

# **Trips into Inner Space: A Phenomenological Approach to the Experience of the Use of Psychedelic Substances**

**Viajes Hacia el Espacio Interior: una Aproximación Fenomenológica a la  
Experiencia del Uso de Sustancias Psicodélicas**

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## **Abstract**

Psychedelic substances have been used by different cultures all over the world for thousands of years. In Portugal evidence of such use is provided essentially by epidemiological studies, but little is known about this reality. In the present article we propose a phenomenological approach to the study of the use of psychedelic substances. Conducting in-depth interviews with people who use psychedelics, we have been able to collect elements of their use, experiences, and representation, tracing a portrait of the experience and the actors. The experiences reported are unique and take multiple forms, underslyng the complexity of the relation people establish with the substances they choose to use. Applying Content Analysis to the material collected in the interviews we have extracted common points from singular experiences reported. Psychedelic experiences are said to be transformative both of the person and their visions of others and the world, essentially with positive connotation. However, negative episodes are also discussed, as well as prevention and minimization/management strategies in the case of its occurrence.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, Experience, Psychedelic Experience, Psychedelics, Hallucinogens.

## **Resumen**

Las sustancias psicodélicas han sido utilizadas por diferentes culturas de todo el mundo durante miles de años. En Portugal la evidencia de su uso es proporcionado esencialmente por estudios epidemiológicos, aunque se conoce muy poco sobre esta realidad. En el presente artículo proponemos un ejercicio de acercamiento, desde una postura fenomenológica, a la experiencia de la utilización de sustancias psicodélicas. Realizando entrevistas en profundidad a personas que usan drogas psicodélicas, hemos recogido elementos de sus experiencias, usos y representaciones, trazando un retrato de la experiencia y de los actores. Las experiencias reportadas son únicas y toman múltiples formas, evidenciando la complejidad de las relaciones que las personas establecen con las sustancias que deciden utilizar. A través de la aplicación del Análisis de Contenido al material recogido en las entrevistas, hemos extraído puntos en común de las experiencias singulares reportadas. Las experiencias psicodélicas son consideradas transformativas, tanto de la persona como de su percepción de los demás y el mundo, y generalmente con una connotación positiva, pero también son referidos episodios negativos, así como estrategias de prevención y minimización/gestión de estos episodios negativos.

**Palabras clave:** Fenomenología, Experiencia, Experiencia Psicodélica, Psicodélicos, Alucinógenos.

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## Introduction

Illegal drug use in Portugal has a public dimension that began to appear only in the 70s of the twentieth century. Three years after the April 1974 revolution, which returned democracy to the country, the first structures of the so-called "war on drugs" appeared. The "drug problem", as the socio-political debate and the language of the media designated it, was dominated in the following decades by the expansion of heroin consumption and heroin street markets, leaving little room for attention to other psychoactive substances and other uses that did not configure dependence. We have already named this period as "the long brackets of heroin". The progressive association of heroin addicts to small street crime (heroin, "dangerous drug"), to troubled urban contexts (heroin, "periphery drug") and to HIV and hepatitis epidemics (heroin, "infectious drug") would lead to its decline in the psychotropic preferences of the youth sector. The apogee of the 80s and 90s was followed by the heroin crisis (Fernandes, 2000; Gamella, 1997). On the other hand, over the 90s and more openly at the beginning of the new millennium, the pressure created by the Cannabis social movements (Gamella & Rodrigo, 2004) and the emergence of new youth party contexts (Calado, 2007; Carvalho, 2007) originated a diversification of the psychoactive substances in circulation, as well as the meanings of their uses.

The aim of this paper is to put its scope beyond the 'long brackets of heroin', asking about another range of substances and another type of psychoactive experience that were almost silenced by heroin's main role. It aims to make a contribution to the rescue of practices and experiences that, in Portugal, were still given very little attention from the community of experts of the drug phenomenon.

## Purpose and central concepts

The field of psychedelic substances is characterized by several controversies, starting with the question of naming substances and which substances can be classified as belonging to the group after it has been named. Physiological effects of psychedelics are diverse and variable and there is a wide variety of other substances, activities and physiological conditions that are capable of producing similar effects (Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1979). To this consideration of the cultural and ideological values of the names available is

added. The name chosen for these substances, besides revealing ideological positions, may influence the content and after effects of subjective experience of their use, creating pre-existing models of signification.

