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Psychedelics, embodiment, and intersubjectivity

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REVIEW ARTICLE



ABSTRACT

Background and aims: Research into the social aspects of set and setting have demonstrated that race is a significant factor in psychedelic experiences for racially marginalized populations. Yet, many studies of psychedelic-induced experiences continue to proceed without collecting data on or considering the influence of race or other social categories. These approaches abstract subjectivity from its embodied and historical conditions, isolating consciousness in ways that do not accord with lived experience. *Methods:* This article draws on critical phenomenology, anthropology, and treatments of race in the field of psychedelic studies to outline how social categories mediate subjective experience in historically specific ways through the framework of embodiment. *Results:* I argue that consciousness is fundamentally intersubjective, including during psychedelic-induced experiences. Intersubjectivity is an existential condition that makes possible meaning, communication, and socialization, processes which rely on and are perpetually (re)enacted through social categories. Therefore, studies of psychedelic-induced experiences must account for the foundational role that social categories play in constituting such embodied experiences and their effects. *Conclusions:* This approach makes embodied differences matter to the study of psychedelic-induced experiences, opening new avenues of inquiry that foreground identity, power, and context in both clinical and naturalistic research.

KEYWORDS

phenomenology, intersubjectivity, embodiment, social categories, socialization, epistemology

INTRODUCTION

As Ido Hartogsohn (2017, p. 1) so aptly writes, “the question of extra-pharmacological variables is becoming increasingly urgent.” Hartogsohn is referring here to the framework of set and setting, which has been central to psychedelic studies since its initial coherence as a field of inquiry (Leary, Litwin, & Metzner, 1963; Wallace, 1959) and continues to demonstrate that the nature and unfolding of psychedelic-induced consciousness is not explainable through reference to physiological processes alone. In conjunction with these biological bases of experience, the framework of set and setting allows us to track with increasing specificity the contextualization of latent psychosocial and environmental factors that bear on psychedelic-induced consciousness. Yet, in focusing mostly on what may *potentially* influence subjective experience, we tend to neglect how experience itself is structured prior to such modulations, as well as how such structures endure through psychedelic-induced consciousness, albeit changed.¹ The framework of set and setting, in other words, does not attend

¹The focus on how experience is structured and changed through psychedelic-induced consciousness is the subject of a recent article by Petrement (2023). In that article, Petrement draws on phenomenological psychiatry to offer a theory of how psychedelic therapy produces positive effects for subjects. He argues that psychedelic therapy transforms our reality by shifting how we are oriented to our environments, which opens new possibilities for perception and action. My current argument is directly related to Petrement’s through our shared theoretical grounding in phenomenology, and we both argue for embodied approaches to subjectivity and for attention to cultural and historical context. However, while his work is concerned with understanding the effects of psychedelic therapy through a broader consideration of their world-shifting potential, my work is concerned with rethinking the model of the subject operative in psychedelic studies, which shapes how we approach human variation as it relates to psychedelic-induced consciousness.

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explicitly to the role played by the subject in mediating *how* such factors enter into experience.

One place we can see lack of attention to this form of mediation in psychedelics studies is in how differences among subjects are treated. As many scholars have noted, much of the research on psychedelic-induced consciousness has been conducted with participants from dominant social groups, primarily white (presumably cisgender) men under the age of 30 with at least some university education (George, Michaels, Sevelius, & Williams, 2020; Michaels, Purdon, Collins, & Williams, 2018). Yet, these research participants' gender, age, race, and education are not treated as significant factors in their experiences of and reflections on psychedelic-induced consciousness, except when they are mentioned as limitations to the generalizability of findings (e.g., Nour, Evans, Nutt, & Carhart-Harris, 2016). Neitzke-Spruill (2020, p. 53) addresses this issue directly, arguing that because "processes of racial formation impact an individual's set and setting, differential experiences, and interpretations, and even therapeutic outcomes of psychedelic use will be observed by race." Neitzke-Spruill is implicitly addressing the model of the subject that operates in the framework of set and setting here, a model that has historically not treated embodied differences as significant. Building on his work, I suggest that race is one of many salient social categories that functions as a structure of experience for *every* person who takes psychedelics, in a laboratory setting or otherwise.

