MIND FOUNDATION

Bewusstseinskultur and the Human Condition | MIND Blog

DATE PUBLISHED

30 June 2021



Between June and August 2021, we published a series of blog posts about the MIND Foundation's INSIGHT conference. The blog posts describe the defining ideas that drive this biennial meeting in Berlin. The second edition of INSIGHT took place on Sept 9–12 at the Langenbeck-Virchow Haus in Berlin. It was also live-streamed into the world. This third blog post of the series is about diversity and how it moves the minds here and over there. The MIND core team consists of colleagues from 14 nationalities and three continents – with many other colleagues from diverse backgrounds around us. They themselves come from contexts in which structured public health systems exists – or in which they don't; they come from social contexts in which "diversity" is pronouncedly understood as racial diversity – or from contexts that have a much wider understanding of social factors determining social and health behaviors. The following is a reflection of such discussions to determine the role we currently assign to diversity issues when it comes to the conference.

> "United in diversity" has been established as the motto of the European Union since the year 2000 – Website of the European Union (Europe.eu)

> "The ability to uncover, understand, and deal constructively with difference is one of the foremost challenges of our age." – Riall W. Nolan1

There have been moments in history when a large part of the earth's population felt united. In these moments, the perception of being "human" or one humanity, became more important than the perception of being Russian, US-American, Kenyan, Brazilian or Indian. For those who had access to TV in 1969, the moon landing was one of these moments. For others, it was the end of the second world war, the inauguration of Barack Obama, or even the immersion in a beautiful piece of music – be it a raga or Richard Strauss' "Letzte Lieder."

But humans are also different. And for many humans most of the time the differences in age, socioeconomic status, property, skin color, sex, gender, religion, cultural practices, educational resources and/or the opportunity to access technology means suffering. How can we be one and be different at the same time?

Like many other organizations, we at the MIND Foundation have continuous conversations about inequalities and representing minorities to support inclusion and initiatives to overcome injustice. At INSIGHT 2019, for example, we had a critical remark from one of the audience members. Specifically, a participant criticized that there were more men than woman on stage. Since then, we tried to address this concern by creating an all women's panel for INSIGHT 2021.

Futhermore, in the MIND Members Association (MMA), we have 50 different nationalities living in 33 countries, 58% of our members identify as male, and at least 84% of our members hold an academic degree or are studying to receive one (status as of June 27th, 2021). The percentage of the general public achieving an academic degree in MIND's home country, Germany, is growing continuously and currently fluctuating around 20% (this is less than in Anglo-Saxon countries mostly because of Germany's famous dual education system). 10% of all German women had a higher academic degree than their partners in 2017. In almost all member countries of the European Union, it is not common (nor frowned upon) to collect census data on "race" (as compared to census surveys in the United States where the population is asked to self-describe as belonging to racial groups).

As a *European* organization, the MIND Foundation develops growing global outreach to members from North America, Australia, Asia, and Africa. Yet Germans, Dutch, Swiss, US-Americans, British, Portuguese, Belgians and Austrians currently make up the largest part of our membership. Many members are of mixed ethnic heritage and diverse skin colors reaching far beyond the historical European nations. This is due to a multitude of reasons reaching from pre-existing differences between European countries, historic European colonialism, and decades of migration and escape from ethnic prosecution in other parts of the world. Europe has a large share of responsibility for these processes and Germany a painful place in it – reaching beyond the twelve years of national-socialist government (1933–1945). This history has created incredible suffering among numerous human groups defined by religious, ethnic or other differences like sexual orientation that have been subject to discrimination, genocide or similar cruelties. The attempt to build a European Union as a transnational organization after WWII originated in Europe's barbarous history. It also originated in Europe's culture of universality and the centuries old struggle to define human rights that are valid for any human being on earth. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10th, 1948 is a milestone in the history of humankind and has inspired a worldwide development to recognize the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family. While some of the most abominable ferocities have continued to happen since, the UDHR is a turning point. It is based on a universalist understanding of equality and similarity in all of us.

