Healing, knowledge and transcendental experiences of unity

- Motivations and experiences of shamanism and entheogens in the Andes.

Rasmus Lindahl

Sociologiska institutionen
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ABSTRACT

This study examines motivations and experiences of shamanism and entheogens in the Andes from the perspective of the participants of entheogenic ceremonies. The results suggest that emotional healing, pursuit of knowledge, need for connection and transcendence are prevalent motivators of the participants. Further the results indicate that emotional healing is achieved through acquiring knowledge about the self and significant others, and the need for connection is met through transcendental experiences of unity. Moreover, accounts of “deprogramming” properties of the entheogens is perceived to aid in the process of self-realization which in turn could result in fundamental life changes if the new knowledge obtained is applied.

Keywords: entheogens, shamanism, motivation, experiences, spiritual tourism, ayahuasca, San Pedro, benefits, hallucinogens, psychedelic medicine, spirituality, altered states of consciousness

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1. INTRODUCTION
1.1 Purpose and research questions
1.2 Disposition

2. BACKGROUND
2.1 Early research on psychedelics
2.2 The shamanic renaissance
2.3 Key concepts
2.4 The valley of longevity

3. METHOD
3.1 Methodological position
3.2 The interview and respondents
3.3 The content analysis
3.4 The coding process
3.5 Methodological challenges

4. RESULTS
4.1 Healing
   - 4.1.1 Reflections on Healing
4.2 Metaphysical experiences
   - 4.2.1 Reflections on Metaphysical experiences
4.3 The pursuit of knowledge
   - 4.3.1 Reflections on The pursuit of knowledge
4.4 Experiences of unity
   - 4.4.1 Reflections on Experiences of unity
4.5 Life changes
   - 4.5.1 Reflections on Life changes
4.6 Connection and transcendence

5. THEORY
5.1 CONNECTION
5.2 TRANSCENDENCE

6. DISCUSSION

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY
1. INTRODUCTION

The word “entheogen” is used to describe psychoactive (mind-altering) components in plants and animals traditionally used for religious and spiritual purposes (Ruck, Bigwood, Staples, Ott, & Wasson, 1979). Entheogens as spiritual or sacramental\(^1\) tools have been used by humans since prehistoric times (Dobkin de Rios & Grob 2005), however the term itself\(^2\) is relatively new and was coined by scholars in the late 70’s (Ruck et al. 1979) to stress the difference between socio-culturally loaded psychoactive drugs like LSD and MDMA (usually labeled psychedelics or hallucinogens) and psychotropics used traditionally by indigenous societies.

In the Andean rain forest and highlands of Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, entheogens are most frequently found in connection to the traditional shamanic ceremony; a meticulously designed experience where people come together with the intention of healing, transformation and gaining knowledge. These ceremonies are often, but not always, being held by one or several persons\(^3\) with extensive knowledge of entheogens and the shamanic journey\(^4\), aiding the process of the participants through guidance, presence, experience and, traditionally, some form of musical performance.

In the field of sociology the interest of entheogens have had a renaissance in relation to an old phenomenon in a new format: the contemporary development of spiritual (entheogenic) tourism in the Andean and Amazon region. Over the past two decades tourism connected to traditional Andean and Amazonian healing like shamanism and entheogenic plant-based medicine have flourished and with it an industry of spiritual tourism (by some referred to as drug tourism, see Winkelman 2005) have sprouted with outposts all over the Andes and the Amazonian basin.

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1 The original meaning of sacrament refers to the bread and wine (the flesh and blood of Christ) received at the Last Supper. In a more broader sense it can refer to any religious rite and the use of entheogens to obtain altered states of consciousness, divination and healing.

2 The word *entheogen* shares the same root as enthusiasm and its literal meaning translates to “awakening god within”, “God inside us” or “releasing or expressing the divine within” (Metzner 1998).

3 The people conducting a ceremony go by many names, including shaman, curandero, vegetalista, ayahuascero etcetera.

4 A “journey” is a common metaphor for these types of altered states of consciousness.
(Kavenská & Simonová 2015). People come from all over the world to partake in traditional shamanic ceremonies and to induce altered state of consciousness by ingesting various types of flowers, mushrooms, cactuses, seeds and vines native to the area (Metzner 1998), and the desire to experience shamanic practices has never been stronger (DuBois 2009).

This newly found appetite for shamanism has, besides creating an influx of spiritual tourists in South America, also paved way for the migration of Andean and Amazonian shamanic practices and entheogens to the rest of the world⁵ - a global phenomenon that under protection of religious freedom have resulted in recent liberal changes in the drug laws of some countries⁶.

These recent trends have naturally fueled the academic interest in shamanism and entheogens and entheogenic and shamanic studies is virtually booming (Taylor & Piedilato 2002). Whereas many studies have been undertaken to study the physical and neuropsychological aspects of entheogens use (see for example Dos Santos et al. 2016), the implications of entheogen motivated tourism (see for example Holman, C. L. 2010; Winkelman 2005), and the therapeutic use of entheogens (see Labate & Cavnar, C. 2014), very little effort have been made in order to understand more about the actual motivations and experiences of entheogen users. With the exception for a few studies (such as Kavenská & Simonová, 2015; Kjellgren, Eriksson & Norlander 2009) qualitative research on modern people’s experiences and reasons for partaking in these ancient shamanic traditions is still very much in its infancy - a knowledge gap that this study aims to bridge, at least partially.

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⁵ The Santo Daime, one of the largest churches that uses Ayahuasca (Daim) as a sacrament, has branches in many countries including the Netherlands, Spain, the United States, Japan, Belgium, France, Germany and The Czech Republic.

⁶ Since the 1st of January 2016, an Ayahuasca Church in Elbe, Washington has legally been serving Ayahuasca to visitors. In 1999 leaders of the Santo Daime church in the Netherlands were arrested for serving Ayahuasca and later, based on European Union human rights laws, were acquitted of all charges, something that set a precedent for the rest of the European Union (Tupper 2002).
1.1 Purpose and research questions
The purpose of this study is to examine the contemporary use of entheogens and shamanic practises in the Andean region, from the perspective of the participant of entheogenic ceremonies. In order to do so, the study has been qualitatively designed to look at central aspects related to the use of entheogens in ceremonial settings, with the intention of covering the aspects of why and what:

**Why:** Why does one partake in entheogenic plant-based ceremonies? A closer look at the reasons and motivations for using entheogens and visiting shamans and how these motivations are reflected in the ceremonies (for example through expectations and the setting of intentions prior to a ceremony).

**What:** What experiences are the participants having and what meanings do they ascribe to these experiences?

Lastly, the results of this study will be examined in light of relevant sociological theories in order to elevate and discuss the findings through a sociological perspective - something that further contributes to filling the current academic knowledge gap of entheogen use and hopefully spawns new research questions in the field of shamanism and entheogens.

1.2 Disposition
1. INTRODUCTION - This section contains a brief introduction, the purpose and research questions of this study and a disposition.

2. BACKGROUND - Here the reader will be provided with background information on early research, key concepts and the geographical and social context where the study was conducted.

3. METHOD - This section is takes a closer look at the methodological position and challenges, the respondents, the interview, the content analysis and the coding process.
4. RESULTS - The results of the study will be presented by reviewing codes, categories and quotes of the five themes: **Health, Pursuit of knowledge, Metaphysical experiences, Experience of unity** and **Life changes**.

5. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES - In this section the theoretical perspectives of Erich Fromm and Zygmunt Bauman will be presented.

6. DISCUSSION - The implication the results will be further discussed in relationship to the theoretical perspectives.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Early research on psychedelics

Psychedelics (such as LSD and MDMA) and entheogens (such as Ayahuasca, Cannabis, Peyote, magic mushrooms, San Pedro) have for many years been of interest to the social sciences, but research in these fields have been far from mainstream, since the 1960s. The bulk of studies made on entheogens derives from the field of anthropology, but psychologists and sociologists have also contributed with substantial research on various hallucinogens and the mind-altering experiences associated to them (see for example Eliade, 1964 & Metzner 1998)

However, the scientific interest in psychotropic substances was, somewhat contradictorily, not born in contact with indigenous societies - rather it all started in a Swiss laboratory in 1938 when Albert Hofmann accidentally discovered Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD)\(^7\). Ralph Metzner, psychologist and researcher in the field of consciousness studies noted that with LSD came “the prospect of unhinging the mind from its normal parameters for a few hours to simulate madness” - a potential that intrigued a small number of ground-breaking therapists and researchers (e.g.

\(^7\) 20 years later, Hofman would also be the first to synthesize psilocybin, the active component in so called magic or sacred mushrooms, making the substance more widely used for clinical purposes. Hofman also identified and synthesized the active components in ayahuasca, the peyote cactus and the seed of *turbina corymbosa*, a species of morning glory (Leary, Litwin & Metzner 1963).
Timothy Leary and Stanislav Grof among others). LSD was considered to bring about a psychic opening of the mind and was used to loosen the defenses of patients in order for them to become aware of previously unconscious emotional dynamics and reaction patterns and that such insight “would bring about a resolution of inner conflicts” (Metzner 1998).