In this article the we take is the term "psychedelic" as proposed by Humphry Osmond (1957b), which is derived from the Ancient Greek words *psychē* (ψυχή, "soul") and *dēloun* (δηλοῦν, "to make visible, to reveal"). It was chosen over other commonly used names such as "hallucinogen" (that which causes hallucinations), "psychomimetic" (that which mimics psychotic states) or "entheogen" (that which manifests god/the divine) because it is more accurate and more neutral, and less focused on certain aspects of the experience. While it may be vague, the term is the most comprehensive, and does not make assumptions about the meaning of the manifested or revealed material, which is what we seek in a phenomenological approach.

Throughout this article we intend to explore the experiences of the psychedelic drug users such as they are described and valued by the actors, subjects themselves. The pharmacological concept of *effect* is widely used in the medical-health model of intervention in the "drug problem". In this investigation we choose to use the concept of *experience*, which we've already defined similarly in a previous study (Fernandes & Carvalho 2000, pp 24, own translation):

*The concept of experience aims to introduce the subject's work in the relationship between the individual and the external elements with which he/she comes in contact with. (...) The psychotropic experience is the result of the work of the subject in the relationship between him/herself and the substance, making this result highly singular because it depends on the combination of elements such as expectations, prior knowledge, ritual, technologies of intake, symbolic boundaries of context and, of course, the elements related to the substance itself. Experience is the set of heterogeneous elements surrounding the consumption, from expectations to ritual, from technologies of intake to the psychotropic fruition; but experience is also the way in which the subject incorporates the fact of using drugs in his/her system of significance: as related to his/her needs and desires, in his/her acts of daily management and, more generally, in his/her own trajectory of life - when ques-*

*tionning the role of the drug(s) in his/her existential course.*

In this way we enter the intersubjective level of meanings and experiences, trying to fit them into the complex system that is the person and his/her lived world. The aim is to be the subject who tells about him/herself and about his/her experiences and relationships with the chosen substance(s) of use. We seek an approach to the other's world, his/her *lebenswelt*, "as if" we were they, to get a picture as complete as possible of the experience(s) of the use of psychedelics.

### Method

The stated question then, calls for a qualitative methodology, choosing techniques that were able to assist the subject to voice which was both informative of a practice and reflexive of an experience - and that could be produced outside the constraints induced by the sight of "drug" as "problem".

### Interview script and semi projective excerpts.

The script was designed to put the focus on the experiential world of the subject, addressing it with a phenomenological attitude. To facilitate this from the first moment, we've started the interview using a strategy we call *semi projective excerpts* (Fernandes 1997; Fernandes & Carvalho 2003, pp 146; own translation):

*The aim of the semi projective excerpts is, starting from a verbal stimulus whose content has to do with drugs, to produce some degree of recognition of the experience and lead the subject to mobilize a personal position regarding the proposed stimulus. It is as if the person could project themselves before such stimulation, with a more loosely and less predictable way than that is required using a question, since it appeals more to rationalization and the semi projective excerpt appeals more for identification.*

We chose, from the writings of psychonauts (literally: 'sailors of the mind/soul'), three of these excerpts - regarding a positive experience, a negative experience and one with a more ambiguous content. The interviewer read the excerpts in that order, and the possibility to read the sentence again was offered:

*1. I think that going to the grave without having a psychedelic experience is like going to the grave without ever having sex. (Terrence Mckenna).*

*2. I started to feel scared, will I always stay like this? Will I ever be the person I used to be? I was so terrified that all I could think of was hoping for it to pass – this only made it worse. I remembered that I was not breathing; how can I forget to breathe?! I sat down, and suddenly everyone there seemed to be staring at me. (Maria Pomar).*

*3. I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin. (Aldous Huxley).*

### Participants and interviews.

This is a subject matter on which no specific research has been developed in Portugal. In addition to incipient knowledge, it is in order to point out that the psychedelic users configure a particular example of what is defined as "hidden population", that is, they present a

