

“EVERY HUMAN IS PSYCHEDELIC” AN ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY
PSYCHEDELIC DRUG USE AND SUBCULTURE

by
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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters
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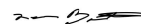
HJ Taylor

This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate’s thesis advisor, Dr. Philip Lewin, Department of Sociology, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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The 21st Century is seeing an unprecedented wave of psychedelic drug research after decades of stagnancy. Despite this revival, there has been little research or interest in the current revival of psychedelic *subculture* or the attitudes of psychedelic users today—from here referred to as “psychedelia.” This qualitative study of 19 self-described psychedelic users/psychedelia members probes their intimate experiences with psychedelic drugs, their involvement in the broader subculture, and their political and social beliefs. By analyzing the subculture through post-subcultural theory, this study examines the state of psychedelic subculture today, its participants, and members beliefs in relation to drugs, politics, and society. Findings show psychedelia exists as a loose subculture, yet has several parallels to the hippies demographically and politically. Second, psychedelia members share several values such as openness, compassion, and caring for others. Third, despite their pessimism towards America’s future, interviewees engage in everyday activism to help disenfranchised groups.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated firstly to the sociology department of FAU, whose professors imbued in me a passion for sociology, and the inspiration to finally pursue my dream of producing research. I thank my fellow graduate students, friends, and family, whose knowledge, support, and encouragement helped me finish this thesis—even when I wanted to give up! Finally, this thesis is dedicated to my interviewees, and the many people I have met through them: thank you for sharing with me your intimate experiences, your passions, and your unabashed pride in being yourselves no matter what anyone says, which is the true spirit of psychedelia.

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INTRODUCTION

Psychedelic drugs—substances that produce hallucinogenic effects in the brain—have entered a renaissance of research in the past twenty years. Psychedelic substances have a long existence in human history: from peyote and mushrooms being consumed by ancient humans; to an explosion of research in the 1930s with the discovery of LSD; to now a revival in research after a decades’ long lull—all research with the goal to understand the extent that psychedelic use affects the mind (Giffort 2020). Psychedelics are notable for their hallucinogenic properties, hours-long highs, and “trips” that can cause significant emotional responses. The most famous psychedelic users are the hippies: a 1960s subculture that was notorious for not only its political activism, but also its embracement of psychedelics for spiritual, personal, and recreational use.

On the topic of personality changes in psychedelic users, most research agrees that using psychedelics (LSD, psilocybin, etc.) usually results in positive emotions, liberal political alignment, inclined interest in activism or social inequality, and a feeling of connection with other people (Forstmann, M. et al. 2020; Griffiths, R. R et al. 2006). Most psychedelic research measures personality changes through tools such as personality questionnaires, surveys, or other more quantitative methods. While research acknowledges psychedelics are variables that affect outlook, little research provides in-depth, qualitative data on *how* psychedelic users navigate these major changes in morals or opinions, *what* they do with newfound information, and *why* many psychedelic users

share these common opinions and attitudes. Lack of interviews and qualitative research in this area fails to explain the psychological process of adopting newfound views of society and how it should function. Analyzing these values from a subcultural standpoint also shows how these common positive values are contained and encouraged within a specific subculture, and how these values are specifically antiauthoritarian, humanitarian¹, and an overall critique of American society.

Overall, this study aims to answer a.) how participation in psychedelic subculture shapes people's interpretation and response to psychedelic experiences; b.) what common values and beliefs members have, and c.) what are psychedelia members' relationship to activism, authority, and society. While these data will contribute to the larger understanding of psychedelics' long-term effects psychologically, it will also analyze users in a subcultural angle, and discuss common themes, grievances, and critiques users have about the way American society should change. This data will also contribute to subcultural literature as an analysis of a revived drug-centered subculture that exists in different social and political contexts. To analyze these points, I conducted multiple interviews with psychedelia members and discuss how their philosophy has changed or been influenced by psychedelic use, and how their daily lives, opinions, and sociability has changed thus far.

My findings suggest that psychedelic users possess preexisting feelings of connectedness, compassion, and openness that are strengthened after psychedelic use,

¹ Antiestablishment views, in the context of this study, can be interpreted as any values that disagree with various ways American society, government, and authority runs. Humanitarian values would be various beliefs that would work for assisting people who are in precarious, disadvantaged, or otherwise unpleasant circumstances.

and that psychedelia critiques and disapproves of society's definitions of success. These findings broaden current knowledge of psychedelia's existence as a subculture and provide further insight into post-subcultural studies. Today, "hippiedom" has been splintered off into multiple other labels, such as new agers and bohemians, and associated with hobbies or practices rather than falling under one umbrella term. While other studies may discuss these two groups for their faults (such as Aldred's [2000] discussion of Native American appropriation by festival goers and new agers), little research delves into what the hippie/psychedelia label means outside of the context of appropriation, commodification, and gentrification. This study also briefly discusses who may still label themselves as a hippie today, and what this label—which is largely seen as esoteric, or an adjective rather than an identity—means to youth today.

Though psychedelia grew out of specific social and political events in the 1960s, this study explores how this subculture continues detached from these specific circumstances. That being said, psychedelia is simultaneously still relevant: the political and social problems of the 1960s still exist in some capacity today (such as environmental crises, civil rights issues, and drug decriminalization). While psychedelia may no longer be considered a youth movement, members are still largely aligned with the political philosophy and concerns of the original incarnation. Finally, this study discusses interviewees' views on contemporary American society, and ideas of success, authority, and the future. As emphasized by both Chicago School and CCCS scholars, Western society projects ideas of success that the public should strive to achieve. However, it is increasingly difficult to achieve what is seen as an "ideal" lifestyle marked by wealth, stability, and independence. Many youths view psychedelia as a way to escape

these unattainable and (for them) undesirable expectations and to learn an alternative way of thinking and acting. As Shipley (2013) notes: “In a modern world defined increasingly by ideologies of competition, consumption, and division, psychedelics offered a means to reenchant spiritually. In other words, psychedelic mysticism, as opposed to signaling a path of withdrawal, forced a radical response in the here and now” (p.44). In the words of famous psychedelic advocate Timothy Leary (1983), drug use could facilitate the process of turning on, tuning in, and dropping out of mainstream society:

‘Turn on’ meant...become sensitive to the many and various levels of consciousness and the specific triggers engaging them. Drugs were one way to accomplish this end. ‘Tune in’ meant interact harmoniously with the world around you—externalize, materialize, express your new internal perspectives. ‘Drop out’ suggested an active, selective, graceful process of detachment from involuntary or unconscious commitments. ‘Drop Out’ meant self-reliance, a discovery of one’s singularity, a commitment to mobility, choice, and change. (Leary 1983:253)

“Dropping out” in particular alluded to the process of questioning and rejecting certain ideas and practices one was raised to believe was correct. In addition to being introspective, psychedelics also encourages one to pay attention outwardly. The phrase “turn on, tune in, drop out” was coined 60 years ago: what does it mean in contemporary America to “drop out” and reject society? Interviewees express hefty feelings of pessimism and feeling trapped in one’s own conditions. Yet, many interviewees agree their psychedelic experiences have helped them facilitate and process these feelings.

The history of psychedelic subculture and psychedelic drug use provides the foundation of analysis for this study. Through qualitative interviews with psychedelic users and/or members of the subculture, I discuss how this subculture and attitudes towards psychedelic drug use have changed in the present day as opposed to the heyday of psychedelia in the 1960s. Particularly, I address two major gaps in the literature:

through analyzing psychedelia participation in the present, I discuss what attitudes are towards casual psychedelic drug use, and how psychedelic subculture exists in today's political climate. This study provides an in-depth account of how the subculture persists and has changed with the internet, different political events, and the emergence of different psychedelic drugs in the 21st Century. Additionally, while researchers have concluded that psychedelic drugs cause feelings of openness, there is little research detailing the process in how these feelings begin and persist after drug use. Finally, this study discusses opinions and conceptions about the safety, effects, and differences between psychedelics and other drugs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To provide context to this study, this chapter will analyze literature on subcultural theory and views on drugs. The brief overview of subcultural studies analyzes how subcultures begin, who joins them, and what the dynamics are within them. Secondly, the drugs section presents theory and literature discussing stigma and approval of different drugs. These topics lay the foundation of how this study will analyze psychedelic subculture.

Subcultural Theory

Subcultures can be described as a subsection of society that share and bond over common hobbies, style, music, and other interests. There are several related labels that can describe a group similar to a subculture: such as a neo-tribe, which is a casual intermittently-meeting group who gather for pleasure; or a scene, which is a fluid setting that shares many different kinds of styles, interests, or music (Haenfler 2013:11).

Subcultural theory explains how and why subcultures such as psychedelia develop.

Subcultural theory originated during the early 20th Century with American researchers associated with the Chicago School. The American tradition's interpretation of subcultures states that subcultures form based on individuals' suffering from anomie within their society. Williams (2011) describes how many young people, the working-class in particular, are socialized by the mainstream to recognize and associate prestige and success in life with, for example, affording expensive items or having a respectable

occupation. However, their socioeconomic status bars them from reaching this type of prestige and conforming to these ideas of success. By being unable to meet mainstream ideas of success in society, youths experience strain and stress (2011:14). When a number of youths are suffering from a similar problem of adjustment and are in frequent contact with one another, Chicago researchers claimed that they attempted to alleviate or abate their feelings of strain by joining subculture that hold cultural goals and expectations that deviate from mainstream society's but are easier to achieve.

During the 1960s and 70s, scholars at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the United Kingdom developed a new perspective on subcultures. While affirming that subcultures acted as a response to social or economic hardship or strain, CCCS scholars explored the ways in which subculture participants questioned hegemonic culture and enacted symbolic resistance against mainstream society (Haenfler 2013:9). The CCCS analyzed British youth subcultures such as mods, rockers, and punks, in an attempt to understand why these subcultures evolved, and what their motives were. The CCCS focused on how youth subcultures resisted mainstream society through style and music. British research interpreted subcultures as a magical solution to social injustice, and believed that participating in a subculture was means to reject mainstream ideas of success and conformity. While participating in a subculture could help individuals meet others who are like-minded, and to join a group where ideas of success are more achievable than mainstream society, joining a subculture would not permanently solve the anomie or strain members felt. The CCCS described subcultures as a "magical solution" to broader societal problems that were affecting youth at the time. While subcultures can resist mainstream ideas of success through dress, music, writing, and so

on, the CCCS maintained that subcultures themselves were not able to enact political change.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, subcultural theorists began to emphasize the conjuncture of individuality and consumption in the concept of post-subcultural theory, which defines participation in a subculture as more of a matter of identity experimentation, leisure, and hedonism than a result of social strain or political resistance (Hanefler 2013:12-13). Additionally, post-subcultural theory argues that in the present, youth value individuality more than subscribing to the expectations of subcultures. From the 1980s to the present, post-subcultural theory states that “individualism has surpassed an emphasis on collectivity as a means by which social actors seek out desirable visual images, and construct sociocultural identities, for themselves” (Bennett 2010:495).

In contrast to post-subculture scholars’ claims that contemporary subcultures are unconcerned with politics, recent research in subculture studies has described the phenomenon of “lifestyle activism,” in which subcultural youth attempt to effect social change by enacting positive lifestyle choices rather than participating in social movements (Cherry 2015: 70). Examples of lifestyle activism in relation to hippies can be maintaining vegan/vegetarian diets, recycling or upcycling, living a minimalist lifestyle, practicing spiritual religions, or doing volunteer work. Such choices are construed as a form of everyday resistance against inequity in mainstream society. While these actions may not seem political, and can be performed simply for one’s personal enjoyment, these activities serve as a small form of deviation and resistance against the larger structures and ideals that American society is based upon.

As this review of the literature shows, there are unresolved debates about whether subcultures are a political and whether they can effect social change. The American Tradition of Subculture Studies describes subcultures as a response for people who do not fit into mainstream society; the CCCS describes subcultures as a response to social and economic hardship and a magical form of resistance against hegemonic culture; post-subcultural theory rejects the idea of subcultures as being class-based, describing them as largely apolitical and shallow movements based on consumption rather than serious political action; and scholars who study lifestyle politics do not agree on whether lifestyle choices can cause meaningful changes in society.

Psychedelia today can best be understood through the lens of post-subcultural theory (PST). Post-subculture studies in the 1990s and 2000s defined emerging subcultures as more fluid than previous subcultures of the 50s and 60s: contemporary subcultures put less emphasis on commitment to a group by ways of fashion and activities and more emphasis on self-expression and consumerism (Haenfler 2014). While festivals and raves may be considered “scenes”—places where people of many different styles or interests congregate for a common reason—contemporary psychedelia as a whole is much more fluid. PST emphasizes that subculture members are able to pick and choose which aspects of a subculture they express and engage with. Additionally, PST argues that participation in a subculture is a voluntary choice rather than something that is caused by societal strain. Strain is defined as the denial of wealth, status, power, and other forms of “cultural goals” in a society. Unable to meet society’s ideas of success, people who suffer from societal strain can join subcultures to achieve a subculture’s standards of success (p.12).

Literature on Drugs

Psychedelics are a class of drugs with hallucinogenic effects that can last several hours. Effects commonly include visual and auditory hallucinations that produce an altered state of mind. Over the past ten years, there has been a resurgence of academic interest in psychedelics. Researchers have shown psychedelics are unique relative to other drugs in that they can cause positive emotions and behavioral outcomes (Yaden 2017:347). Classic psychedelics include psilocybin mushrooms (“magic mushrooms” or simply “shrooms”), LSD (“acid”), mescaline, and DMT. Drugs such as ketamine and MDMA (“ecstasy” or “molly”) are debated if they are considered psychedelics, but will be counted as such in this paper, as they do produce mind-altering effects such as visual hallucinations with positive emotional outcomes.

While Howard Becker’s “Becoming a Marihuana User” (1953) is concerned with the process of using marijuana, the foundation of the study is important to the theory and study of drug use in general. Becker explains that the drug user must go through learning processes in order to correctly use and enjoy the drug they are taking. Using psychedelics, likewise, is an intense learning process in which the user must be knowledgeable about the correct environment they should be in, the dose they should take, the outcome of their drug of choice, and the responsible behavior they should exhibit, in order to have a pleasurable experience. A constant “transformation of meanings” (1953:242) occurs during drug use, where the user continuously assigns meaning to the drugs they use, the effects of the drugs, and the social aspect of discussing drugs with other drug users.

While different drugs have varying degrees of stigma attached to them, drug use in general is considered a deviant behavior. The groups of people who use certain drugs contribute greatly to drugs' stigmatization: for example, "drugs such as powder cocaine by the wealthy is often seen as a display of status, while use of heroin or crack cocaine, particularly among those who are poor or otherwise marginalized, is more stigmatized" (Ahern et al. 188). Cocaine and heroin had also shifted from once being used as a medicinal drug to becoming heavily stigmatized, controlled substances (Giffort 2020). Cocaine, heroin, and other illicit drugs do not benefit from the same recovering reputation and psychiatric revival as LSD and psilocybin are. The users of these drugs heavily influence this: psychedelic drugs have historically been associated with use by middle-class white people, while illicit drugs are commonly associated with being used by poor people of color. In 1965 and 1966, LSD held the reputation as a "sophisticated" drug, and a majority of Californian LSD and marijuana arrests came from the more white and affluent parts of Los Angeles (McBride1998:89). These racial and class stereotypes heavily influence the way society stigmatizes or accepts certain drugs.