The popularity of LSD in the 1960s increased public awareness of the native and traditional uses of entheogens and at the same time psychedelics were entering the field of psychotherapy - and likely as a result of the profound insights emerging from psychedelic research - anthropologists and ethnobotanists were inspired to explore the roots of human’s relationship to entheogenic plant-based medicines (Metzner 1998). Today, due to recent claims and findings of the potential benefits of entheogens in treatment of PTSD, depression, anxiety and, most notably, substance abuse (Kjellgren, Eriksson & Norlander 2009), the field has blossomed with a renewed interest from academia and the public alike (Morris 2008).

2.2 The shamanic renaissance
Shamanism in South America is coming back strong. Long believed to be on the verge of extinction; ridiculed by science, persecuted by religion and criminalized by governments (Narby 1998), this ancient form of folk healing is now “making a Stone Age renaissance in the Postmodern Age.” (Kowalewski 2016). In western societies, people are rediscovering their shamanic roots (Winkelman 2003) and studies on shamanism “has exploded to everybody's amazement” (Taylor & Piedilato 2002). Much of it's current popularity can be ascribed to various illustrious works of the 60’s through the 80’s, such as The way of the Shaman (Harner 1980), Shamanism (Eliade 1964) and The teachings of Don Juan (Castañeda 1968) among many others. Following these works, the popularity of shamanism in public imagination has shown no sign of declining. Yet, this ongoing boom in Latin America and the rest of the world is unlikely to stem solely from literature. So what is going on?
Some researchers see the current trend as an extension of a larger phenomena in postmodern society - the rise of modern paganism; the contemporary practices of ancient (pagan) religions, such as wicca, druidry, heathenry (Luhrmann 2012). This proposal has some valid claims. There are, for example, a number of similarities between shamanism and paganism, such as animism (the belief that animals, plants and inanimate objects have spirits), pantheism (the belief that god is everything and in everything), the holistic concept of an interconnected universe, the earth as a Mother, the sun as a Father, the Ritual, the worship of the divine feminine and many others.

There is, however, an important distinction to be made between modern paganism and shamanism: whereas paganism was extinct for centuries, shamanism - despite its tribulations - never truly disappeared and can as such not be referred to as a “rediscovered” practise (Winkelman 2010). Some isolated tribes managed to hide their shamanic practices from the intrusion of western civilization up until present day, and others, like the Shuar people of the Amazon Basin of Ecuador, never hid at all - but was instead feared and shunned by the Incas and later, the Spaniards for their fierce warriors and tradition of tsantsa (head-shrinking). The Shuar are to this day called the “unconquered ones” and are now, due to laws of religious freedom in Ecuador and Peru, allowed to practise their traditional shamanism freely, and frequently invite foreigners to partake in their rituals (Jandial et al. 2004).

David Kowalewski, adopting a global–historical approach, sees many combining factors as the keys to the recent success of shamanism. Liberal legislative reforms like the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 in the United States and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007 “not only fostered the pride of indigenes in their spiritual heritage but encouraged shamans to come out of hiding and conduct their ceremonies openly” (2016). Kowalewski further credits the feminist movement that challenged the established patriarchal abrahamic religions in search for more

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8 The definition of modern paganism differ. Doyle White suggests “a collection of modern religious, spiritual, and magical traditions that are self-consciously inspired by the pre-Judaic, pre-Christian, and pre-Islamic belief systems of Europe, North Africa and the Near East” (Doyle White 2012).
“female-friendly” spiritualities. But most of all, Kowalewski sees shamanism as a reaction to the zeitgeist of the postmodern individualistic society and the institutions that, whilst facing global crisis on all fronts, fail to confront their own self-perpetuated status quo:

“I propose that starting around the middle of the 20th century, the most important power structures of civilization—governments, religions, and sciences—despite nearly eradicating shamanism, themselves have suffered from a crisis of authority and hence serious popular alienation, most recently by failing to adequately address the growing global crises, leading many people to reach back to their ancient spiritual roots.” (2016)

In contrast to this, other researchers (for example Hefner 1998, Gearin 2015) see modern shamanism as a natural continuum of individualistic society. Modern shamanism, Gearin concludes, would not have been so successful had it not “accommodated and creatively responded to market forces and the ideological peculiarities of Western notions of the individual” (2015). These new movements are thus to be viewed as a response to, rather than a reaction to the modern world (Hefner 1998), powered by individualism that deny rigid social hierarchies, fueled by ceremonies that stress the importance of the self and its relationship to the world.

2.3 Key concepts

Shamanism and entheogens

The words shaman and shamanism is not native to South America, but is believed to come from the Siberian word *saman*, “to know”. At first shamanism was exclusively used for the ancient religions of the Turks and the Mongols, but later was given a broader use, extending to similar, but geographically unrelated, magico-religious practises all over the world. Nowadays the term shaman is used for any practise involving healing and *divination*\(^9\) through the induction of altered states of consciousness where the shaman and often (but not always) the people in the ceremony enters into a non ordinary reality seeking knowledge, healing, or both. A shaman is an

\(^9\) The obtaining or extraction of knowledge through entheogens is called divination. Comparable to break-through in traditional western psychotherapy (Metzner 1998).
integral part of communal religious traditions, acting as intermediary between the natural and supernatural worlds (DuBois 2009)

Entheogens and entheogenic have the same root as “enthusiasm” and will be the term most frequently used in this essay as it distinguishes traditional ethnobotanical plants from other manmade mind-altering substances. Entheogen translates to “releasing or expressing the divine within” and can be seen as a door-opening substance that causes one to experience altered states of consciousness, often in a religious or spiritual context (Metzner 1998).

**set and setting**

Coined by Norman Zinberg and popularized by Timothy Leary, “set and setting” was quickly adopted by researchers in psychedelic therapy (Shewan, Dalgarno, Reith 2000) and has since been applied to a wide variety of altered states of consciousness involving triggers such as psychedelics, entheogens, fasting, rhythmic drumming, meditation etcetera (Metzner 1998).

Leary, Litwin & Metzner argued that the primary determinants of a psychedelic experience are the internal set (the motivation, expectation and intention) and the external setting (the context, the atmosphere, the surroundings). The type of drug or dose plays, according to the researchers, a minor role:

> “It merely acts as a chemical key — it opens the mind, frees the nervous system of its ordinary patterns and structures. The nature of the experience 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.” (1969)

Whether or not the dosage or type of entheogen is of minor importance to the experience itself is debatable, however the concept of set and setting provides an excellent structure for examining the entheogenic ceremony. In fact one can even argue that the shamanic ritual is an intentional arrangement of the set (with emphasis on conscious intention) and setting (the design of the ritual) for purposes of healing and divination.
**Medicine**

The plants and animals that are traditionally used to induce altered state of consciousness for ceremonial purposes is usually not referred to as entheogens or psychedelics by practitioners and participants, rather the word *medicine* is used for a wide range of mind-altering substances derived from plants and animals.

**Curandero, ayahuasquero & vegetalista**

In the Amazon and Andean areas, the word shaman is rarely applied to practitioners doing work that is customarily considered shamanic. The title vegetalista stems from the the Spanish word for plant (vegetal), curandero from the Spanish word healer. Some practitioners working with ayahuasca also refers to themselves as ayahuasqueros.

**2.4 The valley of longevity**

In the south of Ecuador 45 kilometres from the city of Loja lies the remote valley of Vilcabamba. The name of the valley as well as of the village located at the bottom of it derives from the Quechua (1) "huilco pamba". Huilco, which means *sacred*, denotes the sacred trees *Anadenanthera colubrina* (The Wilco tree\(^1\)) that inhabit the region. Pamba means valley or plain. Vilcabamba has been referred to as the "Playground of the Inca" which refers to its historical use as a retreat for Incan royalty. Vilcabamba has also been called "The Sacred Valley" and the "Valley of Longevity" due to claims of unusually high average life expectancy of its inhabitants.

Moreover, the valley is bursting with plant and animal life\(^1\) and several different types of psychoactive plants and mushrooms (such as San Pedro, Datura, Cannabis, the Wilco seed and Psilocybin mushrooms) grow naturally in the area and Vilcabamba has had a long history of

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\(^1\) The Wilco tree was considered sacred by the Incas mainly for the psychotropic properties of the seed. The seed, which contains the psychoactive substance Bufotenin (a type of DMT), was grounded up into a snuff preparation and ingested ceremoniously, and to this day, shamans and entheogenic practitioners in the area incorporate the seed into their ceremonies.

\(^1\) The nearby national park, The Podocarpus, has the most variety of flora in the world.
travelers coming to experience the psychoactive and medicinal qualities of the Vilcabambian flora. With the influx of tourism, the number of shamans and non-registered\(^\text{12}\) plant-medicine practitioners/facilitators has also grown, and there is now a wide variety of ceremonies, entheogens and practitioners to choose from for the spiritual seeking tourist or resident.

Perhaps it is the claims of longevity, the rich wildlife, the beautiful scenery, the abundance of entheogens or maybe a combination of the above that makes Vilcabamba such a popular destination for westerners. Regardless the reasons, Vilcabamba is now an eclectic blend of different nationalities with almost one third (roughly 2000) of its inhabitants coming from different countries and cultures around the world. The local scene could now a days be described as belonging to what could broadly be referred to as the New Age scene, or even Neo-new age scene, so meanings of words like “spirituality”, “synchronicity”, “consciousness” for example are common in everyday conversations around downtown Vilcabamba. Here - in this melting-pot of cultures and creeds, in the afterglow of new-age, among westerners, locals and expats is where I have found the respondents for this study. On a personal note, I have been coming and going several times to Vilcabamba since the dawn of the 90’s when I as a child accompanied my parents here for the first time. As an adult I occasionally live here for the tranquility and beauty of the mountains, the closeness to nature and for the people; I immensely enjoy the company of the people, personalities, friends and loved ones that I have been fortunate enough to meet whilst residing here for over two decades.

