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“It’s like shrooms times a million, plus aliens”: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of experiential accounts from recreational Ayahuasca users

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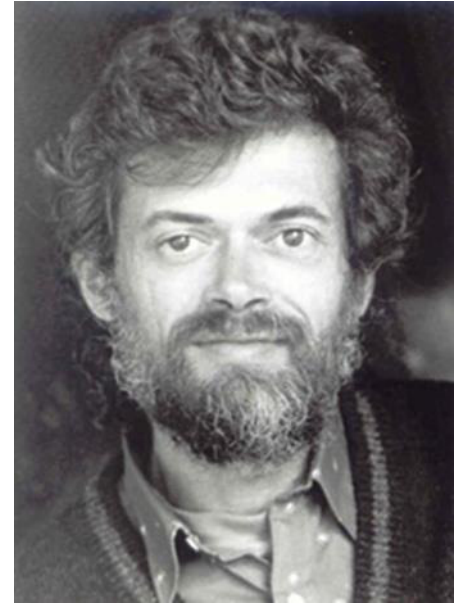


Overview

- Background history
- Literature review
- Philosophical rationale
- Methodological rationale
- Preliminary research findings
- Future implications for further research

Terence McKenna (1946-2000)

*“Ayahuasqueros use sound and suggestion to direct healing energy into parts of the body and unexamined aspects of an individual’s personal history where **psychic tension** has come to rest. Often these methods exhibit startling parallels to the techniques of modern psychotherapy; at other times they seem to represent an understanding of possibilities and **energies still unrecognized by western theories of healing.**”*



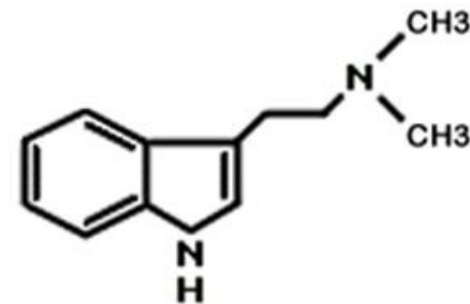
Ayahuasca (yáge) historical background

- Scientific investigation of ayahuasca originates from the work of Richard Spruce (1850s)
- American anthropologist Dobkin de Rios popularised anecdotal evidence of ayahuasca in 1970s
- Plant medicine traditionally consumed in Peruvian Amazonia
- Religious organized practice since 1930s (Santo Diame, União do Vegetal & Barquinha)
- Ceremony carried by “ayahuascero” or “shaman”



Ayahuasca (yáge) pharmacology

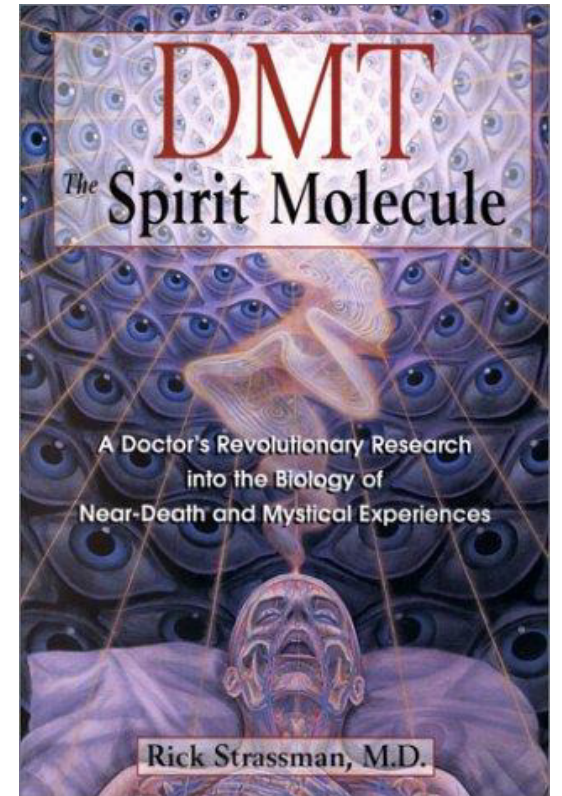
- Ayahuasca is typically brewed by combining Banisteriopsis Caapi (contains alkaloids, harmine, harmaline and tetrahydroharmine) and Psychotria Viridis (N, N-dimethyltryptamine) (Barbosa, Giglio & Dalgalarrrondo, 2005)
- Ayahuasca impacts on the serotonergic neurotransmission pathway and binds itself to the serotonin 2A receptor sites
- DMT endogenous in the natural world in plants and animal species (perhaps humans?)