*... difficult location, less determined by the prevalence of the trace than the occultation of it, usually by initiative of the subjects themselves, given the associated stigma. Characterized also by the absence of contact with formal services and social control systems (Pearsons, 1992) or clinical and institutional contexts (Walters and Biernacki, 1989); and they exhibit some correspondence, according to P. Adler (1990), with deviant populations in general (Fernandes & Carvalho, 2003).*

Snowball sampling was used to access the population<sup>1</sup>. The initial subject of each chain was recruited from the social networks of the researchers, and it was constituted of five subjects, which gave rise to other chains. Due to time constraints, the chains did not go beyond the second level. After obtaining the consent for audio registration of the interviews, ten of them were conducted, with a length between 45 and 73 minutes. Of the 9 participants, 7 were male and 2 female. Most respondents were between 30 and 39 years, one was aged 40, and three in the range between 20 and 29. They were individuals who mostly completed high school or vocational courses and completed or attended college. In the sample, we found people with occupations related

to design, music production and education, craft works, machinery and financial market. One of the individuals was unemployed at the time.

Interviews were conducted in the area of Porto. Thus, we had people residing both in the city and nearby. However, despite their current residence, there were subjects natural from other cities of Portugal, and a Brazilian native as well. The education and professions of the families of origin allow us to classify the sample into middle to upper middle class social range. Except for one case, whose parents had low qualifications and occupations in industry, most had a high school degree, and more than a half of the cases had at least one parent with a college degree.

### **Empirical material treatment and analysis.**

After the interviews were fully transcribed, their codification was guided by a grid (see Appendix 1), adapted from one built on a previous work (Fernandes & Carvalho, 2003). Thematic content analysis was applied to the data collected (Bardin 1977). We then made a descriptive analysis seeking to extract elements of three major dimensions: demographic data, psychedelic drug consumption (objective dimension) and experience (subjective dimension).

## **Results**

At this point we will present the main results of our research. We will discuss various substances that users mentioned during the interviews. We've divided the presentation of each in consumption (objective dimension) and experience (subjective dimension). We will also mention the psychedelic experience in the abstract, with no reference to the substance used, as referred by our subjects. Respondents reported uses and experiences with psychedelic substances (salvia divinorum, mushrooms, mescaline...) that are not included in here because they are of episodic use and not so well known, which allows less reference to description from an experiential perspective. We will also take a moment to analyze the perception of the risk(s) associated with the use of this type of substances and the spontaneous strategies adopted to reduce or mitigate those same risks.

### **LSD – “Self-discovery and revalue”.**

#### **Consumption**

This substance was used by all the respondents, with different ages of onset of use. There are people who report experimentation at around the age of 18, others that started to use at 15 and three that only experienced it later, when they were around 30 years old. Despite all subjects being more or less regular attendees at psychedelic trance parties, we can divide the preferential contexts of use into two groups: there are those who like to do it in the party context and associate both experiences, and those who prefer tripping in smaller, cozy environments, surrounded by trusted friends, and often in contact with nature. Frequency of use is variable from subject to subject and with the time of year - in the summer an increase in use is reported. We have subjects using LSD on a monthly basis, others who do it two or three times a year, and one using LSD every two years. Most of the interviewed reported LSD use in two forms: acid and drops, the former being easier to obtain and, therefore, the most used.

#### **Experience**

When we take a deeper look into the description of the experience of LSD inevitably two poles appear: the negative experiences (not always totally bad) and the positive ones.

The experimentation is usually associated with reports of people close to them that raise curiosity. Except in one case, all people had information (reports of people close to them, internet research...) prior to the first use.

*After all this has to be interesting...  
I want to try this at least once before I die, if  
not I will die stupid (N., male, 19 years old).*

The experience, however, is not comparable to any description.

*It's more than whatever people tell  
you, beyond all you imagine, nothing is  
comparable to being in that situation (M.,  
male, 37 years old).*

On the positive pole, the experience is characterized as a new way of looking at the world. It is also characterized as an enhancer of attention to detail, sense of connection and harmony, accompanied by an increase in sensitivity to the environment and people

The experience of LSD use is, to some interviewees, a tool for access to spiritual dimensions and to increase the fluidity and speed of thought. References to personal transformation in

terms of spirituality, increased tolerance and understanding with others and situations is common.

