



# THE VALUE OF EXPERIENCE

Psychedelics, phenomenology and  
contemporary perspectives on drug use

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The Value of Experience: Psychedelics, phenomenology and  
contemporary perspectives on drug use

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## ABSTRACT

The use of psychedelic substances has become an emerging trend during the last decade. Perhaps this is due to the substances effects, inducing processes of *autognosis* (meaning self-knowledge by the process of self-analysis). To better understand this phenomenon, fieldwork was conducted among groups and individuals in Oslo who use psychedelic substances with various introspective intentions. The thesis addresses individuals' experiences and the sociality in between, situated in a wider cultural context by asking: *What is the value of experience? How do these actors conceptualize, articulate and structure their psychedelic experiences? How might these personal experiences affect their social world, and in turn, how do the social context affect their psychedelic practice?* Drawing on the analysis of ethnographic data, inspired by phenomenological theory, I argue the value of the psychedelic experience is the emotional, sensorial and affective experience of the psychedelic *space*, which stimulates new insights and novel perspectives (*a 'radical experience'*). New perspectives subsequently lead to a change in habitual orientation. Other bodily practices, such as yoga and floatation, are recognized and practiced due to similar functions. Sociality around these substances is structured on the basis of individual intentions and preferences in outcome, as mindset and contextual environment (*'set and setting'*) are variables that interact with the experience itself. The seemingly ineffable character of these experiences means that sharing them by the way of narrative, both in person and through other *psychedelic mediums*, help participants conceptualize and integrate these experiences into their existing cultural framework. These other mediums of translating the psychedelic experience, such as podcast and visionary art, become collectivization of knowledge on a larger scale. The sharing of experiences, communal knowledge and the contextual circumstance of illegality, create exclusive *psychedelic communities*. On the basis of these arguments, I suggest that in order to understand these communities and their behavior, there is great scientific value in interpreting this social phenomenon from the perspective of the psychedelic experience itself by utilizing phenomenological theory and methods.



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# INTRODUCTION

## AN EMERGING TREND

On a cold February evening in 2017, I find myself in a packed conference hall in Oslo City. The room is filled with people of all ages, from white bearded men in suits, to young women with tattoos and dreadlocks. We are all gathered to hear a talk by Paul Austin, whose mission it is to “change the way in which mainstream culture perceives psychedelic substances”<sup>1</sup>.

On this particular evening, the topic of the talk is “microdosing”, a new and trending way of approaching the use of psychedelics. According to Austin’s website, entitled ‘The Third Wave’; “Microdosing is the act of integrating sub-perceptual doses of psychedelics, such as LSD or Psilocybin Mushrooms, into your weekly routine for higher levels of creativity, more energy, increased focus, and improved relational skills”.

The young, confident and articulate speaker comes out on stage. He begins by thanking the organizers of the event, for all they have done for the wider “community”. He continues;

“Community is more important now than it ever has been, as we face certain socioeconomic issues, ecological issues and mental health issues. I think community, and building community, is at the center point of overcoming a lot of these problems that we are dealing with as a culture and as a society. And I think psychedelics, specifically, will play a facilitating role in helping to heal a lot of this past trauma that we have dealt with as a world”.

For the next hour and a half, the attendees listen attentively, as Austin explains how LSD and ‘magic mushrooms’ are changing people’s lives. The popularity of these types of events, attended by a wide variety of individuals, tells the story of a cultural trend in perceptions towards psychedelic substance use. Austin’s lecture is not the beginning of the story however, as over the last decade or so, the use of psychedelic substances have become increasingly

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<sup>1</sup> From the Third Wave website: [www.thridwave.com](http://www.thridwave.com)

popular. Not only as recreational drugs or only in micro doses, but as a pharmacological tool for personal growth through drug-induced altered states of consciousness (ASC)<sup>23</sup>.

This particular state of consciousness gives access to ‘the psychedelic experience’. The nature of the ‘psychedelic’ is suggested by the word itself – blending the Greek words psyche (mind) and delion (manifesting), translatable into the phrase ‘making the mind visible’. The term denotes the substances’ psychoactive effects, as psychedelics are known to induce ASC. This may entail changes in perception, understanding of time, spatial awareness and understanding of self (Studerus et al. 2011: 1434). As ‘temporality’, ‘perception’, ‘space’ and ‘personhood’ are fundamental concepts in anthropological discourse, the use of psychedelics raise interesting questions for anthropologists to address.

In light of this, this thesis will focus on the contemporary use of psychedelic substances. The thesis is based upon fieldwork among psychedelic users in Oslo, who adhere to the notion of psychedelic use as a means of introspection and personal growth. It will address individuals’ experience and the sociality in between, as situated within a wider cultural context. The research questions are:

***What is the value of experience? How do these actors conceptualize, articulate and structure their psychedelic experiences? How might these personal experiences affect their social world, and in turn, how does the social context affect their psychedelic practice?***

Drawing on the analysis of ethnographic data, I will argue that the value of the psychedelic experience was the emotional, sensorial and affective experience of the psychedelic ‘space’, which stimulated novel insights and perspectives. Other bodily practices were recognized and practiced due to similar functions. Furthermore, the sociality of psychedelic experience seems to be formed on the basis of individuals’ various intentions and preferences of outcome, as mindset and contextual setting influence the experience itself. In addition, the seemingly ineffable character of these experiences, meant that sharing the experiences by the way of narrative, both in person and through other (translocal) ‘psychedelic mediums’, helps the

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<sup>2</sup> “...any mental state(s), induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological maneuvers (*sic*) or agents, which can be recognized subjectively by the individual himself (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a sufficient deviation in subjective experience or psychological functioning from certain general norms for that individual during alert, waking consciousness” (Ludwig 1969: 9).

<sup>3</sup> See media references (1)

participants conceptualize and integrate these experiences into their existing cultural framework. The sharing of experiences, communal knowledge through narrative and the contextual circumstance of illegality, created exclusive psychedelic communities.

## ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

The use of psychedelic plants in rituals and spiritual practices, have been found in cultures all over the world (Dobkin de Rios 1984). Therefore, it is not surprising anthropologists have had an interest in these practices, exemplified in David Aberle's (1966) book "The Peyote Religion among the Navaho" and later on Michael Harner's (1980) famous "The Way of the Shaman". A comprehensive amount of anthropological research has attended to such topics since then, and compared to other disciplines, the study of psychoactive plant practices among traditional communities is rich (Castaneda 1968, La Barre 1969, Furst 1972, Dobkin de Rios 1984).

The research on contemporary psychedelic practices in a western context, especially within Norwegian academia, is limited. There are several published master theses within social anthropology and religious studies, looking into the religious or neo-spiritual aspects of psychedelic practices (Bjercke 2004, Seljestad 2011, Galaaen 2015), as well as Per Kristian Hilden's (2008) published research on 'pharmacological rationality'. The latter is an online inquiry of participants who experiment with both prescribed and illegal substances, as a way of optimizing physical health and well-being. Even so, it is my impression that the topic of contemporary psychedelic practices in Norway is insufficiently mapped.

There are numerous Norwegian research projects which have looked at the role of illegal substances in general, many of which are conducted through institutes like the Norwegian Center for Addiction Research (Norw. SERAF)<sup>4</sup> and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (Norw. FHI)<sup>5</sup>. These studies generally focus on the mechanisms of problematic drug use or drug abuse, in the spirit of finding solutions to social and institutional problems. This focus is understandable, as the Norwegian society faces challenges of high overdose statistics<sup>6</sup>, alcoholism and opioid addictions (Skretting et.al 2016).

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<sup>4</sup> SERAF publications: <http://www.med.uio.no/klinmed/forskning/sentre/seraf/publikasjoner/>

<sup>5</sup> NIPH publications: <https://www.fhi.no/en/sys/news/?blockId=49621&ownerPage=45525&language=en>

<sup>6</sup> See reference list: Media reference (2)

It is my impression however, there are improvements to be made in the scientific understanding of drug users who fall outside such categories of drug abuse. I believe this is a fruitful area of inquiry, not only for understanding the role and meaning of drugs in our society, but also to gain a better understanding of drug abuse by comparison. Mapping the different groups and practices of drug use outside categories such as alcoholism or opioid addiction, can possibly shed some light upon how different types of substances distinctively shape our social world. This thesis will therefore portray the experiences and social worlds relating particularly to psychedelic substances<sup>7</sup>.

I have approached the psychedelic experience, and associated sociality, from an anthropological perspective influenced by phenomenological theory. Observing participants experiences as they are enacted and described, I sought to better understand how psychedelics are perceived as lived experience, in hopes of producing new understanding of the meanings and value accustomed thereof (Desjarlais, Throop 2011: 88). Socioeconomic conditions, historical legacies and cultural contexts are also part of any clear understanding of drug use as a social phenomenon. However, to gain a deeper understanding of psychedelic phenomena and related behaviors, there seems to be a need for a closer look at the experiences themselves, carefully de-essentializing the preconceived cultural conceptions that come with terms such as ‘drugs’ or ‘drug user’.

This focus does not exclude taking structural contexts into consideration, especially in regards to topics such as illegality and technology. When addressing these matters however, I will first and foremost try to engage with the experiential content of relevant practices. The theoretical framework is therefore to a large extent inspired by researchers that are influenced by phenomenological methods and theories, notably Victor Turner, Bruce Kapferer, Robert Desjarlais and Jason Throop.

Before I present the ethnographic data on Oslo-based contemporary uses of psychedelic substances, I want to draw the contours of the complex historical context behind this topic. The use of these substances in a western context, dates back over a century, meaning many incidents, perspectives and influences have played a part in where we are today. The

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<sup>7</sup> As I will get back to in the next subchapter, I have not drawn a sharp line of relevance between or around the various psychedelics being used, though the data material has tended towards the so-called classical psychedelics, primarily LSD and ‘magic mushrooms’ (psilocybin), thus not excluding ‘others’ such as dissociatives (e.g. ketamine) or entactogens (e.g. MDMA).

following history of psychedelics will reiterate common narratives found in the popular literature on psychedelics, because it intentionally reflects the histories in which the participants in this inquiry seemingly adhere. Understanding the historical context is a part of comprehending how participants came to develop their experiential and symbolic relationship to psychedelics.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF PSYCHEDELICS

As previously mentioned, psychedelic substances have been used in traditional societies for centuries. However, in western society, the so-called ‘first wave’ of scientific inquiry into psychedelics crashed around 1880 – 1930, mainly revolving around the substance ‘mescaline’ and related practices of ‘peyote shamanism’ (Langlitz 2013: 11-13). Academics ranging from botanist, pharmacist, anthropologist and philosophers, were fascinated by psychedelic substances, often due to their personal experience. During this time, the German pharmacologist Louis Lewin labeled different psychoactive drugs, giving us the terms ‘euphorians’ (such as opium), ‘inebriants’ (such as alcohol) and ‘phantastica’ (which later became known as psychedelics) (Sessa 2017: 69-72).

Today the term psychedelic seems somewhat ambiguous; as in what type of substances are to be regarded as psychedelic? The ‘classical’ psychedelic substances are LSD, psilocybin (active compound in ‘magic mushrooms’), DMT (active compound in Ayahuasca) and mescaline (active compound in Peyote or San Pedro cactus). However, substances such as ketamine, MDMA and ibogaine are often considered psychedelics due to their comparable ‘psychedelic effects’ in terms of the phenomenological experience (Sessa 2017: 34-67). In the context of this thesis, the term *psychedelics* is used to describe substances the participants regard as psychedelic, generally relating to their personal experience, as well as common pharmacological and cultural categories. Our definition is therefore broader than the classic psychedelics alone, including the most commonly referred substances such as LSD, psilocybin, DMT, mescaline, ketamine, MDMA, and ibogaine, though not excluding the whole range of other types and pharmacological derivatives.

The second wave of psychedelic interest started in 1938, when the chemist Albert Hoffman unintentionally discovered the compound lysergic acid diethylamide-25, which is now known as LSD. During this project, he originally wanted to develop a drug which could constrict

blood vessels, by compounds derived from the fungus known as ergot. As Hoffman did not see any immediate relevance, LSD was put on the shelves for some years before he reviewed it again. During the making of a new batch, he unintentionally contaminated himself with a small dose of the substance. This action resulted in what is now known as the first ever LSD experience (Langlitz 2013: 25-26). The experience fascinated Hoffman, and he decided to try it again a few days later. On April 19, 1943, he intentionally took 0,25 milligrams of LSD and spent the day riding his bicycle through the countryside of Basel, Switzerland (Sessa 2017: 72-73). Over half a decade later, April 19<sup>th</sup> is now known as 'Bicycle Day', a global celebration of Hoffmann's discovery.

In 1947, the first academic description of the effects of LSD on humans was published, and hundreds of them followed in the succeeding decade. Due to the substance's cognitive effects, it was distributed and used by professionals within psychiatry. Therefrom it was used in researching mental illness, as the effects of the substance was said to produce a type of temporary psychosis (Langlitz 2013: 27).

Other scientists interpreted the effects of psychedelics as what they called a 'mystical experience' (Pahnke 1963). This term became prevalent due to a research project called the 'Good Friday Experiment', administered by Walter Pahnke at Harvard Divinity School. The project was conducted with a participant group of young pastors in training, using psilocybin mushrooms. Among the research subjects, the psychedelic experience was articulated as one of the most sacred religious experiences of their lives, which they continued to proclaim as they were interviewed decades later (Doblin 1991).

The psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond also used the substance LSD in alcohol dependency treatment (Langlitz 2013: 28). The positive results of the treatment was contributed to the transformative experiences of psychedelics, the 'mystical experience', in which programs such as Alcohol Anonymous (AA) in the US is based upon for success (Bateson 1971: 14-16). The theory was people with substance dependence needed a moment of revelation, or a significant turning point, in which to change their cognitive and behavioral patterns. Perhaps an unknown fact to the millions of members in AA today, is the founder Bill Wilson saw great potential at the time of adopting LSD therapy as a part of the AA program (Sessa 2017: 80-84).



Psychedelics also became prevalent among artistic communities, acting as a source of creative inspiration. Many famous artists, writers and influencers were introduced to psychedelics during this time of the 'Beat generation', the forerunners of the counterculture in the 60's and 70's. Among them, was the famous poet Alan Ginsberg, who was introduced to LSD by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson in his experiments at Stanford Mental Research Institute. In the aftermath of this experiment, Ginsberg wrote the famous poem 'Lysergic Acid', attributed to his psychedelic experience (Sessa 2017: 128).

A Harvard professor, by the name of Timothy Leary, was introduced to psilocybin mushrooms during a trip to Mexico. When he returned to the US after this experience, he decided to dedicate his career to the study of psychedelic substances. According to Leary; "I learned more about my brain and its properties in the five hours after taking these mushrooms than I had in the proceeding fifteen years of studying and doing research in psychology" (Sessa 2017: 89).

Soon after, Leary and his colleagues Richard Alpert (now known as Ram Dass) and Ralph Metzner, set up several research projects using synthesized psilocybin. The British researcher Michael Hollingshead, having heard about the psychedelic Harvard professors, showed up at Leary's office in 1961. With him, he had a (now infamous) mayonnaise jar, containing five thousand user doses of LSD. Subsequently this turned into an expansion of the psychedelic research project, but also due to Leary's unconventional methods of enquiry, the start of a wider distribution of LSD to participants outside the controlled experiments. This loosening of boundaries and scientific regulation, eventually lead to Leary being fired from Harvard (Sessa 2017: 88-91, 134-135).

LSD was no longer contained in the labs, but flourished among and fueled the growing counterculture movement. A movement in which Timothy Leary became a leading front figure (Langlitz 2013: 24-33). Transcendent, transpersonal experiences on a large scale meant more and more people saw no value in fighting the Vietnam War, and they would rather connect to nature on a spiritual level then profit off of its degradation. The anti-war movement and the ecological movements were growing. This, and troubling media stories of reckless drug use and criminal behavior, resulted in the US government taking actions towards prohibition. In 1966, LSD was made illegal and labeled 'public enemy number one' by the US government, and was blamed for the collapse of the idyllic 1950's American dream

(Sessa 2017: 134-146). The prohibition subsequently put a halt on psychedelic research and therapeutic use, due to strict regulations and the growing taboo connotations. Both patients and psychiatrists alike became skeptical to becoming involved with the use of psychedelics (Sessa 2017: 93-70).

The use of psychedelics in Norway during the 60's and 70's was a seemingly fringe phenomenon, perhaps due to the issue of accessibility, as the distribution of these substances was not prevalent in northern Europe. The psychedelic (or 'hippie') culture and ideology reached the Nordic countries however through mediums such as music and literature. Drug use in general was not a widespread problem in Norway at the time, but it was growing and became more visible to the wider public. Heroin, cocaine and marijuana had entered the market, and as drug use became a popular subject in the media, the government started implementing political measures to tackle what the authorities called "*dopets onde*" (the evil of drugs) (Schjøtz 2017: 16-18). Dealing with drug use, as a threat to the stability of society, had become a political agenda. The word "dop" (drugs) and "narkotika" (narcotics) were familiar terms, and all psychoactive substances not used by the pharmacological industry would generally end up in the category of 'illegal substances' (Schjøtz 2017: 18-20).

MDMA, popularly known as "Ecstasy", was first synthesized in 1912, but was shelved until the mid 50s when it resurfaced as a chemical used by the American military. Alongside substances such as LSD, MDMA was given to American CIA agents and other test subjects, in order to see if these substances could act as truth serums (Langlitz 2013: 29). This was often done without the participants being made aware they had taken a psychoactive substance. To the militaries' disappointment, when unsuspecting subjects were given psychedelics, the effects were mostly unpredictable and often meaningless (Sessa 2017: 147-148). Nonetheless, MDMA remained in the clinical circuits as a drug used in psychotherapy. The effects of the drug, such as alertness, relaxation, heightened empathy and interpersonal bonding made it well suited for this purpose (Greer, Tolbert 1986, Mithoefer et.al 2011).

History repeats itself, and like LSD, MDMA became popular during the late 80's among the youth population in Europe, following the growth of electronic dance music. In Norway as well, MDMA or 'ecstasy' made its way to the dance floor during the 90s, as a popular

recreational drug'.<sup>8</sup> The 90's rave culture was born, and the public's concern with hedonistic youth culture and reckless drug use was spreading. MDMA became illegal in the US in 1986, and the rest of the western world soon followed (Pentney 2001, Sessa 2017: 147-155).

The story of psychedelics in the western world seems to pinball between scientific optimism, enthusiastic cultural adaptation and governmental concern for problematic behavior. This is the story of two waves of psychedelic interest, the eras where psychedelics put their mark on the map of history. We will come back to this story in chapter 5, looking at where this story has ended up in a contemporary context, because, as Paul Austin's website suggest, many within the public debate around psychedelics today are claiming that we are entering a 'third wave' of psychedelics.

There are many other perspectives or alternative ways of portraying the role of psychedelics in western history, and some are perhaps more skeptical and less romantic. As previously mentioned, the historical narrative presented above, is a short version of the history which contemporary psychedelic communities relate to. A narrative that is, in a sense, in opposition to majority cultural perceptions of illegal drugs, and the historical context behind their illegality.