N,N-dimethyltryptamine

DMT: The Spirit Molecule

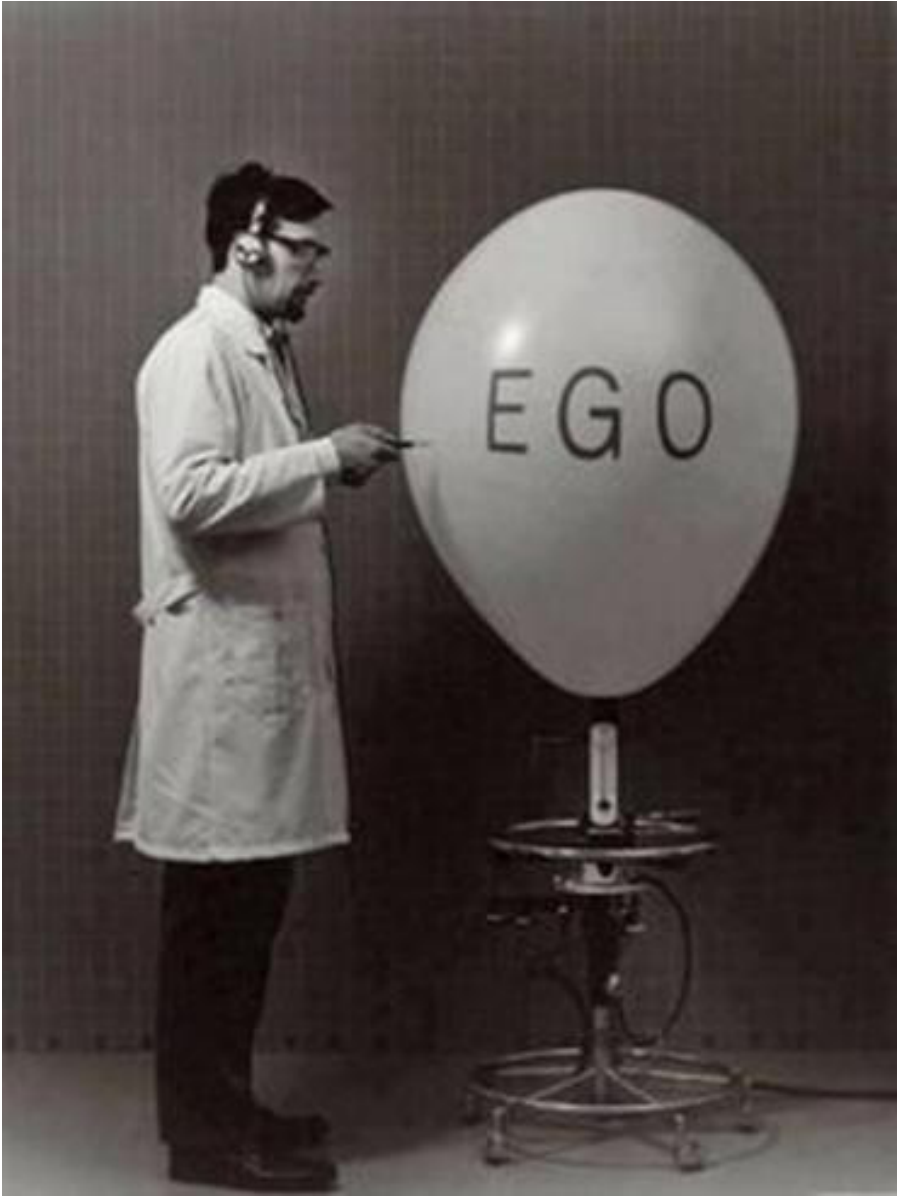
- Strassman's (2001) research at University of New Mexico, intravenously injected low to high dose DMT into 60 volunteers
- Lucid encounters with alien intelligence, mystical experiences and access to hidden unresolved emotional traumas
- Tryptophan (similar to the serotonin molecule in structure)
- Nearly zero toxicity profile (Jacob & Presti, 2005)
- Most potent consciousness-altering compound known to man (Gallimore, 2013)
- DMT-nexus (forum of DMT users trip reports entering hyperspace)