The social reputation of psychedelics is closely tied to the emotionally significant and visually intense highs the drugs can produce. Psychedelics are well-documented as causing simultaneous philosophical feelings of peacefulness and unrest (Shipley 2013). This is likely because they interact with the serotonin system (Carhart-Harris 2018), which can produce feelings of happiness. People who use psychedelics often report the drugs as triggering important experiences of introspection, self-awareness, and self-development. Aldous Huxley (1952), in recounting his experience with mescaline, says the drug:

gives access to contemplation - but to a contemplation that is incompatible with action and even with the will to action, the very thought of action. In the intervals between his revelations the mescaline taker is apt to feel that, though in one way everything is supremely as it should be, in another there is something wrong. His problem is essentially the same as that which confronts the quietist, the arhat and, on another level, the landscape painter and the painter of human still lifes. Mescaline can never solve that problem; it can only pose it, apocalyptically, for those to whom it had never before presented itself. The full and final solution can be found only by those who are prepared to implement the right kind of *Weltranschauung* by means of the right kind of behavior and the right kind of constant and unstrained alertness (Huxley 1952:13).

Huxley, through his personal account of mescaline's effects, describes the drug as presenting philosophical questions that will remain "unanswered" until the user implements a specific worldview (*Weltanschauung*). In other words, psychedelics cause contemplation that must later be confronted by the individual. Because psychedelics interact specifically with the serotonin system (Lyons & Carhart-Harris 2018), it can be concluded that psychedelics neurologically affect users' happiness—and by extension, interpreting the world is "supremely as it should be" (1952:13). Concurrently, psychedelics are well-documented as causing simultaneous philosophical feelings of peacefulness and unrest—thus remains Huxley's question. As with a great religious or life-changing experience, psychedelics can be variables that influence a discovery of "new", philosophical knowledge: the "problem" is that there is a degree of wrongness or dissatisfaction in regards to oneself, others, and society. The "solution" to this problem is further engagement, pondering, and action of the individual to answer the question that this major experience proposed. These revelations are not directly caused by psychedelic drugs, but can be brought about after a process of assigning meaning to their experiences.

Few people experiment with drugs by themselves. On the contrary, most people learn about them from other people, experiment with them in a social context, and draw

from the cultural resources to enhance and interpret their experiences—for example, books, music, and social events recommended by their friends (Becker 1953). This is doubtless the case with psychedelic drugs. Many people who experiment with psychedelics do so within the context of psychedelia—a counterculture that evolved from the hippie movement. Analyzing these values from a subcultural standpoint also shows how these common positive values are contained and encouraged within a specific subculture, and how these values are in direct opposition to American society’s values: whether becoming anti-capitalist, anti-competition, against organized religion, and overall in favor of humanitarian activism, egalitarian (anti-racist, pro-immigrant, anti-sexist, antiauthoritarian) society. This study discusses how users have transformed morally from before and after drug use, and what values are currently most important to them. In doing in-depth interviews, the information I collect gives further context and information on the overall process of: 1.) understanding value changes as a result of psychedelics, and 2.) understanding why psychedelic users have these *common* values and beliefs. This study notes the variation and differences between psychedelia members, their drug experiences, and their processes of changes after their experiences.

My research questions examine how the psychedelics use, and subculture of psychedelic users by extension, members personal values and opinions towards society and politics. This topic is important because currently, there is a resurgence (in the past 10 years) of academic interest in psychedelics (Giffort 2020). It is acknowledged in psychoactive drug research that psychedelics cause emotional effects unique from other drugs; psychedelics are unique in both causing positive emotion and behavioral outcomes (Yaden 2017:347). Despite this growing field of research, there is a lack of research

specific to how the subculture/social aspect of psychedelia influences these feelings. In light of these lingering questions, my research examines the values and beliefs that psychedelic users have in relation to being a member of the subculture.

Literature Gaps

A new wave of research is being done on psychedelics; most of my sources are from the past 10 years. Lyons and Carhart-Harris (2018) discovered how users can have increased nature relatedness and antiauthoritarian feelings, but only studied them in psilocybin users. Much literature on the topic, such as “The Paradoxical Psychological Effects Of (LSD)” by Carhart-Harris et al. (2016) notes personality/feeling changes only after immediate use of LSD; there is little research on the long-term personality changes associated with psychedelic use (over one year since intake) and how major psychedelic experiences act as a variable for influencing users’ philosophy towards togetherness, openness, charity, activism, and so on. Further, most research on psychedelics is for people who have used psychedelics for medical purposes; I interview those who use them recreationally (people who willingly and consistently seek it out for personal reasons). Most literature is about how psychedelic users develop more liberal, open views, along with positivity and tolerance (Kahonen 2020), but I have not found why these two factors (drugs and morals) are *connected*, and more importantly, *common* between users. Other research, such as Schmid and Liechti (2018), studies “long-lasting subjective effects of LSD in normal subjects” and describes their subjects as noting taking LSD as an extremely valuable and self-reflective, positive experience, but analyzes the long-term effects from a self-reflective angle, rather than analyzing subjects’ views of society and humanity.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORY OF PSYCHEDELIA

Evolution of Hippie Subculture

Psychedelia subculture began with three simultaneous significant events: first, after WWII, housing in the San Francisco neighborhood of Haight-Ashbury was cheap, as it was a working-class area. Due to raising property values in other areas of San Francisco, beatniks, Beat poets, college students, and other young people chose the Haight to relocate to in the early 1960s (Ashbolt, 2007:36). While the Beat generation waned by the end of the 1950s, they were the precursor to the hippie subculture: they experimented with arts, drugs, and sexuality, and eschewed conformity and American values (Morrison 2000:8).

Second, since its discovery by Albert Hoffman in 1943, LSD was heavily researched in the 1950s by the CIA, doctors, and professors. In the early 1960s, Harvard professors Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert became avid supporters and spokesmen for psychedelic drugs. Their experimentation with LSD caused their dismissal from Harvard, which garnered much media attention (Baumeister & Placidi 1983:31-2). The extensive media coverage and medical research in psychedelic drugs caused curiosity of their effects with psychiatrists and laypeople.

Third, the mid-to-late 60s were a time of great political change in America, which spawned several political movements. The Civil Rights movement, women's liberation,

gay liberation, anti-Vietnam movements, and environmental movements were the major societal forces that were impacting American society and the futures of young people. Socially, the values of younger generations clashed with the post-war conservatism and traditional values of their parents and older generations (Baumeister & Placidi 1983:44). With little control over their future (such as being drafted and major environmental change), it was particularly younger generations that became heavily involved in these progressive movements.

In the late 1960s, “hippies” were largely a white, middle-class, left-leaning group (McBride 1998). While there were hippies in many different locations, San Francisco, California served as the most popular cultural hub for the subculture. Overall, the youth movement was disillusioned with the values of their parents and previous generations. Icons and leaders of the psychedelic movement said it was “mainstream American society, they argued, which was unnatural, inauthentic, and dangerous, while psychedelic drugs provided access to a more authentic and liberating realm of experience” (Shortall 2014:188). As previously mentioned, several social and political events happened in the mid-to-late 1960s that influenced the rise of the psychedelic movement. By using psychedelic drugs to “open” one’s mind, rebelling against the mainstream, and fighting for their generation’s future, hippies aimed to reject the rules and goals they were taught to follow. This spurred a large amount of psychedelic-style music, art, and clothing that reflected psychedelic drug trips and the values of the hippies. The height of the psychedelic movement was from 1966-1969, when the popularity of psychedelic music, fashion, festivals, and media coverage was at its peak, and quickly spread across the US and other parts of the world.

Politics and Drugs

While psychedelic substances have been used by humans for thousands of years, they were not considered for psychiatric use until the 1940s, when Albert Hoffman synthesized LSD in 1943 (Sessa 2016:4). In the 1950s, LSD and other psychedelics gained interest from the medical community in the treatment of debilitating mental illnesses such as debilitating cases of schizophrenia and PTSD. In 1953, the American government began experimenting with LSD on thousands of individuals for MK-ULTRA, a trial of experiments which studied the use of psychedelics in controlling the human brain (p.5). As psychiatry continued to study psychedelics, psychedelic drugs began to gain popularity as a recreational drug in the mid-60s (as it was legal until 1966). Popular publications and praise of psychedelics by Aldous Huxley, Timothy Leary, Ken Kesey, and others spurred public interest in psychedelic drugs. Psychedelic drugs were used, and associated heavily with, the burgeoning countercultural movement of youth that desired freedom from their circumstances—both mentally, socially, and politically.

The hippie movement was largely a leftist movement. While not synonymous with the New Left movement that was occurring during the same period, the hippie subculture largely overlapped with their progressive beliefs. Both movements agreed a radical change and revolution of American politics and values was required, but the New Left sought direct action (and sometimes violence) while the hippies, who overwhelmingly believed in nonviolence, sought a more cultural revolution. Several hippie and underground newspapers “almost always championed the values and ideology of the counterculture and New Left, and had a symbiotic relationship with both” (McBride 1998). The opinions of the beat generation—hostility towards the mainstream,

support of fringe or disenfranchised social groups, and anti-materialism—carried over into the eventual hippie movement (p.133). McBride noted that the attitudes of the Beats was an “elitist sensibility” (p.134); this could be applied to the hippie culture as well. While hippie dogma generally revolved around peace and loving others, the culture rejected anything they determined to be mainstream or a part of “straight” society².

Despite the hippies’ goals of being a peaceful haven for the new youth movement, the subculture was disorganized and suffered from several problems. In the essay “Slouching Toward Bethlehem” (1967), Joan Didion described several events, attitudes, and issues occurring in Haight-Ashbury in 1967: there was great strife between hippies and the police, homelessness, drug abuse, and the guerilla political agenda of groups such as The Diggers. The Diggers were a political group aligned with community anarchism: the Diggers believed the state and political foundation of society to be corrupt, and participated in activism by direct action rather than organizing protests. This could include organizing soup kitchens, giving out supplies, and operating medical clinics for the poor conditions in San Francisco (Potter 2020:87). Didion witnessed many people, particularly teenagers, fleeing to San Francisco in pursuit of escaping “straight” society—two teenagers she spoke to in particular had run away from home because they disagreed with their strict parents and their attitudes. There are several issues and examples of problematic behavior in her observances that occur in the Haight: people she meets throughout the essay discuss how psychedelic use can easily lead to abusing “harder” drugs such as meth, irresponsible drug use (such as acid being given to small children),

² The slang term “straight” originally referred to people who do not use drugs, but can also describe people who are “uncool” or are aligned in mainstream society.

sexual assault, and police brutality. Didion justified the disorganization and chaos of the movement by pointing out its uniqueness in relation to the generational gap: “we were seeing the attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum. Once we had seen these children, we could no longer overlook the vacuum, no longer pretend that the society’s atomization could be reversed. This was not a traditional generational rebellion...These were children who grew up cut loose from the web of cousins and great-aunts and family doctors and lifelong neighbors who had traditionally suggested and enforced the society’s values...They are less in rebellion against the society than ignorant of it, able only to feed back certain of its most publicized self-doubts, *Vietnam, Saran-Wrap, diet pills, the Bomb.*” (1967:31). While the hippie “children” were seen as “pathetically unequipped” in curating a unified culture and social movement, the hippie movement existed as a way for youth—particularly white middle-class youth—to reject the values and expectations of the previous generation by experimenting with drugs, sex, self-expression, and lifestyles. Perhaps it was not wholly intended to be in rejection, as Didion noted, but that the hippie movement naturally spurred from the strife and alienation that their generation experienced.

The white middle-class youth demographic of the hippie movement directly affected its development and decline. While not completely homogenous, the majority of hippies were from middle-class backgrounds. Following a mass arrest of hippies on the Sunset Strip in 1967, a police officer noted the arrestees’ class: “the parents who picked up their children at the station ‘were nearly all middle-class people who never expected to see the inside of a police station.’ Others corroborated this portrait. The Free Press reported that Toronto hippies fleeing to California were mostly ‘teenyboppers’ opting to

leave middle-class homes” (McBride 1998:86). The affluence of the hippie culture influenced views of drugs as well: LSD and psilocybin, largely taken by the white middle-class, were seen as fun and “sophisticated”, while heroin was associated with “poverty and despair” (p. 89). Additionally, while the hippie’s indulgence in simple living, drug use, and political demonstrations was seen as radical and encouraged within the subculture, minorities engaging with these behaviors was seen as dangerous and criminal.

Culture and Aesthetics

The aesthetics of psychedelia, such as the music, clothing, and artwork, are heavily related to the psychedelic drug high, particularly the visual and auditory hallucinations. In America, the most iconic psychedelic bands emerged from Haight-Ashbury, which was the countercultural hub in the 60s. Psychedelic drugs had a close partnership with music of the area, which influenced the sound of rock music at the time. Most high-quality LSD was made by Augustus Owsley Stanley III, who also financed the Grateful Dead and knew other psychedelic bands (Morrison 2000:22). Psychedelic bands often were friends with each other, as most were living in the same area, played concerts together at festivals and large venues.

Psychedelic music was marked by whimsy or political lyrical matter, and long improvised instrumentals. Inspired by Beat poetry and jazz, psychedelic music was able to rebelliously “break” the rules of rock music by experimenting with loud, excessive guitar soloing, feedback and droning, long song times, and general improvisation and lack of solid structure. Analogous with the music, live bands were often under the projections of colorful lights and liquid lightshows to resemble psychedelic hallucinated

colors and shapes (2000:76). These sounds and sights contributed to resembling, exacerbating, and manipulating the psychedelic high—as it was assumed, and expected, that the audience be under the influence of psychedelics. Even the posters made to advertise these bands were drawn and colored in a psychedelic manner: employing bright colors, bubble letters, and smooth, curling shapes (Peterson 2015).

This visual style not only eschewed or exaggerated psychedelic hallucinations, it was a way to signal that bands and artists were psychedelic. Similarly, psychedelic fashion was marked by bright, bold colors and patterns. Common articles of clothing were bellbottoms, fringed vests, patches, and handmade jewelry for men and women (Kass 2011:22-3). The peace symbol became heavily associated with the hippie movement, embellishing youth in the form of pins, necklaces, and logos (p.22). Native American, Indian, and East Asian fashions were also influential (and often appropriated) on Western clothing and décor trends.

