MIND FOUNDATION

Clarity and depth

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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 kick-off blog post describes some challenges that are specific to psychedelic conferences. By taking a personal look at the past, I outline questions that need to be addressed to create a rational culture around consciousness.

> ***"(…) Although I'm a frequent participant in similar events, it was the first time I had the impression that there is some vision and the bigger picture behind interesting lectures. The philosophy of enculturation of psychedelics through creating a science-inspired culture of consciousness fills a gap in the contemporary psychedelic renaissance. Once again, thank you!!!"INSIGHT 2019 conference attendee***

There is rapid development in the psychedelic field. This is reflected in the current landscape of organized conferences and the values they are built on. In this blog post, I would like to explain how the MIND group has arrived at shaping INSIGHT the way we do. In short, INSIGHT is a conference that strives to integrate discourses from the natural and social sciences, philosophy and ethics, the arts, and the healthcare industry. At the same time, INSIGHT facilitates a critical discourse on the rationality and ethics in the psychedelic field, its historical roots, and the ideas that drive the current innovations and developments.1

What are the psychedelic conferences of the future going to look like? What *should* they look like? Let's imagine a conference to be a temporary mini-society in which a section of the larger society debates. In such a social space, the question is indeed about *what* is debated but also about *how* it is debated. Content, style, and the vivid contact of speakers with participants define a conference's character.

There are overarching questions that we discuss at INSIGHT:

- What does psychedelic-inspired rationality look like for medicine, society, and culture?
- How can psychedelic experiences support the treatment of mental health patients, strengthen well-being, and at the same time add to the modern process of (political and social) emancipation?
- What would non-individualistic ethics of consciousness look like?

There are no straightforward answers.

The landscape for a debate about psychedelics

Psychedelic research has a long history in psychiatry and anthropology.2,3 However, in the last decades, the discourse on psychedelics and altered states of consciousness has been politicized from the "top" and the "bottom" of society. Due to the illegality of classical psychedelics, the field was defined by academic, therapeutic, and political *sub*cultures – and very often by irrationality and ideology.2

Currently, though, we see the beginnings of a more balanced public debate about psychedelics. This happens both in universities and the general public. Over the last decade, some of the most renowned medical faculties – including Imperial College and Johns Hopkins University – allowed gifted researchers to do clinical work with psychedelics again.4,5 Now that the second wave of psychedelic research has entered dozens of universities, this begins to attract public research funding and kick-starts discussions among regulatory authorities and policymakers. At the same time, new pharma companies are on their way to approving substances like psilocybin and MDMA for the health market, and private companies in psychedelic drug development seek finances on the stock exchange.2,3 Now, even the director of the US's influential National Institutes of Health (NIH), Francis Collins, talks carefully about the promise of psychedelics in mental health.7

Both the US-American FDA and the European Medicines Agency are concerned with the unorthodox questions that psychedelics as a substance class pose to approval and regulation. At the same time, in some countries, a retreat-center market develops as a parallel world primarily in legal gray zones or in the context of illegality.

On February 3rd, 2021, the German government approved a research grant of 2.3 million euros to finance a psilocybin depression study at the Central Institute of Mental Health Mannheim and a second study center at the Clinic for Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Charité Universitätsmedizin.6 The EPIsoDE study is led by Prof. Dr. med. Gerhard Gründer and will treat 144 patients who suffer from treatment-resistant depression (TRD). Therapists and researchers from the MIND Foundation are part of the teams in both study centers. EPIsoDE conducts high-quality clinical research following the standards of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the German Federal Institute of Drugs and Medical Devices (BMBF). Initial qualitative data and the conceptual framework of this new research will be discussed at INSIGHT from September 9-12 in Berlin.

INSIGHT is the platform to talk about all of this and bring our European debates in touch with global developments. We have a genuine European perspective to bring to the table – informed by cultural diversity and striving for open societies, secularism, emancipation, and skepticism against ideologies of all sorts. We ensure that such a debate brings both clarity and depth, empirical data, and subjective experience into a fruitful conversation with one another.

