MIND FOUNDATION

Can psychedelics really change the world?

DATE PUBLISHED

6 August 2021



> Rather than adopting a seductive but angelic approach—viewing psychedelics as substances capable of "healing the world"—or a repressive approach based on the fear of these substances becoming tools for "brainwashing," we must recognize what makes them unique among the vast family of psychotropic drugs: their significant sensitivity to extrapharmacological factors.

Psychedelics: Tools for Social Transformation or Vectors of Cultural Transmission?

Recently, a co-founder of the Extinction Rebellion environmental movement publicly called for "mass psychedelic disobedience". During the Breaking Convention 2019 conference, which gathered international specialists on psychedelic substances in London, Gail Bradbrook, PhD, said:

> "I would support a mass civil disobedience where we take medicine (psychedelics) to tell the state that they have absolutely no right to control our consciousness and to define our spiritual practice (…) The causes of the crisis are political, economic, legal and cultural systemic issues but underneath that are issues of human trauma, powerlessness, scarcity and separation. The system resides within us and the psychedelic medicines are opportunities to help us shift our consciousness"1

The environmental activist's comments echo recent interpretations of the data on psychedelics, which suggest that these substances (LSD, but also plants such as those found in ayahuasca, mescaline-containing cactus species, iboga, or various species of psilocybe mushrooms) may encourage users to be more environmentally conscious. Surveys of the general population suggest that experiences with psychedelic drugs might change people's political views and their attitudes towards nature.2 In a recent clinical trial of psilocybin,3 participants scored higher on questionnaires measuring "nature relatedness" and lower on authoritarian views after treatment, with effects persisting for up to a year.

A growing number of scientific studies suggest that these substances can be used to reinforce pro-environmental behaviors and “biophilia”.4 This term, proposed by biologist Edward Osborne Wilson, PhD, refers to the people’s inclination to seek relationships with other living things. While people do not need psychedelics to make contact with nature, users frequently describe the sense of interconnectedness with nature as an important aspect of the psychedelic experience. Recalling the claims of the sixties counterculture, psychedelics are again seen as tools for transforming political opinions, which – some believe – would enable us to face the challenges of our time, especially the ecological crisis.

As appealing as they may seem in a world facing rising nationalism and our collective inability to address the ecological crisis, claims that psychedelics can “heal the world”5 should be met with extreme skepticism. Firstly, even if psychedelic activists have been asserting since the sixties that broader psychedelic use will lead to a more progressive society, there are way too many counterexamples for that to be credible.6 To take a notorious example, the massive use of LSD by the cultish group organized around Charles Manson did not prevent them from developing a racist ideology and committing violent murders in the late sixties in order to start a “race war”.

Secondly, we should not expect broader psychedelic use to automatically make people more environmentally conscious. As I have observed during ethnographic investigations in the Peruvian Amazon over the past ten years, the regular use of ayahuasca in no way prevents some indigenous shaman-entrepreneurs from exploiting the natural territories that they occupy in order to benefit their economic activities. The development of shamanic tourism involved the encouragement of overtourism in the Amazon region, and the activities of reception centers for international clients have often led to the destruction or overexploitation of natural habitats. And while the “shamanic tourists” claim to have developed a different relationship to nature thanks to participating in psychedelic rites, my observations tell a different story. In the long run, their participation only has a very weak impact on their consumption habits or the modes of production in which they are engaged, which sometimes directly, and always indirectly, contribute to the destruction of natural resources. For example, many of them continue to fly regularly in order to participate in the psychedelic rituals provided by the shamanic centers of the Peruvian Amazon. These observations show that while psychedelics can give rise to experiences of feeling more connected to nature, these experiences seem to be more likely to affect peoples’ self-reported connection to nature rather than leading to substantial pro-environmental behavior change.

These examples highlight the fact that, although the cause of legalizing psychedelics has recently progressed alongside scientific and popular interest in their therapeutic properties, this ‘psychedelic renaissance’ is still taking place in a market economy. This point can be further buttressed by considering how, in contrast to the hippies of the sixties using psychedelics for revolutionary purposes, Silicon Valley executives now use psychedelics in microdoses in an attempt to increase their performance, creativity and productivity in a context of strong professional competition.7

To be sure, this commodification of psychedelic substances has been denounced by some leading figures of the psychedelic movement,8 but there is a broader lesson to draw here. Rather than being powerful tools for social transformation, psychedelics thus appear as non-specific – and relatively neutral – amplifiers of existing cultural factors. These observations suggest that the effects of psychedelics on nature-relatedness can be interpreted as a reflection of the prior values of study participants (often Euro-American college students). In this perspective, the alleged impact of psychedelics on our relation to nature may be the product of a selection bias, evoking the well-known systemic bias in conducting psychology studies with participants from “WEIRD” (western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic) societies.9 Euro-American college students, who make up the bulk of the participants in these studies, are indeed known to have a pro-environmental bias

when it comes to self-reported opinions. Far from being a universal panacea capable of “healing the world”, psychedelics might reflect or amplify the dominant values of the individuals that use them.

This interpretation is congruent with comparative anthropological studies showing that while some features of the experiences induced by psychedelics are similar across cultures (e.g., geometric visual hallucinations), others vary extensively. The subjective feeling, meaning, or content of the hallucinations induced by psychedelics are indeed most often consistent with specific cultural expectations.10,11 Anthropologists observing these similarities within the same culture have consequently defended a culturalist approach to psychedelic experiences. Claude Lévi-Strauss,12 for instance, proposed considering hallucinogens as “triggers and amplifiers of a latent discourse that each culture holds in reserve and for which drugs can allow or facilitate the elaboration.”