I believe that Vilcabamba is an excellent place to study the contrasting intersection of western and indigenous consciousness; the social data available (the people) are best understood as a part of this culture, contemporary expats seeking to know themselves and nature better, both as individuals and as interdependent entities.

\(^{12}\) To legally call oneself shaman in Ecuador, one must be officially recognized and registered with the government.
3. METHOD

This study is based upon eight loosely structured informal interviews and one written account. This part of the essay will address the methodological position and challenges, the coding and the method of analysis.

3.1 Methodological position

Since the purpose of this study is to research contemporary motivation and experiences for taking part in plant-based ceremonies in the Andean region, I found phenomenology to be the most appropriate approach. The phenomenological methodology is highly concerned with motive, meaning and understanding and the key concept is intersubjectivity: we experience the world with and through other people and it is this intersubjective consciousness that researchers are to focus upon. To do this, researchers must suspend their own belief (bracketing) they have of the external world in order to discover the world as it is experienced by those involved in it. Tersely put, it is about the nature of human experience and the meaning that people attach to these experiences (Calhoun mfl, Contemporary Sociological Theory, p 38 - 40).

3.2 The interview and respondents

This study is based upon eight loosely structured informal interviews and one written account. The respondents (tourists and residents of Vilcabamba) were chosen to cover several aspects across the population in order to obtain as rich material as possible. The variables were age, gender, cultural background and previous experience with entheogens.

I found the respondent simply by asking around in the local community to see who would be interested in sharing their experiences with me. Three women and five men were interviewed and the age ranged from 27 to 48. They came from five different countries in Europe, North America and South America and had various degrees of experience with entheogens, ranging from little experience (less than 10 sessions) to much experience (more than 100 sessions). They too varied in years of experience, from less than two years to over 30 years experience.
The interviews were conducted in secluded and quiet places, sometimes in the respondent's home, sometimes at a quiet cafe or a park. The main idea was to keep it an informal chat at a secure location for the respondents. The interviews ranged in time from 53 minutes to 3 hours and 12 minutes. After they were briefed about anonymity and right to disengage, the interview started with some initial questions on their background and history with entheogens and other psychedelics. Although the interview was loosely structured, there were some question that remained standard throughout all eight interviews:

“How did you first come in contact with entheogens and shamanism?”
“Tell me about your first encounter with entheogens.”
“What are your primary motives for engaging in plant-based medicine?”
“What risks, if any, do you perceive to be involved with the rituals?”
“What intentions, if any, do you set prior to a ceremony?”

During the interview, I let the respondent decide what he/she wanted to disclose and only asked follow-up questions when something needed to be clarified. On rare occasions did I need to ask questions to guide the respondent back to the purpose of this study.

3.3 The content analysis
The content analysis as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) was used for analysing the qualitative data obtained in the process of coding and categorizing. The benefits of using content analysis for this type of research lies on the complete focus of content, rather than letting interview questions and preconceived ideas govern. Indeed, bracketing becomes easier when using content analysis for this very reason, rendering results closer to the original narratives, which in turn increases overall validity and transferability. An important phenomenological assumption that Graneheim and Lundman make is that reality can be understood in different ways and is always dependent upon subjective interpretation. A text can therefore have multiple meanings and there are always different levels of interpretation, depending on how close one chooses to look. You can for example interpret the manifest or the latent content of a text. The manifest approach focuses directly on the clear and apparent content of a text, while a latent
approach relies more on the interpretation of what can be “read between the lines”. Due to the nature of the subject, I have chosen to focus on the manifest content of the material, fearing that interpretation would risk leading me astray from the original content. When a subject speaks of “tea-time with an anthropomorphic fox”, I have coded this simply as “meeting beings”. And when another subject stresses the importance of experiencing God rather than “simply” believing in God, this was coded to “believing is a poor substitute for experience”.

3.4 The coding process

When the interviews were completed and transcribed, the transcriptions and the notes were reread a couple of times (with and without audio) to get a feeling for the whole. To facilitate the coding process, the software MAXQDA was utilized. Each interview was ascribed with a tag, such as UA1, UA2, UA3 etcetera. UA stands for Unit of analysis and should be a whole interview that is “large enough to be considered a whole and small enough to be possible to keep in mind as a context for the meaning unit, during the analysis process (Graneheim, Lundman, 2004). After this was completed, the coding process could commence with the identification of meaning units: words, sentences or paragraphs relevant to the purpose that contain interrelated aspect to each other through context or content, for example: “when you have baggage, you cannot fly, when you release your baggage, you become as light as light, let yourself go.” When a meaning unit was identified, it was shortened, while still preserving the core and then coded. It was also tagged with a classifying word such as “teaching”, “experience”, “intention” etcetera to more easily distinguish them from other codes (read more about this under 2.3 Methodological challenges). The above sentence thus became the code: “Teachings: When releasing baggage, you become light”.

The next step was to group the codes in categories that mirror the central message and meaning of the codes, illustrated here in table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mirroring</td>
<td>Experience: San Pedro helps to see everyone else as the same</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachings: We are all mirrors onto each other

After-Experience: Acknowledging in her - sees in others

After-Experience: Seeing herself in others

- **Table 1: Illustration of codes in a category.**

Categories are the core feature of qualitative content analysis and should be internally homogenous and externally heterogeneous, that is a code should only fit into one category. However, due to the intertwined nature of human experiences, sometimes it’s not possible to create mutually exclusive categories (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004).

Depending on the levels of abstraction a category can include a number of sub-categories, or even sub-subcategories. This was also the case in this study, illustrated in table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting beings</td>
<td>The Divine Mother</td>
<td>Experience: The Good mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experience: The Shadow Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experience: The feminine receiving lesson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experience: The female God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experience: Coming back into the womb of mother earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experience: Relationship to the grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experience: Meeting the mother Ayahuasca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experience: So many entities in the soup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experience: Meeting his First &quot;me&quot;, self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Experience: Spirit Guide: Woman, learning to fly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Table 2: Illustration of category, subcategory and codes.**

When the categories were created they were organized into five themes: Healing, Metaphysical experiences, Pursuit of knowledge, Experiences of Unity and Life changes. Themes are created
to link the underlying meaning of the material on an interpretative level and does not have to, like categories, be mutually exclusive, see Table 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healing</td>
<td>Motivations: healing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Motivation: Healing mind and soul</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intentions: healing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intention: To understand and fix rel. to men.</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional benefits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After-Experience: Losing a lot of anxiety</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical Benefits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After-Experience: Very energized</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relations: More connected to family</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Purging / releasing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience: Empty your cup so you can fill it</td>
<td>.................................................................</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Table 3: Illustration of theme, category and codes.

3.5 Methodological challenges

Needless to say, studying altered states of consciousness poses some serious methodological challenges, indeed, as Alfred Schütz\(^\text{13}\) noted: One of the biggest challenges in social science is to grasp the consciousness of the other while residing within one's own stream of consciousness. In this case, it gets even more difficult: grasping the altered state of consciousness of the other

\(^{13}\) Alfred Schütz was a Austrian social scientist who constructively brought sociology and phenomenology together.
while residing within one’s own consciousness. Or, even more accurately as I interview the participants about past events: grasp the former altered state of consciousness through the current stream of consciousness of the other while residing within one’s own stream of consciousness. To resolve this, I have tried to stay as close to the text and the narratives as I possibly can, making sure that the codes lie very close to original text, not to lose the meanings the participants intend to convey.

Another problem that arose during the coding process is connected to limitations of the content analysis. As the codes were created they reflected the content in the sentences, but grew somewhat detached from the narratives at large. Fantastic tales of out-of-body experiences where the subject embarks on interdimensional journeys through space and time, meeting alien shamanic beings, passing through the christ consciousness and resting in a sphere at the first point of duality became separated dry codes like “leaving the body”, “meeting beings”, “christ consciousness” etcetera. Something was missing and the story seemed to lose its colour and depth.

In an attempt to rectify this, steps were taken to assure a more wholesome coding process. The codes were for example assigned a tag straight from the start to more easily distinguish them from other codes further down the line in the coding process. If the code was about information obtained from the experience that was relevant to the subject’s life (like a teaching), the code would be assigned the tag “Teaching”. If the code was about motivations or intentions, it would be assigned the tag “Motivation” and “Intention” respectively. This both facilitated the coding process and allowed the analysis to remain close to the original narratives.

4. RESULTS
In this part the results from the content analysis will be presented. From the coded material, 21 categories were retrieved that together formed five major themes: Healing, Metaphysical experiences, Pursuit of knowledge, Experiences of Unity and Life changes. To easily
distinguish between codes and categories, codes are written in **bold** and categories are written in UPPERCASE letters.

### 4.1 Healing

This theme consists of 6 categories and reflect the health aspects of entheogen usage and shamanic ceremonies. The 6 categories are:

- MOTIVATIONS: HEALING
- INTENTIONS: HEALING
- EMOTIONAL BENEFITS
- PHYSICAL BENEFITS
- RELATIONS
- PURGING/RELEASING.

