Mescaline, Psilocybin, and Creative Artists

Written by Stanley Krippner
Tuesday, 05 January 2010 22:24 - Last Updated Tuesday, 28 December 2010 18:13

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A number of creative people claim to have benefited from psychotherapy which utilized psychedelic drugs. Actor Cary Grant attributed "a new assessment of life" to LSD (Gaines, 1963). Blues singer Ronnie Gilbert, in 1964, was mired in a deep depressive state from which she found it impossible to break free. In desperation, she entered LSD therapy and, during the following six months, went through 20 psychedelic sessions. Frequently, Miss Gilbert and her psychiatrist went for walks in the park or visited art galleries and churches.

During one stroll through the park, Miss Gilbert felt a "sense of life all around me; I looked at trees for the first time, really looked at them." She recalled that "everything seemed so rich and so intense." This spontaneous experience (which was not chemically induced) hastened her progress and therapy soon terminated. Several years later she remarked, "I've been turned on to life and have never been so happy."

Miss Gilbert's psychiatrist commented. "Ronnie was lucky. She was one of the people who have been able to work through lifelong problems in a few sessions, and there is no reason why the good results shouldn't stick. Not everybody gets as much out of the experience. She was also lucky because she came into therapy before federal restrictions clamped down on it" (Gaines, 1963).

Only five major research projects in the area of psychedelic drugs and creative performance have been reported and most of these have been described by the experimenters as "pilot studies" rather than full-scale experiments with conclusive results. L.M. Berlin et al., (1955) investigated the effects of mescaline and LSD upon four graphic artists of national prominence. There was an impairment of finger-tapping efficiency and muscular steadiness among the four artists, but all were able to complete paintings. A panel of art critics judged the paintings as having "greater aesthetic value" than the artists' usual work, noting that the lines were bolder and that the use of color was more vivid. However, the technical execution was somewhat impaired.

The artists themselves spoke of an increased richness of imagery and of pleasurable sensory experiences. One said, "I looked out of the window into the infinitely splendid universe of a tiny mauve leaf performing a cosmic ballet." Another spoke of "light falling on light."

Frank Barron (1963) administered psilocybin to a number of highly creative individuals and recorded their impressions. One of Barron's subjects stated, "I felt a communion with all things." A composer wrote, "Every corner is alive in a silent intimacy." Barron concluded, "What psilocybin does is to... dissolve many definitions and... melt many boundaries, permit greater intensities or more extreme values of experience to occur in many dimensions."

Some of Barron's artists, however, were wildly enthusiastic about their apparently increased sensitivity during the drug experience only to discover, once the effects wore off, that the production was without artistic merit. One painter recalled, "I have seldom known such absolute
identification with what I was doing—nor such a lack of concern with it afterwards." This statement indicates that an artist is not necessarily able to judge the value of his psychedelically inspired work while he is under drug influence.

McGlothlin, Cohen, and McGlothlin (1967) made an intensive study of 72 volunteer graduate students following a preliminary study (1964) which involved 15 subjects. (In the preliminary study, no significant changes in creativity were noted following a 200 microgram LSD session; a number of creativity tests were given before the session and one week after the session. However, some significant changes were reported on anxiety and attitude tests.)

A large battery of psychological tests was administered prior to a series of three 200 microgram LSD sessions, and again at intervals of two weeks and six months following the third session. Among the tests in the battery were three art scales, a measure of artistic performance, a test of imaginativeness, a test of originality, four tests of divergent thinking, and a test of remote associations.

Three groups were created: an experimental group receiving 200 micrograms of LSD per session, a control group receiving 25 micrograms of LSD per session, and another control group receiving 20 milligrams of an amphetamine per session. As there were no systematic differences between the two control groups at the end of the study, they were combined for purposes of comparison with the experimental group.

The most frequently reported change in the experimental group on a questionnaire filled out after six months was "a greater appreciation of music"; 62 per cent of the subjects made this assertion. The increase in number of records bought, time spent in museums, and number of musical events attended in the post-drug period was significantly greater for the experimental group. However, the subjects' scores on the art tests did not show a significant increase; the authors concluded that the data "do not indicate that the increase in aesthetic appreciation and activities is accompanied by an increase in sensitivity and performance."

On the questionnaire filled out after six months, 25 per cent of experimental Subjects felt that LSD experience had resulted in enhanced creativity in their work. However, the creativity tests showed no evidence to substantiate this subjective report for the experimental group as a whole or for those claiming greater creative ability.

The other tests in the battery produced provocative results in regard to personality variables and the taking of LSD. The authors reported that "persons who place strong emphasis on structure and control generally have no taste for the experience and tend to respond minimally if exposed. Those who respond intensely tend to prefer a more unstructured, spontaneous, inward-turning (though not socially introverted) life, and score somewhat higher on tests of aesthetic sensitivity and imaginativeness. They also tend to be less aggressive, competitive, and conforming."

On the one measure of artistic performance used (the Draw-A-Person Test), the LSD subjects showed a significant decrease after six months.