A quest for health equality and diversity in the psychedelic field

> "(…) Differences in health occur along several axes of social stratification including socioeconomic, political, ethnic, and cultural" – Michael Marmot2

If psychedelic-assisted therapies keep their promise – and a lot still has to be done scientifically to show that they can – the question of whom to reach with these new treatments, and how, will become top priorities. This traditional problem of health intervention already has an impact on study samples. Some say that there is a special quality in psychedelic therapies themselves that makes an even stronger case for overcoming inequalities. But does health inequality have to do something with factors related to consciousness (and the kind of changes of awareness that can temporarily be achieved in psychedelic experiences)?

In 2007, Michael Marmot published a paper about achieving health equity in Lancet (on behalf of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health).2 The findings are striking and show that "the lower an individual's socioeconomic position, the worse their health. There is a social gradient in health that runs from top to bottom of the socioeconomic range" (ibid.). One of the many consequences is that indigenous peoples of the world have life expectancies lower than the national average all over the world. Not all health differences are caused by hierarchical differences in societies, some are due to biological differences (e.g., between the sexes). While there is a debate on whether health is an end in itself, most authors would agree that good health is a crucial instrument to participate in society, economy, and cultural activities. Marmot's main results show that reducing health inequalities cannot proceed by medical means only, but also requires the empowerment of individuals, groups and even whole countries. "The place people occupy on the social hierarchy affects their level of exposure to health-damaging factors, their vulnerability to ill health, and the consequences of ill health".2

What does all of this have to do with diversity? A lot, if we adopt an understanding of diversity that is broad enough and takes socioeconomic, political, ethnic and cultural factors into account. The belief that health inequalities can be reduced simply to issues of race or gender (self-)definition has very little evidence in the scientific literature by itself, but makes a lot of sense in the context of these issues being an expression of basic socioeconomic differences.

In recent years, "diversity" has become an increasingly politicized and emotionally loaded term in parts of the world. *New York Times Magazine* author Anna Holmes wrote in 2015 already: "It has become both euphemism and cliché, a convenient shorthand that gestures at inclusivity and representation without actually taking them seriously".3 By unloading "diversity" from a narrowing definition, deconstructing the concept, and exploring the fundamental ideas behind it, we might be able to use it in a meaningful way.

Are there specific diversity issues in the emerging psychedelic field?

The question is: does the "psychedelic field" bring particular issues with it with respect to diversity? It is clear that access to science and early psychedelic therapies is as unequally distributed as other health interventions. How can inclusion be reached? This does not seem like a question that is particular to research with psychedelic therapies. However, a number of dynamic groups involved in the psychedelic renaissance are arguing strongly for an early push for equity and inclusion from the beginning.4 This proposal is reinforced by the polarized political situation in the US that is defined by the recurrence of historical race conflicts. Of course, our group, too, is in favor of equity and inclusion. It seems doubtful from a European perspective though that the instruments for inclusion have already been developed.

In the opening blog post of this INSIGHT series, “Clarity and Depth”, Henrik Jungaberle drew on French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to define a social field as “an environment in which competition between groups and individuals occurs. A field is determined by the interaction of dominant players and others competing for new definitions of rules.” The psychedelic community is already full of contradictory subdomains with blossoming differences in interest and value systems,5 some of them seemingly diametrically opposed as for example spiritualists vs. performance-enhancing microdosers, some experiential psychonauts vs. hierarchically defined religious communities, and so on. Diversity and equity issues have been chosen as a key topic by some groups that seem to be at the margins of current psychedelic science. This is not necessarily healthy for achieving health equity and inclusion.

New social and health trends usually emerge in one sector of society and, by definition, such a sector is not a mirror of pluralistic globalized societies that most of us are living in. The idea that an emerging new therapy should actively be distributed among all sub-groups of society seems, at the very least, a demanding task. Likewise, is it unclear whether the presence of non-research, indigenous communities at Western science conferences even promotes social progress or justice. Many of us have observed showcase shamans and the mimicry of allegedly indigenous practices, yet often rituals at psychedelic conferences of the past have actually advanced separation, exclusion, and exoticism – and by no means inclusion. Let’s be humble with apparent solutions that might backfire or serve as excuses for Western or White Guilt.