The first category MOTIVATIONS: HEALING, illuminates the “why-question” of entheogen use, and is made up by **codes** that describe the healing motives. These reasons and motivations reflect physical healing such as **curing epileptic seizures**, spiritual healing such as **cleaning of entities**, and sometimes a combination: **cleaning mind, psyche and soul**.

Although physical and spiritual healing were mentioned as intentions and motivations, the emphasis was clearly laid on the emotional healing aspects of entheogens, such as **depression** or **getting over depression from separation**, here exemplified by a respondent who first encountered Ayahuasca when going through a hard separation:

> “But then my partner left, and I fell into a bit of a... Well I was exposed to my life, like what's going on. So I told him I would have a ceremony with him. Because I was really... Sort of depression if you will, and silly to reflect upon, like the state of depression, but when you are in it it is very serious, the most serious thing in your life. It's real. Real hell. But anyhow, I wanted to get out of it, so. But I was scared as I approached the ceremony.”

Another respondent twice reported the use of San Pedro as a means of facing separation:
“The relationship in the years finished, we separated, and it was again - really bad. Like at the beginning of the San Pedro before. Really bad. And I needed to do something but I did not know what. So one day I talked with XXX, you know her, I saw her in town, asked her if she is going to have ceremony or something”

The second category INTENTIONS: HEALING describes the intentions that the subjects set before a ceremony. This category too illuminates the “why” aspect and reflects the quest for emotional healing with codes such as, more divine love, understanding my hate and love for myself, here exemplified by a woman looking for answers about self-love:

“I wanted love for myself, to receive love for myself, to love myself more so I can share my love with others. And actually it was totally like the whole picture what it showed me… Why I don’t love myself, was connection with parents, the stories I had, where is this coming from, you know, it was just really important, so sometimes you think you don’t get exact answer, but then you have other visions and stories you work through and you actually, I feel it always works on your intention if you have the intention strongly in your heart and really are ready to work on it.”

This quote highlights the desire for love as well as the importance of connection to parents. This category contains more codes on this note, reflecting intentions for healing relationships such as forgiving my father and fixing relationship to men.

Curiously, the motivations for emotional healing seem to correlate to the gains of entheogens, and the third category, EMOTIONAL BENEFITS, consists of codes that describe perceived emotional benefits from the entheogenic experience. The first type of code addresses the release of negative emotions like pulling emotional hatred out of the body, losing a lot of anxiety and losing anger, here exemplified by a respondent who for many years suffered from heavy anxiety and anger issues:

Interviewer: What would you say is the major things you see changing in your life now that you did not have prior to taking medicines? What would be the major things you felt have changed?
Respondent: Well, one of the things for me is the anxiety, like I lost this anxiety a lot. I still have moments when I feel anxiety, of course. The second is the anger. I was a person who was always fighting and arguing with anyone. And for stupid little things and for bigger things, like when I was young I was involved in many causes to help people who was in jail, when I was young I collected money for children in a poverty situation and made them christmas celebration, but always I did these things with an anger…”

The second type of codes in this category mirror experiencing and receiving positive emotions like loving myself, self-respect and finding courage. The following quote, from the code gratefulness is made by a respondent who describes coming back into the body after an intense interdimensional out of body experience (OBE):

“when coming back into this life, it really makes it apparent what a beautiful gift it is, like wow, I really need to appreciate this, really like looking into the beauty of everything like the plants, the flowers and the animals and us people…”

Most prevalent of all positive emotions however is forgiveness, both asking for forgiveness and forgiving others, here exemplified by a passage describing a dinner conversation between a father and a son:

“Dad, I want to thank you for beating me every day of my life, thank you, thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart, if you did not beat me like you did, you did not treat me like you did, I would have never been able to have engaged in the life that I was suppose to engage in in this life, and I realize that of all the souls on the planet you must love me the most, you put yourself in a very difficult position to do that to me, the carry the burden yourself of what you did to me, I cannot even imagine how much your soul actually loves me, I cannot believe it, and I am in awe of you, thank you”

Interestingly, there seems to be a connection between healing and knowing: the acquiring of knowledge facilitates emotional healing. One respondent was shown where his emotional wounds stem from, and through this knowledge was able to heal them (understanding emotional wounds):

“in the beginning it was more like really deep understandings of emotional wounds, where they stem from and I was able to release memories playing in my head in different ways, like I could have never known
that I was still holding on to something that had to do with relationships to my mother and my father and my self…”

Another respondent learned that she was traumatized by the death of her father, and was taken back to the days of his death for a metaphysical healing experience:

“I had to see the body ten days after he died, it was a very intense experience and at that time, Ayahuasca would show me, that his body was shining with this beautiful pure light that looked like light bugs and there was pure energy, it showed me and put me in peace with the experience and showed me like how his body was disintegrating and becoming light…”

The fourth category PHYSICAL BENEFITS consists of codes reflecting a positive change in eating habits as well as receiving energy through body and feeling energized. One respondent describes the after-effect of smoking a plant containing 5MEO-DMT in Peru:

“I was so energized, I’ve never felt like it and it was getting stronger by the day, I was only needing two hours sleep, yeah very strange things were happening…”

The fifth category RELATIONS consists of codes that reflect positive changes in the respondent's relations to family, friends and nature like thankful to friends, more love in the family and love to nature, here exemplified by a respondent who expresses a new found love connection to herself, significant others and nature as a whole:

“for me there are two actually, important things that you learn from Ayahuasca: one relationships and love relationships, like everything has to do with love, so then also love to nature, because it shows you exactly how we are coming from nature - we are part of nature and its so obvious.”

It also contains the subcategory ALTRUISM which consists of codes mirroring the respondents increasing altruistic sides like working to help others and message to help others. The following answer was given by a man on what he found useful of his entheogenic experiences in everyday life:

“I’d say the real clear message is just to help others, try and embody love…”
The sixth and last category PURGING/RELEASING mirrors the perceived importance of purging, like vomiting or releasing negative emotions and/or mind-sets: **when releasing baggage, you become light**, or **empty your cup so you can fill it** are **codes** that explain how the subjects feel that through physical and emotional release they are able to be filled with divine light and love, like this man learned through a series of intense ceremonies:

“If you are hoarding or you are not sharing your energy correctly or you are trying to control or whatever, release all that because that is not serving anybody but your ego and it really doesn’t even do that, that is just an illusion…”

Another respondent who met an angelic being in one of his journeys, was told the following about his emotional baggage after purging during a peyote ceremony:

“When you have baggage, you cannot fly, when you release your baggage, you become as light as light, let yourself go and so we began to fly…”

### 4.1.1 Reflections on Healing

To sum up, the health and healing aspects of entheogens revolves around releasing negative emotions (such as depression after separation and hate), experiencing positive emotions (such as love and gratefulness) and mending social bonds (through forgiveness and understanding). This emotional focus is present if looking at both the intentions and motivations (the why-aspects) as well as the experiences and perceived benefits (the what-aspects) of entheogen use. Further there appears to be a connection between healing and obtaining knowledge and several accounts point to the fact that knowledge of relations and of the self seems to precede and be at the basis of most emotional healing.

There is also an implicit and explicit desire for connection and rootedness in the stories of the respondents. Explicit, such as getting over separation as a motive for using entheogens, as well as finding connection to significant other and to nature. Implicit as in releasing hate and fear (emotions that prevent connection), as well as receiving love for self, experiencing gratitude towards friends and family and finding forgiveness for “wrong-doers” (emotions and experiences that promote connection).
4.2 Metaphysical experiences

Consisting of four categories, this theme deals with various transcendental and metaphysical experiences that the respondents experience before, during and after the ceremonies. The four categories are:

- SYNCHRONICITY
- TRANSCENDENCE
- COMMUNICATION
- MEETING BEINGS.

Drawing loosely from the Jungian concept, the first category SYNCHRONICITY contains codes dealing with meaningful coincidences with no apparent causal relationship, such as being approached by other medicine people days after a ceremony, asking to join them in spiritual work (ceremonies attract other medicine people), or being called to the medicine like the following respondent:

“So I found some purpose, and it was a slap for me cause I never thought about working with the medicine, it called me.”

