

INVESTIGATING THE PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE

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The discovery of the psychedelic drugs marks the greatest advance yet made in the field of psychology. During the last 150 years there has been a remarkable acceleration in the rate of advance in the physical sciences and their attending technology. The psychedelics offer the means of a parallel advance—or, indeed, revolution—in social understanding and human relations.

While, at the present time, techniques are so crude that only holistic and subjective data can be drawn from the experience, this difficulty in no way alters the importance of the phenomenon. It simply indicates that we are ill prepared to describe it. Before any precise description of the LSD experience is possible, a rough mapping of the area seems necessary. At present there is a confusion of purpose and of techniques on the part of the experimenters. Some subjects take the drug and become ill, some become psychotic, while others have transcendental reactions.

Three characteristic patterns of experience may be observed:

1. If the subject attempts to fight off the psychological effects and to deny that anything is happening to him, he can only do so by distracting his attention from the developing symptoms. This may be accomplished, at least temporarily or in part, by either of two methods: (a) By a flight into ideas—a total concentration upon some concepts or series of concepts—the subject can inhibit awareness of the psychological changes taking place. He becomes garrulous, seriously

intent and extremely tense. (b) By concentrating upon the physical effects of the drug, the subject can fight off psychological change. Physical effects are more understandable to him and he can rationalize any peculiar psychological changes as stemming from physical body disturbances. He maintains his usual psychological frame of reference at the expense of his soma. He complains continuously of pain and illness and may express an intense fear of dying.

2. If, on the other hand, the person does not try to fight off the effects but attempts to explain them to himself and to rationalize the experience within his usual frame of reference, he develops a model psychosis. It is from these particular varieties of experience that the use of the terms hallucinogen and psychotomimetic agent have arisen in connection with LSD 25 and mescaline. There seems to be two major patterns of response observable: (a) If the subject tries to interpret each image or idea as it comes to him, he rapidly falls behind in his interpretation, the rationalizing mechanism is swamped, and a vast jumble of uninterpretable experiences leads to a state of stunned confusion. (b) If the subject tries to rationalize everything that happens as being a result of the drug, he finds himself outside his usual reality. He denies the possibility that reality may be more extensive and complex than he has previously believed. Thus, he decides he is psychotic and attempts to get back to reality. He cannot. Doubt overwhelms him and he becomes paranoid.

3. Finally, if the subject attempts neither escape nor explanation, a psychedelic reaction is almost certain to occur.

In the area of paranormal phenomena, people who take the drug together find that an empathic bond is frequently established between them; each is directly aware of the feelings of the other. The development of methods of extension and refinement of this awareness offers scope for extremely important and interesting research. The major concern, however, must be the development of suitable tools. Using the scientific and experimental methods of present day psychology in the field of paranormal investigation is like trying to measure the distance to the moon with a yardstick.