Transpersonal psychology

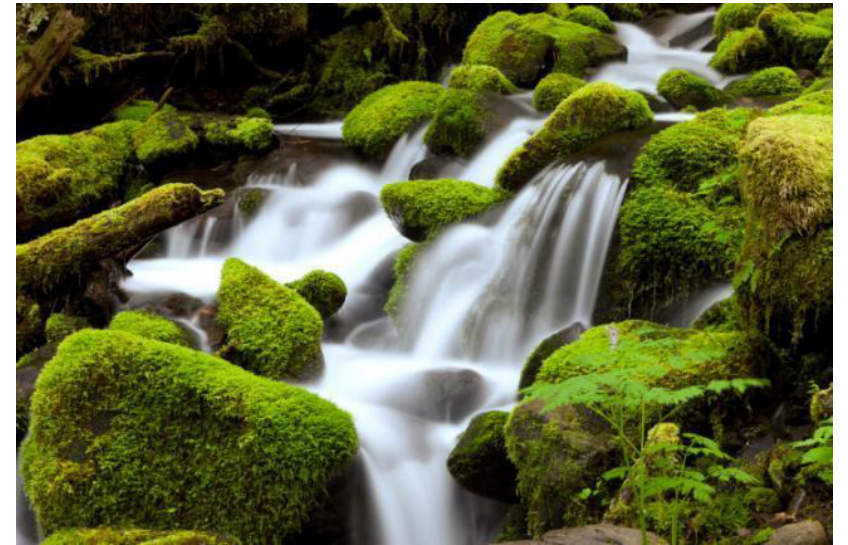
- Transpersonal can be understood as ‘beyond ego’ and ‘transcending self’
- Entheogens allow one to enter divine realms of consciousness only once heard of in religious texts and fables (Fadiman, Grob, Bravo, Agar & Walsh, 2003)
- ‘Ecodelic’ refers to awakening one to the planet’s ecological crisis, to cure the human ego (Friedman, 2002 ; Luke, 2013)
- Grof (2008) see’s postmodern society as a rushed attempt to fix humanity’s cultural values and belief systems
- Renaissance of Eastern esoteric mysticism; Buddhism, Taoism etc.





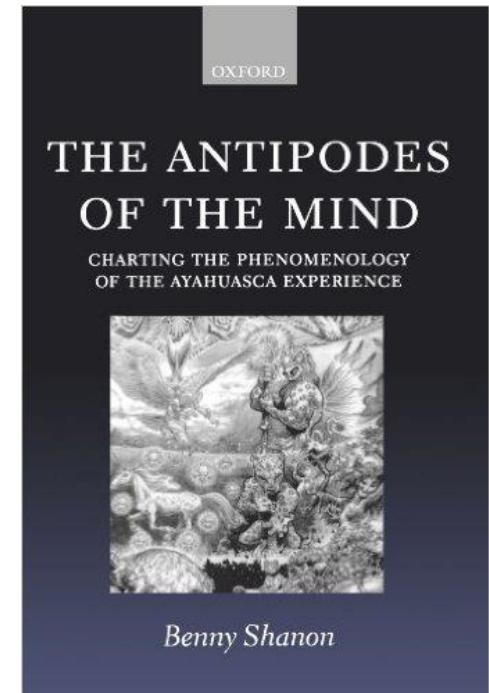
Transpersonal psychotherapy

- Kasprow and Scotton (1999) emphasize the goal for psychedelics and transformational therapy is to deepen one's understanding of existential anguish and to become more aware of one's connection with the cosmic cycle of death and rebirth
- Dr. Salvador Roquet's entheogenic underground practice in Mexico city. Treated over 600 psycho-spiritually 'sick' humans, plant medicines including; Impomea Violaea and Datura ceratocalulum
- Wilber's (2000) integral framework; holon's of consciousness and blockages in consciousness



Shanon (2002) The antipodes of the mind

- Largest known assemblage of ayahuasca experiential data in western science, a typology of experiences
- Shanon (2002) actively participated in 130 ayahuasca sessions in Brazil and Ecuador
- One hundred and seventy eight participants and healers completed 178 semi-structured interviews
- Findings; each experience is phenomenologically unique and complex, internal invasions of snakes common, the “force” a powerful entity prevalent in most reports
- Experiential cartography; enchantment of world, powerful penetrating energy, ego death, colourful visualisations of a “4th dimensional nature”, fractal and sacred geometric patterns



Ayahuasca's potential therapeutic application in western civilisation?