When introducing this research project to colleges and acquaintances, I am met with confusion, discomfort or curiosity. Majority cultural perceptions of psychedelics often associate the substances with flimsy counterculture, mental illness, physical degradation, crime and reckless behavior. One might argue such cultural perceptions lead to both psychedelics, and the people who use them, to be stigmatized or mystified. My hope is this thesis will nuance our understanding of some parts of psychedelic practices and culture, by adding ethnographic depth to our understanding of such behavior.

In the following chapters, this thesis will first address the (2) methods used during fieldwork, in addition to the ethical considerations and reflexivity of the researcher. It will then (3) introduce some of the participants, their personal stories and reflections on the psychedelic experience, and how it may have affected them. The next chapter will discuss (4) how the participants structure their psychedelic experience and how psychedelic communities are

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<sup>8</sup> See reference list: Media references (2)

created in Oslo. These communities, and the psychedelic culture that arises from within them, will then be discussed in the light of a (5) wider cultural context and how psychedelic culture has changed. The final chapter will finish off with a (6) conclusion, and some thoughts on the academic contribution of ethnographic research on psychedelics.

## METHODOLOGY

The research questions raised in this thesis address how people experience, articulate and structure their psychedelic practices. They are the product of my continually evolving understanding of the phenomenon at hand, influenced by prior preconceptions and novel understandings gained during fieldwork. The analyses are primarily based upon 6 months of fieldwork (from January to July 2017) using various qualitative methods.

In this chapter I will address the methods used in participant sampling, data collection and preliminary analysis. Following this, I will discuss the limitations of the research methods and resulting data, as well as reflections concerning my own potential bias and relation to the field. I will finish off this chapter by addressing some ethical considerations in regard to illegality and participants' anonymity.

I understand a presentation of methodology does not adequately demonstrate the validity of findings, though I hope the following claims illuminate my attempt to produce valid knowledge about psychedelic perspectives and practice. The following abstract presentation of methods and techniques used must however be understood in context of the actual ethnographic material presented thereafter.

### CONSTRUCTING A FIELDSITE & BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

#### Anthropology At Home

As this project is mainly situated in Oslo, the fieldsite is also the ethnographer's hometown. Doing fieldwork in one's own culture, may suggest that the researcher shares 'common knowledge' with her participants. This might make it difficult to pick up on patterns of the participants' perspective and behavior, as the researcher might have acculturated similar attitudes herself (Wadel 2014: 26-27). Although Norway has been considered a homogenous society, there is of course great variation in how people live. Psychedelic experiences and practices are not, I will argue, a cultural phenomenon generally shared by the wider community. The behavior and values of the people I introduce here, are not necessarily regarded as 'typically Norwegian'. I therefore relate to Marianne Gullestad when she says; "I study cultures in Norway, not Norwegian culture" (Gullestad, Melhus 2011: 138).

Gullestad points out that studying majority and minority groups is a dialectic process of defining culture. In order to state what is ‘Norwegian’, we must also state what is not (Gullestad, Melhus 2011: 140). I suggest the inquiry of ‘deviant’ relationships and practices of substance use is part of understanding the wider social conceptions leading to the labeling of ‘other’.

When doing anthropology in familiar terrain, one might lack the advantage of linguistic differences and social friction which can contribute to interesting findings. The key is to pay close attention and continue persistent questioning “of that which is taken for granted across broad domains” (Lien 2015: 21). I’ve tried to continually reflect upon the behaviors observed in the field, and what language was used, even though some of the data has seemed familiar and banal to me. Instead of analyzing ‘the obvious’ in terms of my preconceived definitions, I asked the participants to clarify, as well as trying to record my own reactions and interpretations.

### Fieldsite & Sampling

In addition to fieldwork in Oslo, I attended academic conferences in Oakland and London<sup>9</sup>. However, as anthropologists should know, a ‘place’ is not equivalent to a field site. An ethnographic field has interrogative boundaries, within which we map problems we wish to investigate (Madden 2010: 54). Prior to fieldwork, I knew I wanted to learn more about groups and individuals who claimed to use psychedelics as a ‘tool’ for ‘personal growth’. I was familiar with the existence of such ‘instrumental’ uses, on the basis of personal encounters, stories in the media and academic literature, however, I did not have a group of participants or thematic delimitation mapped out in advance. The project was exploratory, and thematic interests changed as the data introduced interesting subjects.

I attended several different arenas and types of events in order to gain access to the everyday spaces of the participants’ lives. Initially, I wanted to look at psychedelics in relation to floatation<sup>10</sup>, so I did volunteer work at an Oslo-based floatation studio, on a weekly basis. As

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<sup>9</sup> Oakland – Psychedelic Science Conference 2017 and London – Breaking Convention Conference 2017

<sup>10</sup> Floatation is the practice of floating in a sealed tank (also known as ‘sensory deprivation tank’) filled with salt water. The temperature of the water and air is adjusted to match that of the body, and there are no sounds (ears under water) or any prevailing smells. Furthermore, there is no light and the water induces a sensation of being weightless. As a result, there are limited sensory stimuli, which is intended to ‘allow the nervous system to relax’, as one enthusiast described it. This environment is therefore arguably well suited for meditation and

a part of this arrangement, I was also able to use the facilities (floatation tanks). This was a good way for me to obtain relevant personal experience, as I became affiliated with the community both as an employee and fellow practitioner.

In addition to my engagement at the floatation studio, I participated in other relevant practices. I attended a yoga and meditation class for 3 months, 3-4 times a week, in order to meet new people and immerse myself in a practice which many of the participants showed interested in early on. I also attended cacao<sup>11</sup> and trance dance sessions, morning raves, yoga events, political debates on drugs or related subjects, and public academic lectures on related topics. These endeavors gave me the opportunity to meet people who were interested in the use of psychedelic substances and related subjects which turned out to be fruitful, as I would end up meeting most the participants through such venues. It also allowed me to get to know a large variety of people, as these practices and events tended to attracted different crowds.

After a couple of months of participation in these arenas, the participants often mentioned that they recognized me from previous occasions. It was my impression being familiar with me as an employee at the floatation studio, as a fellow practitioner of different relevant practices, and being introduced to new people through ‘members’ of the community, participants seemed to quickly develop a sense of trust. I eventually felt I was accepted as an ‘insider’ to the local community of psychedelic enthusiasts. I had also contacted several people through social media and E-mail, expressing my wishes to discuss psychedelic phenomena and related subjects, though I often had less success with this than with ‘real life’ encounters.

I will elaborate on data collection strategies below, but I want to first mention how ‘the interview’ became an important method, both as a tool for collecting data *and* in gaining access to the participants’ lives. In situations where I met potential participants, starting conversations about psychedelics seemed surprisingly uncomplicated. Even more surprising was how open people were about their personal experiences and opinions. This might be due to environments we regularly found ourselves in, where the use of psychedelics was socially accepted and often a common interest.

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contemplation, as without sensation, what is left is one’s mind. In other words, like psychedelics, floatation could be said to ‘make the mind visible’ (Chapter 5 - Business of altered states)

<sup>11</sup> Usually, a cacao-ceremony consists of the consumption of raw cacao, followed by meditation and dancing. The cacao is said to have a stimulating effect, that increase focus and well-being.

This was however not always the case, especially when reaching out to someone online or with people who, for different reasons, were more discreet about their relationship to psychedelics. Starting a conversation about illegal and sensitive subjects, or asking if someone wanted to meet in an informal way, could at times be both uncomfortable and unproductive. Asking for an interview, rather than an informal conversation, sometimes seemed less intrusive as it perhaps carried connotations of being more formal and ‘impersonal’. Therefore ‘the interview’ became a way of initially getting in touch with people I hoped to meet on a regular basis. These somewhat formal meetings generally resulted in the participants and I getting to know each other personally, and they oftentimes lead to either an invitation to attend an event or other opportunities to spend more time together.

As the fieldwork progressed, the snowball method of meeting participants became steadily more viable, as I kept meeting new people when ‘hanging out’ or attending events which participants attended. Thus, the selection of participants grew organically out of the encounters I had the first few months and as will become clear in chapter 3, the participants in this inquiry come from many different backgrounds, occupations, lifestyles and ideologies. Besides common interests in psychedelics for ‘personal growth’, the participants did not necessarily have any obvious common personal or social traits which clearly distinguished them as *one* group. I used discriminate sampling methods, and followed the psychedelic-related practices across various spatial locations, approaching people who seemingly had relevant experience with psychedelics. The places, practices and events which seemed relevant to the participants themselves was what eventually lead to the defining of the ‘field site’.

It is also important to note, although the participants differed in terms of class, age, education, occupation or lifestyle, they do not represent the perspectives of the totality of people who use psychedelics in Oslo. Using discriminatory sampling methods, I generally did not collect data groups which differed notably in their orientations towards substance use. Such groups included; people who use psychedelics recreationally in social arenas such as nightclubs, authority figures such as police officers or health professionals, or people who struggle with drug abuse.



## METHOD, DATA & ANALYSIS

The methods I used combined participant observation, semi-structured interviews and casual conversations. The data collected contains interview transcriptions, field notes and journal notes. Fieldnotes were based on conversations and observations, but in the journal notes I have also reflected upon my personal experiences in engaging with the field. These notes include data on the perspectives I gained through ‘embodying’ the field by participating in relevant practices.

### Interviews & Conversations

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 participants on different occasions throughout the fieldwork period. Most were interviewed once, though two were interviewed on several occasions. The reason I did not conduct more ‘follow-up’ semi-structured interviews was that I often had long in-depth casual conversations with participants that naturally ended up addressing questions I wanted to ask. Arranging formal interviews or interview settings, did not seem sufficiently beneficial.

The interviews lasted between 1 and 3 hours, and were structured into two parts. Firstly I asked somewhat standardized questions in order to get comparative data. Standardized questions addressed my participants’ general background, when they first tried a psychedelic substance and how their relationship to these substances might have changed since. I also had them define what psychedelics meant to them today and what their personal intentions behind their practice was.

As I got a sense of the participants’ background and perspectives, I asked questions based upon what I found interesting about their answers. In this way I let the participants choose the direction of the conversation so the interviews were often exploratory and interactive, which gave me data on many different perspectives and areas of their lives pertaining to psychedelics. Nonetheless, it became apparent there was a pattern to the information participants wanted to convey, and it was from this pattern my further direction of interest took shape.

The interviews were taped with a dictaphone and later transcribed. Pseudonyms and censorship of sensitive personal information were used in the interview transcripts in order to

protect the participants' anonymity. The audio files were then deleted. The interviews produced valuable data on participant's reflections and interpretations of their psychedelic experiences and as mentioned above, they also yielded comparative data, which revealed variance and similarities among the group of participants.

In addition to the interviews, I had hundreds of casual conversations with participants and other members of these communities. As mentioned above, most of the people I met were very open about their experiences and perspectives. Some conversations were taped and transcribed, but most of them were detailed in notebooks and then elaborated on in fieldnotes. The sheer volume of conversations I had, became valuable in terms of guiding the research further, as the same topics, words and feelings were repeatedly expressed.

Through these conversations, I was introduced to different mediums, such as books, documentaries, websites and podcasts. These mediums were generally sources the participants themselves used to find inspiration or gather information about psychedelics or psychedelic culture. I both listened actively and read their recommendations, in order to understand the inspirational sources of psychedelic culture(s) in Oslo.

### Participant Observation & Cultural Embodiment

Participating in different activities gave me a chance to observe the participant's behaviors and social interactions. I participated in situations where they were under the influence of psychedelics, which gave me observational data on how they structured their substance use, the narrative and cultural expressions of these experiences, and the phenomenological aspect of psychedelic practice through their narratives. I attended 'psychedelic gatherings' in people's homes, weekend trips to participants' cabins and 'walks' in the forest. It is important to note that, in agreement with my research license through the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD), I did not take any psychedelic substances during fieldwork. I also refrained from any alcohol while engaging with participants.

The practices and events I attended (yoga classes, yin journeys, morning raves, political debates etc.) gave me observational data on how these experiences manifested in various areas of the participants' lives. I not only was able to observe the participants having

psychedelic experiences, but also the cultural expression of such experiences and how those experiences related to their everyday lives.

Participation in relevant practices and being engaged in techniques of obtaining altered states of consciousness (ASC) allowed me to also experience certain altered states. This gave me the opportunity to emotionally connect with what participants were telling me and it also opened up a personal sense of wonder about the world of ASC. I believe my attempt to ‘embody the field’ gave me a greater understanding for the emotional character of these experiences than would have otherwise been. However, I remain cautious about comparing my own experiences with the participants’, as I recognize the potentially problematic aspect of projecting my own experiences onto the field. I tried to continually stay open to personal contradictions and alternative perspectives than my own. Allowing the field to ‘speak for itself’ through adoption of relevant bodily practices however, helped me take the participants experiences more seriously.

Furthermore, doing yoga and meditating in the morning gave me a sense of calmness and focus throughout the rest of the day. I became more present in everyday social interactions, which not only made the fieldwork easier, but it also helped me get in tune with the affective qualities of interactions. Being more calm and present, in some way seemed to slow down the overly analytical part of my mind and allowed me to better ‘sense’ what was going on.

Floating on a regular basis also had a personal effect on me. Being in a space where sensory stimuli is reduced, is indeed an interesting experience. When the flow of information from the outside is shut off my thoughts became, in a sense, more ‘visible’. This allowed me to easily observe thoughts instead of engaging with them, which is a core principle in meditative practice. Discovering the habitual and at the same time random nature of my thoughts, sent me on my own journey of introspection. I occasionally shared my experiences with participants, which might have influenced my positioning in the field and affected what the participants themselves expressed, though perhaps in an unconstructive way. However, I believe my openness primarily induced a deeper sense of trust and solidarity, which in turn allowed for interesting conversations. I will elaborate on ‘positioning in the field’, below.

## Preliminary Analysis

Analyzing the data was an ongoing process throughout the fieldwork period and the year following. I read field notes and interview transcripts on a regular basis, and engaged in literature deemed relevant. The latter served mainly two purposes; Reading academic literature gave me a general understanding of how I might produce academic texts, which could represent the data and my experiential knowledge. Academic texts also inspired me in terms of thematic interests, and helped retain an ‘anthropological lens’. Reading field notes, however, was part of an ongoing analysis of the data. I noticed similarities and contradictions, or otherwise interesting subjects as fieldwork progressed, which guided the following inquiries. The focus of these inquiries naturally changed direction over time, most notably, how I went away from the floatation studio as the main arena to meet participants, to spend more time addressing other relevant practices.

Another method of analysis I used, was personal memos. During the day, if I had moments of experiential or theoretical realizations relating to the data, I wrote short memos. This became a way of continually testing hypotheses and narrowing the focus. It also allowed me to test hypotheses against the data on a regular basis and regularly share developing ideas with members of the participant group, as well as fellow students and other peers in order to gain perspective.

Collecting different types of data, through interviews, observations and participation at different times during the course of the fieldwork, is believed to increase the validity of hypotheses. This is what is often called methodological triangulation, where using different methods allows for the comparison of different types of data. However, as Fielding and Fielding (1986) argue, these different methods might still be influenced by bias and preconceptions, so triangulation alone cannot be relied upon to address validity. One should attempt to be aware of what bias might occur in any given situation and deal with them directly (Maxwell 2013: 128) and is the reasoning behind addressing some thoughts on my position in the field, as a researcher, and my personal intentions behind conducting this research.

## REFLEXIVITY

The reasons for my involvement and interest in the topics addressed in this thesis are both academic and personal. The latter has to do with my background prior to my academic studies. Since my late teenage years, I have been increasingly interested in yoga, philosophy and matters of spirituality. For nearly seven years I lived abroad and spent considerable time in India and South East Asia in order to learn more about yogic practices and eastern religious perspectives on the nature of consciousness. Prior to this work, I have had deeply personal and transformative experiences through bodily practices and meditation. I am therefore ‘familiar’ with certain altered states of consciousness and ‘alternative’ lifestyles and practices, although most of my experience comes from environments in other countries than the one depicted in this thesis.

When I eventually returned to Norway to finish my bachelors’ degree, I found great inspiration in academic perspectives on these topics, and this is where I have explored the world of ASC since. Many years of experience living in other countries also made me more aware of the ‘weirdness’ and particularities of Norwegians, which led to a fascination for understanding social phenomena in my own ‘native culture’.

As someone with experience and knowledge of ASC practices and alternative lifestyles, I was perhaps more easily accepted as an insider in the field. I believe this also had to do with the transparency of my intentions and open mindedness towards participants. In addition, I speak their language (Norwegian) and often had a prior understanding of terms and phrases used that stem from religious traditions, yoga, psychedelic science and related discourse. This means that I’ve been able to navigate through the social aspects of fieldwork seemingly well, but it also means I have a particular bias towards what participants shared and otherwise expressed. I have tried to remain aware of this as much as possible, but interpretations done by me as a researcher will always be partly, and silently, based upon my own preconceptions. Much like the difficulties of doing ‘anthropology at home’, the key was to be observant and curious in regards to everything familiar, not only that which is obviously a cultural particularity of the participants.

One of the positive aspects of being somewhat familiar with the field is I gained a lot of information through what might be called ‘resonance’ (Wikan 1992). I believe I picked up on intersubjective phenomenon which may have otherwise been difficult to notice if I had not

had a bodily experience of 'it' myself. However, I am also aware friction and misunderstandings between an anthropologist and participants can be a source of insight. There is of course the possibility I missed clues along the way, because I did not immediately notice and react to them.

When it comes to my role as 'someone involved with academia and research', I also tried to remain aware of participants' intentions and positioning towards me. The majority of the participants I have met have a liberal attitude towards drug reform and legalization of psychedelic substances. They were also generally well educated, thus knowing the value of 'positive' research which could be used as leverage in political activism. The intention of this thesis is not to draw normative conclusions, although I am aware that some participants might want to 'downplay' or exaggerate certain aspects of psychedelic culture for such purposes. However, this thesis will not focus on participants' political interests, or opinions, in particular. Furthermore, these opinions seemed more present in the beginning of relationships, after which more personal and balanced viewpoints were portrayed as we became better acquainted.

I have also had experiences in the field where some participants regarded me as kind of an authority figure on how to use psychedelics or maneuver a psychedelic experience. They asked me questions regarding such topics like; the correct dosage of a drug, differences between drugs, how to deal with difficult situations, and so on. In these situations I responded by trying remain as neutral as possible despite my own personal opinions. This was often the case with more 'psychedelically inexperienced' participants, but even so, I did not experience my engagement with the field as changing the course of their behavior in significant ways.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When researching a subject such as psychedelic use in a Norwegian context, one does not escape the complicated frame of illegality. From the perspective of 'the state', these people are criminals. From the perspective of wider cultural conceptions, the participants' 'psychedelic' behavior is deviant. It is a sensitive subject. For this reason, all personal information pertaining to the participants must be kept anonymous, as stated in my research license with the NSD.

As previously mentioned, names and personal information were made anonymous in fieldnotes and interview transcripts, and the presentation of participants in this thesis is laid out in a way that does not identify any particular person. The sensitive nature of illegal substance use has the potential to interfere, or damage, the social and/or professional lives of the participants. Participants are presented as characters to give the reader a sense of the type of the person they portrayed, without revealing identifying details. One exception to this is my portrayal of the floatation studio where I spent time during fieldwork. Without explicitly mentioning the name of this establishment, it is easily recognizable by the description done in this thesis. However, the owner of this floatation studio has given me his explicit approval to use revealing data regarding his establishment. All of the participants I met while working there on the other hand, are made completely anonymous.