In this article, I offer a way to think about how embodied differences matter to psychedelic-induced consciousness by exploring the constitutive role of social categories for subjective experience writ large, not solely as aspects of set or setting.² By constitutive I mean that social categories cannot be bracketed from subjective experience because they shape

²My work differs from other approaches to set and setting which focus explicitly on culture, most notably Hartogsohn's (2020) concept of "collective set and setting." Drawing on anthropological studies of psychedelics, collective set and setting is a macro-sociological approach that treats individual set and setting as "nested within a greater sociocultural context—collective set and setting" (Hartogsohn, 2022, p. 580). In this framework, the factors that enter into individual experience are themselves products of national, and arguably even global, discourses. Collective set and setting has been scaled down to the level of subcultures through Hartogsohn's (2022) use of the term "microclimates," a concept which offers greater specificity on the mediation of collective set and setting through smaller social groups within a society. While both collective set and setting and microclimates offer us useful tools for exploring the extra-pharmacological factors of psychedelic-induced consciousness, they do not address *how* these collective discourses operate at the level of lived experience or *which* differences come to matter to a given person within the group. For example, while a microclimate may provide greater specificity for exploring drug effects that are shared by a group, it cannot address intra-group difference without collapsing into individual set and setting, given the nested hierarchy from individual (micro) to microclimate (meso) to collective (macro). This is because the framework has been developed to explore which factors influence psychedelic-induced consciousness rather than how such factors interact with a subject's existing structures of experience. Through my focus on the latter, I hope to offer a new way of using the tools that Hartogsohn's model offers while attending simultaneously to intra-group variation and shared differences among groups.

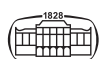
how it unfolds, not merely how it is interpreted, a key point I return to below. By social categories I mean the classification of aspects of actors (humans and otherwise) and their actions which are meaningful to—and therefore salient aspects of experience and resources in action for—social groups. Common examples of social categories include race and ethnicity, age, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, kinship, and nationality. These categories are central mechanisms through which people are socialized (Bourdieu, 2013; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2001; Philips, 2001; Young, 2005). As I make clear below, socialization is not a mere psychological process, but a whole-body-in-context process (Duranti, 2015), one which is mediated by the application and reification of social categories by both the social group and the individual across the life course.

This article will, I hope, encourage interdisciplinarity, as it is based on the fundamental claim that for humans there is no biology without sociality, no neurological process without a cultural process. This holds true in reverse: there is no culture, no social relation, no meaning without the materiality of the body. Understanding the nature and effects of psychedelic-induced consciousness then relies on studying material processes as inextricably bound up with the social complexities of societies in which research takes place and in which participants are socialized. Such an approach has the potential to make immediate and significant changes to psychedelic studies, beginning with the recruitment of research subjects and the treatment of social categories in existing studies. However, it should be noted that attending to social categories more rigorously could continue to operate without increased diversity among research participants, as it simply entails treating difference as consequential rather than expanding the differences included. As a result, we must make structural changes to the field and to scientific practice as a whole, as suggested by many at the Psychedemia conference (e.g., Davies, 2022; Estrada, 2022).

In support of such changes, the present article begins to outline a model of the subject that can be taken up by researchers regardless of disciplinary background, one that begins with how differences are made meaningful at the level of lived experience. In the first section, I elaborate the embodiment of subjectivity and how subjectivity is shaped by social categories. I then turn to intersubjectivity and its relationship to socialization and social categories, treating intersubjectivity as a foundational, existential principle rather than an accomplishment of certain forms of social action. Finally, I close with a discussion of how this framework challenges the way we study psychedelic-induced experiences and points us in new directions.

