involving the process of birth) and the transpersonal (involving relationships beyond the self).

As Grof’s patients underwent repeated sessions they traversed a set of what he saw as clearly distinct experiential states. These states reiterated sequences from the individual’s own gestation and birth. Through the vehicle of the non-ordinary state, one could re-experience and work through early pre- and perinatal experiences and traumas. This discovery led to the development of perinatal psychology and the recognition that these primary experiences impact human development into adulthood.



Christina and Stanislav Grof

Another major theoretical contribution from Grof’s work with psychedelics has been the recognition of transpersonal phenomena. Transpersonal experiences, meaning experiences that go beyond the solitary self, were seen as unique manifestations of consciousness not under-

standable through mainstream psychology or materialism: they surpass personal boundaries, as well as those of space and time. In Grof’s framework, phenomena such as out-of-body states and mystical experiences are natural and normal aspects of human psychology. [4]

The new field of Transpersonal Psychology entailed a new approach to psychotherapy that emphasized the direct expression of intense emotions, deep regression, and the release of physical energies—just as in Grof’s psychedelic therapy sessions. Psychedelic states were seen to be opportunities for greater psychospiritual wholeness and development, and for this reason were termed “holotropic” states (from the Greek *holos*, or “whole,” and *trepain*, for “moving forward”). [5] Psychedelic psychotherapy, with its focus on helping patients create positive relationships with their own profound and transpersonal experiences, offered many patients the possibility of dramatic emotional and psychosomatic healing. [4]

Following the criminalization of LSD, Stan and his wife Christina worked to develop a

non-pharmacological alternative encouraging holotropic states. What emerged was a powerful method of therapy that utilizes accelerated breath, powerful music, and bodywork to induce non-ordinary states of consciousness.

[6] This method, termed Holotropic Breathwork, has since offered thousands access to the healing potential of these profound states of experiences.

Aside from co-developing Holotropic Breathwork and its certificate training program, Christina has advanced her own experiences and theoretical understanding of psychospiritual development, in particular explaining and developing the concept of “spiritual emergency.” She notes that personal transformation can occasionally take the form of a crisis, wherein effective therapy requires attention to the transpersonal aspects of human experience. She founded the Spiritual Emergency Network (SEN), a worldwide organization that supports individuals encountering these challenging experiences. [7]

Stan and Christina Grof have helped create a more integrated psychology and enhanced our vision of human potential. Their work with non-ordinary states of consciousness has expanded the field of scientific study and revealed the incredible healing potential of psychedelic and holotropic experiences. The worldwide renewal of interest in psychedelic research is the legacy of their own half century of commitment to charting a new cartography of the psyche. •

NOTES

[1] Grof, C., & Grof, S. (1990). *The stormy search for the self: A guide to personal growth through transformation crisis* (pp. 18-27). Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc.

[2] Grof, S. Stanislav Grof. Retrieved November, 1, 2011, from <http://www.stanislavgrof.com/>

[3] Grof, S. (2006). *The ultimate journey: consciousness and the mystery of death*. Ben Lomond, CA: Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies.

[4] Grof, S (2008). *LSD psychotherapy: The healing potential of psychedelic medicine*. Ben Lomond, CA: Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies.

[5] Battista, J., Chinen, A., & Scotton, B. (Editors)(1996). *Textbook of transpersonal psychiatry and psychology*. (pp.75-84). New York: Basic Books.

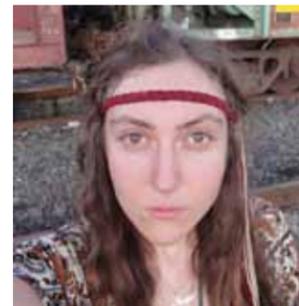
[6] Grof, C., & Grof, S. (2010). *Holotropic breathwork: A new approach to self-exploration and therapy*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

[7] Grof, C., & Grof, S. (1989). *Spiritual emergency: when personal transformation becomes a crisis*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam

A Declaration of Psychedelic Studies:

Psychedelic Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences

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AT THIS MOMENT IN HISTORY, the social sciences and humanities need to work in concert with recent medical advances to address a subject that defies standard disciplinary boundaries. I propose the inauguration of Psychedelic Studies as an interdisciplinary academic field, and I would like to do this by building on lessons learned from the earlier academic revolution known as “queer studies.”

Due to pervasive cultural and legal taboos against psychedelics, I thought my intellectual interests had to remain unspoken. It was only after I found out about the scientific psychedelic renaissance that I realized there was a community of scholars working openly on these subjects. I decided to plug in, and to come out of the closet. This is a common experience among those who for the first time find a community where they can speak openly about their interests.

Scholar David M. Halperin defines queer as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant.” Psychedelic culture is, properly speaking, queer. Some may take issue with this connection, arguing that while queer or alternative sexuality is an essential or natural state the use of psychedelics for personal or therapeutic purposes is a choice. Some may also claim that queer culture is more demonized by society and the state than psychedelic culture, and that therefore queerness and psychedelics require distinct scholarly approaches.

But these common reactions reveal a slippery slope: To claim that queer identity or culture are somehow deeper or more essential to our humanity than psychedelic identity or culture undermines the very rights that queer theorists and activists want to promote. It is counterproductive to argue that some forms of oppression are more egregious than others. Is there not strong state and social repression against the use of or interest in psychedelics? Many view their psychedelic identities, interests, or religious views as inherent to who they are. Queer studies is largely about the

“queering” of identity and consciousness relative to the norm, suggesting the importance of working collectively to support the validity of all forms of identification.

The time is ripe for a genuinely interdisciplinary field of investigation into psychedelics and their correlative cultural roles to come to fruition. Scientific discourse, while serving a distinct and timely purpose, is by nature unable to exhaust the psychedelic question. The findings of multiple fields and methodologies can be mutually informative, enriching the overall possibilities for the production of knowledge. At a premier screening of *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, pioneering psychedelic researcher Dr. Rick Strassman remarked: “How to explicate the full meaning...of the psychedelic experience...? I think it has to be as multidisciplinary a pursuit as possible, because the full psychedelic experience impacts on everything—it impacts on art, anthropology, music, religion, cosmology, physics, psychology, cognitive sciences, chemistry, everything...We don’t want to overextend one discipline at the expense of the other[s].”