*Somehow it allows you to think about things in a different way, in a way that, I don't know, did not occur to you before - a new way! And that's when I realized how this can be a tool, above all! (...) Thinking becomes much more complex, in a much larger spectrum, much more... just more! (N. male, 19).*

Also common is the reference to LSD experiences as breaking mental monotony and escaping the organization of society:

*This is an escape from the prison that is this programming society! A 12-hour-escape from the normal, from the routine! LSD is like a vacation, something like going for a trip inside my very own self! (B., male, 40).*

*I really enjoy these experiences, breaking mental monotony a bit! I think it is a good thing to me, it makes me feel well! (C., male, 39).*

This change in the speed and structure of thought is described by another participant:

*The LSD (...) stores things in drawers! Like, you are a bit confused and it helps you to see things more clearly, to fit everything together, (then) you no longer care about the subject, it is over! And who I am today, completely, has to do with the experiences that I had all along the way ... It fits pieces together, and leads to self-discovery, above all self-discovery, because it's so rare these days to stop and think about important things within us ... So many pieces that are loose that do not fit, and sometimes this clarity and this welfare, because above all, the feeling of clarity of LSD has to do with well-being, you learn to revalue things around you (A., female, 30).*

Regarding the possibility of occurrence of bad experiences, it was recognized and described by respondents as happening occasionally, although infrequent and usually associated with having had little experience with LSD, strong doses, or contextual factors which stemmed experience (unforeseen external events). It is described almost as with opposite traits to the

positive experiences: lost of connection with "reality" (the others and spaces), perception of all stimuli as threatening, feeling of awkwardness and discomfort, loss of notion of time.

*At that moment I thought I could not come back to reality, to normal. And that moment was not only a moment; it was a lifetime to me! (J., female, 39).*

Consuming a stronger dose than usual is also often described as being the cause of bad experiences. Being with reliable people who understand and support the person in case of occurrence of a bad experience also seems to be an important factor that helps to overcome the situation.

*It was at a party in Fafe, at the time very powerful Hoffmans were circulating. And I, with all my adrenaline up, got there and soon took a whole one. The buzz was so big, so overwhelming that I was not able to keep up. I had to leave the dancefloor, everything was confusing to me, everything: noise, people, colors ... I walked away and sat down and fell right on the ground! I could not react...! At this time, two friends were passing by and recognized me, came to rescue me, so to say: spoke with me, took me to drink water, walked around for a while, and helped me getting out of the situation, I started to give more of my attention to them and it got better bit by bit until everything was cool again... But I had a difficult time! With the help of my friends I overcame it, but it illustrates the importance of control! (C., male, 39).*

These negative experiences do not seem to dissuade the people we interviewed from the use of LSD. They are seen as consequences of misuse (by quantity, by personal/environmental context) and as growth enhancing and individual development experiences:

*You are faced with the ultimate experience! And that peak of experience can cause you something, which can range from person to person, that will lead to one's growing in awareness, the way you see things, and sometimes this doesn't happen smoothly ... (M., male, 37).*

**DMT – “Put oil in my hinges”.****Consumption.**

Of the respondents only one did not mention DMT consumption and another one said she hasn't tried it yet, but has it at home "waiting for the right time" (A, female, 30 years). Two forms were reported: crystal DMT, synthetic, and changa, organic. There is recent usage of this substance by those who constitute our sample, most within the last three years, even those who have a long history of use of psychoactive substances.

Some report only one time use, however the average is five, with one person reporting more than ten intakes. Our respondents do not define a usage frequency:

*When I talk about DMT I say it is spiritual, the use must have a purpose (N., male, 19).*

There is in DMT another distinctive feature from the substances previously referred: all respondents agree that it is not to be used in recreational settings or at parties, relating its use with self-exploration in quiet and modest contexts, under ceiling or in contact with nature. The duration of the effects is also shorter than with other psychedelic drugs, however, the loss notion of time is a characteristic of DMT experiences, with the subjects reporting they could not tell, at the end of the experience, if it lasted minutes or hours.