Glimpses into psychedelic conferences of the past decades

Multidisciplinarity at psychedelic conferences has been tried many times before. The topic somehow demands it since the substance class has a rich indigenous, anthropological, natural sciences, and social history.

I entered the debate on psychedelics in Germany as a young student at the historical conference “Welten des Bewusstseins” (Feb 22-25th, 1996, Heidelberg). My later academic mentor Rolf Verres and the ECBS (European College of Consciousness Studies) organized this conference. The ECBS was initiated by the German psychedelic researcher Hanscarl Leuner (1919-1996),8,9, who was a physician with a full professorship at the University of Göttingen, and whose work had yielded many fascinating results. Yet, the medical community did not receive his research well at the time – neither clinically, ethically, nor culturally.

I am looking back with a friendly view of this 1996 conference. It was fascinating to listen to the then nonagenarian and LSD discoverer Albert Hofmann whom I had the privilege to later get to know personally. There were numerous reputable and thoughtful people on stage back then and some whom I would consider iridescent personalities. Academically, the discourse around psychedelics in these years broadly failed to establish a reasonable dialog on psychedelics. To a considerable extent, this was due to a peculiar culture among many people who dealt with the subject from within a psychedelic echo chamber and movement perspective. On the other hand, prejudice and criminalization played their parts, too.

When I reflect on dialogs from the 1990s, I would say that there were some widespread tendencies at these historical conferences.

- Treating psychedelics as “magic pills”
- Equating recreational practices with psychotherapy
- Favoring religious, spiritual, or neo-shamanic concepts over academic theories
- Underscoring the exceptionalism of psychedelic therapy
- Overrating the scientific achievements of the 1960s and 1970s
- Covering tensions between subgroups of a perceived “psychedelic movement.”
- Freezing the subcultural psychedelic aesthetics of the 1960s’ youth and drug cultures
- Ignoring the downsides and ethical challenges of underground therapies
- Politicizing “consciousness” as counterculture
- Blurring the border between authentic spiritualities and escapist, sometimes guruesque and gullible esotericism
- Defining “rationality” as over-intellectuality

This heritage is still alive and is likely growing in the emerging “psychedelic field”.10 The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defined “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. Change may arise from internal struggles or outside forces like governments or industries imposing new rules.11 Many psychedelic conferences of the past have been dominated by various political, spiritual, drug, or countercultural groups1 that had no genuine interest in a scientific approach or “rational” public debate.

In 1996 the phenomena described above stood almost unconnected next to high-level medical and brain research conducted by people like Ernst Pöppel. At the time, there was no reward in building norms on conferences about psychedelic states that would strengthen accountability and a rational dialog. As I googled “Welten des Bewusstseins” today (May 24th, 2021), the first hit on top of the page was the YouTube video of a

presentation by 1960s Harvard researcher Ralph Metzner: "Introduction into the multidimensional world view of shamanic spirituality." The first comment on this video begins with: "Shamanism, alchemy, and yoga…".

Today, we have conferences that either emphasize "research" or "culture" – in the sense of expressing subcultural identities. On the one hand, we have academic insider conferences dominated by neurobiological or biomedical research, rarely by cultural studies. Then, on the other hand, we have various forms of conferences that include the general public. Some of these events gather users of psychedelics with a more recreational, religious, or spiritual identity. Others attract the described groups, the new academic leaders, and the next generation of the psychedelic renaissance. Additionally, several psychedelic conferences have been dominated by social-political issues like cultural diversity, colonialism, and race in the last years.12

A critical history of the phenomenon of psychedelic conferences from the 1960s up until now has yet to be written. I take my observations as a starting point to describe the building blocks of the INSIGHT conference series.

What are the building blocks of the insight conference?

"Psychedelic" conferences of the future (and the discourse in the field in general) need to debate their public culture of rationality. And this cannot be rooted in the self-experience of psychedelics (only), in the traditions of historical, ethnic user groups, or praise for allegedly wisdom-sharing authorities. And such a culture of rationality has to consider the relationship between first-person and third-person perspectives.