Another interesting type of code, ritual instinct, relates to some kind of innate ability of the subjects to create their own ceremony without any previous knowledge thereof or guidance of shaman/guide/facilitator. A female respondent elucidates this phenomenon when retelling her first ceremony where none of the participants had any previous ceremonial experience:

“it was completely amazing how everyone took like a place: one guy started to take care of the fire, the other two were in the north and the south, sitting and raising the energy, and there was some representation of a mother: I didn't know that I was pregnant at that moment, I didn't feel any sickness or nothing but then when I realized that I was pregnant I understood why I felt so much love coming from me, coming through me and from this experience…”
The second category TRANSCENDENCE is made up by codes that describe various transcendental features of the entheogenic journey, such as dissolving, leaving the body, losing sense of self and so on. A young man describes the start of his second encounter with Ayahuasca:

“I drunk the medicine again and it’s stronger on the second night with the guys I drunk with and had a real break through, so like I completely left, and then completely lost all sense of self, the ego-death…”

During a ceremony with Peyote, another respondent has a similar experience:

“I don't know, I can't explain it, I just felt I was dividing somehow, but I was sort of dissolving somehow, moving onto other space…”

The third category COMMUNICATION contains codes that relate to the communication during the trip, such as the plant opens the door of the mouth of your spirit and dialogue with high level of intelligence as exemplified here by a respondent who sometimes speaks directly to “spirit grandmother” when taking Ayahuasca:

“it’s giving you a teaching that is very much for your life and so you are accessing it and sometimes it’s a dialogue where it’s really spirit grandmother that is answering your questions or talking to you and it’s a dialogue and so you feel that you have a really intimate dialogue with a being of much greater intelligence. That’s a wonderful thing when that happen, it does not always happen that way, but it does”

The fourth category MEETING BEINGS contains codes describing various encounters with beings in the entheogenic journey, such as meeting Horus, spirit guide, meeting anthropomorphic fox, shamanic spirits, here presented by a respondent who had a frightful encounter in his livingroom:

“I call them shamanic spirits, three healing spirits, three medicine men came down through the ceiling there spirits hovered right about me…”

It also contains the subcategory THE DIVINE MOTHER, which contains codes describing meetings with a female divinity, usually referred to as “the Mother” or Spirit Grandmother, here
narrated by a respondent who was looking to find the garden of the Mother in a surreal landscape of ancient cities, creatures and semi-gods:

“And so I immediately started walking up the skyline on steps, just walking up and pretty soon that light was getting larger and larger and larger until it consumed everything around me and as soon as I got to the point where I thought I was going to step into it, the Mother steps out in full in front of me and says: “you found my garden” I was like: I did!!? May I come in? She says “well, lets see if you are clean...”

Another respondent sees Ayahuasca anthropomorphized into a beautiful woman, but also into a dark witch:

“And then once when I was in Cuenca with a Shuar shaman, I could see Ayahuasca as this beautiful amazing woman with a long red hair, somewhere in the mountains, pure nature. And there was another one who was like a witch and she was telling me about the bad stuff I did, and I just felt that it was this shadow that I also have to face…”

4.2.1 Reflections on Metaphysical experiences

It has long been known that entheogens and psychedelics have the capacity to reduce or even eliminate a person’s sense of self. Recently, a research team published a report (Tagliazucchi et al. 2016) suggesting that this phenomena (often referred to as ego dissolution) is due to an increase of global connectivity in the higher-level regions of the brain. In particular they found an increased connection between the fronto-parietal cortex (a brain region associated with self-consciousness) and sensory areas which receive information about the outside world, which could imply that psychedelics and entheogens results in a stronger link between the sense of the self and the sense of the environment, something that in turn could create the sensation of losing the sense of self.

In this study, the respondents also report dissolving the ego and losing sense of self at the outset of the journey. Regardless of how this happens, it would appear that the inhibition of a normal sense of self promotes transcendence (to rise above or go beyond the limits of the self) and facilitates the metaphysical experiences reported during the ceremonies, such as meeting celestial beings from other dimensions and communicating with them, as well as with their own higher
selves. Whether talking to your hat, meeting the Divine Mother, shamanic beings or an anthropomorphic fox - all meetings carry some value, meaning or message for the respondents that are addressed to them, although they may not make sense of them straight away:

“Sometimes, I’ll be under the night like: ‘What the f***? This has nothing to do with my intention’...But maybe even a month later, I will have a moment, working in the garden or whatever. DING!! Huh, I understand! Now I understand why I needed to see this…”

4.3 The pursuit of knowledge

This theme consists of four categories and reflects various aspects of obtaining knowledge from the entheogenic experience. The categories are:

- MOTIVATION: OBTAINING KNOWLEDGE
- INTENTION: OBTAINING KNOWLEDGE
- COMPUTER ANALOGIES
- DOWNLOADS

Seeking knowledge about the self, about relationships, about the world and about transcendence are very prevalent reasons to the respondents:; and thus the first category, MOTIVATION: OBTAINING KNOWLEDGE, again looks a the “why-aspect” of the use of entheogens and contains codes such as curiosity, insatiable desire to know etcetera, here exemplified by participants responding to what was the original appeal to entheogenic experiences:

“I was interested in the psycho-spiritual origin of man-made problems”

“I always had an insatiable desire to know, to experience, to delve into those mysteries”

Another respondent sought connection through transcendental knowledge:

“the first motivation was for medicine and it was on some level to connect with the mystery and the poetry of the mystery that is at the basis of creation...”
Closely related, the second category - INTENTION: OBTAINING KNOWLEDGE - revisits intentions set prior to ceremonies but this time to acquire knowledge about the world, rather than for healing purposes. One respondent who travels all over the world to experience different entheogens, sets intentions in pursuit of transcendental knowledge about creation as a whole, as reflected here in a quote from the code **The Big Questions:**

“that was the kind of intentions...when I begun working with plant medicines, I wasn’t going in for like ‘ah, help me get over this’ - I want to know the real like: ‘What is creation?’ ‘Where do we come from?’ ‘How are we here?’ ‘Why are we here?’”

This category also contains more “down to earth” codes like **how can I work with this in the future?** and **what to do with my child?** The common element is the setting of intentions in the pursuit of knowledge about the self, relations and the world.

One sub-category: INTENTIONS ANSWERED contains several codes highlighting the importance of setting intentions prior to every ceremony, such as **clear answers to clear questions, no point without intentions** and so forth as this respondent cautions:

“Yeah, you don’t go just Willy Nilly... And the intention could be broad, I have used intention like: ‘Hey I am here, I am present to be on my path - show me whatever you need to show me, what is important to have in this moment?’ You don’t just go: ‘Well let’s see what this is all about’, you know? You don’t just go and be like: ‘Oh, let’s get fucked up.’ You don’t do that cause that could be harming…”

The third category, COMPUTER ANALOGIES, is made up by codes such as **downloads** and **coding** referring to how knowledge is obtained through the entheogenic experience, here exemplified by three respondents:

“So that was a really powerful thing that I was getting a great download of pure love energy”

“I received some sort of download that it’s total bull shit”

“For me it’s a powerful medicine that opened a lot of gates so that I can connect with spirit and, so I call them receive downloads…”
Another related type of **code** reflects how knowledge, habits, patterns and/or negative emotions are erased, through **un-coding**, as explained by this respondent:

“I knew I wanted to find out what’s wrong with me but then you realized that you just kind of wanna un-code yourself you know and learn something new and live new experiences full of possibilities…”

In this passage, she explains further:

“Un-code because I feel that we all kind of come into this world with some kind of coding, or as I said download. What I mean is our parents, through their experiences, they have some stories that they put into our heads because of their traumas...that’s how you were taught but at least try to learn new paths, you know, and open your eyes and also accept... learn a bit more and love yourself better, that for me is un-coding…”

Another respondent explains it differently:

“San Pedro and Ayahuasca, they are plants who read the structures, break the structures in the basic...so it is the perfect time to rebuild your feelings, or your emotions, or your personality…”

A third respondent speaks of programming and that the entheogenic experience

“is a release of all of your programmes about what is reality…”

In relation to COMPUTER ANALOGIES, the fourth category, DOWNLOADS, is a large category containing subcategories and **codes** containing the knowledge that the subjects have obtained through their entheogenic experiences. DOWNLOADS are made up by sub-categories depending on what type of knowledge that has been obtained, such as ON EGO and ON CHOICE.

One subcategory, BENEFICIAL KNOWLEDGE contains **codes** where the knowledge obtained has had a direct impact on the subject’s lives, like **revealed addiction to pornography** and **remembering, accepting and releasing sexual abuse**. The latter **code** is here exemplified by a woman who through a ceremony recalled that she had been sexually abused as a young child:
“The second time I drank Ayahuasca...I remembered that when I was a child, I suffered from sexual abuse...so knowing and accepting was really a release for me...now when I finally accept it I found a freedom for myself in a way I never could imagine I could get. So it’s really really surprisingly amazing how your mind can hide from you all these things and how you can get stuck…”

This in turn gave her new insights into her eating habits and problems with weight:

“It comes from trying to protect my womb, myself, you know? Because I have the overweight here in my stomach...for protecting my genitals, someone got close to me, so close...And, what I see, what I feel, is that the digestion completely organized... I lost the anxiety for eating…”

4.3.1 Reflections on The pursuit of knowledge

As the theme suggests, seeking knowledge about the self, about relations and about the world acts as a crucial motivator for participating in entheogenic ceremonies. Quite naturally, this too reflects on the intentions that the respondents set prior to the ceremonies, considering the intrinsic bond between motivation and intention. Motivation is the condition of being eager to act (reason for), whereas intention is the aim/goal that you plan to achieve (purpose of). A simplified way of explaining this relationship is that motivation reflects “where I am coming from” and intentions reflects “where I want to go”. Knowing where you want to go, or what you want to achieve by attending the ceremonies (setting intention), is stressed as a necessity by the respondents in order to have a successful ceremony and not get lost in the vast flow of information of the experience (“you don’t go just Willy Nilly”).

As in the theme Healing, here too we find possible connections between the motivations and intentions (why-aspects) and the perceived benefits (what-aspects) of the experience: the pursuit of knowledge also results in finding knowledge about the self, relations and about the world. Whether the knowledge is “real” or merely an interpretation; a coping strategy to make sense of it all, is of course an interesting question - however of little importance to this study. Regardless of whether the knowledge obtained is true and real or if the mind “makes it real”, the participants perceive it to be true, real and significant, and therefore treats it accordingly, act upon the information and, where possible, reap the benefits thereof.
An interesting semantic finding is the respondent’s use of computer analogies. Words like “programming”, “un-coding”, “compute”, “downloads” and so on are used when explaining how information is being received and how habits, thoughts, emotions are being deconstructed and erased. Naturally, this can be seen as an expression of the contemporary information age that we live in, nevertheless it also raises some interesting questions of how we process information, and how we look on ourselves. What does a “download” mean in this context? Who is the programmer? What is the hardware and software? Due to the lack of space in this essay, these questions will remained unanswered, but the concept of un-coding deserves a closer look.