Zegans, Pollard, and Brown (1967) investigated the effects of LSD upon creativity test scores of 30 male subjects chosen from a group of volunteer graduate students. Upon arrival, the first battery of tests was given and certain physiological measures (blood pressure and pulse rate) were taken. A dose of LSD equal to 0.5 micrograms per kilogram body weight was added to the water of 19 subjects randomly selected to receive the drug; the other 11 subjects did not receive LSD. After ingestion (of the drug), the subject was escorted to a lounge where he relaxed for two hours. Immediately prior to the second half of the test battery (which consisted of alternate forms of the same tests previously given), the physiological measures were repeated. The
battery of tests included a measure of remote association, a test of originality for word associations, a test for ability to create an original design from tiles, a free association test, and a measure involving the ability to perceive hidden figures in a complicated line drawing. A tachistoscopic stimulation task was also included; this determined speed of visual perception. When the creativity test data were investigated, it was discovered that the LSD group did significantly better than the control group on the re-test for originality of word associations (a modified form of the Rapaport Word Association Test). Although most other comparisons favored the LSD group, no other results were statistically significant. The authors concluded that "the administration of LSD-25 to a relatively unselected group of people for the purpose of enhancing their creative ability is not likely to be successful."

A further analysis of the data demonstrated that the authors were able to predict physiological reactions to a significant degree of accuracy on the basis of previously administered personality tests. It was also noted that the LSD subjects (although doing significantly better than control subjects on the word association test) made their poorest showing on those tests requiring visual attention (e.g., the tachistoscopic task, the tile design test, the hidden figures test). It was suggested that LSD "may increase the accessibility of remote or unique ideas and associations" while making it difficult for a subject to narrow his attention upon a delimited perceptual field. As a result "greater openness to remote or unique ideas and associations would only be likely to enhance creative thought in those individuals who were meaningfully engaged in some specific interest or problem."

The Institute of Psychedelic Research of San Francisco State College employed mescaline in an attempt to facilitate the creative process (Fadiman et al., 1965; Harman et al., 1966). The subjects were professional workers in various fields, who were instructed to bring a professional problem requiring a creative solution to their sessions. A number of them had worked for weeks or months on their chosen problems without success. After some psychological preparation, subjects worked individually on their problem throughout their single mescaline session. Virtually all subjects produced solutions judged highly creative and satisfactory by practical standards.

Two of the five cited studies suggest that unselected graduate students cannot expect an increase in creative ability as a result of their participation in an LSD experiment. On the other hand, creative workers in three studies utilizing psychedelic drugs showed an enhancement of creative functioning. The results must be regarded as tentative until additional work has been done in this field and until a greater control is exerted over the many variables present. (footnote)

**NINETY-ONE ARTISTS**

During 1967, in an attempt to discover the types of psychedelic drugs being used illegally by artists, as well as the subjective opinions of the users, Krippner (1967) surveyed 91 artists who were reputed to have had one or more "psychedelic experiences." Among the 91 were an award-winning film-maker, a Guggenheim Fellow in poetry, and a recipient of Ford, Fulbright, and Rockefeller study grants in painting.

A remarkably large number of the artists surveyed (93 per cent) agreed with a broad definition of the "psychedelic artist" and 81 per cent felt that the term could be applied to them personally. It was concluded that the "psychedelic artist" is one whose work shows the effects of psychedelic experience—usually, but not necessarily, chemically induced. The work may have been produced as a result of psychedelic experience, during psychedelic experience, or in attempt to induce a psychedelic experience. In addition, the work may remind someone of a
previous psychedelic experience or it may be used to facilitate psychedelic experience brought about by something other than the work of art.

Of the 91 artists in the survey, 100 per cent reported having had at least one psychedelic experience. When asked if they had ever taken a psychedelic substance, 96 per cent answered "yes" while 4 per cent answered "no."

Of the chemical substances, LSD was mentioned by more artists than any other drug, followed by marijuana, DMT, peyote, mescaline, morning glory seeds, psilocybin, hashish, DET, and yage. A few artists had tried Kava-Kava, ibogaine, bufotenin, Ditran, the amanita muscaria mushroom, and the Hawaiian wood rose. One artist reported experimenting with STP, a powerful and long-lasting drug manufactured by an "underground chemist" in California while several others had toasted and smoked the inside of banana skins, usually with extremely mild and inconsequential results. A few artists claimed to have obtained psychedelic effects from substances generally not considered psychedelic—benzedrine (an amphetamine or psychic energizer), opium (a narcotic), ritalin, kinotrine, amyl nitrate, and nitrous oxide.

The artists surveyed were asked if their psychedelic experiences (chemically as well as non-chemically induced) were generally pleasant. An unqualified "yes" response was given by 91 per cent of the group while 5 per cent gave a qualified "yes" response. In the latter cases, it was stated that some of their initial "trips" were unpleasant but that their later experiences were pleasurable. One artist answered this question negatively and three others did not respond.

When the artists were asked, "How have your psychedelic experiences influenced your art?" none of them felt that their work had suffered as a result of psychedelic experience, although some admitted that their friends might disagree with this judgment. Three per cent of the artists stated that their psychedelic experiences had not influenced their work one way or the other. The others cited a number of effects which fell into three broad categories: content, technique, and approach. In most cases, the artists reported effects that fell into more than one category.