At INSIGHT, we will debate the status of psychedelics in medical research, society, economy, and culture in a transdisciplinary sense – across disciplines, methodology, and sectors. The four tracks will cover (1) Treatment, (2) Basic Research, (3) Public Health and Anthropology, and (4) Implementation and Philosophy. In this second edition of INSIGHT, we invite an international audience interested in a science-based dialog and researchers from more than 35 countries. Again, this hybrid conference will be organized at Langenbeck-Virchow Haus in the center of Berlin. *And* we will broadcast all four tracks via live stream into the world.

INSIGHT elements will be elaborated in a series of detailed single blog posts by the MIND Foundation's team members. Here I provide an overview of the aspects along with brief and incomplete "invitations" to reflect and act. Each of these invitations demands in-depth exploration.

Science as a transdisciplinary process

Transdisciplinary applies to research and science communication focused on problems that cross the boundaries of two or more disciplines. This approach also describes how scientific and non-scientific stakeholders facilitate a systemic or "holistic" way of addressing a challenge (like making psychedelic therapies an ethical part of open societies).

Invitations to participants:

- *Make an effort* to expand the limits of your paradigm and methodology
- *Comprehend* diverse approaches from the natural sciences to cultural studies
- *Engage* in authentic, critical dialog with fellow humans and researchers – and avoid the potential lip service of a multidisciplinary, unrelated side-by-side appearance of disciplines
- *Allow* for the exchange and translation of knowledge between researchers and practitioners, e.g., therapists
- *Translate* scientific results to the public and practical knowledge into science

- *Appreciate* that language matters; use metaphors with awareness and translate them into research and back
- *Consider* that “science is a way of thinking much more than it is a body of knowledge” (Carl Sagan)

Philosophy as a tool for the study of essential issues, reason, ethics, and communication

We invite philosophers from different schools of thinking to reflect on subjects as diverse as therapeutic ethics and epistemology (“what and in which sense are psychedelic experiences real?”).

Invitations to participants:

- *Ask* existential questions and listen to diverse answers
- *Appreciate* first- and third-person perspectives as tools for scientific and personal exploration
- *Examine* the principles and consequences of anybody’s experiences, thoughts, and results
- *Explore* the ethics of any state of consciousness

Societal Consequences are the reference point of psychedelic research and therapies

Societies share territories, political authority, and diverse cultural expectations. The scientific investigation of psychedelic states and their *outcome* for societies need to be debated. Most psychedelic research and industry developments currently happen in “Western” and open societies. The relationship to other societies with different value systems has to be considered.

Invitations to participants:

- *Investigate* the values and normative backgrounds of your fellow human beings and researchers
- *Consider* the public health and political consequences of your research for everybody, not only for sub-groups of society
- *Question* ideologies and paradigms, both of dominant Western cultural norms and those related to traditionalist or non-Western approaches to psychedelics
- *Inquire* into the consequences of your science for those who are not part of it
- *Tolerate* others’ opinions
- *Demand* that you and others assume responsibility for their arguments

Conference community as a diverse network of professionals and general audience

Our audience is professionally engaged or generally interested in psychedelic research, therapy, well-being, industry, mental health, arts, and philosophy.

Invitations to participants:

- *Connect with* audiences from more than 35 nationalities on-site and online
- *You’re invited to make use of* MIND’s unique professional networking opportunities on-site and on our live streaming platform Airmeet before, during, and after the conference
- *Test* the MIND Foundation’s online network with our six-month free access for INSIGHT ticket holders to interact, meet or build local groups after the conference
- *Offer support* for those who can’t afford tickets and allow access for underprivileged groups through a donation in MIND’s *diversity program*

- *Support to integrate* patient groups into the conference
- *Translate* conference results into several European and non-European languages in the MIND blog (with 14 languages up as of May 2021)

The emerging psychedelic industry as a stakeholder at the conference

We are including discussions with private and public companies in drug development, clinics, technology, and finance industry groups.