Important aspects of psychedelia—and this study—are the concepts of nostalgia for the past and idealism. Opposite to the loud experimental psychedelic rock in San Francisco, many psychedelic songs employ a sense of childish innocence both to their sound and lyrics, exploring fantasy akin to childhood stories and imaginations. The Beatles, Strawberry Alarm Clock, Pink Floyd, and Donovan are a few psychedelic acts (or at least had psychedelic phases) that touched upon childhood simplicity or fantasy in their music. Even in psychedelic fashion there was a nostalgia for the past, as prairie and Victorian blouses came back into fashion. While psychedelia aimed to be rebellious against old values, music, and fashions, they reflected idealistic parts of previous decades by bricolage: the creation of something by taking elements from many different eras,

sources, and styles (Hebdige 1979; Jefferson 2002). In *Hippie Chic* (2013), Lauren Whitley remarks that, in regards to hippie fashion trends, “historical fantasy dress could also transform the wearer into someone new by channeling an idealized version of the past” (2013:46). Several iconic aspects of psychedelia are directly taken from trends of previous decades: several popular psychedelic bands covered blues songs, or were heavily inspired by Black blues and rock ‘n’ roll; old fashions of the early 1900s, particularly poet shirts and prairie dresses, came back into style. More abstractly, the commune, environmental, and back to the land movements were influenced by rejection of modern society and mainstream ideas of success. By taking influences of the past, psychedelia was able to simultaneously create something individualized and “new.”

Decline of Subculture

Several important cultural events happened, movements declined, or key figures passed away within the end of the 1960s and early 1970s: Richard Alpert left America for India, and Augustus Owsley Stanley III was arrested in 1967. The famous murder of Meredith Hunter happened at the Altamont Free Concert in 1969. Timothy Leary was imprisoned, and Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix died in 1970. Finally, the Vietnam War started to decline in 1972-3 (Baumeister & Placidi 1983:48). The major motivations of hippie movements either died down or were forgotten about as the American political and social atmosphere changed drastically into the 1970s. After several negative events—particularly the death of Meredith Hunter, sensationalist news stories about LSD ruining lives, and the heavy commercialization of hippie culture—the reputation of psychedelia became notorious.

There was also vehement cultural and social backlash against psychedelic drugs that, after the above deaths, caused the popularity of the drugs to wane significantly. Psychedelic drug use was associated with making youth lazy and rebellious. Since psychedelia was largely popular with white and middle-class youth, the use of psychedelics was seen as particularly dangerous and immoral: “the reason LSD in particular (more than other drugs) was singled out for vehement opposition probably has to do with its use by mainstream citizens. Middle America would tolerate minority and ghetto youngsters taking drugs, but LSD was a phenomenon of white middle- and upper-class youth, which made it salient” (Baumeister & Placidi 1983:38). Richard Nixon’s War Against Drugs acted as a finality to the widespread psychedelic drug movement, causing widespread stigmatization, criminalization, and fear of drug use. Finally, into the early 1970s, the economic atmosphere in America was changing. A series of recessions occurred, unemployment rose, and the general optimism of youth was quickly disappearing (1983:50). Thus, people were more attracted to drugs that offered a mental escape from one’s problems, rather than provoking deep thought and hyperawareness of reality. While psychedelic drugs such as DMT and MDMA were further studied in the 1980s and 90s, psychedelic research had largely come to a halt until the 2010s (1983:11-16).

Revivals of Psychedelia

There have been multiple revivals of psychedelic music throughout the decades, though none as popular as the original incarnation. This has spawned several subgenres of psychedelic music, such as paisley underground and neo-psychedelic. Similarly, vintage-

inspired fashions of the 60s and 70s are becoming popular in the 2020s, trends being rehashed as “bohemian,” “festival,” or “vintage” fashion.

Despite the negative media campaigns against psychedelic drugs over the decades, psychedelics were still popular in different iterations and contexts. MDMA or “ecstasy” gained popularity in the 80s and 90s as a rave or party drug. The popularity of MDMA simultaneously rose with the popularity of raves: long parties that played electronic or upbeat music (Jenks 1997:51). During the 80s and 90s, additionally, there was a resurgence of nostalgia and interest in the original 60s psychedelic movement. A wave of neo-psychedelic bands began, along with psychedelic-inspired genres such as shoegaze, trance music, and other types of electronic dance music.

Over the decades, psychedelia has remained a rave and festival culture, where live music settings are important places to meet people, use psychedelic drugs, and listen to psychedelic music. Similar to psychedelic rock, new psychedelic music is marked by droning and abstract instrumentals, with use of many effects such as heavy reverb. Concerts may also have light shows, and audience members may be encouraged to wear colorful clothes (rave fashion) to these events. However, unlike original psychedelic rock which was heavily influenced by blues, neo-psychedelic and its offshoots usually embrace electronic and dance music elements rather than distortion and guitar-heavy sound. Similar to psychedelic festivals of the 60s, which usually had overt political purposes or demonstrations, rave music and rave culture were subversive to mainstream society with their own fashion style, rituals, lingo, and ways of discussing and spreading political ideology.

Separate from rave culture, there are several bands, brands, and groups that embrace nostalgia for the 1960s iteration of psychedelia. Several modern musicians and bands have psychedelic pop influence (Tame Impala, MGMT) while others have a more overt 60s rock style (King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard, The Brian Jonestown Massacre). Popular clothing brands and companies such as Forever 21 and Anthropologie have shifted away from capitalizing on 90s grunge nostalgia to selling “vintage” styles of flare pants, knee-high boots, and floral-print clothing.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the prehistory, course, and revival of psychedelia is vital to understanding and analyzing its present incarnation. Today’s scene, as will be discussed, still has connections to the hippies’ fashion trends, leftism, and the styles of art and music. It is also, as will be discussed, still largely white, middle-class, and concerned with the same societal issues. While there are several aspects in today’s incarnation that are inspired by the aesthetics of the 60s, revivals of psychedelia have changed greatly over the past 60 years: music has moved away from blues and now incorporates electronic music; fashion is rehashed and mixed with current trends; and design is not as zany or colorful. The commodification of past trends contributes greatly to the contemporary psychedelia, as psychedelic media is often repeated and watered-down to appeal to the tastes of a wider, non-hippie audience. Just as the original hippie movement was eventually commodified for the masses, the subculture suffers from cycles of repetition that are further detached from the original movement. This study will discover how psychedelia exists in the present, why it continues, and what aspects of it are still relevant.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

This project spurred from a deep interest in counterculture and desire to observe and explain the progression and persistence of “old” subcultures. In modern society, it is increasingly common to find niche groups, especially on the internet, of subculture revivalists who enthusiastically revive fashions and aesthetics of previous decades. In most cases, these groups are comprised of young people with interests in subcultures that originally occurred several years, or even decades, before they were born. How much of this revival is based on idealistic nostalgia, and how “valid” can a revival subculture be in comparison to its original inception? Most importantly, how does 1960s “hippiedom” exist in the 21st Century’s political and social climate? I answer this hypothesis by analyzing several opinions and experiences of self-identified psychedelia members. My interview protocol was divided into three main groups of questions: first, I asked interviewees a series of questions about how they became involved in psychedelia, their most significant experiences with psychedelics, and how they feel they have changed since these experiences. The second set focuses on the social aspect of psychedelia, questioning who else interviewees know in psychedelia, what activities they participate in, and what a psychedelia member is and is not. Finally, the third set asks interviewees political affiliation, what activism and volunteering they participate in, their values and morals, and their opinions on American society. This paints a picture of both the individual psychedelia member and their experiences within the subculture, and their relationship with drugs, the subculture, American society.

I conducted interviews for this study between April and September 2022. Before starting this project, I had a surface-level familiarity with music fandom and psychedelic fans on the internet. 3 interviewees were people I already knew who expressed interest in participating in the study. The rest of the interviewees were culled from various psychedelic groups on different internet platforms: I advertised my study in psychedelic Facebook groups and group chats, and reached out to individuals on Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr that shared psychedelic content. It was through some of these discussion boards, accounts, and groups I was already following that I gathered my first interviewees.

After interviewing acquaintances and people I assumed would be interested in the study, I branched out to larger forms and websites I am not familiar with. For example, a large percentage of my interviewees volunteered from a large Facebook group (now shut down by Facebook moderators) that focused on discussion of psychedelic drugs in a private and supportive environment. Members of this group discussed harm reduction, shared memes, artwork, and articles related to psychedelics, and asked questions regarding different psychedelic drugs. I had advertised my study in a few different psychedelic groups, but this one was the most successful. I also publicly posted about my study on Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr, where my posts were shared by others and garnered more visibility. After explaining the study and requesting interviewees, several people commented and messaged me or emailed me. It was from there we discussed a time to schedule an interview, and what the interview would entail. Before the interview, I emailed interviewees a consent script (which I read aloud at the beginning of the

interview) and a post-interview survey which asked demographic questions such as their race, age, gender, and occupation. Most interviewees did not fill out the survey.

Despite several cancellations, incidents of ghosting (interviewees never contacting me after a period of time), no-shows, schedule conflicts, and other obstacles, I conducted over half of my interviews within the first three months of starting the interview phase. As time passed, it was more difficult to find people who wanted to be interviewed; after several months of reaching out to various individuals (some interviews took several weeks of rescheduling to finally complete), I was able to successfully complete 19 interviews. In the process of trying to get interviewees, I faced a major obstacle concerning trust: some individuals and interviewees were wary of discussing their drug experiences with a stranger. There were times I had to explain that I was not a threat (notably I had to explain to multiple people I was not an undercover cop), and assure them I was a university student completing a thesis. While some individuals did not want to take the risk by speaking to me, I was able to build repertoire when necessary by offering them proof of my identity as a graduate student (such as offering them to email my thesis advisor if they had any questions). However, some interviewees were very enthusiastic about being interviewed, and did not question my legitimacy.

My data is composed of 19 in-depth interviews in which I asked subjects to describe their experiences with psychedelics, their philosophy, and their political affiliation, and how these three subjects are related. Most interviewees were white and not mixed with another race (15/19) and in their 20s (17/19). 12 interviewees were male, 6 were female, and 1 identified as nonbinary. 5 interviewees identified under the transgender umbrella (such as being binary transgender or gender nonconforming).

18 of 19 interviews were conducted on the video software Zoom; the outlying interview was done in-person. Zoom made it convenient for interviewing subjects in different parts of America on a more flexible schedule. Zoom was also beneficial in relation to allowing us to stay distanced with the prevalence of COVID-19 at the time. I recruited interviewees through advertising this study on social media sites and psychedelic-related forums on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr. I also asked participants to refer people they think would be interested in being interviewed. I only interviewed Americans (people who consider themselves as a member of American society, and have been living in the country for several years), as this study analyzes American society and politics specifically. I chose qualitative methods because existing research I have seen usually employs quantitative or survey methods. There is a lack of specific narratives and experiences from users; while surveys allow researchers to measure personality traits in an efficient way, I feel that this is a gap in literature that I address. I have operationalized and analyzed subjects' personal experiences to find common experiences, thoughts, and opinions within them.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour. The comfortability and casualness of interviews varied: some interviewees gave very short and lacking responses that had to be continuously probed, while other interviewees went on very long tangents. Some interviewees admitted they loved talking about psychedelics and psychedelic experiences, which made them much more comfortable and enthusiastic to discuss their thoughts. However, speaking about drugs with a stranger was awkward for other interviewees, whose interviews ended up being very short. I recorded audio of all interviews, wrote notes during them, and later transcribed each recording. My data analysis consisted

mainly of pattern-finding in interviewees responses and experiences. For example, Chapter 4 discusses interviewees values: I tracked common words, values, beliefs, and feelings interviewees would mention and see which values they had in common. I also kept track of commonalities in their lives, such as their childhoods, the drugs they used, what kinds of activism they engage in, and what political figures they support.

Chapter 3 introduces interviewees and discusses their most significant experiences while using psychedelic drugs. Chapter 4 delves into the social aspect of the subculture: where psychedelia members meet, what opinions they have, and how they feel about other people within the subculture. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses interviewees' political views, politicians they support and why, and their opinions on society, authority, various social issues, and in what ways they engage in activism or volunteer work in response to these social concerns.

CHAPTER 3: PSYCHEDELIC DRUG EXPERIENCES

Introduction

The experiences, “trips” or “highs” that interviewees have from psychedelic drugs have impacted them with varying degrees of intensity. Interviewees were asked if they could recall a psychedelic experience they would describe as the most important or impactful to them, and recall how this experience had affected them. While a few interviewees did not have a psychedelic experience that was personally impactful for them, most interviewees recalled and described a psychedelic experience that not only influenced them in the moment, but also changed them in some way after the experience. These trips ranged from being very pleasant, casual experiences; to being highly emotionally charged; to being intense and terrifying.

This chapter discusses in what ways psychedelic experiences are important to users, how users process these experiences, and how psychedelic subculture can influence these processes. Interviewees discuss what inspired them to try psychedelics, their trip experiences, and how they feel they have changed since these significant psychedelic trips. The social rules in taking psychedelic drugs are also discussed: most interviewees are introduced to psychedelics from other people, take them in the presence of one or more people, and learn specific information from others on how to properly take the drugs. While most research agrees that psychedelic experiences can be greatly

positive events, interviewees discuss a diverse range of experiences and their impact on their beliefs.

Inspiration to Take Psychedelics

When asked what made them want to try psychedelic drugs, interviewees mostly responded by stating that they were curious about the drugs, or that they contributed to giving them social capital. Psychedelic drugs gave people like Julie, a 38-year old white woman in the South, and Nick, a 25-year old white psychology student, a reason to bond with other people who did the drugs in party or rave environments. Katie, a 23-year old childcare worker, and Mary, a 24-year old artist, were able to form deeper bonds or have vulnerable conversations with their friends that they normally wouldn't if they were sober. Julie recounted having an extremely significant bonding experience with a stranger while on ecstasy, which was an impactful and pleasant experience for her. Psychedelics have been described by interviewees as lowering their inhibitions; being under the influence of psychedelics have helped these few users speak honestly, be more outgoing, and bond with others more deeply than they would if they were not under the influence of the drugs.

All but two interviewees were introduced to psychedelic drugs through a friend or family member. The two who were not sought out psychedelics on their own after becoming curious about them through their own research. Since psychedelic drugs have the tendency to suddenly cause the user to have intense or bad trips, a "tripsitter," someone who is sober and has used psychedelics before, usually accompanies the user in case they begin to have a bad reaction to the drug. A good tripsitter is marked by the following attributes: they have experience using psychedelics in the past, they are

responsible, and they are able to calm or console the tripper in the event of a bad trip. For example, a tripsitter would be responsible for keeping the tripper safe, for controlling the environment (through playing music or having a conversation), and giving the tripper expectations for the type of drug and dosage they take. A bad tripsitter, by contrast, would let the inexperienced tripper be in dangerous situations (such as driving, or going outside alone), make them feel scared or emotional, or otherwise make their experience unpleasant and dangerous. All interviewees but the two previously mentioned had their first or major psychedelic experience in the presence of one or more people.