All of the participants were informed about the nature of this research, and all of the interview subjects submitted signed consent sheets. The consent sheets stated their right to retract information at any time, as well as information regarding the research process and topics, and how I would store the data. With people I had more casual conversations with, this information was communicated orally. This was done to ensure the participants' participation remained voluntary.

Another aspect of researching 'illegal subjects' is the safety of the researcher. Often, when I present the research project to colleagues or acquaintances, I am confronted with concerns about my involvement with environments of people who use 'drugs'. I believe this concern partly stems from stereotypical notions of drugs being synonymous with violence and corrupted personalities. As will become apparent in this thesis, this is not the case here. The fact many different types of psychoactive substances are categorized into the category 'drugs', means people often do not differentiate between different types of drugs, which might lead to very different types of behavior. During preliminary research, I did not get the impression safety, in terms of violence or dangerous situations, would become a problem during fieldwork, due to the intentions and structures around participants' psychedelic use. As I entered the field, my impression was confirmed. This point will hopefully become apparent in the following chapters.





## UNDERSTANDING THE INDIVIDUAL

*“LSD is a psychedelic drug which occasionally causes psychotic behavior in people who have not taken it” – Timothy Leary*

Throughout the fieldwork, I met people from many different socio-demographic backgrounds, with a wide variety of professions and lifestyles. The people I have spent time with have long, complicated and personal stories of who they are, and how psychedelics came to be a part of their lives. Although their demographic makeup, their introduction to, and practice with psychedelics may vary, they seemingly share common foundations on which value and meaning is given to such experiences. By conveying expressed intentions, experiences and effects, I hope to elevate our understanding surrounding their psychedelic practices.

In the beginning of this chapter, I will introduce individuals who epitomize some of the characteristics identified among larger groups, in order to not only paint a picture of the diversity of people who use psychedelic substances, but also to show what they have in common. I will then elaborate on the notion of *radical experience* and why this concept is central to our understanding of the efficacy of their psychedelic experiences. I will situate this notion of experience within the psychedelic *space*, meaning the spatial dimensions of such experience, which also relates to notions of temporality. Finally, I will discuss how *radical experience in space* can be described as a means of *autognosis*, meaning self-knowledge by the process of self-analysis.

### THE PSYCHONAUTS

The term ‘psychonaut’ is often used to refer to people who explore their own mind, often through the use of psychedelic substances. It relates to the idea of an astronaut who travels into space, although in this context, ‘space’ constitutes the vast universe of our own minds (psyche). The first part of this chapter, will introduce some of the psychonauts who became the participants in this inquiry.

“John” is a man in his 40’s with a previous career in politics and a current job in finance. We met many times during the fieldwork period, as he is a social character and a central figure among his peers. He became interested in politics at a young age, particularly in drug policy.

This was mainly due to the fact he was a young adult in the 90's, and like many of his peers at the time, he followed the political and ideological debate on this topic happening in the United States. He was a young idealist, and the drug policy debate at the time; "was really about the boundaries between the state and the individual. I guess I was a right wing economic libertarian, that wanted less government control".

However, as he remembers it, the Norwegian cultural view on drugs at the time was very conservative and when he first tried ecstasy (MDMA) recreationally in his youth, the conventional view clouded his experience;

It was a party drug that worked well with electronic house music. I was not too excited about it and this was not something I did very often, perhaps because it was a trend that was mostly correlated with the house/club scene, in which I was not really a part of. It might have lead to some fun experiences, but we thought of it as a drug, in the old fashion sense.

In the last decade or so as the American debate around drugs and drug policy has changed, his attitude changed as well. He now occasionally uses psychedelics (which he started with a couple of years ago) mostly at home or at the cabin, usually with people he knows but also other psychedelic explorers. There is now a "focus on community and experiences, and some might use it for meditation or reflection. We don't 'party'. It is not for recreational use in that sense. We hold gatherings, a place for people to explore and have experiences". The reasons why he became interested in psychedelics are partly due to curiosity and a liberal attitude, but also a search for deeper meaning;

I have the job, the house, the wife, the kids, my life is by standard definition perfect. But still, I feel like there is more, there is something I'm missing. So I want to go deeper, climb to the top of the Maslow's pyramid. No wonder my friends and I are interested in this stuff. We can meditate for ten years or do a 10 hour LSD trip and

come to basically the same existential realization... so yeah, hence the situation we find ourselves in.

About half of the participants group belong to what we might call the 'professional elite'. They are highly educated professionals, with careers in law, medicine, academia or innovation. They are what would be considered 'successful' from a social class perspective. Or as John puts it, they are "by standard definition perfect".

Another professional with a slightly different take on psychedelics, is "Bernard". Bernard is an engineer in his late 30's who runs his own company. He was introduced to LSD by a colleague, who used it for problem solving at work. Bernard became curious as to how this might benefit him as well;

I have a demanding job, a creative job where the results are large expensive projects. Sometimes I just find myself stuck, like my brain will not let me get past an obstacle. So a tool to help me get past my own cognitive limitations is of course interesting.

The tool he is referring to is LSD, which is his 'substance of choice'. "LSD takes away a filter in my mind and I become more responsive to impressions and feelings, more open minded, clear headed and focused". He usually takes 'microdoses' when he uses it for work. He argues that LSD heightens his level of creativity and focus, and lets him see his own projects and ideas from a different perspective. During the last couple of years, he has also been experimenting with higher doses.

First of all I think it is a lot of fun! Primarily, I don't really have a sort of deep intention with doing it. But removing those filters in your mind, I guess a filter that is there to sort out sensory information, is somehow a release. I have a tendency to be a bit neurotic... I have a tendency to be judgmental, especially towards myself. So removing those normal filters and seeing the world from a different perspective is

definitely a valuable experience and it has made me more aware of how my mind works.

Conceptualizing psychedelics as a tool for cognitive enhancement, as in the case of Bernard, is not the primary intention for most of the participants. As we see with John, the cognitive benefits are but a part of a deeper intention of transforming aspects of one's own personality. Personal and emotional struggles were a central theme for “Petter” and “Julia”.

Petter, a student in his 20's, did not like the idea of ‘drugs’ in general until a few years ago, when he heard psychedelics being discussed in Norwegian media. He then started reading research on psychedelics to find out what all the hype was about. The main reason for his interest was a wish to cure his own depression and; “get to the root of the problem, not put a bandaid on it. I needed to know why my human existence was a struggle, perhaps by finding some deeper sense of meaning”. He had been reluctant to experiment with drugs in the past due to family members history with drug abuse. What he found out by doing his own research was that psychedelics seemed to have therapeutic effects.

When I heard about it in the media I thought it sounded absurd, mushrooms curing depression! But as I did some research I quickly realized that psychedelics were something different from drugs like amphetamines, in which I have witnessed abuse. It felt like I had stumbled upon a secret, and I became curious to find out what's up.

Looking back at his first experience with psilocybin mushrooms he remembers it as a positive experience that gave him some insights into what mindfulness ‘really is’, as he explained;

You can control your own mind! Or at least how much you let your thoughts control you. I can choose which perspective to have on the world. Why not choose the bright one? It sounds so banal sometimes, it is such a cliché... but it is hard to explain.

Prior to his introduction to psychedelics, Petter tried to develop a practice of meditation where mindfulness is a key aspect. As he explained, mindfulness was a technique of becoming a

watcher of his own thoughts and not getting carried away by them, therefore staying present in the moment. Although he understood this concept, it was not until he tried mushrooms that he understood what this felt like and why it seemed effective. In the aftermath of this experience, he claims to be able to deal with his negative thought patterns more constructively, as “I don't let them control me, or my emotions, as much as they once did”.

The curiosity of the potential therapeutic effects of psychedelics also changed Julia's apprehension on substance use, she explains, as well as herself as a person. Julia is a successful career woman in her early 40's. She is a stylishly dressed woman, with painted nails and her hair done every time we met. For a couple of years she stood on the sideline as her husband experimented with psychedelics, but did not participate herself. Due to her struggle with anxiety as a teenager, she considers herself lucky not to have “fallen into the world of drugs and not gotten myself out. I mean, I was really sick, so I could easily have self-medicated with drugs for a long time”.

Recently, her husband had talked her into trying LSD for the first time and they decided to give her a significantly large dose, about 700mcg (a ‘normal’ dose is between 100-200mcg). The event took place in their home, the two of them together with a close friend. “I had no idea what I was about to experience. This night was a journey into a space I could not have imagined”. She would portray a night of intense visuals and unusual thoughts, but remembers being aware that she was under the influence of a drug; “I was there and I could understand that I had taken a psychoactive substance. But still, it was one of the scariest episodes of my life, absolutely brutal... it is very hard to explain”.

The important aspect of her story, according to Julia, was what happened in the aftermath of this experience. I met her for the first time one week after this incident when she told me; “well, my reality shattered and I am still processing the experience”. A couple of months later, we discussed the experience in more detail;

I am in some way not the same person anymore. What happened was that I had an experience, perhaps for the first time in my life, of completely surrendering. I had no choice. I was so far away into this other universe that I had to let go of reality. That's the thing, I have always had a problem with the need to control everything in my life.

She talked about her struggle with eating disorders growing up, with school and work and with the fact that she could never fully relax in any setting. “I have always been the one that had to make sure that everyone is ok, the perfect host so to speak. Always on top of things, always making sure everyone is fine”. This had become tiresome for her family and the people around her, and of course for Julia herself.

After that experience with LSD I have learned what it means to let go of control, just accept the situation I am in. If someone is angry, if the day is shit, well, ok! Let them scream, let me scream, after a while it will change and I am not in charge of life’s ups and downs. Let go, relax, I will be fine.

For Julia and Petter, psychedelics opened them up to the idea of altered states of consciousness (ASC) as a means of working through their own personality traits or perspectives on life. For others, practices of changing their perspective was already an integrated aspect of their lives, and adopting psychedelics was another tool in a toolbox of ‘spiritual practices’. This was also the case with “Otto” and “Mons”.

I met Otto at the beginning of the fieldwork period. Since then we have met at many social events and often randomly on the street. He is a well-spoken and attentive man in his 20’s. He has long dreadlocks and is often dressed in ethnic clothing and jewelry. Otto grew up in a small town and from an early age became active on the Internet. He had a fascination with the 70’s hippie culture, the music and the lifestyle, and how the idea of psychedelics was romanticized. He spent several years reading about the topic on the Internet, in books and listening to podcasts. However, “it was not until I was 18 that I tried LSD. It was a big deal and it was the beginning of my conviction”.

He told me this experience gave him a far greater understanding of psychedelics than he had ever had during the years of reading about them. His girlfriend at the time learned about this first LSD experience and she became angry and scared, which Otto described as an anticlimax to a transcendent experience. This resistance from the outside world, he explained;

Sort of represents the rest of the story in some way. It is so hard to explain what it is, how it works and why it is so important to me, and especially why it is ok! I'm good with words, but I'm not understood. As with that first LSD experience, you cannot really understand psychedelics if you have not taken them. That's the conviction.

He attributes his success with psychedelics to the fact that he knew so much about them before trying them;

I knew that I could not know what to expect. I did not fear it. Ironically I think that's why people have such difficult experiences, because we are indoctrinated to fear them. When reality changes, you have lost your mind! Perhaps our culture has missed the point, maybe we should get out of our minds sometimes.

He now spends most a lot of time reading, writing and talking about psychedelics. If it were up to him, he admits, psychedelics would be his profession, researching them and helping inform others of the complexity of such experiences.

I have had similar experiences with breathing techniques, meditation, yoga, sex. Many aspects of life that give rise to the same energy and experience – the senses, the same impressions and so on. My understanding of psychedelic experience is that, it is more than the substance, it is the human. The substance meets the human, but it is the human we are experiencing, not the substance. I would say I have a psychedelic worldview, but again, it is not about the substance for me. Psychedelics are like an umbrella term for communication with nature and a mystical understanding of the world.

Many of the participants talked about psychedelics as a part of their spiritual practice. Yoga, meditation, floatation, and other similar practices were quite common among certain groups.

In contrast to people we met in the beginning of this chapter, these people were often introduced to spiritual ideas or practices at a young age and adopted a lifestyle some might refer to as ‘alternative’. Alternative, in the sense they, for example, did not necessarily care too much about following a ‘career path’. Furthermore, they had distinct interests, including health and dietary regimens such as the paleo-diet, vegetarianism or veganism. Many had also traveled extensively, adopting ‘foreign’ cultural ways.

One of these characters is Mons. Mons is in his mid 20’s and works as a yoga teacher. He considers himself a spiritual person. He started doing yoga about 6 years ago and traveled to both India and Thailand for 2 years, in order to learn more about such practices:

Yoga was where it all started for me. I first went because a girl I liked invited me to a class. It was something about the experiences I had with yoga, the calmness I felt, as well as the friendliness of the community that had me hooked right away.

He was introduced to psychedelics by a friend in the yoga community who told him that “a psychedelic trip was like 10 years of meditation”. He had his first experience walking in the forest while on psilocybin mushrooms. For Mons, both yoga and psychedelics are a part of the same practice of exploring the inner world. It incorporates many other activities like floatation, cacao-ceremonies, signing circles and raves.

It is all about awareness I guess, about changing your perception. I can see in retrospect that this is what happened to me when I discovered yoga, the physical exercises in combination with meditation made me more aware of what was happening in the present moment. However, yoga has always been about training the mind to reach that state. I have had incredible experiences with yoga, but with psychedelics, you just walk through the door right into that space. I’m not thinking about the world around me, I’m just there. I notice everything, colors, hear every sound, and I can see the connections between the trees.



As he was telling this story, he lifted his hands up and looked around him as if he showed me a landscape. His eyes lid up and he was smiling. During conversations with the participants, when they told me their personal stories with psychedelics and related practices, their body language oftentimes changed. It was easy to detect, that the topic triggered certain emotions.

Once you know about these other dimensions of experience, how radically different the universe can be... well, my whole life changed. Nature especially. I feel at one with the natural world. How can these things not be a spirit of some sort? An alien? I mean, they must be highly intelligent if they can intersect with another species and teach them wisdom at such a fundamental level. I know I sound crazy... it's just very hard to explain.

Mons, as well as several of other participants, often referred to the psychedelic plants as 'plant teachers' or 'spirit guides'. They also attributed gender and other characteristics to the different plants, like Ayahuasca being female, liberty cap mushrooms as "gnomes" or "goblins" and arctic fly mushroom as "the grandfather". Mons once told me that, "Ayahuasca has a distinct female characteristic. It is not necessarily like that for everyone, but most people I talk to say that it is like an old wise female energy". Lars once told me; "liberty caps are like goblins, very troll like. A little goblin spirit, tweaking and messing with your reality. It can be overwhelming and disturbing, but also a lot of fun, as long as you don't resist the mushroom".

Attributing these kinds of animistic qualities to psychedelics is perhaps a result of incorporating these experiences into a spiritual framework which is often inspired by traditional religious lineages, such as Buddhism, Vedic scriptures in Yoga and shamanistic cosmology. This aspect stands in contrast to the way other participants, such as John and Bernard, conceptualized psychedelics as their chemical structures, as internal reactions of the brain instead of external "spirits" with a sense of agency of their own. Even so, both Otto and Mons had substantial knowledge of the biological proceedings of consuming psychedelics, but perhaps articulated the experiences within a framework of a 'spiritual nature'. Some of the participants, like "Frida", seemingly find themselves somewhere in-between. Although she comes from a background of practicing yoga and studying philosophy, she used psychedelics as a means to deal with her long lasting depression.

I met Frida through Mons. Frida is a woman in her late 20's, currently unemployed. About 4 years ago, she became interested in philosophy; "I read books from people like Aldous Huxley and started listening to podcasts by people like Alan Watts and Ram Dass. They were talking about their experiences with psychedelics as having a profound shift in their consciousness". During the same time, people in her yoga community talked about their psychedelic experiences, and after a while a friend introduced her to mushrooms. Her first experience was on a beach, on an island close to Oslo, with four other people. "It was the most magical day, I remember it so clearly". As she told her story, she lifted her hand up to her face and smiled.

It was like falling in love with the universe. I had not felt that kind of connection to people and the world around me in a very long time. I could see my place in the universe, as a part of the universe. The feeling lasted long after that day and it gave me the motivation to do something about my depression.

Around this time she started doing yoga and meditation more regularly and she became more social. After a while her depression lifted; "I just needed a change in perspective. I was in a very destructive mind loop back then, just running and running inside this mouse wheel of destructive thoughts. Now I can see them for what they are, just thoughts". Since then, Frida has been doing psychedelics on a regular basis, about 6-7 times a year.

The people I have introduced here could in some ways be categorized into two groups. The first group are the slightly older, professional and scientifically oriented type. The other group live what some might call an alternative lifestyle, often spiritually oriented, and they attribute psychedelics certain animistic characteristics. In the 60's, they might be called the hippies and the hypocrites. A potential difference from the seemingly polarized time of 'hippies' and 'the establishment', however, is that these groups do not seem to oppose each other. In the next chapter I will elaborate, although participants might structure their use of psychedelics varyingly, and might express their psychedelic experiences with different words, they seem to share common ideas of a wider 'psychedelic community', a community that has many forms of expression and consists of many sub-groups.

What is most interesting, in my opinion, is not what sets them apart, but what they have in common. Although the people I have introduced above come from different backgrounds, live different lifestyles and approach psychedelics for different reasons, what they all seem to have in common is the ‘value’ given to psychedelic *experience* – a subjective experience of entering a certain “*space*”, where usual patterns of thought or perception are altered.

#### A RADICAL EXPERIENCE

I once asked Bernard what it was like to be on LSD, and he told me that;

It’s a bit like falling in love. You turn your world upside down. Behavior and thought patterns change when you fall in love... it is a bit like that. Except you keep your rationality. It is not directly transmittable, but you do get that rush of serotonin that makes you happy. Not that taking psychedelics automatically makes you happy, sometimes quite the opposite... Like love!

What Bernard is pointing to here is the experience includes a feeling, an emotion, a sensory stimulus, which can be described by way of analogy (i.e. ‘love’). A well-known aspect of psychedelic experiences is their ineffability, i.e. the problem of explaining in words what happens (Sessa 2017: 29). This is what Otto referred to when he explained the change which happened after he tried LSD, as a “conviction” of that which he already had a preconceived idea about, but did not fully understand until he had his first psychedelic experience.

Comparatively, Julia’s direct experience with this space allowed her to understand what she already partially knew; she was being overly controlling in her own life and others. The psychedelic experience apparently allowed her to ‘realize’ the source and solution to her problem on another level. Having the actual experience of surrendering gave her a sense of meaning and understanding. As she explained; “What happened was that I had an experience, perhaps for the first time in my life, of completely surrendering. I had no choice. I was so far away into this other universe that I had to let go of reality”. On a different occasion she added; “That’s what’s so crazy about these substances, I had one of the most scary, intense and confusing, mind-blowing experiences, but what came out of it was so meaningful, so

precious”. Such paradoxical experiential qualities can be difficult to translate into language, exemplified here by the relative connotations of words like “conviction”, “love” and “mind-blowing”.