**Experience**

The experience of DMT use is described as being very intense, often with feelings of dissociation, accompanied by strong visual hallucinations that often include geometric patterns. Also frequent are the reports of loss of space and time references. As for the visual hallucinations, J. (female, 39) tells us:

*You see things yes, but it is not ... is not hallucinogenic, you only see things that are already there, it's just that you do not realize it with your normal sensory impairment.*

Most tells us that these experiences are, though with a common substrate, all different:

*...That thing of experimenting with DMT is a bit relative, because it seems that every time is an experiment! (N., male, 19).*

There seems to be a distinction with DMT that places it in a separate category from other substances:

*It's more pure than the others, with others you always feel this thing ... added! In DMT you do not feel anything strange (...)* (G., male, 20).

*I don't consider DMT a drug because it isn't something you crave or wish to consume (B., male, 40).*

*DMT, to me, is "the substance" (M., male, 37).*

Negative experiences are not mentioned but it seems general agreement that some care in the context of use is required, such as a quiet environment without interruptions, as well as some kind of personal preparation for the experience. Everyone we spoke to agrees that it is not a substance to be used at parties, because of the intensity of its effects and the "fragile condition it puts the body into" (G., male, 19).

The experience seems to be a source of knowledge and teachings transmitting. The feeling of "return" is described as smooth and quiet, with feelings of peace:

*[The coming back] was brutal ... I felt light, I felt very calm, very calm, calm as I rarely was in life ... It was all in peace within, the heart was good, everything was working well ... Feels like I've put some oil in my hinges! (B., male, 40).*

*Coming back is... Coming back ... is ... Look, coming back is good! Coming back is so good ... You can't compare it with anything ... Almost all the others "coming backs" have their downside, but not this! It's completely different; here you really come back, because you really went out there! And as you went and came back there is no room for anything else to happen, you were and are and when you come back you return to be, but with more knowledge ... and this is spectacular! (M., male, 37).*

## Ayahuasca – “Therapy”.

### Consumption

Two people mentioned ayahuasca in the interviews: one that would like to try it and said that would happen at the age of 30 (about half a year after the interview) in a context of reevaluation of life choices, and another who has had about ten intakes of the drink over the last four years. When this person sought for ayahuasca, she found the Santo Daime Church. She manifested herself little pleased with this context and says she is currently looking for a shamanic context to do it, less influenced by religious dogmas.

### Experience

The experience of the use of ayahuasca, as with DMT- its active ingredient - is not reported to be recreational. Imported from the Amazon, where it is traditionally used as folk medicine, its use is closely related to specific ritual contexts. It is said to have healing powers for physical, psychological, mental and spiritual ailments, and it is also referred to as being a provider of self-knowledge, renewal and transformation:

*My son, as I told you, he suffers from borderline personality disorder, and on Saturday he will attend a new ritual in UDV, I think ayahuasca, for those who have some kind of psychosis, does not cause harm, I think it can be a form of healing. (...) The ayahuasca alone is therapy ... I do not see much where the person could get lost! (J., female, 39).*

*I think that, somehow, maybe because it is so closely related to nature and animals ... Animals don't have these things as we do, these bad cycles of life and relationships ... They don't have it at such complicated level. And I think that ayahuasca is probably able to reduce us to a more primal scene. Your animal instinct is to be well, be in a good life ... It can be interesting; I want to know more about it (R., male, 29).*

Regarding the role of ayahuasca experiences in her life, another participant tells us:

*The ego, it is necessary for survival but sometimes it starts wanting to manipulate, to control our lives, and our*

*mind starts like: oh this and that and the other, and begins to have certain concepts, attachments and limitations ... And that's what ayahuasca and other psychedelics helped me release. Not entirely, I'm here on the way, but ... that's what I feel. That's how I feel like, to let this inner god, my being manifest instead of my ego, of the situation ... (J., female, 39).*

### The Psychedelic Experience: Transformation and spirituality.

A common substrate in references to psychedelic experience is that it is transformative, although this transformation acquires different contours in each case, again supporting the subjectivity and complexity of the relationship that each person builds with substances that chooses to use. Here, descriptions of the psychedelic experience always refer to that induced by the intake of substances, stressing that there are other types of psychedelic experiences induced by other activities (meditation, breathing, sensory deprivation...).

The psychedelic experience is referred as a facilitator of spirituality, improving the capacity of thinking about questions in new ways and establishing new links between concepts or ideas. Thus, psychedelic use has an impact on creativity, but also in relationships with him/herself as well as with others, with frequent assignments to the psychedelic experience of more positive characteristics in person. Most respondents reported not being the same person after a psychedelic experience – they mention learning, exploration of consciousness, evolution, new perspectives and ego dissolution. When we asked what characteristics they attributed to the ego they want to dissolve, people refer to comparing themselves to others and placing high demands on themselves and others. It is also common to mention mystical and spiritual experiences.