Preliminary psychedelic experiences are similar to preliminary marijuana experiences as observed in Howard Becker's "Becoming a Marihuana User" (1953) in that, 1.) both psychedelics and marijuana are done recreationally (in that they are mostly nonaddictive and often used for pleasure) (Becker 1953:235) and 2.) have specific and almost complex rituals to use them. Parallel to Becker's description of beginning marijuana use, interviewees were in specific environments to use psychedelics, and usually did not have intense significant trips their first time. Few interviewees claimed their very first psychedelic experience as their most significant: most interviewees had to experiment with psychedelics multiple times before experiencing something they would describe as emotionally or personally momentous. Like the novice marijuana user learning the technique of how to get high (learning the correct technique to inhale it, how to behave once high, and persistently using marijuana to get desired effects) (1953), interviewees have had to carefully pay attention to the doses of drugs they took, what environment they were taken in, and how to continuously take them. Likewise, the social aspect of drug use is immensely important, as others are able to "point out new aspects of

his experiences to him, present him with new interpretations of events, and help him achieve a new conceptual organization of his world” (1953:242). Being friends with experienced psychedelic users, being a member of a psychedelic online group, or simply reading about psychedelic experiences help interviewees to process and understand these significant events. As will be discussed later in this chapter, some interviewees had very emotionally or personally significant psychedelic trips.

Almost all participants were introduced to psychedelic drugs through friends or relatives. A common story that most interviewees share is: they were taught from a young age to avoid and fear drugs; they were eventually introduced to psychedelics by a friend or family member; their experience with the drugs were mild or pleasant, which abated the fear and paranoia they held about taking drugs. Robert, a 46-year old case manager, was first given mushrooms by a coworker. He explains that he was inclined to try drugs based on the opinions of others that contradicted what he learned from his parents:

Well, my parents were—I’m old, I’m in my mid to late forties, so I grew up in the Reagan era with the “Just Say No,” and all that. My mom in particular always told me to avoid drugs. It was never encouraged. There was no drug use in my upbringing...Neither of my parents did it, that I knew of. If they did it, they kept it hidden. It was, to put it briefly, it was frowned upon.

...Well, I didn’t [take psychedelics] until I was in my early twenties, so I had never touched any type of drug at all throughout high school. And then, when I was in my twenties, I started having more real-world experiences and meeting more people who were telling me different things from what I had heard growing up my whole life, and then I you know I experimented like people at that age often do.

Christian, a 24-year old stagehand, had his first psychedelic experience through his brother, who used LSD to have a casual, fun time:

So I first took LSD. But I was 20, and I got into it because I think my brother gave me like half a tab. One time he was like, “let’s just chill for the day.” I think it was like Labor Day weekend, like my parents are at the pool. So I was just

[going to] microdose, and that's cool, that's my first time. And then I've probably done it 5 or so times afterwards, and then stopped taking acid altogether when I had a very bad trip, and then had very bad time, like when it's psychosis...

Christian and Robert's first psychedelic experiences went directly against the perceptions of drugs they were taught. Realizing their first experiences were positive incidents, they were not afraid to do psychedelics again in the future. Usually interviewees are introduced to the concept of drugs in a negative context to deter them from use. Once interviewees have, as Robert said, "started having more real-world experiences and meeting more people who were telling me different things from what I had heard growing up," as in having experiences that went against what they had been taught. This has usually caused a more relaxed attitude towards drugs, since interviewees realize that (psychedelic) drug use is not as harmful or unpleasant as they had been led to believe. While most interviewees were inspired to take psychedelics at the recommendation of other people, some interviewees were inspired to take them through media such as music and books.

Psychedelic drug use is also associated with loosening inhibitions and boosting creativity. Mary, an illustrator and animator, was drawn to psychedelics because of the "assumption that they do help with art and broadening your horizons as a creative." Adam, a musician in a band that makes psychedelic music, was curious about psychedelics through his friends and through music. When asked what made him want to try psychedelics, he said musicians he liked made him curious: "I knew the Beatles had done it, and I liked some of their experimental stuff." Adam does psychedelic drugs with his bandmates, almost as an initiation. Because of the lack of availability of psychedelic drugs around him, James decided to grow his own psilocybin mushrooms after reading

books about Terrence McKenna, who notably popularized methods to grow, ingest, and experience mushrooms. James had already been curious about using psychedelics as a teenager, and decided to use mushrooms after being inspired by McKenna's method of using psilocybin:

When I was 16 I did psilocybin mushrooms for the first time. What I measured it to be was 1 dried gram. I grew them myself because I was already really curious about psychedelic drugs and I found them to be really difficult to find. I did it kind of impulsively because I had a good yield at that point, so I was gonna try it out now. I kind of did it with the intention of having a recreational experience, but I also was following Terrence McKenna at that time, and I remember he recommended doing mushrooms in complete, dark silence, so nobody's around and you're not doing other tasks. So I did it that way and I found that it was very enlightening—I wouldn't call it "fun," there were definitely parts where I felt joy, but it was more transformative. I felt I had alleviated a lot of angst that I had built up, especially in my teenage years.

There are multiple avenues through which interviewees decided to try psychedelics. Most interviewees had initially experimented with marijuana and, after hearing about others' psychedelic experiences, wanted to try psychedelics for themselves. While some interviewees such as James tried psychedelics alone, all interviewees were influenced by other psychedelic users (friends, Terrence McKenna, The Beatles) to try the drugs.

Views of Psychedelic Experience and Use

Interviewees had widely varying psychedelic experiences that they would describe as very significant to them. A few interviewees describe their most significant experiences:

Robert: So once I actually had some [mushrooms] presented to me. I took them and decided to find out. And it was instant love. I'm an artist, I'm a musician. I had one of my favorite albums playing at the time. I had just gotten home from work, and I, you know, have this bag of mushrooms that a co-worker gave me and I started to hear the music in a very different way...it was magical...There weren't a lot of visuals, just some, you know. Maybe the colors came alive a little bit. I didn't have the fractals, or anything like that. Mostly what it was, it was the music

really came alive, like I heard music in an entirely different way. I just got home from work, and I took a shower, and this shower was amazing... That was a long time ago...I talked about it with everybody else. I talked I talked about it with my girlfriend at the time. I talked about it with my girlfriend's mom.... I was like, "Oh, my God, everybody has to experience this!" I mean, this is this is nothing like what my mom told me. But yeah, I talked to a lot of people about it.

Julie: I was with friends. I was with friends, you know, downtown in the city that we lived in at a rave. None of our parents knew where we were, anyway, and we were at a rave, and I took E [ecstasy], but it had never been as strong as this time that I had taken it. And I remember initially feeling like, "oh, fuck I don't like this, it never felt this strong before," so I wanted to go to the bathroom and just splash some water on my face...I left my group of friends to go to the bathroom, which we—we always use the buddy system, but I think we all kind of just were feeling it super strong, and I didn't even tell anybody where I was going. I'm just out, and I remember, I was using the bathroom, and another person, a stranger, was probably about the same age as me. Maybe a little bit older, came into the stall too, because I just couldn't figure out how to lock it. But I felt—and this was a stranger—but I felt like we instantly were on the same plane, like she was having the same experiences I had...

I was there, and we just sat on the bathroom stall for I don't even know how long, it felt like an eternity. Talking like we had known each other forever but just because we were connected here, almost like I could feel what she was feeling, and vice versa. We didn't even have to really have the words for it, having the same exact experience in this person as a stranger. Which was not typical for me, because although I'm sometimes extroverted, I am a very cautious person like I am cautious safety-wise when it comes to stranger danger and that kind of thing. So, it was significant for me in that I made a connection with a stranger that I wasn't introduced to through a friend, or like we had no mutual friends, nothing like that. But we had this connection. So that was significant for me, because that never really happened to me before, just making a random friend...This was the first time I had ever felt like I made a friend not facilitated by being at school, or we know each other through class, or you know, something like that.

Olivia: My friends were eating [mushrooms] with candy in the morning for breakfast. They were like, "do you want some?" and I was like "Eh, I don't know." and they were like, "Just take a little bit." It was the most beautiful thing I've seen in my entire life. I'd never seen colors like that...We were [festival] staff. We were at the festival two days before the general population were there. So we're walking through the festival grounds at 8am, the sun's rising through the trees, and the trees are talking to me. It was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen, I was like "holy shit, I like *this*. Fuck the party drugs, I like *this*, this feels *good*." Just feeling a connection to nature. It was so peaceful. It was me and three other girls. It was the most beautiful walk I've ever taken in my entire life. I don't even know how to describe it, it was awesome. After that, that's when I was like, "okay, I like psychedelics."

Robert, Julie, and Olivia all had very positive experiences with psychedelics. These experiences caused radically positive responses afterwards: Robert felt so moved by his experience that he wanted everyone to try psychedelics. Julie's social anxiety was lessened under the influence of ecstasy, and she was able to have a deep connection with a stranger that she would not have done if she were sober. Finally, Olivia had a very pleasant and calming experience with mushrooms, so much that she decided to move away from harder party drugs she was doing before. Psychedelics have offered these interviewees not only something positive for themselves, but also a way for them to step out of their comfort zones, change their behavior, and build new connections with people and nature. These highs offered them new experiences they were not used to, and perhaps they would not have experienced without under the influence of psychedelics. Psychedelic experiences, they imply, are beautiful events that help the user realize and experience things they would not have sober: such as Robert's music hallucinations, Julie's deep connection with the stranger, and Olivia's peaceful connection with nature.

A few psychedelic experiences have resulted in drastic effects and changes in attitudes. Nick and Sam describe the aftermath of their respective major psychedelic experiences as helping them improve mentally, and feeling less hindered by their preexisting depression and anxiety:

Nick: I would say that I would definitely be different [if he had never taken psychedelics]. So, it's hard—obviously I can't know, but from my perspective, it seems like there is a very good chance I probably just wouldn't be alive, and if I was alive, it's because I would've killed myself. I was experiencing chronic, long-term, deep depression, just a deep sense of meaninglessness...I don't know if I would be alive today if I hadn't had some of these transformative experiences. And if I was, I think I would be a much less satisfied person.

Sam: My friends, my roommate, my partner—because I hadn't been living here [in their current location] at the time—had said they saw a night-and-day

difference in me. And I didn't necessarily see it to begin with. I would describe it as: it had basically vacuumed the detritus out of my brain. I know that sounds odd. I used to have to go back to my mom's, and she would leave me alone, and I'd basically be living by myself every couple days because I couldn't be around people or be perceived for longer than a couple days at a time. And since that trip—I basically moved in, which I never thought would be a possibility before. They describe it as a night-and-day difference; I wouldn't describe it that way, because I think it's some amount of agoraphobia or fear of other people had melted away, and I was able to exist around people more comfortably than before...It's not like an instantaneous change, but I would describe it as—I don't think I would be where I am today without it by any means...I would probably be a lot more depressed and anxious.

The aftermath of Nick and Sam's psychedelic experiences resulted in significant change regarding their mental health. While it has been long believed that psychedelic drugs can cause significant emotional responses, Nick and Sam experienced change *after* they had processed their trips. It was not the psychedelic substances that radically improved their mental health and perceptions, but the process of interpreting their experiences and feelings that helped them navigate this major event. Most radically, Nick claims that if he would be suicidal if he had not had his major psychedelic experience. Both interviewees affirm that this was not an immediate change, but they were changed "like night-and-day" nonetheless.

Some experiences were not as drastic, but still affected them significantly. Katie and Joseph's most significant trips, similarly, were more cathartic and emotional:

Joseph: I'd say the most recent time I did shrooms was the most impactful. Because I had just moved from [southern state] to a place where I don't really know anybody. And then I ended up doing a bigger dose than I had ever done before. It felt like the first time I did them but a lot more intense. [It had to do with] confronting things within myself, friendships. I just felt like it took so much more out of me. [After agreeing this experience was very similar to his first psychedelic experience years earlier] So for me to feel those same things...it felt like they're connected. It felt like I'm subconsciously trying to tell myself I need to not fall back into the same issues I had when I was younger. It felt a lot deeper within myself. Like I was crying the entire trip, and usually I only cry towards the end. I didn't even feel sad, I just had tears coming down the entire time.

Katie: There was one time I was with my now-best friend and we had an experience where she wanted to try acid, and she asked me if I would babysit her at her house, and all we would do was see what happened. She took it, and half an hour later she was like “I think I can handle it, if you want to take it as well” and I was like “okay.” Originally I was just a supervisor, and now I took it as well. So we’re tripping—and my best friend has autism, and I have ADHD, and we ended up talking about our neurodivergences [sic] together for hours. Being In each other’s arms talking for hours about it. And it felt like the first time I can openly discuss all of my feelings with another person who wasn’t a therapist on a human level, eye-to-eye. And I felt really understood and really accepting of who I was as a person...it was just hours and hours of conversations about our own brains. It made me feel so at peace...it was so cathartic and made me so much closer to this girl who is now my best friend.

Seeing that psychedelics can offer the user great relief, guidance, or good feelings, some interviewees purposefully take psychedelics when they are feeling down or dealing with a difficult problem. Olivia and Sam stated that they feel the need to take psychedelics when they need to seriously think about themselves or their lives, as a way to not only mediate, but to also give themselves guidance or assurance when in a tough mental spot—or, as Sam stated, “to realign my priorities and to get a grip on things”. When asked what he felt after his psychedelic experience, Adam continues:

Adam: At the end I did meditate to process everything. I felt relieved that I was alive. I felt like a kid, almost: relieved of all my adult life stuff mumbo jumbo. I was just light as a feather, bouncing around my room. I cleaned my room, too! I felt like I was renewed.

Me: Do you feel you’d be different now as a person if you’d never taken psychedelics?

Adam: Yeah. I probably would have been psychedelic still, since I believe every human is psychedelic. But it would just be different...I don’t know, a little more ego-driven, a little more doing-what-I’m-told kind of thing. Believing everything my parents say. Other than that, just taking my own path. And I’m grateful I’ve taken my own path—yeah, I think I’d be a totally different person. I wouldn’t have grown my hair out, probably wouldn’t have seen some crazy concerts that I’ve been to (laughs). I don’t know, maybe I would be the same person!

Though he is not certain he would be radically different without psychedelics, Adam’s psychedelic experiences have undoubtedly allowed him to embrace a new way self-

expression and adopt new interests (growing out his hair and seeing “crazy” concerts), and feeling a great sense of relief in his life. Several interviewees have similarly reported feeling relief from anxiety, responsibilities, or other problems weighing on them. Psychedelics have also offered Adam a newfound sense of renewal and thankfulness of being alive.

This data is congruent with the research that psychedelics can be used to alleviate the symptoms of some mental illnesses. Nick and Sam claim to have had debilitating depression/anxiety. While psychedelics cannot “cure” or majorly alleviate symptoms of a mental illness, the psychedelic trips that interviewees experience can cause them to undergo a period of self-reflection and mediation. This is also heavily influenced by who the interviewees process these trips with, and if they spend time processing them: Katie was able to process this with her friend, while Adam meditated and reflected on this experience afterwards. If interviewees did not have a supportive social circle that knew about psychedelics, time to process these experiences, and a way to inform themselves about psychedelic experiences, the outcomes of these interpretations would probably be wildly different.