But how exactly does culture shape hallucinatory content? Some anthropologists suggest focusing on myths and cosmology, kinship systems, iconography, or ritual to make sense of how culture determines non-ordinary changes in perception. I have recently proposed a model called “socialization of hallucinations”,13 which attempts to account for the way in which verbal exchanges and social interactions shape the psychedelic experience by directing attention, expectations, and perception. This question is far from settled, however, and much remains to be done to shed light on the extra-pharmacological factors of the psychedelic experience.14,15

Psychedelics as Tools for Cultural Transmission: Ethical Issues and Political Challenges in the Context of the "Psychedelic Renaissance"

In addition to producing experiences that are strongly influenced by culture, psychedelic substances have another remarkable property: Many observers have noted that the psychedelic experience is frequently marked by a striking feeling of gaining unmediated knowledge.16 The experience is usually received and believed as a revelation, without the felt need for external validation or evidence.17 Insofar as psychedelics produce experiences whose content is strongly influenced by culture, using psychedelics may lead one to feel strongly that the metaphysical claims predominant in one’s culture are true. I claim that these two properties make hallucinogenic substances powerful potential vectors of cultural transmission.

These observations can offer a (partial) explanation for the state of high suggestibility in which hallucinogenic substances place people, which has long been noted as one of the characteristic features of the psychedelic experience.18,19 If the therapeutic efficacy relies on suggestibility, this raises ethical concerns about the kind of influence therapists, shamans and other facilitators are having over their clients, even when therapy goes well.20 In a paper recently written with some colleagues from the Imperial College Centre for Psychedelic Research, we argued that these features of the psychedelic experiences may act as a “double-edged sword”.17 While it may drive therapeutic benefits, the ability of psychedelics to induce feelings of reverence and revelation might lead to problematic effects in the absence of ethical guidelines regulating their use.

The lack of clear ethical guidelines in Euro-American societies for the use of psychedelics – in contrast to indigenous societies, in which these uses are frequently framed by traditional norms – seems to partly explain why some psychedelics have been revived in research, but recently banned in some countries. In France, for instance, the recent prohibition of ayahuasca was motivated by serious governmental concerns about the possible use of the psychedelic brew by so-called “cult” groups for the purpose of psychological manipulation and “brainwashing”21. While the validity of these concerns can be debated, the ability of psychedelics to increase the assumed veracity of cultural propositions and the reverence for the holders of those propositions raises serious ethical implications that need to be carefully considered. A better understanding of how context

influences the hallucinogenic experience is therefore necessary for identifying and minimizing the risks specific to these substances, and ultimately increasing potential positive effects.14

Exploring The Singularities Of Hallucinogenic Substances: Towards Psychedelic Technologies

Without denying the fact that psychedelics have their own effects due to their neuro-pharmacological properties, the psychedelic experience remains strongly shaped by the norms and values of the social groups of those who use them. Rather than opting for a seductive but angelic approach – seeing psychedelics as substances capable of "healing the world" – or a repressive approach based on the fear of seeing these substances become tools for "brain washing", we must recognize what makes these substances unique among the large family of psychotropic drugs: their great sensitivity to extraphamarcological factors.

This attention to the singular properties of psychedelics leads us to think of the psychedelic experience as always already caught up in a cultural and social dimension, and opens the perspective to uncover "psychedelic technologies". I call "psychedelic technologies" the singular social devices composed of material, discursive, and interactional elements, which have the property, whether consciously designed for this purpose or not, of shaping the user's experience. Since the development of Western societies' interest in psychedelics during the 20th century, multiple psychedelic technologies have emerged, particularly in the United States.22 Institutions and individuals have developed specific devices for the use of psychedelics for psychiatric, military, psychotherapeutic, spiritual, or political purposes, but also to develop artistic creativity or technical innovation. For each of these uses, specific technical devices involving the use of psychedelics (i.e. psychedelic technologies) were invented in order to control and direct the effects of these substances in order to serve a specific social purpose.

The psychiatric devices developed by Humphrey Osmond to treat patients with alcohol use disorder,23 the experiments of Oscar Janiger with the artists of Los Angeles24 or those led by the CIA within the framework of the Mk-Ultra project25 thus offer the example of three types of different psychedelic technologies developed in North America in the 1950s around the same substance: LSD.

Clinical researchers are now working to develop psychedelic technologies for the treatment of mental health disorders. The acute attention to the importance of extra-pharmacological factors in the psychedelic experience distinguishes the recent wave of clinical research on these substances from that of the 1950s.15 As legal restrictions around these substances are now slowly relaxing in the countries making up the Global North, this may be the beginning of the emergence of multiple psychedelic technologies. Recent work suggests, for example, that psychedelics could be used in peace processes in the context of socio-political or military conflicts.26

This opens up the prospect of a systematic exploration of extra-pharmacological factor in the psychedelic experience, the arrangement of which constitutes "psychedelic technologies". This could allow us to better understand which specific factor transforms a certain aspect of the psychedelic experience and thus influences the user's experience and subsequent worldview. This better understanding of the dynamic of the psychedelic experience could lead to the development of more accurate and effective psychedelic technologies.

These upcoming psychedelic technologies may put these substances at the service of artistic practices, for example, but also of uses that are more ethically questionable, such as commercial, political, or military ends. In view of the remarkable properties of psychedelics I have outlined here, the scientific community, as well as the community of psychedelic users, must therefore keep a watchful eye on the emerging uses of psychedelics and their ethical implications in the near future.

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