- McKenna (2003) views ayahuasca's primary purpose is for healing individuals both psychologically and spiritually
- Shepard Jr's (2004) 3 dimensions of ayahuasca healing; physical (somatic ailments; gastrointestinal infections and tooth decay), psychological (dependency and depression) and thirdly spiritual existentialism
- Growing spread of ayahuasca tourism from Europe and North America (Trichter, 2010)



Methodology: Qualitative interviews

- Qualitative methodology (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis)
- Understanding participants experiences through the “hermeneutic circle”
- Person-in-context approach
- Face-to-face semi-structured interviews provided respondents opportunity to describe in detail their ayahuasca experiences and transformative impacts on their lives
- Semi-structured interviews allow collect rich data which can be analysed on multiple levels of interpretation (Turner, 2010)

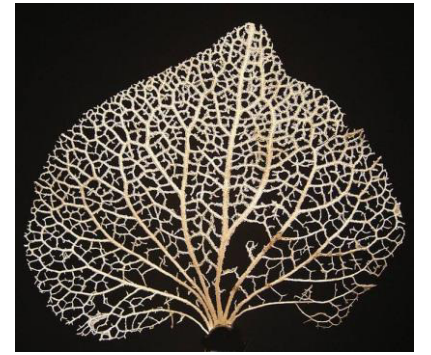
Methodology: Participants

- Anonymous volunteering sample
- Three participants (1 male and 2 females) age range 18-41 yrs, based on Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2007) recommendation for an MSc dissertation
- Participants were requested to be "experienced users"
- All participants had consumed ayahuasca in the year prior to interview, all had time for "integration"
- 2 face-face interviews in London, 1 through Skype (all interviews audiotaped) lasting 1-1 ½ hours long

Methodology: Ethical steps

- Ayahuasca scheduled class 1 drug in UK law (Misuse of Drugs Act, 1971) it is not illegal to disclose experiences nor is it illegal to be intoxicated on ayahuasca, as long as participant did not display possession or intend to supply the researcher was under no legal obligation to disclose to authorities
- We could not prevent users carrying ayahuasca but due to its sacramental use and the fact it is not a 'street-drug' this risk was calculated
- Confidentiality; pseudonyms used, participants provided researchers email address to withdraw data
- Interviews took place in location suitable to participant

Theoretical Framework



- Drawing from process philosophy
 - Metaphysical approach (abstract concepts, time, identity, being, becoming)
 - Focus on differential experiences as formed by the past, immediate present and future (not grounded in scientific discourse)
- Process philosophy – prevalent in critical social psychology research
 - The philosophy of Being rather than Becoming has dominated Western thought (Mesle, 2008, Smith, 2012)
- In this paper, drawing from Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead – expectancy/anticipation

Theoretical Framework



- Bergson (1859-1941)
- Focus on memory and time
- Memory – what we perceive as the present is constituted of the past – all perception includes memory (Sjostedt-Hughes, 2015)
- Present activity is always a combination of the past and potential future experience shaped according to present context (Tucker, 2013)
- As soon as we consciously consider the present it is in the past
- Time (not like a clock in linear motion) – ‘duration’ the form/intensity of relational experience – flow of continuity

Theoretical Framework

- Non-cognitive – focus on psychological experience (Tucker, 2013)
- Continuity – every past is – past- present – future (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004; Tucker, 2013)
- Social remembering – when we recall experiences they are constituted of the past, present and future (socially context bound) not purely cognitive

Theoretical Framework

- Alfred North Whitehead – links with Bergson but more a focus on the future than Bergson (memory)
- Future self-identity, purging, psychological experience important within this research
- Individuals who take *Ayahuasca* have an expectation of what can happen – enveloped within the past and present too

Theoretical Framework

- Relational process – future formed through forms of anticipation (Tucker, 2013)
- What we do in the future is based on our present/past experiences
- What do participants want from taking Ayahuasca?
- Why is this different from taking other psychedelics?