“Un-coding”, “releasing the programmes of reality” and “breaking the structures in the basic” are all quotes that describe one way that entheogens help the respondents to really look at themselves, their relations, their thoughts, emotions, patterns and habits up close. The “normal self” has been dislodged from its ordinary position and the respondents are presented with new perspectives on themselves, and are thus free to, as one respondent puts it ““rebuild your feelings, or your emotions, or your personality…””. Here we can find clear parallels to the theme Healing once more, in particular to purging: “empty your cup so you can fill it”. The release can be done in a number of ways, such as through acceptance and forgiveness, crying, laughing, dancing and, most colorfully associated with most entheogens, through vomiting and defecating. Whether it is physical, mental or emotional release, the purpose appears to be twofold: 1. Emptying the “cup” (mind, body, spirit) of things that no longer serve in order to 2. Fill it up with insights, perspectives, positive emotions and transcendental knowledge.

The physical release of negative thoughts, patterns and emotions through purging may seem strange but regardless of whether it is “real” or if “the mind makes it real”, the desired effect is the same: release of what they feel no longer serves them, release of what they have been told about themselves that they are or are not, what they can do and what they cannot do. And subsequently freedom to build new structures and perspectives on reality.
4.4 Experiences of unity

The fourth theme, “Experiences of unity”, reflects transcendental experiences of being one with everything and perceiving that everything and everyone is one and the same. This theme is made up by three categories:
- ONENESS
- MIRRORING
- THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIENCE

The first category ONENESS contains codes reflecting the perception that everything is connected and that all is one, such as we are a thin sliver of perception of the whole, a unifying state, everybody is part of the same thing, here illustrated in the words of a male respondent who had this type of unifying experience in a ceremony:

“once you learn that you are the same as everyone even though you are not always in that mind set, once you’ve had that experience it’s hard to… you can't really forget it, it's hard to forget it, for me anyhow, being true to myself…”

It also features codes of actual transcendental experiences of being in the oneness and being god such as awareness of being in the infinite, being God inside a sphere, here explained by a respondent who explains how it once was for him to be in the oneness, from the code bathing in all information of existence:

“imagine all of that dissolving and the body, the sense of self and then just having the consciousness but nothing to base reference on, no frame of reference or structure, just infinity and without having specifics pulled out like this information, this information, just the knowing that you are bathing in all of the information in existence…”

Another respondent illustrates a paradoxical state of being in the oneness:

“I realized in that moment: ‘There is only one being, there is only one being’ and I could call it myself, which it is, but it is not…”
These experiences can too be frightening: **scary being in the oneness, being god is scary.** Finally some **codes** reveal that being in the state of oneness is like coming home, returning to something long lost: **I have been there before, returning to the source, back into the oneness** and so forth. Here exemplified by a respondent in a vivid experience back into the oneness:

“there is definitely, definitely the sensation of ‘I’ve been here before - I have done this before’ and you can only truly remember that space once you’ve gone back into it, you are like: ‘oh, I’ve been here before’”

The second category **MIRRORING** is made up by **codes** that describe how the subjects during and after the ceremonies see people as themselves and vice versa, as mirrors to each other: **we are all mirrors onto each other, seeing herself in others, San Pedro helps to see everyone else as the same,** here by a respondent who understood the importance of the golden rule after a ceremony:

“I had that experience seeing everyone else as myself, that has helped me to live in such a way that I would never do harm or take advantage of another individual. Live more purely, in spirit, like the golden rule…”

The third category **THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIENCE** emphasizes the value of experiencing these unifying states first hand, rather than receiving them from religion or reading/hearing about them. Example of codes are: **hard to contextualize in words** and **believing is a poor substitute for experience,** as this respondent explains:

“ it is one thing to believe in the afterlife, to believe in the paranormal and other aspects of reality but to experience it is something else, you know, believing is a poor substitute for experience, once you’ve been there...People could say, well it’s just hallucinations, I say well life is a rudimentary hallucination in comparison, if that’s the way you want to look at it, cause it’s the realest place I’ve ever been…”

4.4.1 Reflections on **Experiences of unity**

The idea that God is everything and in everything (Pantheism) is very old, and has been proposed by philosophers (such as Baruch Spinoza) and world religions (like Native American religions) alike. The concept is closely related to Animism: the world view that everything - plants, animals, and inanimate objects - possess spiritual essence. The respondents of this study
frequently share transcendental experiences that harmonize with animistic and pantheistic worldviews, such as communicating with trees, being one with animals, talking to a hat, seeing the divine in the eyes of others and so on. Not only do the respondents report seeing God in others and in themselves, they also have the mystical experience of actually being god, feeling like Christ and/or being one with the universe. An interesting feature of being in the oneness is the sense of returning to something familiar. It is thus not like a new experience of suddenly being one with the universe, rather it is experience of “coming home”.

If the first theme Healing reflected an implicit and explicit desire for connection, Experiences of unity could be viewed as the experiential response or consequence of that desire. Seeing yourself in others and others in yourself, like mirrors, is often described as an immensely connecting experience to self and others. Being one with the universe or resting in the womb of mother earth gives the participant a feeling of connection and rootedness in their lifeworlds that sometimes linger for months or even years after the experience.

4.5 Life changes

The fifth and final theme that emerged from the text is “Life changes” and deals with how the respondents have had their life, belief-systems and purposes changed after contact with entheogens and shamanic ceremonies. The theme consists of three categories:

- CHANGING PATH
- REALITY RECONSTRUCTED
- DO THE WORK.

The first category, CHANGING PATH, contains codes that tell the story of how the respondents find a new path, purpose and/or outlook on their life, such as just be, Ayahuasca taught me to live here and now and new purpose, new path as this respondent illustrates:

“plant medicine completely changed my life, in a really beneficial way, it was a path that I was called strongly onto without a shadow of a doubt”
The second category, REALITY RECONSTRUCTED, features codes that reflect how the subjects have had their view of reality profoundly changed, such as: **I am nothing what I think I am, questioning reality/existential crisis, not seeing time in the same way**, illustrated here by respondents talking of perceived life changes after the ceremonies:

“I just felt I had been reborn, completely reborn and there are completely new eyes I was looking at everything through”

“my whole structure of reality has completely been rebuilt”

“I now understand that we are all part of the oneness so of course everything is spirit so in that sense the relationship to every single thing has changed…”

The third category DO THE WORK, is about the participants attempt to integrate and live by these new realities and purposes they find themselves in. They emphasize the importance of checking in and keeping up the daily practise, of “doing their homework” and take responsibility for the information that they have been presented with. This category features codes like **towards a pure vessel, keeping up the daily practise, there is no magic bullet, several years integrating, do the work** and so forth. One respondent explains how she was presented with the same lesson over and over until she acted upon the information:

“And I did experience that, that if Ayahuasca shows you that you are supposed to work on something and you don’t do it… she will just refuse talking to you, or she will just keep coming back to the same subject. With me for the whole ten sessions I had, there was always the image of my mum…”

Another respondent states that entheogens only help momentarily if you do not integrate the information obtained:

“Ayahuasca is not gonna take anything from you, it gives you momentary relief like aspirin, you know, but if you don't change the habit that keeps giving you the headache, you have to keep taking the aspirin…”
Several respondents stress that entheogens are no “magic bullet” or “magic pill” that will solve all problems:

“As with anything, anytime a person wants a magic bullet or one pill that’s gonna straighten them out, well we know it’s doomed for failure, and if there ever was such a thing it wouldn’t work anyway. We are not here in this energy in this realm doing what we are doing to have an easy-button. We are here to figure it out. To learn how to react, interact, participate, overcome...”

In essence, if they do not integrate and make use of the knowledge obtained, the experience will have little to no value in the long run.

4.5.1 Reflections on Life changes

This last theme further explores what meanings the participants ascribe to the entheogenic experience in terms of actual changes, minor and major, that the respondents have experienced as a result of participating in the ceremonies. Earlier in the theme Pursuit of knowledge we could read about how entheogens help deconstruct former conception of reality (through un-coding for example), and here in Life changes we can perceive the reconstructed aftermath, life changes and new paths that the respondents experience.

However, a change in path or purpose appears to be dependent upon whether or not the respondent chooses to acknowledge and act upon the knowledge obtained through the entheogenic experience: knowing the way is not the same as walking the way. Time and again, the respondents stress the need to DO THE WORK if the experience is to have any value, that is, to keep up the daily practise and honour the information that they feel has been given to them.

4.6 Connection and transcendence

Whether the purpose of the entheogenic ceremonies is to connect to the eternal, to mend broken relationships, to understand one's place in the universe, to receive love for self and others, to
meet God or to simply “be one with nature” - two underlying motives for entheogens and shamanic practices in this study are *transcendence* and *connection*.