Some of us are anthropologists, and we are no strangers to dealing with a history of colonialism and exclusion. A personal diary from our so-called “father of anthropology,” Malinowski, is now often cited as both a critique and reflection on the root issue of bias as his sexist and racist descriptions of his participants seemed to negate his attempt at scientific objectivity through ethnography in fieldwork.6 The fact of the matter is that we don’t need a scandalized publishing of a diary to tell us that there is bias and exclusion in research and society.7 While not glossing over the problems present, we as a team at MIND aim to explore how challenges of diversity can be addressed through effective interventions, thoughtful discussions, and even more acutely at our INSIGHT conferences.

Different ways of understanding diversity

> “How does a word become so muddled that it loses much of its meaning? How does it go from communicating something idealistic to something cynical and suspect? If that word is ‘diversity,’ the answer is: through a combination of overuse, imprecision, inertia and self-serving intentions.” – Anna Holmes3

It seems inevitable to not sound cliché and cite the dictionary definition of diversity: “The condition or instance of having or being composed of differing elements”.8

On the surface, that appears self-explanatory as with varying people and perspectives, potentially a grander, more holistic view and solution can be achieved. But how does that translate into the political reality? In recent decades, strategies for including underprivileged groups often focused on mandated quotas of including more of a gender, another race, different ages, and so on. And if we are to compare the original definition with the action, the idea and the action do not seem that far off from each other. But there lies a problem – adding in a seemingly missing element or person with non-mainstream social, economic, cultural, or ethnic characteristics does not inherently create solutions, nor does it automatically change the socioeconomic status of this person’s group, or support a productive working atmosphere.

It is an important step to include multiple perspectives. However, the effects of such “affirmative action”-approaches are manifold. Sometimes, they can also be lip-service or even stimulate (self-)victimization patterns on the side of minorities. Much like planting a palm tree in a desert, adding in a different fixture does not

inherently benefit the greater environment or even the individual. Empowerment, social integration, discussion, and contextualism are all important factors here that often get lost in the debate.

It seems like a paradox, but we would argue that the connotation of diversity has lost some of its original meaning and has – at least in some discourses – become a quite narrow term. When it comes to a scientific research conference, we may therefore need to take another angle from the idea of diversity than just integrating persons of different colors and ethnic backgrounds. And to remember that meaning is constructed based on the society, so even the norms of addressing “race” are very different between different countries and cultural spheres.

Inviting diversity in public events as opportunity for self-empowerment

Giving a voice to any group interested or active in the field of psychedelics is a fundamentally different goal for a scientific conference than academic discussion. The first one is primarily a socioeconomic and political goal. Striving for the first goal could go well beyond the scope of a structured science convention or could even contribute to a distortion of conference norms or deterioration of standards and quality. Not to mention, the difficulty of defining which groups are potentially missing from an event. Let’s consider Europe as a diverse continent with dozens of histories, languages, and cultural backgrounds and contradictions. Our concept for enabling diversity is invitation for self-empowerment. We express such invitations publicly and repeatedly to junior and senior researchers, therapists, and other contributors. And for those who feel they can’t afford the travel or tickets, we initiated and offer our Diversity Program to help make it accessible.

Taking care of “false balance” effects

Additionally, the problem of “false balance” needs to be addressed. “False balance”, also bothsidesism, is a phenomenon that is much discussed with respect to media reporting and little with respect to science representation. For example, suppose a journalist asks a clinical expert about psychedelic therapies, and, for the sake of having an opposing or differing opinion in the piece, the reporter provides a large space for a person that uses psychedelics on the platform of a religious community. What does our religious person really have to say about clinical practice with psychedelics? Devoting her/him as much time, space, and attention as our clinical expert could create a bias. On paper, we would then achieve an assumed “balance” between the two people or groups they are representing. However, an issue may at the same time be presented as being more balanced between opposing viewpoints than it actually is.

Transdisciplinarity as an invitation for multiperspectivism

INSIGHT aims to include views across scientific disciplines and practical fields – a place where we can have conversations, for example, on new molecules and the factors responsible in society for creating effective mental health interventions. It is a place to question paradigms, but at the same time a place to discipline yourself to systematic discussion and arguments. Speakers need to address the scientific method – even if they criticize a certain paradigm.