Theoretical Framework

- Ontological creativity does not resonate with Western thinking (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004; Smith, 2012)
- “The ‘creative advance’ is the application of this ultimate principle of creativity to each novel situation which it originates”. (ANW, 1978,pg 21)
- The ‘event is key’ (Massumi, 1998)
- Move away from ‘fixed’ positions of experience allowing for anti-establishment events to occur (psychedelics, mental health distress)

IPA Analysis

“Like the time before is very intense and it’s completely different (J: is this advice given by the shamans or?) no this is something I experience, like [before] going to this thing, lots’ of changes started happening in my life before that, for months you know emotionally, mentally, physically I started changing my habits... I’m taking [this] very seriously and I started preparing myself so I start meditating more, I start to not going to parties, you know remove myself from people that are too intense and just try to get in the space of observation and preparation and silence in stillness...” (Andel, 2015)

IPA Analysis

“I’m sure there were a few people here who already had the experience but there was a lot of first timers (J: how did you feel at this point?) I felt a little bit anxious the whole day, because you have the activities but the funny thing is that the closer I was getting to the moment, thoughts were disappearing cos I really was preparing for the moment for *years* basically and all of a sudden I’m sitting there and after making all these preparations, Peter [the ayahuasca coordinator] calmed the whole place he asked the bad spirits to stay out the good ones to come in, [there] was lots of ritual around it”
(Andel, 2015)

IPA Analysis

“I felt so happy, at the moment I wasn’t feeling excited or fear, just finally like you know, I was gulping it down like good feeling (?) and just down it like ya know and then really like 15-30 minutes after that, I start tripping, I could see things coming out the floor and (J: was it erm like a, was the initial psychedelic effects like other sorts of psychedelics?) I was comparing it like the strongest acid trip in the first 5 minutes (J: really) the first 5 minutes yeah (J: 5 minutes) ya know because as soon as it was simply morphing and very fluid, very like things coming out of the floor and some everything morphing and falling down and my head if I put it on the floor just melts erm and it was just was like ah oh my God this is too strong...” (Andel, 2015)

IPA Analysis

“January this year I was going through [life] a bit unhappy with everything and then my friend just came back [from an ayahuasca retreat] and she was radiant and she told me about her experiences and I thought hmm maybe that could be something that could help me with these certain issues that I had lingering for years and years but I would always push aside and say that’s not important [I] can deal with that...” (Chloe, 2015)

IPA Analysis

“I was feeling so bad it was just dread it felt like... fear, just to put it in context in that particular ceremony I was dragged.. into this place that would present itself to me as hell, this is the place where all the evil all the bad feelings and bad thoughts and everything happen... so it was my 2nd ceremony... it instantly took me to this really horrible place and I just felt it was a feeling of dread of fear and like um of experiencing all the pain of the world like everything that’s evil, it’s here, comes from here, everything wrong and in the ceremony I was screaming, I was crying, I was asking them take me out of here and.. why is this, why does this exist and (J: Yeah) it was horrendous and they took me to a little room where I would come down...” (Chloe, 2015)

IPA Analysis

“I placed a lot of faith in the ayahuasca, in terms of thinking it can deliver answers to me that can deliver healing and coping strategies and things” (Sarah, 2015)

“You are opening yourself up, it’s that you are willing to hear and to learn it, it helps you feel like a better person which you can put into actions and confidence and behaviours. Therefore, it does have a wider impact on those around you” (Sarah, 2015)

“The key to humanity’s existence is in the memory I’m gonna pop into your DNA, it’s not gonna become activated until you’ve taken a psychedelic” (Sarah, 2015)

IPA Analysis

“You gotta go with open-heart with open-mind... cos there’s... I think part of what makes it work is this idea that you go for your day of reckoning ya know what I mean, judgement day and it’s Ok I’m ready for it now gonna face what it’s about and you can only do that if you have spiritual beliefs” (Sarah, 2015)

Future implications

- Data still to be fully analysed...
- Psychedelic substance use and identity in Britain
- Social progression of psychedelic compounds (LSD vs. DMT)
- Further focused qualitative analysis into the 'spiritual' experiences (connectivity, on the 'right' path, cosmic awareness)
- Further clinical research required in ayahuasca's physical and psychological healing effects



Thank you!



For further information on the study contact;
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