Seventy per cent of the group stated that psychedelic experience had affected the content of their work, the most frequently cited example being their use of eidetic imagery as subject matter.

Fifty-four per cent of the artists surveyed said there had been a noticeable improvement in their artistic technique resulting from their psychedelic sessions; a greater ability to use color was the example mentioned most frequently.

Fifty-two per cent of the artists attributed a change in their creative approach to the psychedelics. Frequently made was the claim that psychedelic experience had eliminated superficiality from the artists' work and had given them greater depth as people and as creators. Some referred to their first psychedelic experience as a "peak experience," as a turning point in their lives. "My dormant interest in music became an active one," said a musician, "after a few sessions with peyote and DMT." Another said that a psilocybin experience "caused me to enjoy the art of drawing for the first time in my life."

The impact of psychedelic experience upon an individual was illustrated in the case of Isaac Abrams, one of Krippner's subjects. In an interview, the artist stated that "psychedelic experience has deeply influenced all aspects of my life. It was an experience of self-recognition, under LSD, which opened my eyes to drawing and painting as the means of self-expression for which I had always been seeking. During subsequent experiences, many difficulties, personal and artistic, were resolved. When the personal difficulties were solved, energy was released for the benefit of my art."

Upon graduation from college, Abrams got married, toured Europe, and went to work selling
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furniture. "I had been taught," he said, "that the most important things in life were to look neat, act nice, and make money. Yet, I knew that something was missing. There was something to do that I wasn't doing. I had a sense of mission but no idea what the mission might be."

Abrams was offered mescaline by a friend but turned it down. Several years later, in 1962, he was offered psilocybin and decided to give it a try. On Washington's birthday, Abrams and his wife took psilocybin. Abrams watched the ceiling whirl, turned off the lights, and realized for the first time that during all the years of his life he had been behaving "like a person who had no mind."

Abrams enjoyed his psilocybin experience and a few months later had another opportunity to try mescaline. "We took it in the country and it was beautiful." His next psychedelic experiences were with marijuana; once again, these were pleasant and positive in nature.

The inner life having been opened up by these episodes, Abrams thought that he might discover his "life's mission." The search was in vain. He sold more furniture. He wrote a play. He entered graduate school, but this was not for him and he dropped out.

Early in 1965, Abrams took LSD. During his session, he began to draw. "As I worked," he recalled, "I experienced a process of self-realization concerning the drawing. When the drug wore off, I kept on drawing. I did at least one ink drawing every few weeks."

Abrams attended art classes to learn about technique and materials. His wife went to different classes, took notes, and passed on the information to her husband. The skills developed quickly and he began to paint.

Abrams entered psychoanalysis with a well-known psychoanalyst who specialized in the creative process. The artist mused, "Analysis helps me to mobilize the psychedelic experience and externalize it. I think any individual can go just so far on his own. At some point he needs a spiritual teacher or guru. A good psychoanalyst can be a guru."

"For me," Abrams continued, "the psychedelic experience basically has been one of turning on to the life process, to the dance of life with all of its motion and change. Before 1962, my behavior was based on logical, rational, and linear experience. Due to the psychedelics, I also became influenced by experiences that were illogical, irrational, and non-linear. But this, too, is a part of life. This aspect is needed if life is to become interrelated and harmonious.

"Psychedelic drugs give me a sense of harmony and beauty. For the first time in my life, I can take pleasure in the beauty of a leaf; I can find meaning in the processes of nature. For me to paint an ugly picture would be a lie. It would be a violation of what I have learned through psychedelic experience."

Abrams continued, "I have found that I can flow through my pen and brush; everything I do becomes a part of myself—an exchange of energy. The canvas becomes a part of my brain. With the psychedelics, you learn to think outside of your head. My art attempts to express or reproduce my inner state." Abrams concluded, "Psychedelic experience emphasizes the unity of things, the infinite dance. You are the wave, but you are also the ocean."

Krippner noted that he rarely had found artists among the casualties of illegal drug usage, suggesting that an artist must stand somewhat apart from his culture in order to create. "To invent something new," Krippner concluded, "one cannot be completely conditioned or imprinted. Perhaps it is this type of an individual—the person who will not be alarmed at what he perceives or conceptualizes during a psychedelic session—who can most benefit from these altered states of consciousness."

Cohen (1964) summarized the research data on creativity and the psychedelics by stating, "Whether LSD does or does not increase creativity remains an open question. No systematic
research is available to help in finding an answer. All that can be said at this time about the effect of LSD on the creative process is that a strong subjective feeling of creativeness accompanies many of the experiences."

(footnote) An additional study (Janinger, personal communication, 1967) is being evaluated at the present time. Fifty prominent artists painted a picture of a standard object (an American Indian doll) before ingesting LSD. During their psychedelic sessions, they again painted the doll. The 100 paintings are being evaluated on the basis of several artistic criteria in an attempt to determine what type of change took place as well as the artistic merit (or lack of merit) reflected by the change.  

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