Another obvious problem here, besides language, has to do with ‘experience’. Although the term ‘experience’ is a foundational concept in anthropological theorizing, both as the focus of inquiry and as a means of understanding, the definitions of the term are often highly ambiguous (Throop 2003: 220). One of the prominent figures in theorizing experience is Victor Turner. Turner draws a distinction between ‘mere experience’ and ‘an experience’, which is built upon a discussion of experience in terms of a temporal organization of ‘meaning’, ‘value’ and ‘ends’. ‘Meaning’ is a cognitive structure oriented to the past by a way of memory and categorization. ‘Value’ is the affective structure of experience tied to the fluctuations of the present moment and ‘ends’ are tied to aspirations for the future (Throop 2003: 223).

What I interpret from this theory is ‘value’ is tied to the emotional, sensorial or otherwise phenomenological experience of the moment. ‘Meaning’ and ‘ends’, however, are tied to the workings of cognition, as in analyzing memories and imagining the future. It is the difference between the ‘value’ of direct experience and the consequential ‘meaning’ and ‘ends’ that I want to note here. Following Merleau Ponty, there is a difference between our ‘pre-objective’ experience and the experience of reflection (i.e. theoretical attitudes) upon objects of experience (ourselves and others) (Desjarlais, Throop 2011: 88).

According to Turner, the personal and cultural forms of ‘meaning’ are what transform the unarticulated quality of ‘value’ into coherent and reflexive structures of experiences. ‘Meaning’ objectifies ‘value’ into a set of coherent structures, as our memories compare our experience to other relatively similar experiences. According to Turner, this collection of ‘expressions of experience’ is nothing other than culture (Throop 2003: 224). Perhaps Turner’s choice of the word ‘meaning’ in this context is to point out that sensory experience is given meaning when reflected upon in retrospect. ‘Mere experience’ is the passive endurance of this temporal stream of experience. In other words, we all experience all the time; ‘value’ is continuous. As *an* experience cuts through this arbitrary stream of experiences, it retrospectively gains a clear beginning and an end, becoming a non-arbitrary occurrence (Throop 2003: 224). In short, we make objects of our experience, by lumping

together series of experiences and giving them meaning in retrospect, based on our personal and cultural forms of ‘meaning’.

Clifford Geertz (1973) on the other hand, argues there is no such thing as mere experience, but always *an* experience, which is placed against the appropriate symbol of meaning. For Geertz, if experience were “undirected by culture patterns – organized systems of significant symbols – man's behavior would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless” (Geertz 1973: 46). In other words, what makes our lives or our experiences meaningful, is the constant dynamic between Turner’s ‘value’ and ‘meaning’. This interpretation of experience happens at the “immediate observational level” (Geertz 1973: 28), which means experience is always culturally organized. When speaking of this argument with a fellow student, who notably has personal experience with psychedelics, he humoristically argued perhaps Geertz never had a psychedelic experience himself, “for if he did, he would know that there are experiences to be had, in which the cultural habitus of everyday life are temporarily dissolved”.

Along these lines, one could argue the psychedelic experience is like a melting-pot of cultural symbols, stirred to a point where they lose their original meaning, becoming virtually shapeless, allowing us to leave our indoctrinated cultural structure. In this sense, the psychedelic experience is one of *mere* experience, however, it can be so discontinuous with other experiences, when looking back at it in retrospect, as *an* experience, it is hard to classify or categorize its content. I call such experiences ‘radical experiences’, for they can be so disassociated with our normal waking consciousness they cannot easily be comprehended or conveyed within existing linguistic and cultural frameworks.

I believe *novelty* is another central concept in our attempt to understand radical experiences. The experience and sensation of novelty may include the emergence of new insights, or a change in perspective, such as the empirical data above exemplify. In the undefined space of a radical experience, the potential for transformation may arise as one can see the world as something ‘other’ than what it was.

It is at the limits, at the edge of reasoning and existence – where human beings are brought outside the forms of ordinary life and placed in situations of subjective

intensity – that they can be brought to reimagine their circumstances and its orders and to reform and perhaps redirect their lives in original ways (Kapferer, Hobart 2005: 155).

This ‘other’, in our context, is the psychedelic *space*; a spatial and temporal dimension of a radical experience, the state induced by psychedelic substances.

#### A PLACE OF INSIGHT

The metaphor *trip* is often used when referring to a psychedelic experience (Montagne 1988: 37). According to the anthropologist Michael Harner, several ‘traditional’ Amazonian tribes conceptualize the psychedelic experience as a *trip* which allows them to gather information from ‘another world’ (Harner 1980: 26-27). Similarly, perhaps, one of the reasons we travel is to ‘fill us up’ with new impressions, people, ideas, and activities, in the hope it will benefit us or enrich our lives, temporarily, if not permanently (Partridge 2004: 87-89). In the same manner, many embark upon a psychedelic *trip* to satisfy some spiritual or personal needs or desires.

The psychedelic experience the participants describe, seem to have a spatial dimension to it. The experience happens in a psychedelic “*space*”. As Mons described; “with psychedelics, you just walk through the door right into that space”. Or as Julia described her first LSD experience as; “a journey into a space I could not have imagined”. This ‘space’ is not another place in a geographical sense, but a different perceptual dimension, different from that of everyday perception. Perhaps somewhat like the ‘space’ within a dream. Although one is fully awake, fully conscious and engaging with the environment, there is a perceptual re-imagination of that environment. It is often said psychedelics produce hallucinations, which is misleading since people generally do not see what is not there, but rather they see what is there in a different way. Perhaps ‘illusions’ is more descriptive, rather than ‘hallucinations’ (Sessa 2017: 4).

Similar to when we travel, when you take a psychedelic substance, you only stay within this state for a certain amount of time. Different psychedelics have different time frames. The psychoactive effects of psilocybin mushrooms, for example, can last between 5-8 hours, while

the effects of LSD can last up to 12. Ketamine, a dissociative substance with non-classical psychedelic effects, can last between 30 to 120 minutes (Sessa 2017: 38-63). The psychedelic experience then, the journey through the psychedelic ‘space’, seems to have a rather clear beginning and an end. Like a trip to another geographical place, there is anticipation for the future event. One leaves this reality and goes into another, or ‘an other’ if you will, and following the experience, one travels back into normal waking consciousness. Although one might come back to ‘reality’ as largely the same individual as before, perspectives may have changed. Much like a long journey to a foreign culture.

When asked what the psychedelic space looks like, many of the participants described the same scenery that I saw when conversing with them. However, how they interpreted it often varied. The most common visual effect seemed to be a heightened vibrancy in color, movement of, and between, objects which were otherwise still, and distortion of people’s faces. As I was sitting on the lawn with Frida, outside her family cabin, she described her psilocybin mushroom experience;

Well, everything is the same as before, but it’s not. It is very hard to explain, he he.

The colors are brighter, things seem to merge into each other a bit... or they kind of dance. Like the trees are making shapes they don’t usually do... The biggest difference is *how* I see the world. I can see the connection between things. Like how the water’s edge is not an edge, but is a part of the land. The trees are talking to each other, energetically. And I don’t feel so different from them. I’m a part of this landscape, not in it.

The fact that you see what is there in a different way means that the surroundings play a role in the outcome of your experience. This is what is known as ‘setting’, and includes the social and physical environment in which psychedelics are taken. In this sense, who takes what, where and with whom, matters when cultivating a positive ‘transcendent’ psychedelic experience. ‘Set’, on the other hand, is the condition of your state of being, or your mindset at the time (Leary et.al 1964: 11). I will elaborate on these terms in chapter 2.

So far, I have argued what the participants have in common is they have a radical experience with psychedelics, a temporal journey into a space where their perceptions of reality change. These perceptual changes, or this place of novelty, somehow generate insights into personal behavior patterns, as well as changes in the psychonauts outlook on life. As we have seen with Frida and Julia, the experience of seeing the world as it could be, or perhaps ‘really is’, where one has ‘a place within the universe’ or where ‘it is ok to let go of control’, has the potential to motivate users to approach their habits constructively.

Habits of thought might also constrict creative thinking, as in the case of Bernard. To experience alternative modes of perception, is to experience the potential to change ‘everyday experience’ as well, like when you travel to a foreign culture; The lifestyle and way of engaging with ‘the others’ reality can be an inspiration to change one’s own habitual orientation. There are many examples of these kinds of attitude or behavioral changes among participants, all in their unique way relating to their unique personality and circumstance. However, as we will see, some particular changes seem to be widespread among the participants, particularly their understanding of spirituality, and their relationship with alcohol or ‘other drugs’.

## CHANGING HABITS

The participants’ relationship to spirituality is first and foremost a matter of shifting one's attitude. John considers himself an atheist, or as he puts it “a religious atheist”. A worldview anchored in science, but with the recognition his scientific understanding might not explain everything. He sometimes described his experiences with psychedelics as spiritual, or at least he “can understand where that feeling comes from, or what spirituality means to people”. He also stated: “I now have a sense of respect for the spiritual and religious. Which is hard to explain, because I have not become a believer”. It was one of his first experiences with LSD that gave him this insight;

Let’s look at it from this angle... the serotonin molecule has 9 edges, which binds to the receptor. Then you add a molecule that has 5 edges and the world looks completely different. I’m not sure the 9 edge one is reality, he he. When a tiny adjustment like that creates a perception of the world that is so different... and we



know that our normal perception does not correspond with the mathematical models we have of the world and there is an evolutionary reason to believe we prioritize survival over truth... probably we see things inaccurate, we see things functionally. To enhance our probability for survival. That recognition is hard to accept. I kind of knew this intellectually a long time ago, but having the experience of it makes me like... what else can I be sure of?

Besides altering his ontological perspective on reality, Johns' political attitude has also changed in the wake of these experiences, he explains. Not that he doesn't care about the same political topics as earlier, but his interests and prioritization has changed. As he explains, "I still care about wealth taxation policies, but it is not what is important to me anymore".

"Morten", a medical professional in his late 30's, said his experience with the plant medicine Ayahuasca, which has strong psychedelic effects, made him open to alternative forms of medicine, as well as bodily practices such as floatation, and ideas from various philosophical traditions:

Up until about five years ago I considered my self a hard-core atheist, even though I took psychedelics (mainly LSD). Of course I had a deeper connection to nature and people and stuff like that, but I just saw it as that... but this is different now. In the first Ayahuasca ceremony I was like... a plant medicine that shows you your subconscious destructive patterns and allows you to change them in an instance...

When you actually see and move between dimensions and actually feel how all these dimensions or universes are all one, all of it in unity and harmony... well, I had to laugh at myself for being an atheist all these years.

One other communality among the majority of the participants, was their relationship to alcohol. Most of them claimed to have reduced their intake of alcohol considerably since they started using psychedelics. This seemed to be consistent with my own observations, as social

events I attended were seldom focused around alcohol. Mons did on several occasions' mention that he;

Does not like alcohol or other drugs. I'm not trying to escape my existence; I'm trying to dive into it. There is no hiding from the dark corners of your being with psychedelics. Ayahuasca especially. She will tare up your ego, there is no hiding from your destructive behavior.

The Ayahuasca experience could be unpleasant. Mons told stories of Ayahuasca ceremonies of great physical discomfort, including vomiting. Vomiting had a function, however:

You purge out bad spirits or aspects of yourself that don't serve you anymore, by physically vomiting them out... With alcohol, I just feel numb... and dumb. I behave from a place in myself that is not where I want to be. Yeah, sure, alcohol has its place, it's a social lubricant, but it is not evolving our species to put it that way.

This type of relationship to alcohol was prevalent with many of the participants, and interestingly with both groups. Alcohol seemed like a symbol of sorts, as if it were a 'totemic figure' for everything 'not psychedelic'. Such comparisons were common, though occasionally contested. Some argued that these substances "do not compare" - neither in terms of personal effects or sociality.

As Mons suggested, the character and the outcome of having a 'drug-induced experience' is important. As John put it; "we are not interested in alcohol, cocaine and other 'mind numbing' drugs. We want awakening, development and community". It is perhaps the perceived intention behind drinking alcohol which 'psychonauts' tend to react against, being seemingly banal or selfish even. Mons drew a similar distinction in the context of yoga;

If you do yoga to get flexible and have a nice butt, you kind of miss the point. Yoga can teach you to know yourself better, body and mind, so you do what you do from a

more genuine place. It is a personal practice that you do by yourself, but with a selfless intention, if you know what I mean. Wisdom makes you a better person, and wisdom comes from experience.

There was also attention given to the physical consequences of alcohol. Petter, as several others, sometimes used psychedelics in a more recreational sense, meaning for the enjoyment of it rather than intentional self-development, and he explained that; “I use it recreationally sometimes because it is a more interesting drug experience. Much more than alcohol, and alcohol is so costly, as in how it disturbs your physical welfare. The investment does not justify the outcome”.

What becomes apparent through these statements is the participants regard their psychedelic use as a means of exploring their own mind and expanding their understanding of themselves and their world. The radical experience of a psychedelic trip allows them to gain insight into their patterns of thought and subsequently their behavior. In other words, their intention is to develop on a cognitive, emotional and spiritual level. This is an ongoing everyday process for many of the participants, habitually changing habits. Participants seem to convey a message: Specific intentions separate their practices from other forms of drug use, including forms of escapism or self-medicalization. In a sense, participants’ view their psychedelic use as a ‘practice of self’, commonly known as self-development.

## PRACTICE OF SELF

The value given to the way psychedelics is conceived to improve ones mindset, or subsequently one's behavior, tells us something about the intent behind taking these substances; Intentions which are built upon improving quality of life, by how one perceive or interact with the world around them. Changes in perspective allows them to develop a deeper understanding, or sense of meaning in their lives. As Mons pointed out, ‘wisdom is gained from experience, and the wiser you become, the better equipped you are to deal with situations that arise’.

Working on oneself in order to function better, both inwardly and outwardly, is reminiscent of what Michel Foucault (1994) calls the ‘Practice of self’. Foucault was greatly inspired by the

ancient Greeks perspectives on freedom and ethics, in which a fundamental concept was the need to foster one's own 'ethos' (ethics). Individual ethics gave us the tools to avoid being dominated by the forces of social power dynamics, power dynamics which exist from neighbor to state level. In order to know what good ethics are, one needs to 'know oneself', and knowing oneself comes about by 'taking care of oneself'. The latter concept is what, according to Foucault, western societies have misinterpreted as selfishness or egoism, but the actual meaning is to engage in practices which teach you about the inner world of mind and body. In other words, taking care of oneself is synonymous with knowing oneself. 'Knowing oneself' is a concept which has remained in western societies, although interestingly without much guidance on how to do so (Foucault 1994: 223-249).

There are several different practical techniques which can be used in the practice of self. Foucault mentions meditation, writing or fasting; enabling individuals to cultivate a certain critical awareness of one's *self* and the surrounding environment as different 'techniques of the self'. This awareness is what allows you to better relate to people and live an ethically sound life. In other words, taking care of one's *self*, through practicing 'techniques of the self', is how one becomes better equipped for life, from the inside out (Foucault 1994: 223-249). Whether it is used for cognitive purposes or creative enhancement, for healing mental illness or attaining spiritual growth, psychedelics arguably allow individuals to know *themselves* from an intrinsic place. At least this seems to be a main purpose or goal of instrumental use, as we have seen examples of.

I was initially tempted to call these practices 'self-development', however the term is often used to describe activities which develop one's physical or cognitive abilities without specifying the origin or methods of such transformation, nor what defines the *self*. Plastic surgery, for example, could be called self-development, if self is defined by the physical appearance of the body. The term self-development then is perhaps too general, though it may have quite specific connotations in certain circumstances.

A second inclination was to use the term 'spiritual', as in 'spiritual practices', however the word spiritual has strong connotations to religion. Religion is often viewed as the social or institutional structures of a doctrine, and spirituality as the personal realm of the particular religion (Mercadante 2014: 4-5). Although some of the participants might use the word spiritual to define their relationship to psychedelics, some of them expressed their discomfort

with this term, as spiritual has non-representative connotations as well. Like Bernard once pointed out; “I’m not really spiritual. Like, I’m not really a hippie”.

The practices depicted in this chapter, through the experiences of the participants, are practices of retaining insight through exploring ‘inner worlds’ to gain insight by means of a ‘philosophical’ *self*. As we will see in the next chapter, redefining self can be a part of this process. Therefore, I choose to use the word ‘autognosis’, which means to ‘know one self, through one self’, or ‘self-knowledge by the process of self-analysis’<sup>12</sup>.

#### IN SUMMATION...

The participants express their psychedelic experiences as journeys or trips, into *spaces* where their perception of the world differs from everyday ‘ordinary’ experience. These spaces enable novel perspectives and insights about their personality and behavior patterns. These novel perspectives however, derive from affective, sensory, emotional experience, or what Turner describes as the ‘value’ of experience, the un-articulated space of ‘mere experience’. They *feel* connection to nature, *feel* at one with the universe, and experience the *feeling* of surrendering. It is the experience which makes a change, not the concept.

The intentions behind taking psychedelics are different ranging from curiosity, creativity, spiritual growth or relief from depression. However it varies from traditional views on drug use as escapism or self-medicalization, as psychedelics *reveal* aspects of themselves, and do not numb them. Therefore, their use of psychedelics can be understood as a means of autognosis – to know one’s self through oneself.

Expressions of this process can be seen in how they change their behavior. Exemplified in their relationship to alcohol, where alcohol is given lesser value due to this lack of insights from the drug experience. The fact difficult experiences are often welcomed, tells us a suppression of difficult feelings are not the primary goal, but rather, the difficult or ‘intense’ experiences are often a fruitful field of valuable insight. The common intention is long-term personal development or fundamental understanding, not necessarily short-term intoxication.

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<sup>12</sup>Definition retrieved from: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/autognosis>

The central theme I want to linger into the next chapter is the value given to having *an experience* with psychedelics. A novel experience which is hard to explain with words or categorize within a cultural frame, but which change participants' perspectives and behavior patterns. However this experience does not happen in a vacuum, or in (this context) a clinical sterile lab; it happens in a complex, social world. The next chapter will illuminate the sociality of the participants' psychedelic use, as the context is a variable that influences the experience, but also the experience is a variable which influences the participants' social life.

## PSYCHEDELIC COMMUNITIES

*“Collective rituals which incorporate potent psycho-active sacraments can stimulate profound subjective individual experiences, but they are simultaneously a socially dynamic collective force”* (Tramacchi 2000: 210).

Although many of the participants have experience with taking psychedelics alone, in most cases, for the majority of them, the psychedelic experience is also a social event. During fieldwork, I attended several “*samlinger*” (‘gatherings’) organized around the purpose of inducing psychedelic experience and sociality.

In this chapter, I will firstly describe two different gatherings I attended in order to illuminate the variety of ways people structure their psychedelic practice. When looking at communal aspects of psychedelic use, it becomes apparent the mindset and environment (‘set and setting’) of practitioners play a role in shaping such experiences. Also, the role of communication and language, and the problems associated, help us understand how these communities develop. I argue ‘narration through shared experience’ leads to a form of ‘psychedelic community’.

### WALKING IN SPACE

I was invited by Mons to go for a walk in the forest. He and a friend, “Lars”, were planning to eat some “*fleinsopp*” (liberty caps mushrooms), which they themselves picked the previous fall. We met on a warm spring morning, in the green, flowering forest outside of Oslo city. Although Mons told me they had done this walk several times before, they both expressed excitement and seemed slightly nervous.