While almost all interviewees reported their most significant experiences were pleasant, cathartic, or positive in some way, Nick’s most impactful experience was extremely unpleasant. During a very unpleasant trip, he hallucinated that he was being tortured: he was in Hell, his friends were torturing him as well, and he was doomed to suffer for all of eternity. When he came down from the trip, he found these things not to be true, but the aftermath of processing this event affected him greatly. This is an abridged story of Nick’s most significant, and horrifying, psychedelic experience after

taking four LSD tabs and puffing from a dab pen (a tool to vaporize concentrated cannabis) while camping with friends:

...And then next thing I remember is laying on the ground for God knows how long. Apparently, I was never on the ground, but I thought I was on the ground, and I was looking up at everyone, and they were standing over me talking about, “How should we get him help?” or whatever and then they basically decided “No, we don't need to get him help.” And I thought for sure, “Okay, I'm dying. I probably had a brain aneurysm or something, and I'm dying.” ...I thought I was dead. And now I'm back sitting in the chair, and we're all sitting around the fire, and I thought for sure that I was in Hell. When I was laying on the ground, I was thinking about all the things that I wish I would have done, like the ways in which I wish [I thought about] how I want to call my family, tell them I love them and everything. and so I'm back sitting in the chair. Everyone's sitting around me and I am utterly convinced that I am in hell, and that these people around me are just basically demons, you know they're just here to trick me.

[After coming down from the high] I thought about that experience the whole time until I went home, and then the moment I got home I went and cleaned my room all up, and I went and bought a bunch of frozen vegetables and everything, so you know my diet's really bad. So basically, immediately after that trip, I was instantly beginning the process of trying to improve myself.

...So initially after the experience, I immediately got home, and I started doing basic things like cleaning my room and eating more vegetables and that sort of thing. And to be honest, that change didn't last very long. That was several years ago. Now I have had more periods where I clean my room better, and I eat more vegetables...At that time I had spent the vast majority of my life extremely depressed. It just chronic intrusive suicidal thoughts and just completely [being] beaten down by trying to fit myself into whatever role I think I'm supposed to be doing. And it was a pretty miserable experience. And then something clicked after that...of just trying to do basic things to help me feel better, like have a clean room and eat food. It made me realize that well, if I can be miserable anyway, then I might as well do what I think I would like to do. And then probably about 2 and a half, 3 months after that experience I was signed up and back going to college.

Nick goes on to discuss what can be described as experiencing ego disillusion, where this was, in his own words, “completely shifting my conceptions of myself.” While this distressing and disturbing psychedelic trip was not the *only* catalyst for an immediate change in lifestyle, he did go onto say that he had drastically changed since using psychedelics, as was quoted previously: “I don't know if I would be alive today if I

hadn't had some of these transformative experiences. And if I was, I think I would be a much less satisfied person." This parallels with the above description of Nick's aftermath. This major psychedelic experience was seen as almost a near-death experience: Nick was convinced he had died, and reflected on doing life differently. Most of his hallucinations were from the perspective of being tortured (being in Hell), tormented, and in need to *accept* his role as a sufferer. When he became sober, the trip made him heavily reflect on his past and his relationships with people in his life (thinking about calling his family, wondering what he could have done differently in his past). While Nick's psychedelic experience was frightening and traumatic, to an extent it affected him in a *positive* manner. These psychedelic experiences are vastly different, yet all of them triggered a significant emotional response that interviewees had to process afterwards. While steps can be taken to control a trip (such as influencing one's environment), a trip can be completely unpredictable.

Presumptions of Psychedelic Highs

Because of the hallucinatory nature of psychedelic drugs, media (such as movies and music) use abstract sounds and visuals to demonstrate the psychedelic high experience. Media's interpretation of psychedelic highs tends to overexaggerate the drugs' effects. Mary and Sarah explain how certain types of media give the expectation that psychedelic highs are "crazy," but found their experiences to be much more mellow than expected:

Mary: So the first time I took psychedelics was mushrooms. I don't know what kind, I bought them off of a friend. I went to my girlfriend's house, they took the mushrooms with me for the first time. At first, obviously, I thought nothing was happening. When stuff started happening, it was definitely not what they hype it up to be in movies and TV (laughs)...No Jefferson Airplane montage of the

“White Rabbit” song. It was nothing like I thought it would be. I thought it would be really crazy, but it was very mellow, and I actually just sat down with my phone and took notes on some writing I was planning to do. It was probably the most low-key, gentle, almost boring high I’ve had. I’ve had a lot more crazy experiences being drunk or on weed.

Sarah: You hear all of these stories, people are like “it enlightens you, you’re a new person after.” My experience was, it almost in many ways did that for me, it did open my mind, but at the same time it almost allowed me to realize that it just brings out who you are inside, if that makes sense. Like before I took them, I imagined this like Rick and Morty-type stuff (laughs), but then afterwards you’re like “oh no it’s a very insightful thing, it’s a very personal thing, it’s not something you do to socialize, it’s more so something that you do to be in touch with yourself.” So, I think that was the biggest difference. Before it’s like this big scary unknown, and after it’s more like “oh well, it makes things more clear in my own life.”

While media’s interpretation of psychedelic experiences can inspire people to take psychedelic drugs, it can also give people a false or exaggerated impression of what the psychedelic experience is really like. Movies, songs, and television shows that feature a psychedelic being taken give the impression that the high will have intense visual hallucinations and act as a profound experience for the user. Sarah acknowledged that while her experience wasn’t life-changing as expected, yet she was able to learn and acknowledge how psychedelics can be a tool for personal insight and development, though her initial drug experience did not cause a drastic revelation. Both Sarah and Mary did not have “crazy” exciting highs as they expected to have.

Similarly, there are expectations for how psychedelic trips should affect users mentally and emotionally. Major psychedelic highs are expected to produce major, even life-changing, revelations and effects. Travis explains that he did not “learn” anything from his psychedelic experience, and explains how he and his friends experience and interpret highs differently:

And my friend that introduced me to [mushrooms] actually...asked me, “So, what did you learn? What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about the universe?” I went, “Oh, God! Was I supposed to learn something?” I said I didn't learn anything. I learned that the underside of that table is really pretty...[his friend] feels very differently about [psychedelics] than I do...it's more of a spiritual experience for her, like she says that she uses it as a spiritual experience. [It's] a way that she connects with the universe and the earth and everything. I just never felt anything like that.

Mary, Sarah, and Travis had expectations of what psychedelic experiences were supposed to be like, as they were socialized to associate psychedelic trips as having either intense hallucinatory effects or significant personal realizations. In Travis's case, his friend expected him to “learn” something about himself or the universe; what he “learned” was not profound (he remarked finding the underside of a table he was lying under during the trip beautiful). Since his friends use psychedelics for more spiritual and personal purposes, they expected Travis to have a significant spiritual experience as well. Though other interviewees have claimed their psychedelic experiences have imbued them with new realizations and inspiration to change their lives for the better, not all psychedelic experiences are pleasant, life-changing phenomena.

The volatility of psychedelic trips affects the drug usage of interviewees significantly: users who have a scary or very unpleasant trip, for example, may not want to use psychedelics in the future. What constitutes as a “major” trip is also not clearly defined: what may be considered significant and life-changing for one person may be seen as minor to another person, and vice versa. There are also unclear parameters in judging the intensity of a psychedelic trip: there are no measures of appropriate physical, mental, and emotional response that could categorize highs. However, based on interviewees' responses, trips they have categorized as “impactful” have involved a significant emotional response in the form of catharsis, fear, or happiness. While

psychedelic highs may be frightening, cathartic, mild, or intense, it is how the interviewees process these events afterwards that make them significant. That being said, not everyone has a significant psychedelic experience.

Interviewees have varying opinions on what circumstances are appropriate to take psychedelics, and who should and should not take them. Since psychedelic trips can be wildly unpredictable, and various factors greatly determine how a trip will be, interviewees discuss the risks of certain people taking psychedelics, such as people in a bad setting, or having a negative mindset. Adam speaks negatively of people who use psychedelics too often, or who do not respect them. In using himself as an example, he implies people who abuse psychedelics are young and/or immature, and need to be guided on how to use them properly. Simultaneously, the user also needs to learn about the psychedelic experience “on their own.”

Something I don't like...I just choose to not be around certain people that abuse it. People that don't treat it as like a sacred experience, but really just as another way to get high. I feel like that's a state I've been in before, but I feel like I've like grown up. Psychedelics and people that are new to it, or just starting, I'd like to help them and guide them with experiences. But I'm not gonna be around those people all the time cause a lot of those things I had to learn on my own, you know, just through experiencing and experimenting. Yeah, I feel like they need to do on their own. It's like being a fifth grader and trying to hang out with the kindergarteners.

Adam went onto describe his first experience with acid that he bought from a friend. He didn't know it at the time, but the chemical he bought was not LSD, but a research chemical called LSD-25i NBOMe. This chemical is a synthetic analogue of LSD which is similar, but not chemically the same, as LSD. Analogues of LSD and other psychedelics mimic psychedelic effects, but can cause the user to have more/less intense trips or different biological responses than when taking regular LSD. A common cautionary

phrase for psychedelic drugs said by different interviewees is “if it’s bitter, it’s a spitter.”

This refers to the taste of the drug and its safety: if the blotter tastes bitter, it should be spat out. He recalls his first psychedelic experience being positive for him but negative for the friend he took the analogue with:

I was 14 or 15, and I had taken what my friend sold to me, and my friend sold it to me as acid, it’s really a research chemical called 25i NBOMe. So it was pretty scary. Well for me, I had a good time personally, but my friend, it was his second time taking it in the same week. So, this was bitter. It was it up my mouth and I didn't know that at the time when I was 14, I had no knowledge of anything I was doing, I was just kind of doing stuff... We were all unaware that it wasn't LSD so we thought it was fine to do, and he ended up having a really bad time, and it was weird, because we were in the same room. But we're in completely different head spaces and he ran away, because he thought [we are] getting up to kill him and like, really messed up stuff. And he didn't talk to anybody, he...became quiet, like he was a really loud or rambunctious kid. But after that, he was reading books all the time, and not hanging out with us. He came around about 6 months later, and I know [this is] not about my experience, because my experience was good.

Adam took this analogue without knowing this cautionary piece of information. While Adam had a positive experience on the drug, his friend seemed to exhibit abnormal withdrawn behavior for several months. While having a bad trip can be unavoidable in general, having knowledge of what a drug is, where it comes from, how often it should be taken, and how it affects the body, are crucial pieces of information to know to stay safe when taking drugs. If Adam and his friends had been educated on what they were taking, its effects, and how to deal with the aftermath of the drug experience, this situation could have been entered with much more caution, or avoided altogether. While in the previous quote Adam thought psychedelic users need to both be taught about using psychedelics and learn about psychedelics on their own, drug users should be taught how to buy, store, and take drugs safely to avoid harmful or unpleasant circumstances as best they can.

The potential intense effects of psychedelics can cause people to have aversion towards the drugs. Abby is involved in psychedelic subculture and is the creator of a group chat that is themed around discussion of 60s and 70s music and art. They dress in a psychedelic fashion and consider themselves a hippie, and they have no interest in taking psychedelic drugs, partly because of their physical and mental state:

I'm a very small person, I don't weigh a lot, I don't really know. I don't want to know what's gonna happen even if I microdose. And I feel like I've never really been in a safe [and] confident enough mindset to do it...I have been kind of staying away from drugs in general, or smoking or anything just for personal reasons. But yeah, in terms of psychedelics, it just has never really felt needed for me..."

Abby does not feel psychedelic drugs are necessary to experience in order to be aligned with hippie culture or expression. Similarly, Dana notes the importance of the drugs to the subculture, but does not feel like taking them is detrimental to being a part of the subculture:

Yeah, I definitely feel like [psychedelic drugs are] a really important part of the culture. Whether I do it or not, it's got a great deal of influence, but it's not necessary to being a hippie. It can further somebody's experience within the culture and allow them to connect with it more, but it's like a person-to-person sort of decision, if that helps you like explore the ideas of being a hippie. Whether that be just like how you view the world, or other people, or love or whatnot. Then like you can do that. But if you feel that that won't like further your experience, and it's like, if you don't like that kind of thing like it's not like a mandatory part to the experience, but it definitely can work as an aid for whatever reason of course.

...I definitely think it's—especially like in the earlier iterations of hippies in the late sixties and whatnot—it was a crucial part to forming the community. I have no doubt about that, because considering historically where the world was at the time...I definitely appreciate how tightly connected [drugs are] with the culture...personally, I haven't really built an interest, especially with like the music...I can experience what I should be experiencing through the psychedelic drugs for the music...I haven't really felt the need to really experiment with [psychedelic drugs]. It's like I get some of it through the art that the people who are doing it were able to convey, but I'm just kinda here enjoying it.

While psychedelic media, like music, for example, can be made to be enjoyed while on psychedelic drugs, Dana believes that psychedelic media can still be enjoyed without the influence of drugs.

While Karen did take psychedelics, she feels that people with certain mental illnesses—usually more emotionally volatile or unstable diagnoses such as BPD or schizophrenia—should not take psychedelics for their own mental health:

I do not think psychedelics are for everyone. Not everyone should try it. Not everyone is capable of that sort of reflection, and that's not a diss on them. It's just genuinely—you can just ruin someone's life by giving them a psychedelic. You have to be a certain kind of person...I am schizophrenic and I deeply regret taking acid as many times as I did because I had three really bad trips. I could have done without doing that. I'm being a hypocrite, but I don't think certain [mentally ill] people should take them. Like schizophrenia is a pretty big one, borderline personality. I had used to be friends [with someone], she is borderline. And no, acid is just not a good choice for her. And people with anxiety. I guess it depends on the psychedelic...Acid is not for everybody. It can be worse for you.

While Karen calls herself a “hypocrite” for being a schizophrenic psychedelic user, she does draw on her own experiences and the experiences of others to assert her point.

Conversely, Adam had stated, “I think if everybody in the world [takes] a psychedelic in the right setting, I think the world would be just a peaceful, harmonious place...”

There are three interviewees who no longer use psychedelics for one of two reasons: having a bad psychedelic experience, or because psychedelic drugs do not react well with medication they take. Sarah refrained from using psychedelics after a bad experience. Christian stopped taking psychedelics when it affected prescription medication he began taking.

Christian: I haven't taken it since my 21st birthday...so I can't take it anymore, because my medication...it doesn't do anything at all. It's probably unsafe to do that, anyways.

Sarah: My last experience with shrooms was actually horrifying (laughs). I attribute it more to my mental health at that point in my life, I don't necessarily think that it was the actual substance I was taking. But it just kind of freaked me out and I just, you know, choose to step away from it until I feel like I'm in a better mind-space.

Many interviewees have asserted how volatile psychedelic experiences can be, and how easily they can be influenced by internal and external factors. In Sarah's case, she now abstains from psychedelic use until she "feel[s] like I'm in a better mind-space," or feels emotionally content and prepared to use psychedelics again.

CONCLUSION

Interviewees discuss a variance of psychedelic experiences and outcomes. Their experiences both support and go against preexisting research of the affects of psychedelics: while some interviewees expressed that their psychedelic experiences were emotionally significant and positive, other interviewees had negative or unimpactful experiences. Most importantly, as will be discussed in the next chapter, psychedelic experiences do not directly cause major shifts in opinions, emotions, and values. Rather, psychedelic experiences can act as the catalyst to these changes after a period of processing. Nevertheless, interviewees commitment to psychedelia, whether their trips were positive or negative, is important to the subculture: despite having negative or unimpactful trips, or ceasing taking psychedelics, interviewees still engage with the subculture and view psychedelia as important to them.