*[I seek], but it is not that God who is up there, you know? It's that God that is in here, self-knowledge, which somehow awakened when I took psychedelic substances. This God awakens and I'm full. At the same time, when the effect wears off then, yes, I think I don't want to be alone in here, rather I want to be all the time at that vibration ... I know you can even (feel) without having used, you know? (...) My*

daughter, after a couple of months, told me "Mom, you look like a different person!" And I said, "Sure I'm different." I thank the psychedelic drugs because they did it, certainly with help, it helps to have a certain predisposition ... (J., female, 39).

It's something you learn with psychedelics, that God is not an old man with a white beard that is sitting on the clouds and judging people. God is us, we forgive ourselves in our conversations with ourselves and, so, we are God. Psychedelics, as I said, were for me a crutch for spirituality! (B., male, 40).

And I think psychedelics have a great importance in all this... Especially with a religious education as I had. When I had the opportunity to try psychedelics they opened up for me a door to explore, with dignity and respect, things that I did not relate to at the time ... I think psychedelics managed to make a better version of me! (...) The state in which you stay [while on psychedelics] is the state in which I would like to live in my day-to-day ... It's hard to remain in this state, the complete state of happiness, the status of total connection to godless without cuts, the feeling of comfort ... This state – and I know that there are states greater than these – but this to me is the state that I have ambition for as a human being! And yes, psychedelics were of much help in it, and yes, they made me a different person! (M., male, 37).

I think these experiences are fundamental to the person I am, I obviously can't speak for others, but I'm not the same person after each experience I have! I can count on the times it was not anything interesting. All other times there was evolution, there was openness, there was expansion ... Clarification of who I am, what I want ... So to say it is expansive, or rather, more than anything, is clarifying! It won't create situations that are not already there, waiting to be discovered and developed, and that's why I think it opens doors, you are constantly opening doors and exploring! (A, female, 30).

The psychedelic experience makes you see things differently. You start to see life differently, you start to think things you

never did before, you begin to be more aware of yourself... There are people who don't, but most people have it. (Was it like that with you?) Yes, after the first acid, the following day I was not the same, and I have this notion. (What do you think has changed in you?). The level of consciousness was brutal. At the spirituality level it was a crutch to start my contact with spirituality. It was practically my religion! (Laughs) Hum, you know, much has changed! (B., male, 40).

Less positive aspects of the psychedelic experience are also reported. We were told that it has two poles, the very positive and the very intense, which can induce anxiety and fears. However, a positive potential and personal growth is assigned to the successful resolution of difficult experiences:

*Chaos can be a good deal: you learn to reorganize yourself!* (B., male, 40).

*Imagine you are now grabbing a little balloon and begin to rise. Don't feel fear "Hey, that's high"; if you do, you won't be able to feel the experience of the climbing! You see, with the buzz is the same! If you are going to live the buzz like: "Hey, I'm so high right now, I'm so damn high, and everyone is looking at me" and stuff like that, then it becomes anxiety producing and you only want it to pass! But if you embrace the experience and you know how to properly be in it, oh, then you have a lot of fun!* (C., male, 39).

*I think it's a very important experience and really no one should [miss it]... not in a sense of obligation, it's not that the person shall be required to use before going into the grave, no. But certainly if you don't, you will be losing an important experience, a door to grow up!* (G., male, 20).

*I don't think everyone will have to have the psychedelic experience! I think each one should choose their own path and that there are people who don't have ... Hum ... That is not part of the path of everyone's path! It opens too many doors that, if the person is not [comfortable] with this type of perception, maybe they shouldn't do it ...* (A, female, 30).