After about a 20-minute walk, we stopped by a small lake and sat down by the waters edge as Mons said; “ I would like to start by performing a little ritual”. We sat in a circle on the ground and Mons took out a thermos full of tea from his backpack. The tea was infused with black tea leaves, some spices, coconut milk and dried *fleinsopp*. Mons showed me the thermos and said;

If you put the mushrooms in warm water for about 15 minutes, the psilocybin (psychoactive compound in mushrooms) dissolves into the water. I like to grind the mushrooms into powder and pour it in, but you can also do this with whole mushrooms and then take them out. You see, they don't taste so good, he he. So I make my own mushroom chai latte.

He then poured the tea into two cups, and gave one of them to Lars. They held the cup with both hands, resting in their lap. Mons was the first to speak; "My intention for this journey is to be present in the moment and speak truthfully". Lars went next; "my intention for this journey is to reflect on my relationship to nicotine". I joined in; "My intention for this journey is to be mindful and observant, and to listen deeply". We all closed our eyes and sat there together for a little while in silence. They drank the tea in one big gulp. Mons went down to the water to rinse out the thermos and cups. He stood up and said; "Ok, let's go".

We walked through the forest on a small path, one after the other. For about 30 minutes they talked about life and the beauty of the Norwegian forest, until Lars suddenly started chuckling. He looked back with a big smile on his face, like a child with an untold secret. "I'm sorry, he he, things are just starting to get weird". Mons started laughing as well, and for the next half an hour or so, they seemed to have trouble keeping eye contact, as if they could not compose themselves if they did.

After a while, they stopped by a fallen tree log and paused. Lars had a sad and confused look on his face, while Mons just stared at him. He started talking about the tree, how graceful it was laying there;

I used to have a tree just like it at in the yard at my mom's house. She took it down last summer and it made me really sad. I mean, it has always been there, like a totem pole, a constant in my life. I loved that tree. It hurt when she removed that constant factor in my life. It is nice that something's stays the same.



He took a couple of deep breaths. Mons walked over to a tree next to the fallen log and put both his hands firmly on the trunk, with a soft serious voice he said; “I love trees. There is something so safe about their presence. Like wise old spirits”.

During that day, Mons and Lars would stop and reflect on objects in nature this way several times. While gasping at the sight of a spider web, in awe of a smoke mushroom, playing with the ants in an anthill for 30 minutes. The whole time with gentle voices asking questions and rambling on and on about how interesting everything was. They acted in a childlike manner, though with a philosophical and deeply serious undertone, which was exemplified when Mons stated;

Everything makes sense out here. Nothing in the woods is clutter, there is no dirt, it's all in symbiosis. Whenever I get back to the city after a walk like this, I feel out of place. Straight lines and boxes everywhere. Like my body, usually I can find many imperfections, potential for improvements, and now... it just is what it is, natural in its natural environment. It is like you eat a piece of nature's magic and then become nature, or become what you are, a part of nature. You in nature, nature in you.

Although it felt like I was listening to a thought stream, it was easy to understand what they were talking about, even though I was not in the same ‘space’. It was clear however, they had emotional responses to their environment which I did not share. Their experience of ‘feeling emotionally attached to a tree’, seemed to be more genuine and profound than the easily cliché, stereotypical representations of such an experience. Yes, they were hugging trees, but they were not necessarily ‘tree huggers’<sup>13</sup>. Talking about their connection with trees, and writing about it in retrospect, almost seems to reduce the experience they conveyed through bodily expressions and spontaneous utterances.

Every once in a while we sat down and had a little break. As I took the opportunity to have a snack, they spent their time examining their environment attentively. Every time we sat down, after exploring the surroundings, Lars took out a box of “*snus*” (Scandinavian tobacco) and

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<sup>13</sup> The term tree-hugger is often used as a derogatory term for an environmental activist or frivolous hippie.

look at it. He then opened the box and sniff the tobacco. With a look of confusion and disgust, he put the lid back on and hides it in his pocket. During an interview on a later occasion, he told me he did not feel attached to the *snus* on that day:

It is kind of weird and gross. It was like I had never tried snus before and did not have any desire to do so. I still have one every once in a while, but I do not enjoy it as much anymore, like I don't feel like the snus wanted to do me good.

Around 5 pm, after 7 hours in the forest, Mons and Lars had 'come down'. We were then getting close to the end of the forest where the subway station was located. We all stopped and held each other's hands, standing in a circle. Mons closed his eyes and said; "Thank you mushroom spirit for being present, showing us the way through the woods, teaching us humility, showing us our place on this earth, thank you, thank you". They kept their eyes closed for a while as we stood there holding hands in silence. Lars then squeezed my hand as he said; "Thank you for connecting us to our new sister, may her path show her wisdom and may her wisdom change the world". We looked at each other and they smiled with a sense of confirmation and humility in their eyes.

On the subway, Mons said he wanted to go home and write down notes from the day's experiences. He called it a "trip report"; "a recording of what happened. It helps me reflect on what I can learn from this trip in the next couple of days". He looked at me and smiled as he added; "that's kind of what you are doing as well, isn't it?".

Several of the gatherings I attended, like the empirical example above, were intentionally situated in nature. During a cabin trip with Frida and her friends, she explained;

It might sound stupid, but nature feels more natural. It is how nature is in symbiosis, it is one organism, less boundaries. This feeling also makes it less likely to have uncomfortable experiences, as I feel more natural, more at home.

Although many participants emphasized the role of nature in a psychedelic experience, others held gatherings in their homes in the city. Gatherings which, if you could see it from the

outside, might simply look like an average Saturday evening with friends. One example of this was the psychedelic evening hosted by John, who I introduced at the beginning of the previous chapter.

#### A SATUR'DELIC EVENING

On a snowy Saturday evening, John invited me to come to a gathering in his beautiful villa situated on the west side of Oslo city. John did not give me any specifications on what this gathering was about, except like-minded people were invited. Although I had interviewed John prior to this and met him several times, this was the first occasion I was introduced to his friends. When I arrived, three other guests were socializing in the living room, along with John's wife "Turid". The dimmed lighting, soft electronic music and fruit and refreshments on the table, made the atmosphere inviting and calm.

As we were getting to know each other, 5 more guests arrived. The guests were well-dressed, educated professionals between the ages of 25 - 50 years old. Some of them had met each other briefly before, but there were others who met for the first time this evening. John knew them all. The conversation at the beginning of the evening was polite, though there was a slight nervousness and excitement which filled the air.

At one point, around 8:30 pm, John came into the living room and put a nose spray on the table. He didn't say anything. He simply looked discreetly around for a reaction. People looked at it, but went on talking. I asked Turid about the nose spray and she told me it contained the substance 2-CB. That question opened up a conversation around the room about what substances people wanted to take that night. One couple attending did not have any prior experience with drugs in general, and they were not sure if they wanted to participate yet. Another man had brought some MDMA, but had not taken it. As the night went on, everyone (except one woman) did one or several types of substances. I observed LSD, Psilocybin mushrooms, 2-CB, Ketamine, DMT, MDMA, 6-APB and Marijuana. Throughout the night people referred to psychedelics as *psykedelika* (psychedelics) or *substanser* (substances). The word *dop* (drugs), was explicitly used to refer to things outside this category.

The whole night consisted of mingling. People moved from one room to another, mostly talking to one another. The ones on MDMA or 6-APB also cuddled up on the couch or on

mattresses on the floor, often in intense conversations about the ups and downs of life. The conversations ran fluently and no one slurred their words, said anything which did not make sense or any loss of motor control. However, some did have dilated pupils and a general exuberant facial expression.

The vibe throughout the evening was very inviting, calm and genuine. They opened up about difficulties in their lives and then listened attentively as others did the same. Often they gave hugs, held each others hands or put a hand on each others shoulder. Everyone seemed to be good friends, although as mentioned earlier, some of them did not have any previous affiliation to each other. All of this was a part of what created a sense of 'safe space', something which was expressed by several of the participants throughout the night. They often compared the gathering with other social arenas in their lives, such as work or their social life, describing these places as disconnected and alienating.

One of the guests, a lawyer in her early 30's, realized throughout her career, she had met so many people and worked side by side with them all day and attended countless social events, but never;

Actually met any of them. You sit in your office every day and wonder if you're going mad... am I the only one that feels different... lonely. I don't care about our lunch conversations, every day talking about taxes, Birken, the weather, some TV show I have no interest in. I think everyone does this, endure his or her everyday existence, but no one is aware of why. I realize that it is because I never meet the people around me in a genuine way. We never look into each other's eyes and just meet, soul to soul. Talk about what we really care about or really listen when others open up. There is no community, just the roles we play.

At one point I was standing in the kitchen next to John. I asked him what this night was about and if this is an usual event. He told me this is the way people are introduced to psychedelics; "They usually mention it to someone in this inner circle and we invite them to a gathering, a

psychedelic evening like this one. We recruit people all the time, there is always someone who has not tried it before”. He smiled and leaned in a little closer as he said;

We are about 100 people by this point, there is a massive movement going on. And if you think about it, if everyone I meet gives this experience to another 3-4 people, well, it will not be long before society starts to wake up. If you haven’t noticed, we are not interested in alcohol, cocaine and other mind numbing drugs. We want awakening, development and community.

The guest on MDMA and 6-APB would mostly talk and cuddle, while the ones on LSD or 2-CB were more active and exploring the house. One of the men, an athletic man in his late 20’s even took a bath. After he came out of the bathroom he told me that he had a “*gjenfødsel*” (rebirth) experience. With tears in his eyes he explained;

It felt like I was sitting there forever, waiting for the water to fill up and being very confused about the situation... then after I turned the water tap off, I slid under and emerged myself in the water. Under the water I thought, am I dying? Is this it? Am I killing myself? What is this warm and cozy place? But I was not panicking. That’s the moment it all changed. When I came up from the water, the world was another. One way going in and then something totally different coming out. I’m still there... like I was born again.

He then went into one of the bedrooms where a group had gathered on the bed, cuddling and talking. He told them about the experience in a slow, soft voice. Another male guest, who had given him the substance earlier that night, laid down beside him and held him. Next to them were two women, holding hands. At some point, they all grabbed each other’s hands and just laid there in a huddle on the bed. There was nothing sexual about the situation, the atmosphere felt very loving and ‘normal’ and no one seemed to care that I was sitting on the

end of the bed just observing the conversation. We were there for about 30 minutes, listening attentively to the man's experience in the bathtub.

Throughout the night, I had conversations about quantum physics, politics, relationships, and general concerns in people's lives. But most of all, people expressed how wonderful this situation was. Several comments were made about how transformational it was to meet people like this, having this experience and being so "ekte" (real). As I left the gathering that night, everyone said goodbye with long hugs and expressed appreciation for my presence. The conversations we have had, of a deeply personal and philosophical nature, created an atmosphere of warmth and genuine humility. The affective quality of this gathering was thick with sincerity.

Although at first glance, this gathering might not seem intentionally structured. I will however argue there is a reason why these gatherings happen the way they did. The safe confined space of a home, or the open organic space of the forest, are two different environments that will influence the participants' psychedelic experience differently. The structure of how psychedelic substances are taken and the intentions behind doing so is what is known as 'set og setting' (set and setting). Two variables in a formula, which shape the psychedelic experience.

#### A PSYCHEDELIC FORMULA

The term "set og setting" (set and setting) were often referred to by the participants when talking about the structure and proceedings in which they took psychedelic substances. Although an emic term in this context, 'set and setting' has been a kind of mantra in the psychedelic literature for a long time. It was first coined by the famous Harvard professor Timothy Leary (1964), in his book titled "The psychedelic Experience". According to Leary, psychedelics themselves do not produce transcendent experiences. Rather, they are the chemical key which opens up the mind (Leary et.al 1964: 11).

According to Leary, the outcome of 'opening up the mind' depends almost entirely on set and setting. "Set denotes the preparation of the individual, including his personality structure and his mood at the time. Setting is physical - the weather, the room's atmosphere; social - feelings of persons present towards one another; and cultural - prevailing views as to what is

real” (Leary et. al 1964: 11). In other words, the outcome of a psychedelic experience will be influenced by a person’s state of being (physicality and mindset) and the state of his environment. As we have seen in the empirical examples, the participants prepared for their psychedelic experience in different ways attuning to what comes natural to them. Although the participants approached the concept of ‘set and setting’ in different ways, all of them were familiar with it as an important element of the psychedelics experience which should not be ignored.

In the example of Mons and Lars, setting an intention before they embarked upon a psychedelic trip attuned their mindset on what they wanted to accomplish during that day, as well as a sense of sincerity when inviting the “mushroom spirit”, were ways of addressing their state of mind. In addition to addressing their mindset at that moment, their cultural understanding of the mushrooms from a perspective of traditional spiritual practices and other cultural expectations and attitudes, may also affect the outcome of their experience. The ‘setting’, in this case was the wild and green forest outside of Oslo, giving ‘nature’s wonders’ a prominent role in their experience.

In the case of John and his friends, the attention given to set and setting was possibly not as obvious to outsiders, though nonetheless intentional. They valued the safety of having a private gathering in which everyone was attuned to the intention of having transformative experiences. A group of collegial and likeminded people made it safe to explore and express whatever came naturally during a psychedelic experience. A private setting, isolated from disturbances from the outside world, created a ‘safe space’ for them to enter their experience. Also, the attention given to soft electronic music, dimmed lights and access to fruit and refreshments made the setting inviting and ambient.

The ‘set’ in this case, was influenced by the conceptualization of psychedelics as a cognitive tool and a general scientific oriented attitude. None of the participants from this group were expressing their intentions explicitly for any particular psychedelic trip, and there was no obvious formal ritual or structure in attending to mindset. However, during the interviews and conversations, as we have seen in the previous chapter, none of the participants went into the psychedelic experience in the first place without thoroughly reflecting on why. The set in this case was more implicit, than in the case of Mons and Lars. Even so, safety in closing off from outside influences and safety in knowing everyone within the confined space was open-

mindful, as well as their individual reflections of their journey with psychedelics, was their attention to set and setting. As nature becomes a prominent variable in the experience of Lars and Mons, people and community became a prominent variable in the experience of John and his friends.

The lack of attention to set and setting is often attributed as to why people have ‘bad trips’. This is a common term used for psychedelic experiences which are challenging, as it might lead to a feeling of panic or unwantedly losing control (Sessa 2017: 28). Truly horrifying experiences can sometimes be traumatizing, especially if the participant is not prepared and does not know what to anticipate. On the other hand, even though a psychedelic experience is challenging, the outcome might be positive, as one can gain great insights from pushing one’s comfort zone. We would not call mountain climbing ‘bad’, even though it will often be greatly challenging. Completing such a task and having those challenging experiences might afterwards lead to a great feeling of joy and accomplishment. What we do value however, is the training and preparation one puts in before the mountain is confronted, and an awareness of what is to come (Sessa 2017: 31).

This notion of gaining valuable insight through difficult experiences was clearly portrayed in the example of Julia, where she expressed; “I had one of the most scary, intense and confusing, mind-blowing experiences, but what came out of it was so meaningful, so precious”. She recognizes the fear or unpleasantness while under the influence, but she also gives this experience value due to the outcome of personal insight.

So then paying attention to set and setting is a way of preparing for a psychedelic experience, trying to create the best possible route. How to prepare is often based on the individual, as we do not have the same associations with different objects in our environment. Therefore, a setting which accommodates one person’s transformational experience might be challenging for someone else. Where Frida “feels at home” in nature, others might not.

What becomes apparent so far in these two chapters is that a drug experience is highly variable. Different types of drugs will foster different experiences for different people. Also, the amount of drugs taken will naturally play a role. As we have seen in this chapter, the mindset of a person entering a drug experience and the environment surrounding that person will shape their experience as well. In a way, we can sum it up into a formula of;



type of substance + dosage + set + setting = experience.

Although one can stabilize the first two variables to a certain degree, at least with chemically produced substances such as LSD, the last two variables however are complicated, situational and hard to define. To ‘know yourself’ in the Foucault’ dian sense, takes practice, and being honest or aware of your mindset is difficult. How your mindset then will interact with its surroundings is equally fluid and might surprise you. Nonetheless, I will argue being aware of this formula and of how they are interconnected, gives someone who wants to enter a psychedelic experience the possibility to manage their experience responsibly, to a certain degree.

The Norwegian anthropologist Per Kristian Hilden (2007) did a inquiry online of Norwegians who use psychoactive substances to self-regulate mood or physical conditions. His participants discussed a variety of methods using prescription pharmaceuticals in addition to illegal substances. Hilden argues, based on attaining scientific knowledge and their own and others experiences, these people view their body as a kind of pharmacological machinery, on which they use drugs to tweak the system. Not in order to retrieve health from sickness, but as a daily practice of maximizing skills, experiences and pleasures. They practice their own ‘pharmacological rationality’ which, according to Joseph Dumit, attributes to the normalization of such drug behavior in modern societies (Hilden 2007: 34-35). In the case of the participants in this inquiry, the psychedelic formula is a how they tweak their own experience, optimizing the outcome in form of novelty and insight. However, it has more layers than mere bodily experimentation as they realize the ‘mechanical machinery’ is equally influenced by the environment in which it is part, and the valuable outcome of ‘tweaking’ the material form, is ephemeral.

The empirical stories illustrate how the participants construct their experiences, by attending to the variables in the psychedelic formula. By giving attention to set and setting, the participants may avoid challenging experiences, even though challenging can also yield positive outcome. However they are structured, these psychedelic gatherings are spatial and temporal spaces of experience which alter states of consciousness, creating what might be called a ‘psychedelic ritual’.

## A PSYCHEDELIC RITUAL

A ritual can take shape in many different forms, as rituals are an “indeterminate category of actions” (Versteeg 2011: 2). The concept of the ritual has been discussed in anthropology for a long time and there are many definitions and explanations for such human behavior. The most dominant way to approach the ritual theoretically, is ritual as a representation of the wider social order. The ritual is an arena where social structures and cosmologies are maintained, as a mechanism for their reproduction (Kapferer 2004: 38). According to Levi-Strauss, it is not a representation of the world as it is, but the world as man sees it (Handelman 2004: 2). In this sense, a ritual is given meaning when situating it in the society in which it arises, as the ritual actions by themselves are meaningless. The ritual is given meaning by the participants, because they are a part of the relevant social structure and cosmology.

Although some rituals may play out this function of re-affirming social order or cosmologies and giving meaning by mirroring the world, some argue a ritual can be fruitful because it is in some sense independent from larger realities (Kapferer 2004). In other words, ritual is an arena for the different, for ‘other’, than the social reality where they are played out. Victor Turner was one of the first to shift the perspective of ritual from representation, to the notion of ritual as ‘becoming’ (Turner 1995). According to Turner, the liminal face of a ritual is crucial to this notion. The term *liminality* refers to the stage in-between, or outside, social structures. In this state, the established psychological, social and societal boundaries and categories (such as roles and status) temporarily disperse (Turner 1995: 56-59). Through his theory of liminality, he showed how rituals could be points of transformation and redirection, as this in-between stage is a place of potential, and therefore can create change from *within* society (Kapferer 2004: 37).

In the shift from traditional religion to self-oriented spirituality, the ritual according to Turner, has moved from the liminal to *liminoid* (Versteeg 2011: 6). Although the two terms relate to each other, there are some qualitative differences, which make liminal linked to more traditional societies and liminoid to contemporary cultures. While liminal refers to the transitional state between leaving and reintegrating society, often in the context of a traditional ‘rite of passage’, liminoid refers to the space outside social structures which are based on “more individual preferences and motivations to create temporary enclaves of contemplation, vision and abandon” (Versteeg 2011: 2-4).