While psychedelic experiences between interviewees vary in setting, mood, and aftermath, most interviewees shared commonalities between how they were introduced to psychedelics and if their experiences benefitted them. Being introduced to drugs, and psychedelics in general, is largely a social activity. A large number of interviewees were

offered psychedelics by someone else who already had experience taking them. Learning about psychedelics through their own experiences and the experiences of others had changed their preconceived notions and apprehensions about drug-taking. While a couple interviewees note their initial psychedelic experiences as their most significant, most users did not have a “breakthrough” or a significant trip until after taking psychedelics multiple times, and after experimenting with doses and different drug types.

The effects of these major trips vary greatly. Nick, Sam, Katie, and other interviewees have reported feeling great senses of relief, catharsis, and acceptance of themselves. Other experiences, like Olivia and Julie’s, were more beautiful, casual, and social events. However, not every interviewee had positive and significantly personal trips: Travis remarks he did not “learn” anything profound or personal about himself after using psychedelics; Mary and Sarah’s trips were not as exciting or momentous as they anticipated; and several interviewees had experienced unpleasant trips at some point. This extreme variation shows that, as interviewees mentioned, highs of psychedelic drugs are unpredictable. A life-changing or significant psychedelic trip is not promised, nor is a pleasant or mundane one. Conversely, interviewees who have a significant and pleasant trip usually recommend taking psychedelics to other people. Other factors, such as medication, mental health, and the mood interviewees are in, greatly affect the outcome of a psychedelic trip. While psychedelics have greatly relieved some interviewees of their anxiety, or helped them process and understand their mental illnesses better, psychedelics have also caused some interviewees to be under extreme distress, psychosis, and unpleasant mental states.

There is no clear explanation as to why psychedelic trips vary from person to person, from experience to experience. While outside variables such as an encouraging tripsitter, a calm setting, or pleasant stimuli can encourage a trip to go well, there is no guaranteed method to make psychedelic trips go a certain way. Someone, like Sarah, could have several good psychedelic experiences and then have a bad one, to the point she did not want to take psychedelics anymore. It is for this reason that interviewees put great stress on “respecting” psychedelics (not taking the drugs and expecting the high to be a certain way), and taking psychedelics in specific environments for specific purposes. Attitudes about psychedelic use and in what situations they should be taken is touched upon in Chapter 5.

Finally, there are seemingly two distinct views on who should and should not take psychedelics. There is great concern about who may be fit or unfit to take the drugs. Interviewees like Abby not only does not have much interest in psychedelics, but notes their small stature probably would not be able to handle powerful drugs such as psychedelics well. Building off of this, several interviewees note how important mental fortitude is in regards to taking the drugs. Adam and Robert have similar opinions along the lines of believing everyone should take psychedelics, in belief that psychedelic experiences are extremely positive and influential events, and will improve the empathy and happiness of the user. Karen believes psychedelics, particularly acid, should not be taken by people who may be more susceptible to having intensely negative trips, such as people with extreme anxiety or schizophrenia. Other interviewees such as Sarah and Christian have abstained from using psychedelics after having an unpleasant trip. Despite this, there have been examples of psychedelics helping interviewees who are mentally ill.

Psychedelics have been a catalyst to help ease interviewees anxiety or depression, and help them understand their own illnesses better.

It is implied that psychedelic users must meet a correct external and internal “criterion” in order to take psychedelics safely. Loud and busy environments, isolation, and being in a negative or otherwise “incorrect” emotional state are variables that interviewees agree may make a psychedelic trip unpleasant. The next chapter delves further into interviewee’s social relationships and opinions on this topic. They discuss environments to take psychedelics, other psychedelic users, different types of psychedelic users, and further elaborate on opinions and unspoken rules that psychedelic use has.

CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL DYNAMICS AND VALUES IN PSYCHEDELIC SUBCULTURE

Introduction

Social dynamics are an imperative component for the function of subcultures, as subcultures themselves are social groups of people with similar opinions, expression, and interests. In terms of psychedelic drugs, almost all psychedelic users interviewed had been introduced to psychedelics by a friend or family member. For those who do not use psychedelics, they had been introduced to the subculture by psychedelic music. Most interviewees have been recruited from online spaces—thus the discussion of the structure and validity of online subcultures is important. The accessibility of the internet has changed the way subcultures are able to form and exist. However, all interviewees are engaged with “in-person” psychedelic activities, such as attending concerts, and meeting other psychedelia members in person. While no one engages with the subculture wholly online, as interviewees have varying degrees of in-person engagement and online-engagement, subcultures in the present are increasingly existing as in-person and online hybrids. As will be discussed, there are benefits to both settings: interviewees use in-person spaces to use psychedelic drugs with other people, attend festivals and concerts, and to meet local likeminded people at these venues; online settings help interviewees connect with a wider breadth of psychedelia members from many different places, and discover music, art and other psychedelic media more easily and rapidly.

Since psychedelia is largely a drug-based subculture, interviewees have strong opinions about how psychedelics should be treated, taken, and how they compare to other drugs. While music, internet, and recreational environments help interviewees meet other subculture members, it is often the drugs themselves that are the main variable that instigates and holds these settings together (festivals, raves, and parties are a common place to buy, sell, and use drugs with other people). Since psychedelics effects are largely dependent on setting and dosage (Baumeister and Placidi 1983:27), interviewees have different views of when, where, and how often psychedelics should be taken. Those who misuse or abuse psychedelics are viewed as irresponsible.

The basis of subculture, as Chapter 5 of Haenfler's (2014) *Subculture: The Basics* discusses, revolves around the concepts of authenticity, hierarchy, and boundary making (2014:85). Interviewees will discuss their feelings and opinions around other members of psychedelia, what beliefs they should have, and what behaviors they should and should not engage in. As discussed further in Chapter 4, interviewees have very similar political views and opinions on various social issues. Aligned with this, several interviewees believe others in psychedelia have, or should have, certain values and opinions.

This chapter will include and discuss the opinions and values interviewees have on 1.) matters concerning socialization within, and opinions on, psychedelic subculture, and 2.) opinions on psychedelic drugs, and how these drugs should and should not be used. The main components of this paper will discuss what the cultural components of psychedelia are; what values and beliefs psychedelia members hold; how members of psychedelia distinguish between insiders and outsiders; and contradictions of interviewees values, beliefs, and opinions on psychedelia.

PSYCHEDELIA AND SOCIAL SETTINGS

Psychedelia as a subculture persists today in several different forms, both in-person and online. These settings provide individuals with spaces to meet and interact with other likeminded people. Most social activities in psychedelia (besides drug usage) revolve around music, dancing, meditation, or discussing relevant topics. There are three main processes in which interviewees became involved in psychedelia: through friends or family members, through music subculture, and through online spaces.

The drugs and subculture provide a commonality for interviewees to bond and socialize with other people. Some interviewees have close in-person relationships with people who use psychedelics and engage in psychedelic subculture in various ways. Julie, who was introduced to psychedelics as a teen, occasionally meets up with a group of psychedelic drug users who discuss drug legalization and other related issues. Katie, a multi-racial 23-year old who works in childcare, occasionally has parties with her friends where they use psychedelics and listen to music. These events are organized by and for psychedelic users. However, Julie's example relates to formal discussions, while Katie's excursions are for fun.

Nick describes how he took psychedelics with a group of friends for spiritual or meditative purposes. Under the influence, they would listen to or read speeches by psychedelic figures and talk about their thoughts and feelings afterwards: "What we would do is take some kind of psychedelic, either LSD or mushrooms, and then [his friend] would put on the TV, like a lecture by spiritual leaders like Adyashanti or Ram Dass, or just some psychedelic talk like Terrence McKenna or something like that...and we would all lay down and meditate over the course of the trip and come back, and we

would talk about what our experiences were, what our perceptions or what it meant—so there's the direct experience, and then there's the meaning behind it, and then there's trying to directly tie that in to the way in which we should live our lives moving forward. Essentially it's a tool for meditation for my group of friends at this point.” Nick and his friends took psychedelics for the purpose of having deep spiritual experiences. The friend group served Nick as a small community to not only do psychedelics with, but to discuss their experiences, emotions, and thoughts after having these spiritual psychedelic trips.

Besides the substances, other interviewees were able to bond with others based on psychedelic subculture and interests. Abby, a 21-year old art student who does not use psychedelics, was able to cultivate a group of like-minded friends and feel more comfortable expressing themselves when attending university:

Abby: ...Where I grew up and where I went to school...[it] was very like rich, white, and Republican... And then I got to university, and it was a really big school in the city. So, there were a lot of people that I don't know. [Students] just felt a lot more comfortable expressing themselves in their own way, and that helped me feel more comfortable doing that.

Me: And the people that you mentioned, were they also aligned with your interests? Are these also people who would be in psychedelic culture?

Abby: ...Well a lot of them were musicians...We'd hang out at house parties and stuff. We hit it off because we had similar music tastes...we had a general interest in that sort of era of late sixties, early seventies kind of time period...”

Abby's social environment was mainly a monolith of students they did not agree with; when they entered a more diverse university, they were able to make friends with students they shared values, interests, and hobbies with, especially in relation to the 60s and 70s. Similarly, Dana, an Arab animation student, was also able to meet like-minded friends through a more liberal university environment:

...my in-person friends, since I've started art school, I've definitely been able to find some more people who identify as a hippie as one of their identities. I feel in general...they're overarching a few people, and their worlds seem to align with mine a lot. In terms of that fundamental ideology of "things surrounding everything that you do is encompassed by love in some aspect or another," that seems to be something that we all agree on. So yeah, we haven't really ventured too much into the topic, but it's usually things that they're more involved with, like spirituality. I'm kind of indifferent in that regard. I'm cool with anything, so I don't really ponder spirituality a lot, but I do notice that they venture more into that which is quite interesting, and they definitely experiment more with psychedelic drugs than I do.

Abby and Dana were able to move from more conservative environments to places where people expressed themselves more openly, and thus had the confidence and ability to express themselves in psychedelic fashion, and meet people with similar interests. Mary is the only one of her friends who has interest in psychedelic culture. Growing up in a sheltered home, she was able to express these interests more once she was in college. Thus, not only are personal relationships important to becoming involved in psychedelia, but an accepting environment to explore one's interests is also important for interviewees' personal development. Abby, Mary, and Dana benefitted greatly from finding online groups of people interested in psychedelia, which helped them discover and express their own interests in the subculture.

Psychedelic drug use and hippie lifestyle is closely related to certain genres of music, such as psychedelic rock and EDM (electronic dance music); those involved in psychedelia are able to congregate at music raves, concerts, festivals, parties, and clubs, where it is common to do psychedelic drugs, wear psychedelic/festival clothes, and meet people with similar interests and values. When asked what makes psychedelic music "psychedelic," interviewees connected the music as purposely made to be enjoyed *while* under the influence of psychedelic drugs. Nick says that psychedelic musicians "make

[music] for people who do psychedelics. It's just kind of a hand-in-hand thing. I think I heard the Grateful Dead made music to be listened on psychedelics. It's like audience participation in a very, very, very distant way. You're kind of feeling what they're feeling when you listen to the music." However, as Nick continues, the setting where one takes psychedelics and listens to music is very important to the drug experience. As was commonly reiterated among interviewees, the setting of where one takes psychedelic drugs heavily impacts the psychedelic trip: "If you're doing LSD or mushrooms in an area where more people are really high-paced, it's not really the best fit. And especially dark and enclosed areas...like if I were going to a rave tripping in a dark club or whatever, normally I wouldn't be too comfortable. But going to some festival where it's outside, you're camping, you're with a bunch of people who are more on mushrooms, ketamine, LSD, they're more on that vibration, that level. It's easier to feel more comfortable in that setting..." While both a club and a festival can be settings for psychedelic users to meet and do drugs, they are starkly different atmospheres: while one may be high-paced and dark, the other may be calmer and bright. Of course, this preference varies from person to person: Katie is a big fan of EDM, and Karen use to frequent dance clubs. Olivia, a PhD student who used to work in clubs and festivals, used cocaine when she worked in club environments, and shifted to using mushrooms when she started working in outdoor festivals. Psychedelics, rather than stimulants, offered her a much more mellow and pleasant high in the different environment.

Katie describes the appeal of rave culture in relation to psychedelics: she never had an interest in the culture before becoming involved with psychedelics. Now, she goes to parties with friends to listen to electronic music and do psychedelic drugs annually.

When asked if she had gained any new interests after doing psychedelics, she responded, “rave culture is one of them for sure, like I never thought that I’d get into electronic dance music. I had *never, ever* liked it before. But it has its purpose, and...to do LSD or molly, it’s the best music in the world.”

While Katie started to enjoy raves after taking psychedelics, Brad was introduced to psychedelic subculture and raves through a girlfriend in high school. He describes how being introduced to rave lifestyle changed his life positively: he was able to meet new people and engage in a scene that provided him with an alternative to social isolation:

She would be that kind of girl, she’d go to raves, so that’s how I got my first exposure to that. And then meeting other people in my class at the time would also go. This was like 2011, 2012. Saying, now I have something I can actually do instead of staying home playing video games and being secluded, I can hang out with these people, I can go to these things, I can take these drugs, have a lot of fun, meet new people. That totally different lifestyle hooked me for sure.

Raves, clubs, and parties are heavily-populated events where drug use is casual and meant for fun; this gives users the opportunity to not only meet other drug users, but to also have access to drugs, and use them in a fun, high-energy environment. As Katie mentioned, being under the influence of psychedelics can make the music seem like “the best music in the world,” or very enjoyable and upbeat.

Online Spaces

Besides music-based settings, many interviewees are able to meet other members of the subculture through online groups. Almost all interviewees (17/19) were culled from online spaces, such as forums or groups on websites such as Facebook and Instagram. Most interviewees are involved in online spaces that are specifically themed around psychedelic drugs or hippie culture, such as chatrooms, forums, and social media

communities. These communities allow for individuals to talk about drugs, their experiences, and other aspects of psychedelia in a semi-anonymous space. For example, some interviewees were culled from a few different private psychedelic groups on Facebook; these groups center around discussing psychedelic drug experiences, harm reduction and asking questions, and sharing memes, music, or other relevant information. In their rules and among their moderators, these groups encourage users to be kind and respectful to each other, and to not judge others' experiences and reactions to these drugs. Other interviewees are in less formal "communities" of artists and musicians who post about similar interests, such as fandom or art accounts on Instagram, Twitter, or Tumblr.