THE EMBODIMENT OF SUBJECTIVITY

The concept of subjectivity is elusive, at best. Introducing the ambiguous concept in their edited collection, Biehl, Good, and Kleinman (2007, p. 14) focus not on defining it, but rather on identifying its relationship to subjects: "Subjectivity is the means of shaping sensibility." The ambiguity in



the concept comes from the tension between its individual and collective manifestations (Ortner, 2005, p. 34), as well as its variations across scales within individuals and the collectives of which they are a part. In other words, where does subjectivity live, and what forms does it take? In philosophical discussions of psychedelics, the term subjectivity is often taken to mean “self-consciousness” (Letheby, 2020; Millière, Carhart-Harris, Roseman, Trautwein, & Berkovich-Ohana, 2018), with the “self” being an umbrella term “that subsumes a broad range of *mental* phenomena” (Lebedev et al., 2015, p. 3138, emphasis mine).

The differences in definitions and uses of the term subjectivity follow from the different projects in which the concept is being used. In the case of subjectivity as self-consciousness, scholars have used the concept to explore how various aspects of the self are impacted by psychedelic-induced consciousness, especially “peak” psychedelic states such as ego dissolution (Letheby & Gerrans, 2017). This formulation has deepened our understanding of the self, the relationship between its various components, and its neuronal correlates. Yet, there is no “self” without the body from which it arises, even in contexts where the body is supposedly bracketed and experience is more or less purely mental, as in virtual reality (Murray & Sixsmith, 1999). Inquiries which bracket the situatedness of selves in unique bodies that inhabit particular times and places do not offer us the tools necessary to explore the role that human variation plays in mediating the self, its inner relationships, and its neuronal correlates.

If subjectivity is to help us make headway on these and other concerns, we must have a rigorous account of its location and how it is affected to shape sensibilities. Drawing on Ortner’s (2005, p. 34) work, I define subjectivity as *embodied cultural and historical consciousness*. This definition suggests a preliminary answer to the question of where subjectivity is located—the body. It also tells us that our sensibilities are shaped in culturally and historically specific ways. Importantly, this definition rejects a mentalistic view of subjectivity, one that locates it in cognitive processes or in the “unconscious.” Rather, in using the term *embodied*, I am addressing oppositional binaries that continue to operate and constrict our analyses of lived experience: mind and body, subject and environment, freedom and determinism. The framework of embodiment resists seeing these paired terms as mutually exclusive and antagonistically related through its insistence that embodied subjects are inherently active (Csordas, 1990). For example, in discussing the significance of existing as embodied beings, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 84) writes that “having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein.” In other words, as embodied beings we are *perpetually engaged* with a socially complex world through the historically shaped projects we pursue. Inquiring into subjectivity, then, requires that we take seriously not only the material specificities of our bodies (i.e., the neuronal correlates of consciousness), but also the mediation of those material specificities via the inherently reflexive nature of human consciousness.

This mediation has been elaborated by feminist disability studies scholars through such concepts as “bodymind” (Price, 2015; Reynolds, 2022; Schalk, 2018) and “extended body” (Reynolds, 2018), with the former addressing the body and mind binary, and the latter addressing the subject and environment binary. The term bodymind highlights the inextricability and mutually constituting nature of physical and mental processes, intervening in approaches which take them to be wholly separate. Similarly, the notion of the extended body builds on work in embodied cognition and critical phenomenology, referring to “the ways in which one’s body always extends into its environment, just as its environment extends into it” (Joel Reynolds, 2018, S33). Reynolds is drawing on the notion of the extended mind here, where analyzing “mental states”—as biopsychosocial events (Kitayama & Uskul, 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 2010)—requires that we consider how the environment extends into embodied beings. Again, these models refuse the division between subject and environment and between body and mind, taking such divisions to be tools which offer clarity on specific theoretical issues to analysts rather than accurate descriptions of the lived experiences of subjects themselves whose understanding of their bodies and minds cannot be separated from each other any more than either can be separated from their environments. In short, taking subjectivity to be embodied offers us a way to think about the subject as a “bodymind” always in context.