The pursuit of connection is, as we have seen, salient in its most basic forms like getting over a bad separation to more metaphysical forms such as “to connect with the mystery and the poetry of the mystery that is at the basis of creation…”. Interestingly, this need for connection and rootedness is also being met in various ways; interpersonal relationships are being mended, forgiveness and love for others is found, and mystical (re-)connections with the oneness are being experienced.

In the same way as the need for connection is being met, so is the urge for transcendence (such as asking *The Big Questions* and seeking *transcendental knowledge*) satisfied in two different ways: 1. by acquiring transcendental knowledge (such knowledge about the nature about the ego and about death), and 2. by having transcendental experiences, such as losing sense of self and being in the oneness.

The fourth theme EXPERIENCES OF UNITY can be seen as a response to the urge for transcendence and the need for connection alike: being one with everything and seeing yourselves in others is both connecting and transcending. In this experience of unity we also learn about the intertwined nature of transcending and connecting. Transcending the self is a vital part of connecting and unifying with the world - and connecting and unifying with the world is, per se, a transcendental experience. In the next section, we are to learn more about the human need for connection and urge for transcendence through the sociological works of Zygmunt Bauman and Erich Fromm.
5. THEORY

This part of the text presents theoretical perspectives that will be utilized to analyze the results in a larger context. The perspectives have been chosen on basis of their relevance to the findings of transcendence and connection this study.

5.1 CONNECTION

In the book The Fear of Freedom\textsuperscript{14}, social psychologist Erich Fromm argues that fear of separateness and the strive for connection, is one of the primary motivators underlying most human behaviour. To understand why, Fromm encourages us to (like Marx) adopt a biosociocultural perspective. In any form of human culture, man has collaborated in various forms to, for example, produce food and defend themselves against enemies or predators. Empathy, solidarity and love have thus been important social emotions to promote this affinity. For a child, the sense of belongingness and connection becomes extra vital on account of the factual inability of the human child to take care of itself:

“the possibility of being alone is necessarily the most serious threat to the child's whole existence.”\textsuperscript{15}

When a child is born it is no longer a part of its mother, but although this biological separation constitutes the onset of individual human existence, in a more functional sense the child remains very much a dependent part of its caretakers for survival - being fed and taken care of in every vital aspect\textsuperscript{16}. As the child grows older, these primary ties are cut off and it develops a quest for independence and freedom:

“filled with curiosity about the world, they want to grasp it physically as well as intellectually. They want to know the truth, since that is the safest way to orient themselves in a strange and powerful world.”\textsuperscript{17}

Through the child’s own activity it experiences a world outside itself. Fromm referred to this as the individuation process; a process with two fundamental aspects. One aspect is that the child grows stronger emotionally, mentally and physically and develops an organized structure guided

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 16
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 21
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 213
by will, reason and self-strength. The other aspect of the process of individuation is a growing sensation of separation from, and aloneness in, the world:

“The primary ties offer security and basic unity with the world outside oneself. To the extent to which the child emerges from that world it becomes aware of being alone, of being an entity separate from all others. This separation from a world, which in comparison with one's own individual existence is overwhelmingly strong and powerful, and often threatening and dangerous, creates a feeling of powerlessness and anxiety…”18

The very process that makes us aware of ourselves also creates an existential fear of our own individuality. We were once one with everything - in the perspective of the grandiose child - but gradually we find ourselves alone in the world; we can never truly take the perspective of others or be fully understood ourselves, and we must face death alone. This self-consciousness by which man is aware of himself as a separate entity from nature and other people is to Fromm essentially a human problem:

“by being aware of himself as distinct from nature and other people, by being aware--even very dimly--of death, sickness, ageing, he necessarily feels his insignificance and smallness in comparison with the universe and all others who are not "he". Unless he belonged somewhere, unless his life had some meaning and direction, he would feel like a particle of dust and be overcome by his individual insignificance.”19

As a result of this subconscious experience of disconnection from world, inevitably impulses arise to escape one's individuality to once again feel “one with the world”. These “mechanisms of escape” are according to Fromm widely practised in modern society, in a number of different ways - but the purpose is always the same: to actively or passively merge with the world.

To passively merge with the world is to give up one’s control, freedom and individuality by surrendering it to another person, circumstances, group, cause, country or religious ideal:

“Religion and nationalism, as well as any custom and any belief however absurd and degrading, if it only connects the individual with others, are refuges from what man most dreads: isolation.”20

18 Ibid, 24
19 Ibid, 17
20 Ibid, 15
This way the individual passively becomes part of something larger, and as a result the feelings of separation diminishes. A diametrically different way of escaping individuality is not through passively surrendering control, but instead actively seizing it by attempting to control situations and/or other people\textsuperscript{21}.

Yet another mechanism of escape to avoid the isolating feeling of individuality that Fromm believed to be of the greatest social significance was \textit{automaton conformity}. This simply means surrendering critical thinking through mindless adoption of the behavioural patterns of the surroundings, such as dressing a certain way, thinking like others, voicing the opinion of the public, being who others expect you to be and submerging through consent into the security of the many, in short - becoming an \textit{automaton}:

\begin{quote}
“the individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be.”\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Indeed, the sense of belongingness increases, but the individuality is lost. This is largely unconscious: the automaton consciously conceives himself as a free thinker and subject only to himself, unaware that the originality of his thoughts stem from extraneous patterns of thinking and feeling.

These mechanisms of escape and the new ties arising from them, are however not the same as the primary ties once lost:

\begin{quote}
“Just as a child can never return to the mother's womb physically, so it can never reverse, psychologically, the process of individuation.”\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

There is however, according to Fromm, positive and productive ways to reconnect with the world and experience positive freedom: by the realization of the self - the spontaneous and active expression of the emotional and intellectual potentialities of the self:

\begin{quote}
“One premise for this spontaneity is the acceptance of the total personality and the elimination of the split between "reason" and "nature"; for only if man does not repress essential parts of his self, only if he has become transparent
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 125
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid 159
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 24
to himself, and only if the different spheres of life have reached a fundamental integration, is spontaneous activity possible.\footnote{Ibid, 223}

According to Fromm this is the only way unite with the world without sacrificing the integrity of the self\footnote{Ibid, 224}. The foremost component of such spontaneity is love, not possessive love, but love as an affirmation and union with others on the basis of preserving the individual self. The other component is work and creativity in which man becomes one with nature in the act of creation\footnote{Ibid, 225}. The inability to act spontaneously and be yourself, presenting a pseudo self to others and oneself is at the root of separateness:

“Whether or not we are aware of it, there is nothing of which we are more ashamed than of not being ourselves, and there is nothing that gives us greater pride and happiness than to think, to feel, and to say what is ours.”\footnote{Ibid, 226}

5.2 TRANSCENDENCE

Life owes its value to death; life is worth something and the days of our lives matter precisely because we are aware of our own mortality, argues Zygmunt Bauman in The Individualized Society\footnote{Bauman, Zygmunt. Det individualiserade samhället. Göteborg: Bokförlaget Daidalos AB, 2002.}. The awareness of death's inevitability could easily deprive life of its value (what’s the point, we are going to die anyway), but instead the prospect of death bestows eternity and the perdurable with an extra high value. From coveting this elusive eternity and knowing that we will die springs the human need for transcendence\footnote{Ibid, 285} - to rise above the normal shackles of the self and find foothold in eternity.\footnote{This is by no means an original thought, indeed philosophers, theologians and existential psychologist alike have all in some way, shape or form touched on the subject of the human need for transcendence. Baumans contribution, however, brings the matter into the 21st century and discusses it in light of the “problems” of transcendence in a liquid modern society.}

This need for transcendence expresses itself in different ways. One way is to leave footprints that are more permanent than the person or people who left them in an attempt to remould transience
to permanence - to build a bridge between the finite and the infinite\textsuperscript{31}. The ultimate task of culture is, according to Bauman, to build these bridges and one of the most diligently used by the masses is the prospect of life after death, a bridge that religion for centuries have successfully maintained in various shapes and forms. Other bridges employed by the masses are according to Bauman the nation and the family. These bridges do not help the individual from perishing, however, they do provide participation in the collective immortality\textsuperscript{32} - such as dying for your country or securing the family line. The individual will die, but the family and the nation lives on which gives the individual some sense of purpose.

If the family, the nation and religion have provided transcendence for the masses, there are also bridges for the lucky few: individuals who will be remembered for their achievements like artists, painters, scientists, political leaders or people who in other ways have won the favor of the masses and thus will be preserved in the collective memory long after they are gone.

There is, however, another way that the need for transcendence expresses itself: the desire to have experiences that, in life, are more powerful than death; that is doing and experiencing things that give meaning and purpose to existence, however short it may be. Society channels and regulates this desire, according to Bauman. It feeds upon it through providing credible objects that are appealing enough to produce efforts that make “life worth living”, providing meaning and life purpose. These efforts are time- and energy consuming enough to fill a human life and varies so that members from all classes strive for them, regardless of their resources. Every form of society and culture draws its lifeblood from the growth and proliferation of these life purposes, and every social order lives on its ability to manipulate the pursuit of transcendence. Whatever life meanings are being promoted, however - fitness, religion, consumption etcetera - they can only provide relief that varies in terms of depth and durability, but never truly satisfy the original need of transcendence. Death is, at the end of the day, non-negotiable.