Abby, an artist, is involved in a large group chat that revolves around discussion of classic rock music, psychedelic art, and general aesthetics and media of the 60s and 70s. She found it was easier to meet and talk to these like-minded artists, musicians, and individuals with the same interests and beliefs than in-person. In addition to the group chat, she is also involved in "communities" of artists who are fans of the hippie aesthetic on sites like Tumblr and Instagram. It was through these online communities that Abby was able to learn about hippie history, and make friends with people who are also interested in psychedelic art, music, clothing, and other aspects of the aesthetic:

So just being online and being in classic rock fandom has allowed me to meet a lot of people...which I feel like is one of the main things I can credit to learning more about hippie culture. That kind of like an initiated me into the subculture. So, I feel a lot of the people that I've met online I've just found...specifically those art circles on Instagram, and like sort of Tumblr, but mainly Instagram, but specifically like, when I joined the [group chat] I was able to just speak to people on like a bit more of a deeper level, because I could like just before then. I sort of befriended some people within the culture. But once I joined that [chat], I just reached out a lot more and found out like, 'hey, this is really cool!' just this little pocket of hippies who like art and like [the] Sixties and stuff. So yeah, I feel I've

been able to talk to my online hippie friends more than in-person ones in terms of the nuance of the culture.

Julie remarks how being involved in psychedelic groups online had changed her assumptions about people in psychedelia. Before being involved in these spaces, she said she had been out of the psychedelic “scene” for a while, and would have been able to offer a more stereotypical description of someone in psychedelia before. Since joining the internet scene, she has a much more diverse view of the subculture: “...especially with social media, I’m in so many social media groups of psychedelic users from all walks of life, and from all ages, and all political backgrounds and socioeconomic classes...” The accessibility of the internet allows many people to easily meet people of similar interests and experiences. These online spaces allow individuals, with varying degrees of anonymity, to meet and speak to dozens, if not hundreds, of others with similar interests.

VALUES OF SUBCULTURE MEMBERS

Personal Values

In almost all cases, interviewees were self-described as left-leaning before becoming involved in psychedelia; using psychedelics or being involved in the subculture only strengthened their values. Politically, most interviewees agree that psychedelia members are left-leaning—or rather, that it would be hard to imagine a right-leaning psychedelic member. Similarly, people who identify as a hippie (regardless of psychedelic drug use) most often self-identify as left-leaning; as Abby notes how hippies were a notoriously left-leaning subculture, and a hippie identifying with right ideology seems hypocritical to the subculture: “Being a hippie is very much rooted in [the] left, or in general, just at least being somewhat on the left...people expressing oddly far-right ideals, how are you identifying with a movement that is inherently on the left, and then going the other way?”

Using the aesthetic but not the beliefs...being involved in the subculture, like it *is* both. Well, it doesn't have to be the aesthetic, but at the core it's the ideology, and whether or not you choose to adopt the aesthetic is a choice. But it's like, I don't know, it's usually both.” Abby describes the left ideology of psychedelia as being central or of utmost importance to identification with it, more so than simply coopting the aesthetics of the culture. Interviewees’ political views will further be discussed in Chapter 5.

In terms of what values psychedelic users try to practice, and the values of other users, my interviewees cited openness, compassion, empathy, and understanding as common traits. Psychedelia and hippie culture, which originated as a countercultural peace movement against the Vietnam War, have long been associated with peace and loving others as the central beliefs. When asked what attracted her to hippie subculture, Dana said, “I feel just the general sentiment, like the core beliefs of it, like when you boil it down, being a hippie really is just about everything centering around love.” When asked what values he finds most important, Adam, a musician in a psychedelic band, says “to find the love in everybody...everybody's capable of being loved, and everybody should feel loved even if they've done wrong before, or even if they have philosophies or ideologies about life that I don't agree with. I still think that they deserve love, you know, because at the end of the day that's what we all kind of want and need, and I feel like not everybody gets it. And that's sort of why...there are bad people out there, it's because they don't get love, or they don't feel like they received enough love in childhood.” Dana and Adam both emphasize the importance of *love*, which in these cases refers to showing kindness to others, even if one does not agree or like them completely. To love others, as Dana stated, is the core sentiment of psychedelia. Methods of loving others, as other

interviewees will discuss, would be values such as openness, kindness, compassion, empathy, and so on. Adam continues to discuss the importance of love in relation to psychedelic drugs, by explaining his personal development and opinions after his psychedelic experiences:

Me: And how do you feel that your psychedelic experiences have affected your perspective on the world [or] society?

Adam: I think being more loving towards everyone. And not just, you know, whoever I'm in a relationship with, or my dog. Love is much bigger than that. And I think just bringing smiles and bringing joy...you can really go a long way. I never really used to think that, I was more like self-driven and like, "I need to do what makes me feel good all the time." To some extent there's legitimacy to that. But I think being more like a servant can really go a long way. I think that would fix a lot of problems if people were just.... It's so stereotypical, but love is the answer. And that's what I believe with my whole heart, that love can solve so many problems. There's so much of it in the world, but not enough to go around, you know? And I feel like psychedelics can bring love into the world, it can birth love. It can also birth hatred if using the wrong setting, like my friend [from the Ch. 3 anecdote]. But yeah, I think if everybody in the world have taken a psychedelic in the right setting, I think the world would be just a peaceful place, a harmonious place with nature.

I didn't think all that before, that's for sure. I was thinking, "Oh, God, I gotta ace this exam! Oh, God! Oh, God, everything is falling apart! Oh, no I'm messing up everything," you know? But now it's like, I'll mess up but it's okay. I'll just keep on trucking, it's not a big deal to me anymore...I think it showed me that love can fix all our problems

Adam expresses several key concepts in these opinions. First, he emphasizes the importance of giving love and kindness to many different people, not just the people close in his life. In this case, "smiles and bringing joy" and other forms of kindness are considered acts of love. Second, he explains that before psychedelics, he did not value playing a "servant" role as much as he does now: while he acknowledges that focusing on oneself is important, before psychedelics Adam was more anxious and concerned with his own satisfaction and success. Psychedelics have, therefore, seemed to alleviate him of this anxiety and "self-driven" mindset, and put more focus on doing acts of service and

kindness to others. Finally, Adam believes with his “whole heart” that love—kindness, sympathy, charity—can solve many problems. Perhaps drawing on his own radically life-changing experience, Adam feels that psychedelics can also be agents of positive change for others, and embed them with the same peacefulness he experiences.

In a more abstract sense, “psychedelic” as a concept also deeply affects Adam and his philosophy. I asked him to elaborate on what he meant by the phrase “every human is psychedelic,” which he mentioned in the previous chapter, and which is the namesake of this study. He explained:

To me, the word “psychedelic” means something that can’t be explained. Now can you explain humanity as a whole or what it is to be human? Probably not. At least I’ve never met anyone who can, because everyone has such a vastly different experience. So to answer that question accurately would be next to impossible. Same goes with the psychedelic experience.

Personally, I’d like to see the definition of psychedelic be “something that can’t be explained” with a synonym of [bizarre]. It would be nice to be able to look up the word and not have the online definition say it’s related to drugs, but the word “drug” brings a certain stigma to the table when there’s so much more to it.

People have psychedelic experiences all the time without psychedelic [drugs], but they might call it something else. For example, let’s say you’re listening to a song as you’re driving down the road when suddenly the song says “bluebird” at the exact time you see a sign that says “Bluebird Street” [he later said this event happened to him earlier that day]. Most would call that a coincidence or synchronistic, which it is, but it’s also “trippy” or “psychedelic” with no drugs involved! That’s an obvious example, but there’s a lot more subtle things that happen at every moment of everyday to every person that can’t be explained. So that’s a small taste of why I think everyone and everything we know and experience is psychedelic.

Adam explained that “being psychedelic” is more akin to a way of being, or an explanation for phenomena that are uncanny or unexplainable. Therefore, “psychedelic” may not strictly refer to the effects of the drugs, but to a broader interpretation and understanding of the mysteries of existence. He compares the human experience to the psychedelic experience: as every individual’s life experience may be unique, so is every

person's psychedelic experience. Trips can be immensely personal, emotional, and bizarre. Likewise, humans contain multitudes, mysteries, and deeply complex and unique thoughts and experiences. The complexity of humanity and existence is in itself, as Adam implies, bizarre and "trippy."

Branching off the aspect of "love" in relation to psychedelia, having compassion is a way interviewees show "love." Having compassion and empathy for others is another major value that interviewees feel is important. Interviewees remark that since their major psychedelic experiences, they have tried to be more considerate, patient, and sympathetic towards other people. In the quotes below, three subjects give an example of admitting they do not know why other people behave, and people should therefore be met with empathy rather than anger or impatience. Psychedelics have helped these individuals approach unpleasant people and situations by stepping back and attempting to consider other circumstances and opinions that are not one's own.

Katie: I think kindness...one thing that taking psychedelics that has helped me a lot, is feeling sympathy—not sympathy, but empathy for people who have conditions like schizophrenia or other kind of dissociative conditions where they feel detached from reality to any degree...and doing psychs made me aware of how easy it is for something to happen in your brain, you perceive things differently or you experience false memory. And I started feeling very sympathetic about that. And I also started to move through life constantly considering what situation may have brought someone to the place they are. My boyfriend tries to describe it as passivity, but I do not let things get to me...even when it's extremely obvious that [people] are doing it to hurt me in some way, I don't know, I find it very hard for me to get angry at them. You know, what life circumstances have led them to this point? How would it help me to get angry this way? What would I wish someone would do for me if I were brought to a point to act like this? So I find myself constantly making an effort to empathize with people, and always consider circumstances that may lead them to a not-so-desirable place, and how I can approach that with compassion and understanding instead of anger. And I think that is something I got from doing psychedelics, understanding a state of mind other than my own, and how different minds can be, and I have to take all of that into consideration in judging a person's actions.

Katie reflected on many compassionate questions about others' circumstances and background, and considering their motives rather than making assumptions. She claimed that psychedelics changed her perception and method of how she approaches potentially angering and unpleasant situations: she consciously makes the choice to approach others with patience and kindness rather than frustration. She acknowledges that in these situations, getting angry at someone else probably would not help either of them, and considers what circumstances the other person may be dealing with before acting impulsively. Katie's experience is congruent with other interviewees' claims of "understanding a state of mind other than [one's] own," and attempting to try to understand the circumstances, emotions, and goals of other people rather than focusing on the goals of oneself. Similarly, Karen expresses the same opinion on compassion and understanding others:

I love the compassion part. Well, I want to say don't be judgmental, but I just am naturally a very judgmental person. But to take a step back from the judgment and just be understanding this person is very rude to me right now. But I'm going to assume unless they're being, like, violent or rude, I don't know if they're just kind of being grouchy in the line or something. There's no point in being rude back unless you want to cause more issues. And if anything, you can be a little bit nicer or do something goofy, and hopefully they'll just remember that.

Karen's main takeaway has to do with compassion and having patience and empathy towards others. While she admits she can be a judgmental person, she lists examples of ways she combats the urge to judge others by "taking a step back." In admitting she does not know other people's situations as to why they might be acting in a negative way, Karen tries not to let the anger or negativity of others deeply affect her. In trying to be sympathetic and compassionate to others, and to "be a little bit nicer or do something goofy," she hopes that her kindness will make an impact on other people. In a less

emotional sense, Nick describes openness to new ideas and ways of thinking is important to people in psychedelia:

They're not a monolith, of course everyone's different. But from my impression, one of the largest pillars for values for people who do psychedelics regularly or are a part of those communities, is the idea of openness. Just to accept that you're very limited in the data you have and you're limited in your ability to parse and organize it. To me that is the *biggest* takeaway from the psychedelic experience, you don't know anything...and consider why you reject [ideas you disagree with].

The most important, and common, takeaway Nick provides, is the idea of openness to new ideas. A sense of humbleness is required, as well, to accept “you don't know anything” and should thus be open to new and challenging ideas, opinions, and experiences.

While traits such as openness, compassion, and kindness are highly valued, most interviewees find conservatism and meanness as being opposed to psychedelia's values. While most people agree that many psychedelic users can be kind people, Joseph describes some bad experiences with people in the subculture who do not follow the associated political beliefs of psychedelic members: “I want to say that [people in psychedelic subculture] could be positive people and nice people, but I've definitely—I don't know if it's [southern state] or some bad experiences myself, I've definitely met some people who will do psychedelics, and are very deep into that subculture, and will be racist or be shitty people...and I don't really understand how you can correlate those together. I feel they very much go against each other in their values.” Joseph states explicitly that “racist and shitty people” are directly against psychedelia's values and beliefs. While they may be in the subculture and do psychedelics, they do not represent the values of psychedelia. Similarly, in a political aspect, Katie explains “I cannot imagine—and I'm sure they exist somewhere—but I cannot imagine being an LSD user and

maintaining conservative ideology.” While some interviewees such as Joseph have met psychedelic members who do not reflect the subculture’s values, they do not seem to outnumber psychedelic members who *do* practice openness, acceptance, and so on. It can be concluded that those who are conservative or right-leaning politically do not express or align with the values of psychedelia.

Interviewees had varying exposure or association with other people in psychedelia: some subjects knew of many people in the subculture; some knew only of 2 or 3 close friends. This knowledge varied from online spaces (interacting with many people who could be anonymous, or which the subject does not have a close relationship with) or in-person (people the interviewee does activities with related to psychedelics or psychedelia). No matter how many or few people interviewees personally know and interact with, most acknowledge they cannot speak for the values and beliefs of all members.

As mentioned earlier in regards to online spaces, Julie described members as coming from many different backgrounds, such as different ages, races, and locations. However, she saw a common denominator as searching for meaning in life. “I think people who use psychedelics, the only common denominator would be that they're seekers... searching for meaning and purpose. When you're not content with the way things are, you seek something different, and psychedelics are an incredible way to access something different.” With this information, Julie deduces that psychedelic users can have large variance—what they have in common is a desire for personal change and growth in the form of taking psychedelic drugs.

Nick further attests to the variance of psychedelia members and their beliefs. He describes the disparity of ideology between what psychedelia members are assumed to be like, and what they are observed to be like:

...from my impression, one of the largest pillars for values for people who do psychedelics regularly or are a part of those communities, is the idea of openness... So on the [psychedelic group] where you posted, there is definitely a lot of people who—it's tough to say if you got them into a conversation, if they would articulate that is something they would value—certainly they're not presenting that, they're not living that out in their day-to-day interactions on the forum and everything. For my friends I know personally, that is something they would articulate as a top value for them, is the openness to ideas. I don't know about the broader community; how many people would actually agree with that. My interpretation is that it would be a lot, but I don't know how many people are actually living that out in any sort of meaningful way.

While some interviewees may assume that psychedelia members demonstrate specific beliefs and practices, it is impossible to confirm if people in the whole subculture ascribe to these values. Interviewees usually draw these assumptions from their own friends, or other people they have witnessed who are a part of the subculture. As Nick stated, he acknowledged that there are psychedelia members who can be hypocritical, and do not outwardly practice openness or kindness. However, as Nick continued, it is unknown how these people may behave offline, or in other social situations.

Julie, while acknowledging there are “bad apples” in the overall group, speculates that psychedelia members share common values relating to wanting the betterment of humanity: “I think there's definitely common values, and you're always gonna have your bad apples. But I think there's definitely common values like the betterment for humanity... Some common values might be like, there should be no such thing as world hunger, or that war is bad, or the government is too intermingled, I think those would be

some common denominators. The government has too much say in needless unnecessary violence.”