Context is crucial for thinking about psychedelic-induced consciousness, as many have shown through the framework of set and setting (Carhart-Harris et al., 2018; Hartogsohn, 2016; Leary et al., 1963; Olson, Suissa-Rochelleau, Lifshitz, Raz, & Veissière, 2020; Taves, 2020; Wallace, 1959). As Frantz Fanon (2008, p. 77) established in his work on psychological distress under colonial violence, “there are inner relationships between consciousness and social context.” This means that consciousness is constituted by, not merely influenced by, context. Yet, consciousness is not constituted whole cloth by context, and the consciousness one has when they take psychedelics is shaped by their previous experiences. Embodied subjectivity offers us a way to think about how one’s structures of experience are shaped across the life course by focusing our attention on how our “sensibilities”—what I will call “orientations”—are incorporated. This incorporation is best understood as the creation of habits, where our orientation toward phenomena is integrated into our body such that “we do not have to cognitively interpret what we perceive in order to adjust our movements appropriately” (Fielding, 2020, p. 155). In other words, it is not merely that social categories shape how we make sense of phenomena after they have appeared in experience, but that their integration into our bodies means that the process of constituting what appears in experience is already influenced by culture (Csordas, 1994).

This is backed up by research in neuroanthropology, which focuses on the enculturation of physiological systems. For example, Greg Downey’s work in neuroanthropology began by exploring the claims of capoeira practitioners about how the practice shaped their perception, their



balance, and other physiological systems. He, like others, has demonstrated that our sensory-motor systems are shaped by culture, and that “skill formation can affect nonconscious or only semiconscious sensory-motor systems” (Downey, 2012, p. 171). In exploring how the vestibular system is shaped by different balancing behaviors in capoeira and gymnastics, he argues that plasticity allows certain systems to be encultured. One example from his work with capoeira practitioners is the conscious experimentation “with the edge of disequilibrium,” which he says “may loosen overly sensitive reflexes maladaptive to maintaining inverted posture, suppressing prior reflexes rather than simply building upon innate neurological settings” (p. 177). Importantly, he notes that developing new skills to handle disequilibrium in capoeira “can only develop in the space for action created by preventing automatic reflex” (p. 177). This development uses culturally specific sensory strategies that orient the practitioner to aesthetic and practical goals, such as gaining points for maintaining straight posture in gymnastics, or keeping one’s gaze fixed on opponents in inverted positions to engage in defensive and offensive moves in capoeira. In other words, gymnasts and capoeira practitioners come to be differently oriented to inverted posture due to the culturally and historically defined goals of each practice that are incorporated into the body.

Downey’s research demonstrates that culturally and historically defined projects shape how we interact with, and therefore experience, the world through their physiological effects. As bodyminds perpetually engaged in our worlds, these physiological effects factor into our consciousness as materially grounded possibilities—and limitations—for how we experience the world, shaping our orientations to phenomena and our future capacities for action in ways that accord with salient social categories (Ngo, 2017). However, while Downey’s comparative research makes this point clear at the level of social groups, his project did not consider variation among capoeira practitioners or among gymnasts. Here, critical phenomenology offers useful resources for considering how social categories influence embodied habits both within and across social groups.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CATEGORIES

Social categories are crucial to understanding how socialization and lived experience are mediated in culturally and historically specific ways. As mentioned previously, Neitzke-Spruill has argued compellingly that race is an important factor that shapes psychedelic-induced consciousness. Using the framework of embodied subjectivity, we can rephrase his argument in the following way: Race is a salient social category in American society that shapes orientations to phenomena in habitual ways, where orientations are structures of experience which persist across all states of consciousness, including psychedelic-induced consciousness. I will come back to the second claim in that argument below, but the first has been central to phenomenological studies of embodiment. For example, in his famous work on

“The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” Fanon (2008) argues that the white gaze—which is not merely an individual relation but a sociohistorical, material-discursive one—brings into relief the racialization of the body schema, a dominant factor in the “set of sensory-physical conditions” (Reynolds, 2017, p. 425) that constitutes our being in the world. “I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the ‘idea’ others have of me, but to my appearance... The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am *fixed*” (Fanon, 2008, p. 95). He later explains that the white gaze—a particular manifestation of race (as a social category) within the context of colonialism and other local histories—is the basis for the psychopathologization of his Black patients: “A normal black child, having grown up with a normal family, will become abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world” (p. 122). This “becoming abnormal” is part of the process of racial formation for the Black subjects in his study. Fanon here demonstrates that race as a social category is a salient structure of experience, something other scholars have elaborated on in more recent work (Ahmed, 2006; Al-Saji, 2014; Benn Torres & Torres Colón, 2020; Hill Collins, 2000, 2020; Ngo, 2016, 2017; Ortega, 2016).