\footnote{Ibid, 11} \footnote{Ibid, 290}
If the awareness of death comes uninvited and is non-negotiable, how man chooses to live his life, fill it with meaning and narrate his life story - is very much under his influence. Man creates his life, but not under the terms of his choosing, Bauman claims. This Marxian paraphrase leaves man in a unique position to break the bonds of social influence and make new paths. However, in order to do this, he or she must first recognize and challenge the imaginary line between structure and action, background and capacity. When people say there is nothing they can do, indeed there is nothing they can do, for they have conceptually turned action into structure. By this line, many ideological battles have been fought which according Bauman is odd seeing that the most effective ways of fighting it is simply by questioning it.

6. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the contemporary use of entheogens and shamanic practises in the Andean region by covering the *why* and *what* aspects of the phenomenon. As we have seen, the results suggests that healing, pursuit of knowledge and the urge for connection and transcendence are prevalent topics upon reviewing both the motivations (why) and the experiences (what) of entheogen use. In this final section we are to look more at what these results might imply and how they relate to the theoretical perspectives.

*Healing and knowing*

Upon reviewing the intentions set prior to ceremonies, as well as the overall motivations of the participants in this study, the explicit quest for knowledge and/or healing (specifically emotional healing) becomes evident. This comes as no surprise, healing and the pursuit of knowledge (divination) are often cited as top motivators in the bulk of academia written on the subject (see for example Metzner 1998, Kavenská & Simonová 2015). Moreover, the results suggest that the desires for healing and knowledge are being met upon reviewing the experiences and perceived

33 Ibid, 16
34 Ibid, 17
benefits of the entheogenic experience. This too is nothing out of the ordinary; indeed it would be peculiar if the participants would return time and again to the ceremonies if their expectations and motivations were not being met.

Moreover, there appears to be a connection between the prospects of healing and knowing; the acquiring of knowledge. The healing doesn’t just happen, as if taken a painkiller, benzodiazepine or an antibiotic, rather it comes from the knowledge obtained through the experience. In accordance with the motto “the truth shall set you free”, the respondents are being presented with information that aid the healing process. This can occur through remembering something forgotten or repressed, it can happen through seeing habits or negative patterns in a new light and it can occur through a transcendental awakening: realizing that there may be more to reality than meets the eye, as was the case with the woman who saw her dead father’s body dissolve into light bugs and pure energy.

Again, whether or not the healing truly is beneficial and the knowledge obtained is “real” or merely a construction is of course an interesting question, but in the end an irrelevant one. It is not the purpose of this study to examine the validity of the respondents’ narratives: the knowledge obtained and the healing benefits are perceived to be real and are as such treated accordingly. This connection between healing and knowledge should be kept in mind as we review two other findings of this study; the need for transcendence and connection.

Transcendence and the tree of life

In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. - Genesis 2:9

The results of this study suggest that partaking in entheogenic ceremonies always implies some degree of transcendence (to go beyond the normal limits of the self). Intentions are set in pursuit of transcendental knowledge and the respondents frequently describe transcendental experiences like “dissolving” the self or “being on with nature”. Further knowledge about the self and about
the world is obtained by transcending the “normal” sense of self: deprogramming concepts of reality and viewing the self through a new perspective.

Zygmunt Bauman argues that awareness of death's inevitability creates the human need for transcendence - to eat from the tree of life. This need for transcendence expresses itself in one of two ways: either by, collectively or individually, finding a foothold in eternity by bridging the gap between the volatile existence of the self and the perpetual beingness of eternity. Alternatively, by having experiences in life that are more powerful than death; meaningful experiences that give life a purpose (in varying degrees of depth and durability). In light of the results of this study, I propose that the entheogenic experience may have qualities that match both of these expressions.

In relation to the first expression (bridging the gap between the finite and the infinite), these experiences curiously enough seem to do just that. Not through cultural bridges such as religion, family or the nation where collective immortality is embraced, nor through winning the memory of the masses through individual achievement, but through the bridge of individual experience. You enter the realm of infinity, connect with the oneness and come back. You “die” and you are reborn, often with the transcendental realization that “death is merely an illusion”. Having connected mortality and immortality and learned - through experience - that death is not the end, fear of dying may not be completely taken away nor the need for transcendence eradicated, but it may take some of the edge off, something this respondent attests to:

“...Dying. There is medicine in that.
Interviewer: There is medicine in dying?
Respondent: There is medicine in everything.
Interviewer: Do you fear dying?
Respondent: I would be lying if I said I didn't have some latent fears, but my threshold for that is greater and greater, I think the more medicine I take, the further I walk down this path, I get more and more comfortable with the idea of dying. I could see myself smiling as I go out. I don't think I would be very scared. Whereas before the medicine, yeah, I was really afraid of dying...”
The entheogenic experience also seem to have qualities that satisfy the second expression of transcendence (having meaningful experiences in life that are more powerful than death). The ceremonies are often described as very meaningful and can even have life-changing impacts if the knowledge obtained is accepted and integrated.

Further, just like society as a whole channels and regulates (feeds upon) this second expression of transcendence (pursuit of life purpose), there are people and structures in these regions that draw their life blood from the quest of shamanic practices and entheogenic experiences, something the flourishing state of entheogenic tourism attests to. The desire to experience shamanic practises has never been stronger and consequently the industry around spiritual tourism grows every year.

**Connection and the tree of knowledge (of good and evil)**

“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” - Genesis 2:16 - 17.

Emotional healing by reconnecting with significant others and with nature is frequently mentioned, both as a driving motivation and as perceived benefits of the entheogenic experience. This emotional healing comes about by experiencing positive emotions like love and self-respect, but also through receiving “downloads” - knowledge that help them understand, forgive and reconnect with themselves and others.

In *The Fear of Freedom*, Fromm discusses the double nature of knowledge. On the one hand, seeking knowledge is imperative for healthy development in the process of individuation: the child reaches out to the surroundings outside the mother “filled with curiosity about the world”\textsuperscript{35}. Through its own activity it grasps the world physically as well as intellectually, to know “the truth, since that is the safest way to orient themselves in a strange and powerful world.”\textsuperscript{36}. But knowledge comes with a price; by learning about the world, the child also inevitably learns about

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 213
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 213
its own separateness from the world. The once grandiose child learns with growing anxiety about its own individuality, which in turn creates feelings of disconnection from significant others, nature and source. Just as the tree of knowledge of good and evil suggests: knowledge is a two-edged sword.

From this knowledge of separation comes an urge to connect, and Fromm would possibly deem the use of entheogens as another fruitless “mechanism of escape” to avoid the dreadful feelings of isolation and, if only momentarily, crawl back into the womb of “the mother” for comfort. However, he may also see the possible benefits of self-realization that entheogens could bring about. Just as we have previously seen a connection between healing and knowing, so there appears to be a connection between self-realization and un-knowing (un-coding or deprogramming the extraneous structures and programmes about reality that have been built up through socialization). These internalized programmes are the very same that Fromm believed were responsible for creating the automaton:

“The development of the automaton, in contrast, is not an organic growth. The growth of the basis of the self is blocked and a pseudo self is superimposed upon this self which is - as we have seen - essentially the incorporation of extraneous patterns of thinking and feeling.”

The characteristics of the automaton are thus the unconscious adoption of thoughts, feelings and behavioural patterns of the surroundings. The entheogenic experience seems to have ways of breaking down these cultural patterns and pseudo-selves so that the participants can see themselves from a different perspective. This is, according to Fromm, an important premise of self-realization: only by becoming transparent to oneself and accepting one’s total personality without repressing essential parts of the self can one achieve spontaneous self-realization.

Having these “deprogramming” experiences also aids in recognizing and challenging the imaginary line between action and structure (previously introduced by Bauman) that stipulate what can and cannot be done. By dissolving false (and often negative) beliefs about the self and

37 The Fear of Freedom, 227
38 Ibid, 223
seeing reality through “new eyes” one may have the possibility to more easily break the bonds of social influence and more freely choose how to live life. It would appear that entheogens could provide what Bauman considered the most effective ammunition to fight the line between structure and action: the power to question it.

Entheogens - escape mechanisms or tools for self-realization?

Georg Simmel taught us that the measure of sacrifice necessary to attain goods or goals is the source of its value, or in other words, the value of something obtained is measured in how difficult it was to attain it. Skeptics of entheogen use as a means to achieve healing and self-knowledge often criticize the easiness of which the self-knowledge comes about, claiming that there is no quick fix or “easy-button” to solve the complexity of human problems. I agree with this claim, however, there is a large difference, as we have previously learned, between “knowing the way and walking the way”. Although the knowledge obtained through entheogens may come about relatively quickly (one ceremony usually lasts between 8 to 12 hours), understanding, integrating and utilizing that knowledge may take weeks or even years. This is why the respondents time and again stress the importance of “doing the work” if the entheogenic experience is to have any long term value whatsoever.

Are entheogens “mechanisms of escape” or mystical tools for achieving self-realization? Is the current entheogenic boom in South America to be viewed as drug tourism for post-modern hippies, or as spiritual pilgrimage with the purpose of healing and self-exploration? Again, I believe it depends on how one approaches it. If someone goes into the experience without any other intention than looking for kicks, chances are he or she will come out empty handed, dehydrated and quite disappointed. But if someone was to, as I believe most of the respondents in this study have done, approach the entheogenic experience with respect and honest intention of obtaining knowledge and healing, they may very well reap the benefits and reconnect with themselves, others, nature and with the world at large.
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