Alternately another participant states:

*... They all end up being experiences that ... If you don't have them, ultimately you're missing an important experience to your development as a human being! "(K., male, 30).*

Regarding the hallucinogenic feature of this type of substances it is referred in the reports, however it doesn't tell the total of the psychedelic experience:

*There are many people that, when taking some psychedelic, think that all they are experiencing is merely a hallucination (...) and then people say that all they have is hallucination: "Oh, what a hallucination, I was seeing such a thing" ... Myself I don't believe it to be only a hallucination ... Of course there are things that are, I've hallucinated yes, but I already begin to discern "Oh, I'm hallucinating,", then later I look again and I no longer see that ... So yes, there is a hallucinogenic part, but it doesn't make the whole picture! (J., female, 39).*

### **Perception of risks and its control.**

In the interviews we tried to understand if there would be some risk perceived as inherent to the use of psychedelics. The answers we've obtained led us to understand that the perceived risk has to do with negative associations with other substances and dosing issues, as well as concern regarding the purity of the substances and contexts of use. When these issues were taken care of, for most the subjects we spoke to, the risk felt is almost non-existent. The question of what the personal preparation was needed for this type of experiments was also referred. One person mentioned the increased risk for people with mental disorders like psychosis. It was common the reference to the lack of serious and pragmatic information to enable experiences informed of pleasures and risks involved.

Everyone recognized some kind of risk inherent in the experience, but considered that the experience was worth the risk, and that such risks are likely to be reduced when some factors are controlled.

*I think that the same way a guy decides to smoke tobacco or ride in a car,*

*everything has risks. Before you do it, you have to measure them and decide if you are willing to take that risk or not. Maybe people look at a car and it is more common, a day-to-day object, and they don't take it too seriously ... I think (the risk involved with psychedelics) has to do with the cultural stigma and also the lack of credible information and education! (G., male, 20).*

*I think there is the risk of the dose ... If you have too much then there can be consequences ... Likewise if you take too much alcohol you can vomit and it is solved, you can get into a fight, you can get in the car and make the greatest mistake of your life ... Isn't it like that? In this case it's different because it's not something as discussed or explained –[with alcohol] you already know that if you drink too much, you get drunk and what can happen, there is consumer awareness! Ignorance can be dangerous! "(A, female, 30).*

We call spontaneous strategies of harm reduction to the actions the users develop by their own initiative to reduce the likelihood of negative consequences associated with the use of psychedelics (Fernandes, 2003).

There seems to be agreement on most aspects of harm reduction, in particular the importance of ensuring, when possible, the quality of the product (buy from a person you trust), use of the substance in an environment that the person perceives as safe and comfortable, with friends or people they can rely on. The necessary care in the mix with alcoholic beverages as well as respect for the doses and the body and its time of rest were also mentioned several times.

*Most people sometimes don't have a good experience because they aren't using the right substance, in the right dose with the right people at the right time. You can be with people who have no knowledge of the substance and don't know how to help you, you may not be doing the right dosage because of ignorance, you may not be able to find substances with the purity level required for the experience you want to have, and (in any of these ways) you can bring harm to yourself, your body and your mind ... (K., male, 30).*

In the event of a bad experience or unpleasant feelings, our respondents point out the

importance of talking with friends and remembering that they've ingested a substance and they are having a psychedelic experience:

*There is this thought I never forget, which is «I'm on some substance.» Never ever forget it ... When I feel confused what I do is to step back and I think about this and I get cool again. Because I am aware, I never cease to be aware ... (C., male, 39).*

*If you are experiencing any situation, or you have any fear ... If it is messing with you, you can talk to someone and that person can get you out of that trip, support you in any way, because there are fears that it is just like offering an apple, doing anything to change the focus of attention, because if you are fixed on thoughts like «I'm not so well, I see certain things and I am thinking of certain things, I am not very well» it only gets worse! (J., female, 39).*

When the authors asked about the ideal context for psychedelic experience, the common substrate in the answers identifies a safe and comfortable environment, doing it with friends or trusted people, and having no important appointments the next day. We have two main types of responses, which can be related to what the person sees as comfort and safety: the ideal experience to be at home or in nature, but without contact or third party interruptions; or the ideal experience as being in an electronic music festival, for several days, in the summer, where there is contact with nature, music and a sense of freedom. The contact with nature is referred as an amplifier of the experience but, in some cases, the person may do it without contact with nature at the expense of a more homely environment, if it cannot be done in conditions of some privacy and / or is not perceived by the person as a safe environment.