The liminoid then, offers alternatives and ‘otherness’ to the social reality. Not structured by society or religious institutions, but performed by individuals to reflect on individualized realities. As we have seen in the empirical data, some may intentionally refer to aspects of the gathering as ritual or ceremonial, like stating one's intention before drinking mushroom tea. Others might not use the word ritual, but structure a temporal gathering where the intention is to dive beyond the social structuring of everyday life. They are both creating temporary enclaves of ‘other’ than everyday realities. In the very essence of participating in such psychedelic gathering, is the intention of wanting to experience alternative realities; a change in perspective outside established psychological, social and societal boundaries – to experience the liminoid.

The theory of liminality or the liminoid tells us the desire to expand awareness, by creating alternative realities, is not a contemporary phenomenon in human culture. Neither is using psychoactive substances for this purpose. As mentioned in chapter 1, the use of psychedelic plants in ritual or spiritual practices is found in cultures all over the world and has long historical roots. One might argue there is no reason why ritual practices which are performed with the intention of radical experiences, is a contemporary phenomenon. One of the reasons perhaps why psychedelics can be found in spiritual practices around the world, has to do with the psychological term ‘transpersonal experience’.

#### A TRANSPERSONAL EXPERIENCE

One of the pioneers in psychedelic research Dr. Stanislav Grof, has done thousands of psychedelic therapy sessions with the substance LSD. From his research, he categorized the psychedelic experience into different levels. The level, or state, which often became the point of healing is what he called a ‘transpersonal experience’ (Grof 1979). Having a transpersonal experience is what might also be called ‘ego loss’ or expansion of self-awareness. The term refers to having the experience in which ‘self’ is not confined to the limits of one's own body, with a particular individual personality, but rather ‘self’ is expansive and in some instances encompasses everything within one’s surroundings. This feeling has also been called ‘oneness’ or ‘universal consciousness’, which is arguably why some more religious oriented individuals might express this experience as ‘being with God’.

This transpersonal experience is what most of the participants attributed as the most important aspect of their psychedelic adventures, or the part of the experience which had the greatest impact. As Morten explained; “When you actually see and move between dimensions and actually feel how all these dimensions or universes are all one, all of it in unity and harmony. Well, I had to laugh at myself for being an atheist all these years”. This feeling, of connectedness, is part of the ‘vibe’ experienced at John’s gatherings. The experience of being in a group of people, where the phenomenological boundaries between them dissolve to some degree, arguably creates a higher degree of openness and solidarity. Conceivably more so for the participants who are scientifically inclined, due to the dualistic constitution of scientific materialism, in comparison to the individuals who have a spiritual practice like yoga or Buddhism.

Among the psychonauts I have met, this openness and solidarity is common, not only among friends, but also among relative strangers. Many of the people at John’s gathering did not know each other, or at least had loose social ties to each other, and still, they touched each other attentively, cuddled, shared personal stories and kept steady eye contact. The affective quality of these gatherings where people have transpersonal experiences is what I will classify as ‘warm’ and ‘inclusive’. This was expressed throughout the night, even towards me, the sober ethnographer.

As mentioned, the affective quality is not easily translated by describing the proceedings of the events alone. During the walk with Mons and Lars, I could ‘sense’ there were more profound things going on than what I could observe and convey through text. Perhaps this is the reason for the expressions of gratitude and acceptance when we gathered in a circle at the end of our day, because even for me, the day was suffused with more than merely a walk through the forest. When discussing experiences such as a transpersonal experience, we do not get away from the predicament in which we shape these experiences with words. As discussed, a well-known aspect of these psychedelic experiences is its ineffable character.

#### NARRATING THE SELF AND THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE

In spite of the ineffable character, getting people to open up about their psychedelic experiences was, in most cases, a surprisingly easy task. Once I mentioned the word psychedelics, most people’s eyes would light up and their stories would easily flow out. There

might be many reasons for this, one of them being having a transformative experience in it self, however it came about, will surely occupy the mind. Getting the opportunity to share what's on one's mind is often welcomed. But the act of telling the story, of 'narrating the self', has other functions than a mere showing of interest.

Language will always reduce experience, as it has to fit within a frame of common cultural conception in which language is based. In the case of a radical experience, to categorize or make sense of the experience within such a frame becomes difficult. As Otto stated; "I am good with words, but I am not understood". The sentence "it is hard to explain" was perhaps the most commonly used phrase during the 6 months of fieldwork. Nonetheless, "personal narrative simultaneously is born out of experience and gives shape to experience" (Ochs & Capps 1996: 20).

Narrative might be said to transform people's moment-to-moment experience into a sequence of events, a lump of moments into an object to be analyzed. This object, the story, will never be equal to the experience itself. However, the story, as an object to be analyzed, allows a kind of integration of the ineffable into common cultural conceptions, as well as navigate our relationship to others (Ochs & Capps 1996: 20-21).

Language is a tool created in order to try to understand experience collectively; we make sense of ourselves in the world by narrating our self and coding the reactions of others. As has already been discussed, 'set and setting' includes the cultural understanding of how psychedelics are conceptualized and articulated. We frame our experience, via narrative to others, in order to categorize them into our cultural framework. As Turner pointed to in the previous chapter, the personal and cultural forms of 'meaning' are what transform the unarticulated and affective quality of 'value' into coherent and reflexive structures of experiences. The narratives of these psychedelic experiences both give 'meaning' (structure) to the 'value' (unarticulated experience) of the narrator, but also to the recipient.

Some of the participants, like Mons, liked to write down their experience into 'trip reports'. These trip reports are often shared with friends or on the Internet, in the countless online

forums dedicated to such narratives<sup>14</sup>. Throughout the fieldwork, people referred me to an online forum where they had posted their trip reports, as a way of introducing themselves or their experience with psychedelics. The feedback they got from others interpretations of their trip report helped them create the narrative of what had happened to them, and how to use these experiences productively for personal transformation.

These online forums where also used by scientists I met during the conferences I attended in Oakland and London. The online trip-report forums acted as a kind of knowledge base for finding interesting topics to research, as well as a source of massive amounts of information which could be used as additional empirical data. Some researchers made the argument such “citizen science”, through the technology of the Internet, is a valuable resource in academia when it comes to researching arenas of illegality.

At all the gatherings I attended, talking about these experiences happened during and after the influence of the substances. At John’s gathering, the man who had what he called a “rebirth” experience in the bathtub, soon created a narrative of his experience by sharing it with other participants. The recipients of this narrative listened attentively and comment with mostly positive feedback about how brave he had been, how this was a positive turning point in his life, and how they appreciated him telling them the story. Although the narrator is the only one who truly knows what a “rebirth” experience actually means in this context, it arguably portrays a sense of new beginning and potential for those who listen. Their ‘set and setting’, in the sense of how they conceptualize the psychedelic experience, is now open for such a categorization of their own experiences.

This predicament of language and experience post some interesting analytical questions. A large part of the empirical evidence this thesis is based upon, is participants’ linguistic interpretations of their experiences, both during and after the fact. What actually happens, in space, is not possible to analyze in the context of this thesis. Observational data as well, is my interpretation as a researcher with a certain subjective culturally laden lens, notably ‘from the outside’. In other words, the analysis is based upon Turner’s expression of experience (Throop 2003: 224), rather than the experience itself. An interesting methodological

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<sup>14</sup> Examples of popular trip report websites are Erowid.org (<https://erowid.org/experiences/>) or BlueLight.org (<http://bluelight.org/vb/forums/40-Trip-Reports>)

conundrum, as the participants themselves stress the value of experience in order to understand.

What does become apparent however is sharing the experience of this ineffable 'space', where transformational experiences occur, creates a sense of belonging or community among the participants. Being offered a chance to share their narrative and mirror those narratives with others, allows the psychedelic experience to be better incorporated into their everyday lives. Sociality, both influence the experience (setting), but also the experiences shape the participants' sociality. Creating what might be called 'psychedelic communities'. Perhaps the ineffability itself strengthens this notion, as they all are aware that they share an experience, which cannot be adequately communicated to others, especially those who have not experienced.

## PSYCHEDELIC COMMUNITIES

The beats and the hippies, by the eclectic and syncretic use of symbols and liturgical actions drawn from the repertoire of many religions, and of 'mind-expanding' drugs, rock music, and flashing lights, try to establish a "total" communion with one another. This, they hope and believe, will enable them to reach one another through the 'ordonne de tous les sense' in tender, silent, cognizant mutuality and in all concreteness (...) What they seek is a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person's being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared (Turner, 1995: 138).

What Turner points to here is the value given to 'ecstasies', or transformative experience, in the flowering of the 1960's counterculture. These experiences in turn shaped the way people interacted with one another, due to a sense of *communitas*. 'Communitas' refers to the feeling of a group which shares a common experience, often among people outside of social structure or the collective community feeling of participants of a rite of passage. However, it can also refer to the spontaneous communal feelings which arise in all kinds of ritual practices such as the 'hippie gatherings' Turner refers to above (Turner 1995: 131-140). "In particular, in its

spontaneous forms, *communitas* is said to be accompanied by intense experiences of unity amongst those who partake of that experience” (Vertseeg 2011: 5).

In contrast to Turners analysis of the counterculture in the sixties, where communities resolved in groups diverging from the mainstream cultures, the psychedelic communities of Oslo today are very much a part of the wider social matrix. After having these transformational and personal psychedelic experiences during a weekend gathering, come Monday, these people go back to work. They have family lives, pay taxes, go to the gym and have weekends at the cabin. Where the goal of the sixties movement arguably was to attain a consistent feeling of *communitas*, the “psychedelic experience is no longer seen as a total and terminal disruption of society’s fabric, but rather as a distinctive, but integrated social process” (Tramacchi 2000: 210).

Most of the participants did (arguably) not stand out in a crowd, and most of them were involved in several social groups which have no affiliation to illicit drug use. Although openness about their psychedelic experiences to the public is slightly more common among the participants such as Mons and Otto, most of the participants did not share this information with people other than their ‘psychedelic peers’. Many of them had family members, close friends, colleges and even spouses who had no affiliation to this side of their lives.

The most common reasons why they do not share their psychedelic experiences with the public, is the obvious one: psychedelics are illegal. It is not necessarily the possibility of a criminal conviction deferred them, but rather the fear of not being understood. As we have seen in the last chapter, many of the participants distance themselves from alcohol and other types of drugs, but the mainstream cultural conception of psychedelics in Norway does not necessarily make this separation. As Lars put it, when asked why he did not share his experiences with his family;

People would think I was a junky. My mom does not know the difference between LSD and heroin. If you do illegal drugs in Norway, you are labeled an addict. A looser. Where would I even begin to explain what is really going on.



## ILLEGAL ‘SET AND SETTING’

One of the participants “David”, a man in his late 40’s tried to tell his friends about his experiences with psychedelics. He expressed great frustration about navigating his friend’s cultural conceptions and his own experiences;

Here I was, talking about one of the most profound experiences of my life, and all they expressed was concern. I told them, this is a positive aspect in my life. I have a healthy relationship to drugs! But apparently, there is no such thing.

During the period of fieldwork, the political climate in regards to drug policy in Norway was changing. Due to decriminalization of marijuana in several countries and the successful drug reform policies of Portugal, international debate on alternative measures to deal with society's relationship to drug use is taken seriously. There is now an international consensus (from many states and institutions such as the UN drug administration) the strategies involved in ‘the war on drugs’, has failed<sup>15</sup>. As the fieldwork period coincided with the parliamentary election campaign in Norwegian, drug policy reform was a prevalent topic in the media and political debates.

However, the discussion is still very much laden with what anthropologist Steffen Jöhncke (2009) calls ‘treatmentality’. Treatmentality is the theory which drug treatment, and drug use, have become culturally constructed opposites of good versus bad. Up until now, the drug policy debate has been based around whether it is ethical to keep punishing drug use through legal measures, or to help them overcome their ‘illness’ by way of health treatment. As stated above, punishing drug use has been the dominant strategy for six decades and has not resulted in the desired outcome. Treatment then, has become the morally sanctioned strategy.

Treatmentality refers first of all to the sheer obviousness of drug use treatment as a cultural and social institution that is placed beyond our questioning and that, therefore, defines in important ways the limits of our understanding of drug use as a social phenomenon. Treatment is a solution that defines our knowledge of the problem.

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<sup>15</sup> From public lecture ”Portugal på norsk: RIO-debatt om narkotikapolitisk reform”, 22 March 2018.

(Jöhncke 2009: 17).

Subsequently, the debate surrounding drug-reform policies was based upon how to best ensure drug treatment, with little attention given to the meaning of drug use. Arguably, restating the moral divide between drug treatment and drug use, and in some sense preserving the legacy of the war on drugs.

Psychedelics are drugs, drugs are bad and drug users need treatment. This puts the participants in this inquiry in an interesting contradiction, between their own conception of their psychedelic use and the wider cultural conception of drug use. For participants such as Frida, Julia and Petter, their use of psychedelics is a kind of treatment of its own. For most of the participants, the practice of autognosis, including substance induced states, are a form of healing from individual afflictions.

For the participants, the illegality and stigma around drug use created a sense of secrecy, and subsequently a separation of ‘those in the know’ and those who are not. This is strengthened by the value given to actually having *an* experience, in which psychedelics are not to be intellectually understood, but experienced. Added to this is the ineffable character of these experiences, which means explaining what they have experienced with words often leads to either glorified or deterministic impressions. Narrating such an experience might then be easier if the recipient themselves have been to ‘space’. Frida once expressed she has a special connection to people who are experienced with psychedelics;

I definitely feel more comfortable with the people I share psychedelic experiences with. It might also be that many of them are also my friends, but there is definitely a special vibe with people who do psychedelics. It's in their eyes, there is a spark that is hard to explain, I even see strangers on the street... you just know, like... hey, there you are.

As we have seen at John's gathering, many of the participants expressed how other social arenas in their lives seemed disconnected and alienating in comparison. Thus, although the participants are not separated from the wider social matrix, there is an inside/outside division.

There is a ‘psychedelic community’, of those who are ‘turned on’, those who know the secret, those who have experienced. On many occasions, and from every social group I interviewed, this psychedelic community was referred to as something real and growing. As we have seen, as in the case of John’s gatherings, recruitment into this community is by way of sharing the psychedelic experience. Or as Mons once jokingly added when paraphrasing Star Wars; “come over to the *bright* side”.

The word *rekrutering* (recruitment) came up many times throughout the fieldwork period and often people were quite blunt about this. Recruiting someone means; giving psychedelics to people who had not previously tried it. I want to stress however, sharing psychedelic substances with others is, according to the participants, done out of a desire to help people. The desire to help them open up their minds, give them perspective and hopefully free them from negative habitual patterns. As John expressed;

If everyone I meet gives this experience to 3-4 other people... well, it will not be long before society starts to wake up. If you haven’t noticed, we are not interested in alcohol, cocaine and other mind numbing drugs. We want awakening, development and community.

This brings up the question, wake up to what? Perhaps Otto hinted at this when he said; “psychedelics are like an umbrella term for communication with nature and a mystical understanding of the world”. Or as Petter expressed; “I want to get to the root of the problem, not put a bandaid on it”. Perhaps, as Mons stated; “It’s all about awareness I guess, about changing your perception”. Or for Frida, on a fundamental level; “falling in love with the universe again”. Answering this question is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis, however my point is to state the participants’ seemingly benevolent intentions behind sharing these experiences with others.

#### IN SUMMATION...

This chapter has looked at the way participants structure their psychedelic experiences. By attending to ‘set and setting’ and what type of drug they use in what dosage, they create a space which is attentive to their own personalities and desires. The empirical examples have

demonstrated two ways of structuring such a psychedelic experience, which produce two different focal points. Both of them are temporary enclaves of ‘other’ than their everyday lives, a type of contemporary liminoid ritual. This ritual is performed as a practice of autognosis, giving the participants insights into their habitual patterns and personal perspectives.

These insights and perspectives which come from having a radical experience, which is often a feeling of transpersonal connectedness, is an experience which is known to have an ineffable character. This is one aspect of psychedelic use which gives value to the need of having the experience personally. Nonetheless, the participants narrate the experience to each other in order to conceptualize the experience within a cultural framework and better integrate insights into their everyday lives. Through sharing these experiences, actively and through narratives, and an added sense of secrecy due to the context of illegality, the participants create a type of psychedelic community. A community based upon ‘those who know’, ‘those who have experienced’, creating a communal bond between psychonauts.

Communities of psychonauts however, stretch beyond the participants represented in this thesis. As we will see in the next chapter, mediums such as podcasts, books and art, tie people together to a wider psychedelic culture.

## THE WIDER CONTEXT

*“If you start taking things too seriously, just remember that we are talking monkeys on an organic spaceship flying through the universe” – Joe Rogan*

In the introduction chapter, I outlined the historical background of psychedelic practice and interest in modern times. History shows us that psychedelics have been in the spotlight before, both in terms of scientific interest and cultural adaptation, through two so-called ‘waves’ of psychedelic interest. We might assume this historical legacy has shaped the way psychedelics are used and conceptualized in contemporary cultures around the world, including the participants of this inquiry. This chapter will address certain aspects of this wider societal context of interest in psychedelic substance use, in order to better understand ongoing psychedelic practices in Oslo. Much like the selective process of writing history, the topic of ‘context’ has an abundance of possibilities, as the interconnectedness of social phenomenon seems endless. Therefore, I have chosen a few empirically relevant topics and tendencies, which I perceive to be especially interesting in relation to our discussion.

Firstly, I will introduce an empirical example from the field, primarily located at a floatation studio in Oslo. This establishment seems to act as a kind of junction between different aspects of psychedelic culture. I will then discuss how communication mediums, especially podcasts, are affecting contemporary psychedelic culture by narrating psychedelic experiences on a large scale. Following this, I will examine how psychedelic culture expands beyond the realm of psychedelic substances and why many psychonauts seek other practice such as yoga and floatation. Finally, I will touch upon the current status of psychedelic science and culture, as some would argue from a historical perspective, we are currently witnessing a ‘third wave’ of psychedelic interest.

## THE BUSINESS OF ALTERED STATES

As a part of fieldwork, I worked as a volunteer at a floatation studio in Oslo city. Floatation is the practice of floating in a sealed tank (also known as ‘sensory deprivation tank’) filled with salt water. The temperature of the water and air is adjusted to match that of the body, and there are no sounds (ears under water) or any prevailing smells. Furthermore, there is no light and the water induces a sensation of being weightless. As a result, there are limited sensory

stimuli, which is intended to ‘allow the nervous system to relax’, as one enthusiast described it. This environment is therefore arguably well suited for meditation and contemplation, as without sensation, what is left is one’s mind. In other words, like psychedelics, floatation could be said to ‘make the mind visible’<sup>16</sup>.

The studio has two floatation tanks in separate rooms, a reception area, a podcast studio, a living room space and an art gallery. The art gallery was used to present Norwegian artists who create “visionary art”. I was told this type of art ‘illustrates psychedelic experiences’, such as ‘visuals’ and emotions which are symptomatic of an altered state of consciousness (ASC), conveying such arguably ineffable experiences into material form. A variety of animals, humans, therianthropes and other figures of nature seemed to blend in and out of each other on the canvases, in fractal patterns and impressive colour. Such qualities might explain why visitors at the floatation studio occasionally ascribed the paintings as “trippy”. The notion of ‘trippy’ can have a wide array of possible connotations, though in this case it seemingly referred to certain visual and other ‘visionary’ qualities representative of the effects induced by introspective practice. The owner of the floatation studio once told me this is the perfect setting for such a display, as people are often relaxed and open minded when they come out of a floatation tank.