Invitations to participants:

- *Create* a platform for discussions between private and public stakeholders
- *Involve* the government, parliaments, and industry in ethical and research dialogs
- *Access EFPIA standard tickets* for the pharma industry
- *Use* the opportunity to meet financiers for clinical and other research at the conference
- *Ask* questions about ethics and outcomes

Therapy as the key focus in the application of psychedelic states

We combine a solid basic research track with presentations and workshops that focus on applied psychotherapy. Therapists from clinical studies with psychedelics from all over the world attend the conference.

Invitations to participants:

- *Enjoy the opportunities* to meet clinical experts from different backgrounds and therapy schools
- *Attend pre-conference* workshops and receive CME/CE accreditation (for physicians and psychotherapists)
- *Meet and have a coffee/tea* at infob ooths in the main hall and corridors on therapist training opportunities, risk management, and treatment opportunities
- The MIND Foundation has started to build a European network of physicians and psychotherapists interested in working with psychedelic substances and methods – you can test it

Innovation as a key focus for achieving real-life improvements for all stakeholders and society

INSIGHT focuses on the health systems of modern societies. We do not ignore traditional and indigenous societies but focus differently. And we focus attention on the value of innovations around psychedelics – which we strive to assess critically.

Invitations to participants:

- *Engage in a critical dialog* on sustainability, public health outcomes and ethics of drug development, and new clinical concepts
- *Assess* traditional and synergistic practices in the psychedelic field for positive and detrimental effects on indigenous and Western communities, for social development, cultural appropriation, and social justice issues

Self-experience as invitations for those who want to explore, relax and socialize

Separate from the research and clinical program, we offer mindful self-exploration with stroboscopic light, neuromeditation, and immersive art projects.

Invitations to participants:

- *Explore* self-experiential pre-conference workshops and playful on-site opportunities
- *Meditate and relax* in mindfulness rooms

Arts & Music as a communicative and aesthetic tool beyond verbal discourse

The conference space will also be used as an aesthetic space (*Exploratorium*) by MIND's Arts Section in cooperation with "EDGE – blurring the borders between art and neuroscience."

Invitations to participants:

- *Play, reflect* and *immerse* in art and music mainly designed by MIND's Arts Section in cooperation withEDGE
- *Evaluate* how we expand classical conference formats
- *Critically discuss* the role of aesthetics and stereotypes in psychedelic treatment, research, and enculturation

The MIND Foundation is committed to the enculturation of psychedelic states into open and democratic societies, bringing a European perspective to the table and showcasing its key values together with an international audience:

- scientific approach
- innovation
- community
- professionalism
- integrity
- connectedness

Building on this value system, we as conference organizers are helping to shape a rational and responsible culture around psychedelic research and therapies.

The conference's Scientific Committee has taken care of a fair and transparent selection process of speakers, non-scientific contributors, and diversity program applications. Similar to 2019, we will publish a conference report and provide video material of the conference to a global audience. An after-conference series – the Extended INSIGHT – will present quality speakers who could not be chosen to present at the conference because of a lack of time and space.

As MIND's director and OVID co-founder, I will open the conference with an outlook on the latest developments and critical issues to address in psychedelic research and therapy. The principal investigator of the German psilocybin depression study from the Central Institute of Mental Health Mannheim, Prof. Dr. med. Gerhard Gründer, will speak about international developments and discuss the new German psychedelic research that began after more than 2.5 years of thorough preparation.

Prof. Dr. med. Franz Vollenweider, who also presented at the conference “Welten des Bewusstseins” in 1996, will close INSIGHT 2021 this year. After years of concentration on neurobiological methodology in understanding what happens in the brain/mind when under the influence of psychedelic substances, Vollenweider now comes back to a more integrative perspective. He will talk about the (depressed) self – from both a psychodynamic and brain research direction.

We look forward to a lively dialogue about the opportunities and risks of current psychedelic research and therapy. Welcome to one of the most innovative conferences in Europe.

If you missed INSIGHT 2021 or are still interested in the presentations, you can access the recorded content from the INSIGHT conference here if you have an an active MIND Membership.

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