### **Conclusions and final comments: The subversion of meaning**

Being this study an exploratory investigation, there is much more to study and many questions to unfold about the Portuguese psychedelic reality. It would be pertinent to explore more deeply the personal transformation that our actors associate with the psychedelic experiences. It would also be interesting to

compare objective and subjective measurements of this transformation, including the perception of people that are close to the psychedelic user.

It is common the reference to the spiritual dimension of the use of psychedelics, so one direction for future investigations could be focused on the use of psychedelics as sacraments and tools to connect with the divine.

Concerning the results in the Ayahuasca section, in which one of our interviewers refers to the beneficial use of the substance by her borderline diagnosed son, it would be pertinent to explore the use of this substance by people who suffer from various disorders or mental illness.

None of these proposed questions are new, and various investigations have been made worldwide but the Portuguese reality is still yet to be discovered.

The history of drugs throughout the twentieth century shows us how the meaning construction around them had a dominant direction: the one that converted them into a problem (Agra, 2009; Escohotado, 2008; Romani, 1999). The first questioning made the drugs into elements linked to the breaching of the rules, putting them at the center of the concerns of the criminal legal device; the second questioning made them the cause of diseases, turning them into the object of medico-sanitary device. Thus, we came to the turn of the millennium with a social representation of "drug" that endowed it both with the power to change individuals and the social system itself, marked by the problematic side. For the individual it involved the risks of addiction, diseases associated with certain forms of consumption and psychiatric co-morbidity (Alcaide, Fernandes, Pinto & Calatayud, 2015). For the social it contained the risk of association with delinquent activities, and it was increasingly connoted with areas and population fringes that were traditionally segregated in large cities (Burgois, 2003; Chaves, 1999; Kokoreff, 2000).

However, taking psychedelic uses as a field of analysis, our article points another way for the transformation that the psychoactive operates. In our study, we have seen how personal transformation is the constant across the variety of experiences with LSD, DMT and ayahuasca. What is different in the relationship between individuals and psychedelic drugs is that it reverses the assumptions of the dominant discourse: while one sees in substances such as heroin or cocaine vehicles for a transformation of the self-characterized by dependency, with a whole series of problematic elements at the level of physical and mental health, our actors see their use of

psychedelic substances as a vehicle for transformation that they value, well summarized in the phrase "I think psychedelics managed to make a better version of me" referred by one of our subjects.

We have exposed the meanings that our subjects attribute to the effects experienced, and how they reevaluate their experience, considering how this was magnified by the experience provided by the psychedelic substance. We can say that these drugs are still instituted today, as they were in the 50s and 60s, as counter hegemonic by how their users find meaning for the psychotropic experience in direct opposition to the core elements of the dominant social representation of "drug".

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a literature review on the snowball method in the access of hidden populations see Fernandes & Carvalho (2000).

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**Appendix 1: Grid used for the codification of the interviews and the content analysis.**

Actor's file	Sociodemographic data
	Biographic data
Uses	LSD
	Mushrooms
	DMT
	Ayahuasca
	Mescaline
	Salvia
	Others (non psychedelics)
Experiences	LSD
	Mushrooms
	DMT
	Ayahuasca
	Mescaline
	Salvia
	Others (non psychedelics)
	Generic (refers to psychedelic experience without naming used substance)
	Ideal experience
	Spontaneous strategies of harm reduction
	Perception of risk

**Actor's file:** In this category we gather all the elements useful to construct a portrait of the interviewed person. Sociodemographic data, on one hand, and demographic data, on the other, constitute the principal elements of actor's characterization.

**Uses:** In this category we gather the information concerning the drug's *mode of utilization*: which drugs are or were used, the frequency, contexts, ways of ingestion, stiles of use. We also fit here all the elements related to problems of any order associated to the use or the substance and management strategies implemented. There are as many different subcategories as substances referred.

**Experience:** In this category are included all the elements that relate to the subjectivity of the use: the way it originates the construction of a way of *being in the drug*, a way of personal relation to it. Cognitive and affective/experiential dimensions are included. Besides the experiences with different substances, that form the various subcategories, there is the inclusion of the subcategory “Spontaneous strategies of harm reduction” that gathers the emergent strategies of harm reduction being used in the actor’s practices. There is also the subcategory “Perception of Risk” that relates to the conception and understanding of the risks associated to the use of this type of substances.