Across from the art gallery there was a room set up for “Pandora’s Light”. This is a type of light technology which produces kaleidoscopic patterns of color and psychedelic imagery. The practitioner would lay on a couch with their eyes closed. The Pandora then beams light over their face, creating the kaleidoscopic patterns behind the eyelids. According to the floatation studios website, the light has an array of therapeutic and calming effects, but also, it is an interesting and novel experience.

The living room area contained a small kitchen, a seating area and a coffee table. On one of the walls, there was a large mural of a sitting Buddha in colors matching the intricately patterned pillows on the couch. The lighting was dimmed and there was often incense burning, filling the air with a sweet and spicy smell. On the table lay a stack of books, all of them in the genre of psychedelics, visionary art or floatation, such as Alex Grays book about his visionary art and Aldous Huxley’s “Doors of Perception”. A notable amount of people

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<sup>16</sup> Paraphrased from the project proposal of this inquiry p. 1

who came in for a floatation session would also spend time in this space, which supposedly ‘allowed for an easier transition back into the world outside’ (paraphrasing one of the floaters).

The last room at the floatation studio was a podcast studio. From here, the owner and one of the employees put together a regular podcast series. They invited people with different stories and backgrounds to come on as guests, including several prominent figures within psychedelic research (often through Skype from the US). Other guests included artists and occupational representatives, as well as friends and affiliates, they perceived to have interesting stories and knowledge to share, often times based on their introspective journeys and practices.

As I am writing this thesis, the floatation studio is working on launching a new project with non-gravity AI (artificial intelligence), enabling customers to float in the tank with AI goggles, simulating flying over an imaginary space. One of the programs the studio will be launching is called “Ayahuasca space”, a simulation of traveling through a world of, according to the owner, “fractal colors, golden goddesses and endless horizons”. As the name suggest, the experience is meant to resemble a psychedelic trip with the Amazonian psychedelic sacrament, Ayahuasca.

Besides the opportunity to experience floatation myself, this engagement allowed me to meet a large number of people who were interested in various forms of ASC. Of course, many of the customers were there for other reasons, such as relaxation or for magnesium uptake through the saltwater. However, a majority of the clients I talked to were explicit about their intent to change their state of consciousness. They seemed curious to see what happens when they shut out sensory stimuli in the tank, ‘amplify’ sensory input by means of the Pandora’s Light or learning new practices of ASC through being inspired by other people, books or podcasts.

During one of the evening shifts at the studio, “Christian”, a man in his mid thirties came in for a floatation session. He was wearing a suit, a leather computer bag and carrying two large shopping bags. He seemed somewhat in a hurry, perhaps stressed, and I asked him how he was doing; “good, but I need to relax. I must admit, my life is really busy these days. I’m looking forward to getting in the tank for an hour”. I then showed him the room and how to

use the tank, and an hour later he came out, seemingly more relaxed. He moved in a slow manner, before he sat down in the reception area and looked at me; “ so... what kind of experiences can you have while floating?”. I responded that this is quite relative for me, and asked if he had something particular in mind. He then explained that he was an active listener of the “Tim Ferriss podcast” and had just bought his recent book, “Tools of Titans”. In this book, Christian explained, Ferriss talks about floatation as the closest he could get to a non-drug induced psychedelic experience.

Among other influences were books on flow states, like Steven Kulters “Rise of Superman” or “Stealing Fire” and podcast such as “The Joe Rogan Experience”. According to him, psychedelics as a topic of conversation seemed to have exploded among his group of friends.

The problem is that no one knows where to get any drugs or have the guts to do something so radical. But personally, I would love to, if the opportunity arises. That’s why I am here, to get the next best thing.

Christian associated psychedelic substances as a type of “consciousness hacking”. Several other participants have also used the same term. What they seemingly refer to include practices which allow a certain ‘change’ of mental state to occur, like meditation, nutrition, physical exercises and of course psychoactive substances. Another term, “biohacking”, would comparably refer to various types of food, supplements, nootropics (neurological supplements or so-called ‘smart drugs’), physical exercises or ‘breath work’, which likewise induce changes of one’s state of mind. Christian explained that;

If you have ambitions as a businessman, working on yourself to optimize your state of being is key to keeping up with today’s creative market. Also, I just want to be a better person, since you guys seem to have it figured something out.

The empirical description of my encounter with Christian epitomizes a tendency I’ve noticed during my engagement at the floatation studio. During conversations with customers, many have expressed similar interests as Christian, including practices which could ‘optimize their state of being’, or ‘wellbeing’, often by reference to certain informational sources.



The variety of ‘psychedelic communities’ and ‘inspirational sources’ is likely far wider than the representational group of participants in this thesis can account for, and we should be careful making any ‘external generalizations’ beyond the available data. Still, the mentioned sources of information and inspiration, such as JRE, seem to be global in reach. In my attempt to reflect on some of these sources, as they manifested during fieldwork, it seems cultural perspectives on psychedelic substances are changing on a global scale. I believe this ongoing change can in turn be related back to the empirical findings of this project. By mutual influence, ‘global narratives’ seem to inform local practices and experience, and vice versa. If we wish to better understand the current development in Oslo, as I’ve described it so far, I believe we should not ignore this aspect.

These utterances and modes of behavior, as recurring correlations in data, eventually lead me to wonder; how come men in business suites seek out psychedelic experiences in a floatation tank? And, more generally, how might we interpret the emergence of this kind of establishment in Oslo? Why is kaleidoscopic light, art, floatation, podcasts, AI and conversations about psychedelics happening in the same space? As I will discuss below, the emerging trend of psychedelic use for introspective purposes (as we have seen in the last two chapters) might be better understood in context of this seemingly translocal trend.

## PSYCHEDELIC MEDIUMS

When entering the floatation studio, there are logo stickers on the door of two popular podcast series, namely the “Joe Rogan Experience” (JRE) and “Duncan Trussell's Family Hour” (DTFH). According to an employee at the floatation studio, they are there to signal to people walking by that; “yes, this is that thing you heard about on that podcast”. When Christian told me about Joe Rogan, Duncan Trussell, Tim Ferris, Steven Kotler and other popular ‘psychedelic figures’, I was not surprised. The same influential speakers, including several of their books and *podcasts*, had already been mentioned repeatedly by other participants. Joe Rogan, for example, was a particularly common source of inspiration among participants both within and outside the floating studio, and several emphasized his influence on their initial interest for psychedelics. The popularity of the show suggests this might be the case for many

others. With about 16 million downloads per month<sup>17</sup>, I'd say it is plausible the JRE podcasts have notable influence on the widespread flows of information on psychedelics.

The JRE is produced by Joe Rogan, a standup comedian who became famous for hosting a reality TV show called *The Fear Factor*, and later as a martial arts commentator for the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship). A JRE episode usually features himself and guests of his choice, talking about subjects that interest him. Floatation has been one of the recurring subjects of his series, and Rogan himself has expressed a longstanding fascination for floatation practices, even having installed a floatation tank in his own home.

Several of the clients at the floatation studio were practicing mixed martial art (MMA) on a regular basis, some semi-professionally. When asked how they came to know about floatation, most mentioned they are active listeners of the JRE podcast. According to one of the MMA practitioners; "Visualization is an important tool in MMA training, and the tank lets you visualize techniques undisturbed. It also lets you relax and recover physically, which is awesome if you want to increase your training".

Throughout the fieldwork period, I listened to numerous episodes of the JRE. Psychedelics were also one of the topics which seemed to become relevant in an array of different conversations, as Rogan would express his great fascination for these substances, largely due to personal experience. Tim Ferriss is another such personality, who has become famous as an entrepreneur and public speaker, with an interest in 'business development' or 'self-development'. Ferriss is an advocate for 'microdosing' psychedelics, in order to improve cognitive performance or creativity. His influence has been exemplified by Christian, who emphasized his work during our conversation at the floatation studio.

Podcast technology and use is interesting for several reasons. The podcast has become an increasingly popular technology, globally. Anyone with a microphone and an Internet connection can start and distribute a podcast, and they are easily made accessible through websites and apps. There is not the same need for production studios, commercial distributors or other 'middle men', than other more traditional media. Following this, I believe you don't necessarily find (through other types of mediums) the same variety of topics and lack of

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<sup>17</sup> See reference list: Media references (4)

censorship as you do through Internet-based podcasts.

People who initially seek out JRE in order to hear about other subject (such as UFC and MMA), might in turn be introduced to psychedelics and other closely related topics (e.g. floatation). Podcasts seem to be introducing people to the idea of psychedelics as instrumental tools, including people who might not otherwise have be introduced through personal affiliation with members of a psychedelic community. Arguably, sharing ideas about psychedelics through podcasts such as the ones mentioned above, may be leading to further normalization of these substances. Psychedelics can no longer be regarded as pertaining to one certain stereotype, but should rather be understood as something variably used and discussed among different personalities with various backgrounds and interests.

Also, the *format* of a podcast is interesting. When listening to the JRE, you become a silent participant in a conversation. When tuning in to an episode, you enter into the world of the speakers and are ‘witness’ to an in-depth narrative of their personal experiences. Rogan’s ‘motivational rants’, to paraphrase the figure himself, conveys the psychedelic experiences in an humours, personal and articulate way. One of the employees at the floatation studio noted;

It is weird, because I feel like Rogan is a close friend of mine. I mean, I’m talking to him all the time, or he’s talking to me, but still, I consider him and his conversations valuable in my own psychedelic journey.

The podcasts become mediums for exchanging information about psychedelics substances, and how to interpret and narrate the psychedelic experience. They are, in this sense, a technology of ‘narrating the self’ on a seemingly massive scale. In line with the discussion in chapter 4, these narratives make an object out of an incoherent and fluent ‘mere experience’. They do so for the narrator, but also for the recipient, as the story becomes a reference point for their own conceptions of their experience.

These podcasts are sources of ‘scientific narratives’ as well. Joe Rogan, as well as Duncan Trussell and Tim Ferriss, often invite on scientists (e.g. mycologist Paul Stamets or psychologist Rick Roblin) within the field of psychedelics, or other professionals such as

psychotherapists or psychiatrists, as interview subjects. During fieldwork, participants would regularly reference a podcast when discussing psychedelics or related topics.

The notion of ‘narratives of self’, on such a large scale, might be transferred to the creation of ‘visionary art’ as well. Visionary art, like the art on the wall at the floatation studio, is made to represent phenomenological visuals or emotional experiences under the influence of psychedelic substances, or other ‘radical experiences’. Visionary art can also be defined as “visual media, which depicts and projects the artist’s multi-sensorial, mystical or theophanic encounters, and which at the same time affects the imagination of the viewer” (St. John 2012: 178). One of the most famous visionary artists of our time, Alex Grey, stated that; “Spiritual wisdom transmitted by the psychedelic state is often visual. Science cannot point a camera into our mental flow. Only the visionary artists have begun to translate life-changing theophanies into iconography”<sup>18</sup>.

Artists can expose the audience to potentialities of feelings and situations by “laying bare the incommensurabilities of a particular lived situation” (Ochs, Capps 1996: 29). Whether or not you analyze these artworks as a metaphor or as a depiction of an actual lived experience, visionary art can stimulate feelings and states of being which can communicate something which is hard to convey with words. As these ‘mediums of psychedelics’ are shared among the psychedelic communities, they become increasingly important sources of knowledge about the psychedelic experience and psychedelic culture.

#### AUTHORITY OF KNOWLEDGE

In Per Kristian Hilden’s (2007) study on ‘pharmacological rationality’ briefly presented in chapter 4, the participants used scientific studies and personal experience, both their own and others, in order to rationalize their use of substances to tweak their biochemistry for ‘optimized’ experience. They used the collective experiences of other users as a source of knowledge to conceptualize, and therefrom rationalize, their behavior. Within the participant groups in this inquiry, the collective knowledge attained through shared experiences and narratives were similarly instrumental. These narratives are not only shared through

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<sup>18</sup> See: [Alexgray.com](http://Alexgray.com)

gatherings and personal communication, but through forums such as Erowid.org<sup>19</sup> and mediums such as podcasts. They are sources of data which, due to active participation and engagement, are building upon each other in order to come closer to a standardized conceptualization of psychedelic experiences. They become sources of ‘objective’ knowledge; objective in the sense of being the ‘collectivization of experience’.

These mediums of narrative construction arguably become what one might call ‘engines of alternative objectivity’ (Blencowe et.al 2015). Blencowe, Brigstocke and Noorani (2015) coined the phrase ‘engines of alternative objectivity’ when researching a self-help group for people who hear voices. ‘The Hearing Voices Movement’ is a participatory project where the aim is to become comfortable and ‘work with’ voices which are otherwise viewed as a consequence of mental health conditions. The participants met up in self-help groups talking about their experiences, categorizing them and becoming familiar with their voices. “At a collective level, novel ways of speaking are made possible by new concepts and metrics for comparing, including experimental techniques for coping with, and transforming, distressing experiences” (Blencowe, 2015: 7). Similarly with the participants in this inquiry, sources of collective experiential knowledge become important ‘authorities of knowledge’ about psychedelics and the psychedelic experience.

Another interesting point in this regard, is the institutions which one might think of as authorities on the subject of illegal substances, such as the Norwegian Policy Network on Alcohol and Drugs (Norw. ACTIS), National Institute for Alcohol and Drug Research (Norw. FHI) or other governmental institutions, seem to carry little weight. In terms of authority within psychedelic communities in Oslo, statements about drug use from a governmental perspective, seemed to be quite easily ignored as ‘propaganda’ and ‘ignorance’ (e.g. ‘lacking experience’, ‘agenda-driven’ etc.). Rarely did anyone mention any Norwegian governmental organization or institutions when discussing psychedelics or drug use in general, except in instances where participants criticized their public statements as false or misleading.

As mentioned in chapter 4, drug reform policies were a hot topic in the media and public debates during the fieldwork period. Subsequently, this was a topic of debate among the participants as well. Most of them were positive towards a drug policy reform which would

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<sup>19</sup> As mentioned in chapter 4, Erowid.com contains information about psychoactive substances, as well as a large collection of “trip reports” about psychonauts personal experiences.

decriminalize most drugs, and potentially lead to legalization. “Sven”, a young law student, summed up what many of the participants seemed to express, when he stated;

The discussion about decriminalization in the media is about not punishing the heroin addicts, like, the ones really struggling with addictions. What to do about the fact that we don't want these people hanging around 'Brugata' dealing drugs and scaring people, after all, they're sick right? My opinion is that drug policy should really be about the fact that I have a human right to change my own consciousness, as long as I am not hurting others or myself. My body, my mind, my reality.

Perhaps the lack of 'trust' in governmental authority is a side effect of a public debate anchored in 'treatmentality' (as discussed in chapter 4), a debate many of the participants do not feel represents their situation or interest. As has been discussed in previous chapters, most of the participants distanced themselves from other types of drugs and other forms of 'drug culture', including 'recreational' uses and abuses (e.g. “just for parties”, “habitual use”) of certain substances (e.g. amphetamines, opiates, alcohol and other). The political debate, as well as the focus of research from the governmental institutions, is interpreted as centered on the notion of drug abuse and its consequences, and therefore does not resonate with the participants' psychedelic practice. Therefore, authority is found through 'engines of alternative objectivity', such as shared experiential narratives and international scientific research which resonates with their own experience of psychedelics and psychedelic communities.

Besides the participants' psychedelic practice, this notion of 'experience-based knowledge' could also be found in other areas of their lives. Throughout this thesis, I have used the phrase 'related practices' when referencing to other practices the participants were engaged in. Bodily practices, such as floatation, are often associated with psychedelics or psychedelic communities. This can be seen in the merging of such practices and psychedelic culture, as was depicted in the beginning of this chapter. As discussed in chapter 2, my journey into the realm of psychedelic substance use in Oslo, has also pulled me towards practices such as yoga, meditation, dance and morning raves. As I will discuss below, these practices could be

seen as alternative ways of producing ASC, outside ‘the sphere of illegality’. I will concentrate on yoga and floatation in particular, as these practices seem to epitomize characteristics of a wide range of practices.

## LEGAL STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

First of all, it is important to note many people who engage in these activities, such as yoga and floatation, do not have any affiliation to psychedelic communities nor do they use psychedelics. The interesting thing however, is the data collected from communication with yoga and floatation practitioners outside the psychedelic communities, as well as experiences from my own participation, yielded some interesting correlations in regard to this thesis.

The practice of floatation is seemingly an effective way of changing people’s state of being. During the time I worked at the floatation studio, I witnessed numerous people have their first experience with sensory deprivation. It was not uncommon for them to be skeptical and slightly reserved when I presented the tank and gave them an introduction to the practice. They often asked questions such as; is it scary? Could they drown if they fell asleep? Will it be dark the whole time? Will they experience boredom? Others, however, would express more excitement and enthusiasm than anything else. Either way, when they came out of the tank one hour later, their demeanor had generally changed. The more experienced floatation practitioners usually seem more relaxed when they came in, in terms of their excitement towards floating, but they would also regularly express a change in behavior (e.g. moving and talking in a more relaxed manner). Some also seemed to hold eye contact longer, during conversations, then before they went in the tank. Many also stayed after their session, sat down in the reception area, where we often talked about the experience they just had. On a late Tuesday afternoon, a man in his late 20’s had his first floatation session. After the experience he said;

In the beginning I thought it was eerie. I did not know what to do or what to think.

After a while I felt a bit lost. There was nothing to hold on to, nothing to orientate

myself from. I had lost track of time and space. Then after a while I noticed how

liberating it was, to just float around. I let go of my need to know how much time had

passed and how much time was left. It was not important anymore. What was left was

the sound of my breath, something in me that is always anchored in the present moment. Now I am just floating. I feel like a new human being<sup>20</sup>.

In the journal notes from my experiences with floatation, this feeling of floating around in a cosmos outside time-and space was noted. In the notes I stated;

After a certain amount of time of floating around in space, I stopped searching for sounds or other external stimuli. My entire world was comprised of thoughts, which were more visual and vivid than I normally experience them. It was like an out-of-body experience, disassociated from my bodily world. However, this world was equally 'real', just that I was emerged in fantasy rather than matter. When the music came on and it was time to get out of the tank (this is how the studio signals to the practitioners that time is up), I had to come back into my body. I had to find my bodily orientation of reality. My movements were heavy and as I stepped out of the tank and on to the floor, I noticed the immense pressure of gravity on my feet, then the rhythmic sound of the shower and the tantalizing textures of my clothes. When I stepped out of the room back into the reception area, sights were intense, colors bright and I noticed details in the room I haven't noticed before.

One of the regular customers at the floatation studio, told me she used floatation to help her make decisions or to help her gain some cognitive clarity;

I have a hard time making decisions. It is like my mind is overloaded and I can't seem to get organized up there. When I get in the tank things slow down a bit, kind of like taking a walk in the forest or something. Like you need to remove yourself from

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<sup>20</sup> This quote was first used in an article written by this author in the magazine Antropress, see reference Høifødt (2016).



yourself to get the full picture, or to get the mess to calm down and get a better perspective on the subject matter.