As the work of Fanon and others show, phenomenal experience is inseparable from our being in the world. Culturally elaborated social categories and their historical manifestations act on embodied beings who are differently positioned within the social organization of a society, and such positions come to be incorporated into the body through habitual orientations. This fact is further explored by Iris Marion Young (2005, p. 36) in her study on how the application of gender in interactions and in social and environmental structures across the life course—here she examines differences between how boys and girls throw a baseball—shapes embodied subjectivity: “Feminine bodily existence is an *inhibited intentionality*, which simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an ‘I can’ and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed ‘I cannot.’” Intentionality is a term of art in phenomenology, and it refers to consciousness as always being consciousness of something. Here, Young is arguing that young girls’ very awareness of things in the world is inhibited because they are socialized into comporting themselves in ways that limit their capacity to act by bringing into awareness the limitations they must perform at the same time as the action they are engaged in. While Young’s work is about a particular population in a particular society, she offers tools for how we might analyze embodied perception and action with reference to social identities more broadly. This is because she identifies the socialization of bodily comportment and extension into the environment as being located in “the particular *situation* of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society” (p. 42).

Young’s phenomenological approach to “feminine bodily existence” looks at the broader structural conditions for a social group and their impact on members of the social group. In Young’s case, the group “women” (including girls) is a social category that is structured in cultural and



historical ways that come to be embodied by members of the group given how they are situated in society (intersectionality theories typically use the word “positioned” here). In other words, social categories organize and mediate relationships within and between different bodies through the enculturation of the body and its orientation to phenomena, where “orientation” is further defined as a habitual approach to particular phenomena that manifests in perception, cognition, and action. These social categories structure our relationships to our environments as well as our environments themselves, and they are contextualized in interactions (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Chikkatur, 2012; Goodwin & Alim, 2010; Kuipers, 1986; Sharma, 2016), all of which are events in the iterative process of socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986).

Downey, Fanon, and Young all demonstrate that the bodymind in context, which underpins racialization and inhibited intentionality, is shaped by culturally specific sensory practices, where those practices arise through locally salient power relations. Our social practices, then, are themselves shaped by social categories, which have physiological and psychological consequences. This is how we can make sense of ethnographic data on shared differences in experiences of the same psychedelic substances that correlate to culture and history, such as those between Indigenous groups in the Americas and White Americans with peyote and ayahuasca (Wallace, 1959). An embodied approach to subjectivity treats social categories as locally salient configurations that are essential to the recursive process of socializing a bodymind. Through creating an open-ended feedback loop between a bodymind and an environment by shaping orientations to phenomena, social categories reveal that shared differences are not just about interpretation—where interpretation is often taken to be a post-perceptual process of making sense of phenomena that have already appeared in experience—but that it is about their distinctive incorporation into the body’s sensory-motor systems which serves as a foundation for orientations to phenomena prior to interpretation.

FROM SUBJECTIVITY TO INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Social categories are quintessential intersubjective phenomena. As sociohistorically specific typifications of aspects of actors and their worlds, they pick out and make meaningful particular phenomena that structure the socialization and experiences of individuals and groups. To fully appreciate social categories and how they function within socialization, we need an account not only of subjectivity but of *intersubjectivity*. If subjectivity is the means by which habitual orientations are produced in subjects, intersubjectivity is a term that refers to the inherent sociality of subjects and the means by which they interact, drawing our attention away from approaches which would posit the self as existing prior to or apart from co-presence with other selves. This term also highlights the dialogic nature of subjects and their existence in the world (Lysaker & Lysaker, 2010). People are not passive objects but active subjects, even if their agency is

limited in particular ways through socialization, as Young demonstrates.