One definition of “transdisciplinarity” involves crossing the border between science and practice. This is a further source of diversity: topics will be explored not only from a research angle, but also to investigate aspects related to therapeutic practice, implementation, philosophy, public health, and anthropology.

Art as an invitation for multiperspectivism

And complementary to the rigor that the sciences need, the INSIGHT conference series is also a place where art and music can be sources of inspiration and thinking beyond your confines. For those who seek it, we offer a space where one can directly experience from a first-person perspective. This is as far as we want to let it go: close to a “psychedelic experience.” We do not want a conference to be a place for tripping. Quite the contrary, we want people to separate thinking and debating from “doing therapy” or “self-experience.” Rather, we want participants to appreciate an opportunity to take a look at things from outside. And at the end of the day, the goal is to foster a multilogue about the science and implementation of psychedelics that is grounded in a rational and practical approach. INSIGHT is a platform to raise awareness of the problems which occur if we neglect diversity efforts in its different dimensions through talks and discussions.

Respecting the universal humanness of a speaker or audience – notwithstanding her gender or skin color

So, if we turn away from reducing diversity to race or gender and include socioeconomic factors, transdisciplinarity and artistic views on subjective phenomena and society, we reconstruct diversity in a more complete sense. We invite more speakers and audience from divergent social backgrounds, contradicting disciplines, and question paradigmatic perspectives that benefit science, society and the individual.

As mentioned in the introductory blog post, many psychedelic conferences tend to focus on a single area of science or society or culture, which tends to lead to the pitfall of addressing only one perspective or putting that one perspective on a pedestal. While it may be fascinating to listen to a traditional shaman describe the pre-ritual preparation for an ayahuasca ceremony, what’s missing, amongst many possible blind spots, is the contextualization and implications for the audiences both in the original and “Western” settings. How does exactly this contribute directly to more health equity?

Fieldwork into understanding just the function of a shaman in a certain environment takes months and often years to explore. Furthermore, questions of how shamanism has been altered by outside influences over the years and what it even means to translate this “native experience” tend to get lost in presentation.7 And let’s not forget that there are also problems of intellectual diversity when people claim that consciousness is the only factor in mental health issues. It is not – health is determined by factors like policymaking, health services, and genetics, too.

Let’s have critical debates and conferences on indigenous uses of psychedelics. And let’s have conferences on (mis)conceptions of shamanism, too, that include the many problems that the concept of “shamanism” brings with it when used in a lifestyle context of people seeking personal transformation. (In fact, this has been done by members of the MIND platform many years ago.)9 There is much more to learn about the uses and misuses of indigenous and “shamanic” concepts and this conversation will continue on.

Building conference platforms that appreciate quality and representation

From scientific researchers to spiritual seekers and financial investors, there are many different groups that have divergent interests in psychedelics. And even within those groups, there are countless subgroups that have their individual perspectives on the topic. In the medical science community, for example, there are pharmacologists, neuroscientists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, and many others who have a specific interest in the therapeutic potential of psychedelics. Although this is a very important perspective on psychedelics, it is by far not the only one, as for example philosophers or artists may be drawn to them for varying reasons. A conference and, in general, a discourse needs mechanisms of negotiation and moderation, and it needs to

“define its rationality” (and what counts as a good argument). A conference is not so much – or should not so much be – about the performance of alternative perspectives only.

Unpacking diversity is no easy task. Enacting it is even harder. With INSIGHT 2021, the goal is therefore to provide a transdisciplinary, rationally based platform in which psychedelic research and therapy can be discussed openly, critically, and from multiple perspectives. We take care that the multitude of voices and perspectives on this conference will allow for meaningful, salient conversations to occur. With this conference taking place on-site in Berlin and online via Airmeet, we want to give anyone interested in the field the opportunity to join us for these conversations. In this spirit, we also created the INSIGHT Diversity Fund as part of the MIND Academy Diversity Program, to make INSIGHT more accessible, regardless of socioeconomic status.

If you agree or disagree with some of the points that were mentioned here, or, if you are just curious to learn more about our take on diversity, you can access the recorded content from the INSIGHT conference here if you have an active MIND Membership.

You can view some pictures from our 2019 conference below:

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