This notion of calming down was often expressed by practitioners of yoga as well. This was exemplified with Mons, who introduced the idea of yoga in chapter 3, where the sense of calmness and the warmth of the community was what got him involved in the practice. As he stated;

It is all about awareness I guess, about changing your perception. I can see in retrospect that this is what happened to me when I discovered yoga, the physical exercises in combination with meditation made me more aware of what was happening in the present moment.

Mons seems to describe a shift in perspective, a change in his state of consciousness that allowed him to be more mindful. This resonates with my own experience with yoga during the course of fieldwork, as described in chapter 2. The calmness and focus achieved from this practice, allowed me to be more present during interactions with participants.

For the participants (and myself), yoga and floatation are expressed as bodily practices which change their state of consciousness. Much like the ‘radical experience’ of psychedelics, where experiences of novelty produce certain insights, these practices are in a sense ‘less radical’ ways of doing ‘the same thing’. These are all practices of introspection, so to speak. Introspection which may teach practitioners something about their everyday reality (i.e. practices of autognosis). Notably, there are people who do not have such experiences while practicing yoga or floatation, or otherwise do not resonate with this description. Some people I have talked to in the yoga community state that primarily practice yoga for better physical flexibility and strength. However, they often mentioned ‘calmness’ in the same sentence.

Among the participants in the psychedelic communities, many of them practiced yoga, meditation, floatation or similar practices. This was most common among the participants who had longer experience with psychedelics, in contrary to the ones who were recently introduced. Some of them, like Mons and Otto, were familiar with such practices before they

tried psychedelics, and categorized them as being different expressions of the same “spiritual practice”. Others, like Morten, started engaging in these practices after they first used psychedelics. As he stated in chapter 3, he found the psychedelic experience made him more open to floatation and meditation, as practices which could give him valuable insights. In a sense, yoga and floatation (among other practices) could be seen as legal, bodily induced alternatives among a multitude of ways to attaining ASC.

One might speculate this is one of the reasons why psychedelics are stereotypically attached to ‘hippies’ or ‘eccentric’ people, as yoga and other related practices often carry these connotation as well. That being said, yoga has become popular throughout mainstream culture in Oslo during last 5-10 years. The fact that yoga has become mainstream, can be seen in the expansive development of yoga studios, retreats and other commercial enterprises.

This link between yoga and psychedelics is not a new stereotype, as we will see. These types of practices became popular, in Western societies, around the same time as psychedelics during the 60's and 70's. As yoga has risen in popularity and entered mainstream culture, some indeed argue this is what is happening with psychedelics as well. As the name of Paul Austin’s website, the speaker introduced in the very beginning of this thesis, suggests, some now claim that the western world is experiencing a ‘third wave’ of psychedelics – or the new ‘psychedelic renaissance’ (Sessa 2017).

## THE THIRD WAVE

Psychedelic substances were made illegal as a part of the international ‘war on drugs’, as I outlined in chapter 1. During the following decades of prohibition, most scientific research on the effects of these substances stagnated (Langlitz 2013: 21). At the turn of the century however, we have slowly seen the revival of psychedelic research within clinical studies, looking into the use of these substances in treating conditions such as PTSD (Post traumatic stress syndrome), OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) or anxiety due to terminal cancer diagnosis (Mithoefer et.al 2011, Chabrol, H 2013, Rodriguez et.al 2011, Gasser, P et.al 2015). There have been scientists and activists fighting behind the scenes to make this possible. Organizations such as The Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) and the Heffner Institute, for example, have now received approval to proceed with a phase three

study of MDMA for therapeutic use. This means the use of MDMA in clinical research and treatment may be right around the corner (Sessa 2017: 205-206).

However, outside the realm of scientific research, psychedelic culture has never gone away. The spiritual revelations of the hippies did not die with antagonistic legislation. Out of the second wave grew a culture of alternative spiritual movements which eventually came to be known as ‘New age’ (Partridge 2004: 99-100, 154-155). New age spirituality can be defined as a movement of spiritual seekers who create a patchwork of symbols, practices and philosophical ideas which are individually oriented. Related spiritual beliefs are often experience-based, as one seeks out, and moves between, various practices which foster so-called ‘mystical experiences’ (Partridge 2004: 21, 29-30, 88). Techniques such as yoga, breathing exercises, trance dance and spiritual tourism, did not necessarily replace the psychedelic experience, but the use of psychedelics became *one* method of autognosis among many. Even so, most of the participants in this thesis did not call themselves new age. For many of them, this term carries unwanted connotations of self-proclaimed ‘energetic healers’ and ‘magical crystal bowls’, as over the years the term new age has come to incorporate many different expressions.

Eastern philosophies and mysticism also became popular around the time of the second wave of psychedelics in the west. The transpersonal experiences of ‘being one with the universe’ can easily be transmitted to core principles in Eastern religions, such as Buddhism. These traditional spiritual practices were easily adopted into an individualistic modern lifestyle, perhaps more so than the relatively authoritarian traditions associated with Christianity or Judaism (Partridge 2004: 51-52). Within the psychedelic communities in Oslo, there are many symbolic references to eastern mysticism, exemplified by the mural of the Buddha on the wall of the floatation studio. Many spiritual teachers in the west today, correlate the beginning of their path towards mysticism with drug experiences in their youth (Partridge 2004: 97-100). An obvious example of this is the famous guru-figure Ram Dass (previously known as Richard Alpert) who together with Timothy Leary ignited the psychedelic revolution in the 60’s<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> As mentioned in chapter 1 - “A brief history of psychedelics”

Following this, the rave era of the 80's and 90's seeded the emergence of contemporary psytrance culture, psychedelic festivals and neo-tribalism (Partridge 2004, St. John 2012, Maffesoli 1996). Several scholars have researched contemporary rave cultures and compared them to traditional shamanism, as these raves constitute ritualistic trance-inducing events which let participants themselves (rather than solely the 'clergy') have transforming experiences. The use of psychoactive substances, repetitive rhythms and hours-long dancing, can induce similar trance states collectively described as 'mystical' (St John 2012: 4-6).

My point is not to say all individually oriented and experience-based spiritual practices are a direct effect of the use of psychedelics during the second wave, although the effects of these substances might certainly have played an influential role. What I want to address, is the historical context in which contemporary use of psychedelics is practiced, as well as the seemingly global exchange of cultural elements. What used to be alternative new age culture, derived from the counterculture of 'the hippies', is now largely mainstream. Practices of introspection (or autognosis) have become an acceptable part of society in Oslo. This is evidenced by the fact we see these practices as a part of many Norwegians everyday lives, with yoga studios in every part of town, meditation being a commonplace practice alongside other novel forms of introspection (e.g. floatation studios, cacao ceremonies etc.).

The use of psychedelics fits in to this idea of an individually oriented, experience-based practice, often with an introspective and contemplative purpose. I would argue psychedelic practices are becoming increasingly accepted in today's society, as one more practice of autognosis. This attitude is perhaps shared by Otto, who in chapter 3 stated;

I have had similar experiences with breathing techniques, meditation, yoga, sex. Many aspects of life that give rise to the same energy and experience – the senses, the same impressions and so on. My understanding of psychedelics is that it is more than the substance, it is the human. The substance meet the human, but it is the human we are experiencing, not the substance. I would say I have a psychedelic worldview, but again, it is not about the substance for me. Psychedelics are like an umbrella term for communication with nature and a mystical understanding of the world.

In a relatively secularized country like Norway, these practices become a way of getting in touch with the ‘mystical’ aspects of life. Linda Mercadante (2014) did several years of fieldwork among people in the United States who identified themselves as ‘spiritual, but not religious’. According to Mercadante;

Could it be that we are seeing a “re-enchantment” of the world, rather than a straightforward secularization process? Or, instead, could this dramatic change in American religion be not so much desertion but more a privatization of faith – a “do it yourself” enterprise?” (Mercadante 2014: 34).

However, I want to add a collective dimension to this notion of contemporary practices of autognosis being individually oriented. Because, although the participants’ psychedelic practice were experience-based and adjusted to the individual’s personal journey of autognosis, it was at the same time a social practice. As we saw in chapter 4, psychedelic experiences are shaping communities as well as minds. Social interaction and sharing experiences become a part of ‘practice’ itself. Practitioners do not solely ‘do it themselves’, though relevant social structures seem localized and focused on experience rather than doctrine.

I quoted Tramacchi at the beginning of chapter 4, stating; “Collective rituals which incorporate potent psycho-active sacraments can stimulate profound subjective individual experiences, but they are simultaneously a socially dynamic collective force” (Tramacchi 2000: 210). Among the psychedelic communities in Oslo, psychedelic experiences induced personal journeys of autognosis for the participants, and at the same time fosters communities and communal practices. As we have seen in this chapter, these communities are influenced by a translocal historical legacies, global communication technologies and other practices and means of producing ASC. One might argue that they are a part of a cultural trend that is wider than the local expressions of the psychedelic communities in Oslo. This interconnectedness, and seeming normalization of these substances, might be some of the reasons why this emerging trend is referred to as the ‘Third Wave’ of psychedelics.

## IN SUMMATION...

The culture which emerges around participants' psychedelic practices, is influenced by actors and processes outside the Oslo based communities. Through mediums such as podcast, art, books and online forums, the participants are introduced to and find inspiration from psychonauts all over the world. Podcast are especially noteworthy, because, due to the wide distribution and their significant format of long uncensored conversations, they act as a kind of 'narration of self' on a wider scale. These mediums are large source of experience-based knowledge, which creates constructive ways of talking about and thinking about psychedelics collectively. They become 'engines of alternative objectivity' which help psychonauts conceptualize, articulate and integrate their psychedelic experiences.

Other bodily practices, such as yoga or floatation, were popular among the participants group. Some of them had previous experience and incorporated psychedelic use into their repertoire of autogenesis practices. Others were introduced to these practices after they discovered psychedelics. However, they all expressed the value of these practices, as practises of ASC, in which they gained a different perspective on their world. One might say, these practices (such as yoga and floatation) are 'less radical', legal ways, of experiencing ASC in participants' everyday lives.

The affiliation of psychedelic use and other practises of ASC started during the second wave of psychedelic interest in the US, as they both are means of 'individualized, experience-based spirituality'. As the empirical evidence tell us however, psychedelic practices in Oslo are at the same time a social practice which foster communities.

Practices such as yoga and meditation have to a large degree become normalized in Oslo and are now a part of mainstream culture. I have argued, these 'less radical' ways of changing one's perception, is allowing the 'more radical' experience of psychedelics to be more readily accepted. This normalization of psychedelics is, arguably, the reason why public discourse is calling this era 'the third wave' of psychedelics.

## CONCLUSION

### IN FINAL SUMMATION...

This thesis grew out of an interest in drug-induced experiences and the significance of these experiences within Norwegian society. Drug-induced experiences are part of contemporary Norwegian lives, as alcohol is widely enjoyed and plays a central role in many of our cultural traditions and rituals. For many Norwegians, other psychoactive substances are also relevant means of changing their state of being and the category *drugs* encompass a wide variety of phenomenological experiences and associated cultural expressions. This thesis has looked at the use of psychedelic substances in particular, among groups in Oslo who engage in their psychedelic practice as a means of autognosis (meaning self-knowledge by the process of self-analysis).

There has been a recent shift in the acceptance or perception of psychedelics. Psychedelic practices are no longer a fringe phenomenon, but are gradually making their way into mainstream culture by slowly being normalized. Understanding the value and meaning of drug-induced experiences, in this case ‘the psychedelic experience’, becomes important in an attempt to approach this cultural change, as well as broadening our general understanding of the meaning and function of drugs in Norway.

The participants interviewed for this inquiry, used psychedelic substances with different intentions, and adapted their practice to their individual preferences and needs. What they seemingly had in common, was their aspiration to gain insight into the nature of their own being, by producing novel experiences through the use of psychedelics. The novelty or ‘otherness’ of these experiences came from the character of the psychedelic ‘space’, the temporal and spatial dimension of a psychedelic trip, which was particularly hard to convey with words. The emotional, sensorial and affective qualities of these experiences resided however, giving the participants new perspectives and habitual orientations. Thus, there was an emphasis given to actually having ‘a psychedelic experience’, of having been to ‘space’, an altered state of consciousness particular to these substances.

The structure around how the participants used these substances was often practiced as ‘psychedelic rituals’. These rituals may be organized differently, but they were intentionally

built around the individual's motive through managing 'set and setting', meaning the mindset and the contextual environment of the participant. These experiences can for example, be focused around nature or people by creating a space where these variables are prominent. The common character between these rituals however, was they were temporary enclaves of 'other' to participants' everyday reality, a type of contemporary practice of the liminoid state.

The transpersonal experiences which psychedelics often produce, means a strong sense of connectedness was often encompassing these psychedelic rituals. The connectedness or sense of community was also strengthened by sharing the experience. Sharing these experiences with each other, both actively and narratively, created an object to be analyzed (a story) out of what was otherwise often an ineffable experience. This is helpful for the narrator, but also the recipient, as one can better comprehend one's own experiences through shared concepts.

These narratives however are usually circulated among psychedelic peers, as the illegality of these substances creates a sense of secrecy due to their taboo connotations. The normative aspect of drug-use and a public debate anchored in 'treatmentality', means the participants experience a lack of understanding from the mainstream perception of their practice. Transpersonal experiences, communal knowledge through narrative and secrecy due to illegality combined, create 'psychedelic communities' of those who share the experience of the psychedelic space.

Psychedelic experiences effect the way the psychonauts socialized in regards to these substances, by creating communal psychedelic rituals and culture and these rituals in turn effect their experience, as they become the setting in which the substance is taken, and therefore influence the outcome of the experience. In addition, these communities were influenced by other factors such as podcast, art and online communities, as these mediums act as communal knowledge on a wider scale. Participants also embraced other practices, such as yoga and floatation, as the same 'value of experience' could be found by other means than the use of psychedelics.

In conclusion, the value of the psychedelic experience was the emotional, sensorial and affective experience of the psychedelic 'space', which stimulated novel insights and perspectives. Other bodily practices, such as yoga and floatation, were recognized and practiced due to similar functions. Sociality around these substances were structured on the



basis of individuals' intentions and preferences in the outcome of the experience, as 'set and setting' became variables which influence the experience itself. In addition, the ineffable character of these experiences, meant sharing the experiences by the way of narrative, both in person and through other mediums, helped the participants conceptualize and integrate these experiences into their existing cultural framework. The sharing of experiences, communal knowledge through narrative and the contextual circumstance of illegality, created exclusive psychedelic communities.

## CONSTRAINTS AND POSSIBILITIES

Having spent time with the people depicted in this thesis, it was easy to fall for the romantic story of personal transformations and the mystical flavor of psychedelic culture. This is, in my opinion, because it truly was an enchanting social phenomenon to study. Therefore, I want to underline the constraints of this inquiry, and highlight some critical perspectives, in order to nuance the concluding remarks above.

As discussed in chapter 2, this inquiry is based upon discriminate methods when choosing participants, and the fieldsite is structured around their social world. This means this thesis is based upon the perceptions, actions and sociality of people who have a particular view of or relationship to psychedelics. The participants are mostly affluent middle to upper-class citizens, who do not experience problematic substance use. Or more accurately, did not express or display any apparent substance abuse. Their auspicious social standing, in terms of economic and cultural capital, means their 'set and setting' were based upon these circumstances. Therefore, there is no telling on the basis of this ethnographic data, what other set and setting 'opportunities' might produce. In other words, the concluding arguments made in this thesis are, as arguably most anthropological research, highly circumstantial.

There is a generalizing ability in the core argument of 'the value of experience', as in the novelty aspect of the psychedelic experience is independent of the context. In other words, when taking a higher dose of LSD, you will have *an experience*. However, the conceptualization, articulation and structuring of these experiences may be different, in different social environments. 'Psychedelic culture' in this sense, may not be the same in every psychedelic community and the particular psychedelic communities introduced in this thesis, produce certain kind of values.

This is perhaps a banal point to make in an anthropological circumstance, but my aim is to point out although the participants do not express any problematic consequences of their drug use, it does not mean this is the case for anyone who uses psychedelics. It is not my intention to reduce the validity or seriousness of problematic drug use, or problematic ‘drug culture’ in general. This thesis tells the story of one segment of drug culture in Norway, which shows us one side to drug experiences and the role of drugs in our society.

Another thematic aspect of this thesis outside the topic of ‘psychedelics’, is the topic of ‘autognosis’, or related terms such as self-development or self-optimization. The intentions which the participants express in terms of why they use psychedelics, are different from the standard notions of drug use as escapism, self-medicalization and addiction. It is not, in Maslow’ian terms, fulfilling biological needs, but attending to the top of the pyramid of self-realization. The term self-realization has been a topic in public discourse, as being a double-edge sword. The concern is often attributed to the fear of an overly self-centered western culture, where self-realization is yet another expectation or standard for social advancement.

Cook (2016) has written about similar subject, such as adaptation of mindfulness practices in public institutions as measures of stress reduction and depression. The theory behind mindfulness in this context was; “suffering was interpreted as resulting from the ways in which patients related to experience, rather than the experience itself” (Cook 2016: 144). In other words, mindfulness is a tool which helps change the perception of their circumstance, rather than changing the circumstance. Cook argues such adaptation of self-realization practices can be analyzed from a neo-liberal perspective, as putting the responsibility on the individual to change their perception, rather than deal with structural issues in society. In a neo-liberal framework, this fits in to the “increasing emphasis on the responsibility of subjects to self-manage in times of increasing privatization” (Cook 2016: 147).

This is an interesting argument, as there was an aspect within the psychedelic communities in Oslo of ‘experience’ as a type of social capital. The value given to the individual’s personal journey and growth through the use of these substances includes them into the group of ‘those who know’. On the other hand, these experiences, as expressed by the participants, were truly significant and authentic in their transformational effects. By looking at these experiences from a phenomenological perspective, it becomes apparent their psychedelic practices are not

fully understood by looking at the structural mechanisms of such behavior. I will argue self-realization can be a way of optimizing an individual, as so to better operate within society, and at the same time it can be a personal ‘radical experience’ which has value outside of any structural significance. The value of experience in my opinion, is not adequately understood by context, it needs to be explained by examining the experience itself.

This is where phenomenological theory, and methods, become valuable in the inquiry of drugs in social science. In terms of method, embodying the field as a researcher gave me a greater opportunity to experience resonance with participants. This in turn allowed me to understand the sincerity of participants’ expression of experience, but also better understand how the psychedelic ‘space’ shaped their social world and not only the other way around. On that note, there is of course limitations in the data. I did not partake in the psychedelic experience myself during fieldwork, only relevant experiences of ASC through practices such as yoga and floatation. Anthropological theory inspired by phenomenology has given me the backdrop of understanding how rituals or behavior (Turner 1995, Kapferer 2004) can be acts of becoming and transformation, and not necessarily of representation – how psychedelic rituals and experiences change society from *within*.

This is perhaps what Austin, the speaker we met at the beginning of this thesis, was hinting towards when he claimed psychedelics will play a role in managing some negative consequences of history. If we look at society as a sum of its individuals, then transformative experiences on a personal level will ultimately change the nature of its totality.

What natural science tells us about the mechanisms of psychoactive substances on our biology, does not tell us why these substances are meaningful in our social world. I would argue, there is a place in social sciences’ research of drugs, to pay more attention to the value of experience.



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