In other words, intersubjectivity is the existential condition of sharing the world with others that makes possible meaning, communication, and socialization, processes which rely on and are perpetually (re)enacted through social categories. Given that consciousness develops in socially complex environments with others (Guenther, 2013, p. 28), we are always “*situated* in an intersubjective world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 371), one that has the meanings it does for us because of our socialized orientations, which begin, as feminist scholars point out, even before birth (Martin, 1991). As the condition of sharing the world with others, intersubjectivity should not be understood as the accomplishment of mutual understanding or shared experiences, but rather as the “*possibility* of human interaction and understanding” (Duranti, 2010, p. 26). This formulation allows us to study empirically what are the sociohistorically specific manifestations of “shared conditions” and how they structure interaction and experience within and across groups.

Following phenomenology’s insight that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, we can see that consciousness entails a relation, and that relation is structured, or *oriented* (Ahmed, 2006). In addition to being oriented through our encultured bodies and minds, we can also see how language acts as an orienting system saturated with social categories (Duranti, 2010; Gal & Irvine, 2019; Goodwin, 2019; Hanks, 1996; Lucy, 1992; Pederson et al., 1998; Rosaldo, 1982; Tambiah, 1985; Whorf, 1956). To the extent that people mobilize linguistic resources before, during, and after psychedelic-induced consciousness—including conceptual resources that are informed by language (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003)—we can study which orientations (i.e., structures of experience) are most salient and carry over from other states of consciousness into psychedelic-induced consciousness. These articulations can be studied linguistically as well as neurologically, allowing scholars to triangulate the mobilization of underlying physiological systems that scale up to actions and practices (e.g., Harle, Glennon, Blackburne, Cooper, & Skipper, 2022). In short, since all conscious states draw on the same encultured structures of experience (physiological as well as social), psychedelic-induced consciousness should be studied as an inherently intersubjective phenomenon.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The fundamental claim I have made here is that we are social beings, and that this fact must be accounted for in the study of psychedelic-induced consciousness. Given that socialization is a whole-body process that manifests in orientations to phenomena, I want to conclude with suggestions for new directions in the field of psychedelic studies. First, the field must approach social categories as causally significant factors and design studies accordingly, because the model of embodied subjectivity I defended



above places socialization at the center of consciousness. Whereas much of the work on variation in social categories looks at minoritized groups, these categories equally—though certainly differently—include members of dominant groups. This means that we cannot study psychedelic-induced consciousness among people from dominant groups without attending to how their socialization as members of those groups bears on their structures of experience. For example, in the study that validated the Ego Dissolution Inventory (EDI), the lack of demographic variation among research participants is posed as a limitation on the generalizability of these findings but not a problem for the study itself. The authors do not account for how being “male, under the age of 30, and [having] at least some university education” influenced their experiences during psychedelic-induced consciousness (Nour et al., 2016, p. 10), and they suggest that future studies should include “subjects from different cultural and religious backgrounds” (p. 11). While their call for broader inclusion is important, this approach ultimately treats social categories as separable from the participants’ subjectivities, something I have argued against.

Instead, we need to place social categories at the center. This leads to a second point, which is that we must expand the social categories included in research. Doing so means that race must be accounted for and engaged with, perhaps especially for white participants given the lack of engagement with whiteness in the field overall. It also means that studies must more rigorously deal with existing categories like sex/gender, which overwhelmingly collapses sex assigned at birth with gender identity, systematically excluding transgender and non-binary people while ignoring the influence of being cisgender on psychedelic experiences. Finally, the model of embodied subjectivity suggests that the field must consider not only the social categories relevant to their research participants, but also the dynamic nature of the categories. Social categories are not top-down, deterministic forces, but rather interlocking structures which shape orientations and the material world itself (Liao & Huebner, 2021). The field’s overwhelming focus on neurology at the expense of social studies has meant that while we have a framework for attending to extra-pharmacological factors, we do not have a full appreciation of how such factors interact with existing structures of experience. Engaging with this site of interaction will not only deepen our appreciation of the factors identified by the framework of set and setting, but will also reveal the extent to which they impact psychedelic-induced consciousness in recognizable ways and the role that psychedelics play in people’s lives on longer time scales. When studying any form of interaction with psychedelics, we must conduct a social, historical, and political analysis of the structures of experience and their differentiations across contexts. Only then can we truly begin to understand the significance of the wealth of scientific findings that have emerged throughout the resurgence of psychedelic studies.

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