As the next sections will assess, most interviewees believe the subculture is too broad to assign unanimous values. However, in their personal experiences, interviewees believe that psychedelic users they know or have come across generally hold similar values. As Chapter 5 will discuss, psychedelic subculture in the past and present is still largely associated with left-leaning, progressive values and political stances.

Most interviewees associate psychedelia with holding openness to new ideas, and being kind to others, as important to the subculture. The main conclusions that they discuss is 1.) most people in psychedelia are left-leaning, 2.) they value openness and empathy towards other people, and 3.) people usually take psychedelic drugs for personal, social, or spiritual development. Phrases such as “love,” “openness,” and “compassion” are repeatedly used to describe the core tenants of psychedelia. To be “open” or nonjudgmental to others and their ideas is to be willing to listen to ideas one does not agree with, to consider other people’s circumstances and beliefs, and to be more willing to accept new situations and experiences. Similarly, compassion and love refer to expressing concern, sympathy, or kindness towards others. Nick remarking that the most significant takeaway from psychedelic experiences is to “consider why you reject” ideas, concepts, or people one may disagree with. Thus, it can be implied that being a member of psychedelia requires a period of self-questioning and self-development.

As psychedelia members repeatedly espouse values of kindness and love towards people they may not agree with, there is a pattern of intolerance towards conservative, right-leaning, or unkind people. While this will be further discussed in Chapter 4,

interviewees have a strong dislike of personal and political figures who hold opposite opinions as theirs. It would be assumed, then, that interviewees believe (or stereotype) right-leaning people as unkind, uncompassionate, and unloving. As several interviewees previously noted, being open to new ideas, circumstances, and situations one may not initially agree with, is an important quality to have; however, these interviewees seem to staunchly dislike those who they interpret as being “shitty.”

Identifying as a Hippie in the Present

There are varying views and comparisons of what it means to identify as a hippie or a psychedelic person today. Interviewees, none having been alive in the 1960s, have had different ways of being socialized to the subculture. Some, like Adam and Dana, were introduced to classic rock when they were children. Others, like Mary, discovered psychedelic music and culture on her own without previous exposure to it. The subculture, mainly the internet, allows interviewees to learn about the subculture, art, and music, and meet other people in the culture, extremely easily and quickly.

Since hippiedom is a historical subculture, interviewees have varying levels of commitment and identification with the “hippie” label. When discussing her interests, Mary often noted that she had a lack of historical knowledge of hippie subculture, and said her interest in it is “shallow.” As she mentions, this is partly because she had grown up in a “sheltered” non-American family. She asserted her aesthetic appreciation of psychedelic subculture (listening to psychedelic music and wearing psychedelic clothes for example) without having knowledge of the subculture or the key figures within it is shallow engagement:

In terms of the broader [sub]culture, I am still pretty new to it. I did not grow up on classic rock or anything. I didn't grow up knowing anything of what the 70s were like in the West. That's why I have this fixation on it now, it's all so foreign and exotic to me now. I have to be honest, I don't know much about it. My knowledge of American and British musicians who make up the bulk of the psychedelic counterculture movement is really limited. I would say my fascination with it is quite shallow, a purely aesthetic sense...I'm a weeaboo, but for Americans! It's like the reverse.

Moe is another young person who spoke at length about the aesthetic value of hippie culture. Like Mary, he conflates identifying as a hippie with wearing "rose-colored glasses," or idealizing and picking-and-choosing certain aspects of the subculture. Again, there is a small prevalence of enjoyment and involvement in the subculture as being ingenuine:

Moe: I call myself a hippie as half a joke, because it's something that I associate so much with, a movement that's responding to circumstances which no longer exist....I guess everybody means something different when they call themselves a hippie, or at least there's multiple different things I think some people do...it's kind of a yuppie thing, or like a Tiktok aesthetic, but I try to take in a different way than that.

Me: What do you mean by like a yuppie thing, or a Tiktok aesthetic?

Moe: Oh, kind of like an expensive health food store, and kind of engaging with the new age. I don't like I guess like the like the people who, where they're coming from they have a lot of wealth, whether it's like a health food thing, and kind of like bohemian boutique type stuff, or it's also a lifestyle for them.

Me: Would you say that a "real hippie" is kind of related to the tenants of...authenticity?

Moe: Yeah, I think so. But also, I'm aware that I'm looking at how it was with rose-colored glasses and idealizing it.

Moe briefly mentions how pieces of the culture, such as the fashion, can be turned into an easily-digestible, casual aesthetic (which is implied to be ingenuine). While he admits he may be looking at the subculture and the past with "rose-colored glasses," he affirms, as will be explained next, that hippiedom has morphed into a commodified, and perhaps watered-down aesthetic. This implies a "correct" and "incorrect" way to live a "hippie

lifestyle:" the incorrect way would be a shallow, uninformed engagement with the subculture, or rather treating it as a marketable product rather than means of self-expression. When asked how the subculture is different today than in the 1960s, Moe mainly blames not only the changing political climate of America over the past 60 years, but because of the commodification of the hippie identity:

How [the subculture] changed, I can't say completely because I wasn't there. But I think a lot of a lot of what I've read particularly had pointed to a sort of commercialization that really drained a lot of energy from it. Now it's more like a subculture or something. You can take parts of it and you can take those more radical parts, but it's not something that's currently existing in the [original] form.

It's good that men can wear long hair now without getting harassed or grow their hair long, but [it's] almost gentrification it seems, even though a lot of this came from a middle-class background to begin with...How all hippies are privileged yuppies and stuff, it's not true, although...there's a more middle-class element to a lot of them. They sort of had kind of like a revolutionary flavor, which I don't mean it's strictly like militaristic sense, almost the opposite. But it did have a genuine energy of something that was like putting forth new ways of living, that we're genuinely a threat to the establishment.

...A lot of people moved in to like sell peace sign *tchotchkes*, or you know, like there's a town close to mine that sells tie-dye shirts for a lot of money, because, [it's] like a boutique...to try to sell it as a lifestyle that you can buy your way into...I think that's why people conflate them with yuppies a lot, because that's kind of the most commercialized element, or something that's taking parts of it. This is, you know, the common people I've talked about are taking different parts of it that I think...you see that a lot with Grateful Dead t-shirts or whatever is another example, of just kind of like taking something that's kind of counterculture and kind of draining it out of its energy, or what it symbolizes you know. It's kind of viewed by selling copies of it.

Commercialization greatly impacts the function and authenticity of subcultures. Haenfler (2014) discusses how while commercialization of subcultures can make them more widely known and more accessible to join, they can also diminish the subculture's "impact" or what Haenfler calls "defusion, wherein subcultures lose their shock value, their resistance potential, and become marketing tools." (2014:97). The commercialization and commodification of hippie subculture was a direct cause of its

decline in the late 1960s: the sudden media coverage of the hippie movement in the neighborhood of Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco caused a surge of interest in hippie culture and tourism to the area, which had caused the subcultural hub to become disenfranchised, commodified, and dispersed away from the area (Zaroff 2019, Harrah-Conforth, 1990). Since then, the hippie subculture has been reduced to stereotypical symbols, such as peace signs, tie-dye and colorful clothing, and band memorabilia of the time period. Both interviewees believe there is no way to be a “true” hippie, since the movement happened under historical circumstances. Thus, people can pick and choose elements of the subculture that appeal to them, and are not obligated to know the context or history of a movement in order to be involved in it. Moe believes that people, and himself, take pieces of hippie subculture to identify with and express themselves with. This correlates with post-subcultural concepts of consumerism and fragmentation: people interested in a subculture are able to pick and choose what aspects of the subculture they want to adopt, and buy products that are associated with the subculture (such as, as Moe mentions, Grateful Dead shirts and peace signs). However, commodification brings up a strict difference with authenticity: selling psychedelic paraphernalia for high prices, or co-opting hippie aesthetics without knowing the meanings or purpose behind it is seen as ingenuine and inauthentic.

OPINIONS ON PSYCHEDELIC DRUG USE AND USERS

Many interviewees believe that psychedelic users as a group is too broad and varied to make clear assertions about their values, beliefs, and behaviors. As discussed above, some interviewees have witnessed, or believe, psychedelic users to share positive personality traits such as sympathy towards others and an openness to new ideas.

However, many psychedelic users have staunch ideas of how psychedelic drugs should and should not be used. Interviewees also have varying opinions and perceptions of how psychedelic drugs are different from other drugs, particularly “hard” drugs. Because psychedelics are seen as nonaddictive and do not take damage the body in comparison to drugs such as heroin or cocaine, psychedelics are seen as “safe” drugs.

Psychedelics Versus Other Drugs

The classification of drugs as dangerous does not only rely on the physical effects of substances themselves, but how they are perceived by the public and by authority. Public opinion of psychedelics “dangerousness” has changed drastically over the 20th Century: only in recent decades, after a long campaign to criminalize them, are psychedelics reentering the scientific field. While many drugs can also alter one’s senses and body, psychedelics’ cultural context is distinctly different than other types of drugs. Drug classification and perception, Giffort says, “depends on culturally and historically specific beliefs and values about the body, health, and morality. Saying that drugs are socially constructed doesn’t mean that drug abuse is a fantasy... Yet how drugs are constructed shapes people’s actions, behaviors, and identities” (2020:3). As previously discussed, psychedelic drug use has the capability to cause negative effects on the user; cocaine, heroin, and meth also can cause the user great distress and unpleasant effects, yet these drugs are heavily controlled, and public perception of them is very negative. Marijuana was thought to be an extremely harmful and dangerous substance—in 2012, marijuana possession arrests were higher than arrests for possession of any other drug (Miech et al. 2015:337). Now marijuana is gaining medical and casual legality in various

states. The basis of this chapter explores what the perception and morality of psychedelic drugs are, and how they compare to the perception of other drugs.

Since the 1960s, the American government has employed a persistent propaganda campaign to criminalize and stigmatize drugs and drug users. The War on Drugs, the “Just Say No” campaign, and DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) programs created a nationwide fear of drugs, which labeled drug users (particularly youth) as dangerous and amoral (Monteith 2016). All but two participants came from families where drug use was discouraged; the two outliers had parents who were open with, or more casual about, use of ‘softer’ substances such as psychedelics, alcohol, and marijuana. When asked what interviewees were taught about drugs growing up, many mentioned the DARE program that was common in elementary schools. Scare tactics were commonly used to dissuade participants from taking drugs; most often participants were taught that taking drugs will ruin their life. Some interviewees, such as Patrick, were taught that all drugs were equally bad: “I was taught that they will ruin your life...if you use drugs you would amount to being a burnout...Everything I was taught is that just there's no variance, it was just any amount is bad whatsoever.” Most interviewees, like Julie, were taught drugs were dangerous by their parents or programs like DARE, but eventually were socialized by friends to try drugs.

Julie: “When I was younger...I wasn't really taught very much about drugs, except for the DARE program in the late eighties and early nineties, that was really our exposure to what drugs are, and the definitions of them, what they look like. And that they were bad, you know, like that was really the extent of it. I grew up in a big city...it was the eighties and nineties, so we were latch-key kids. We were always out in the neighborhood. You learned about drugs from your friends...”

Psychedelic drugs are interpreted differently than other types of drugs; they are usually seen as being ‘safer’ than other Schedule 1 and 2 drugs such as heroin and cocaine, which are associated with having high potential for abuse. When asked how psychedelics are different from other drugs, participants gave a range of answers: some participants thought taking psychedelics was a more ‘serious’ process than taking other drugs, given that one’s environment and mindset greatly influence a psychedelic trip. Other participants view each psychedelic substance differently: Sam, for example, viewed mushrooms as more therapeutic, and LSD as more recreational.

Interviewees had various responses and interpretations of how psychedelic drugs are different than other drugs. Some interviewees expressed feeling psychedelics were a “safer” drug than other types of drugs; for example, Jake claimed he liked psilocybin mushrooms for the fact they are “from the earth, it can’t hurt me.” Additionally, when first introduced to drugs, Patrick was afraid to try alcohol because he was taught it was very addictive. Some views are:

James: I feel like most other recreational drugs...propel you into [an] enhanced mood. I think that’s why most people do them, like alcohol, or uppers like cocaine, I think the reason people take those is to feel good. But psychedelics, I feel like, you’re not always guaranteed to feel *good*. I feel that in other cases, psychedelics enhance your perception. They don’t dull them like alcohol.

Jake: I feel like there's a very slim chance that [mushrooms] would be laced with anything...so [it's] completely natural, you know. No one's died from weed...it's from the earth. It's a plant, so I feel like it would be safer than doing something that was lab grown or of dubious origin. You don't know where it came from, you don't know exactly what's in it. Mushrooms, you know what's in it: it's a mushroom.

Karen first used psychedelics in party environments and in a casual sense: her first experience with MDMA helped her relax mentally and physically from emotionally and physically taxing situations she was in at the time. She had easy access to a variety of

drugs due to having a “situationship” (situational relationship) with a drug dealer and wanted to try “everything except cocaine, meth, heroin, and crack.” During this period, Karen would “want to do the absolute most [she] could” and would take large and/or frequent doses of acid and MDMA. She recalls a time when she took ten points (similar to doses) of MDMA in aim to chase the initial high. In turn, it ended up being a negative experience that took a negative toll on her body:

When I first started [taking MDMA], I just took one. [Her dealer] just gave me one and I was like, woohoo! it's fun, you know? And then the next time I wanted to try more, and then you can't do it. Like, I mean, you can take multiple pills during a day, but once you have your peak... So after the first time, I kept trying to chase that same sensation in the same high, but I never got to reach it again because it wasn't my first time.

The most I ever did was ten points. I want to say [ten], I don't remember. And it sounds like a lot, and it is, because it was within 6 hours. We went out dancing or something, then came back and I wanted more. And then like, I would do little performances, like we would just play songs and I was singing along to the songs and I just kept doing more and he was like, yeah, you probably should stop. And I was like, no, let's party, blah, blah. And then eventually I was like, yeah, I'm not going to reach that high. Like, I've already peaked tonight and I'm just like doing damage to my body. But I took the last three whatevers. And I remember being like, “oh man, I messed up for real.” And I just couldn't move. I can't eat when I'm on drugs except for like, weed. But I was just sitting still, completely stiff and I was hungry and I couldn't even move. And I wanted to use the restroom, but I couldn't. And looking in the mirror, oh my God, my eyes are just complete black holes almost. And then that day I stayed up for three days straight and I was like, “I'm not going to do that much again.” I still do it, but not ten points.

Karen discusses an important aspect of drug use: the peak. A common reason people fall into drug addiction is in effort to recreate or reexperience the experience of their first significant drug high, thus resulting in continuous use of the drug. She experienced severe physical symptoms after taking a large amount of MDMA in a short amount of time. While other interviewees claimed that one cannot overdose on psychedelics (as in taking a large amount of psychedelics will most likely not kill someone), taking a large amount of psychedelics can still result in unpleasant mental and physical effects.

The comedown after a drug high are also an important aspect to consider when comparing drugs. Olivia discusses the differences between taking party drugs such as cocaine and taking psychedelics like mushrooms. Unlike psychedelics, cocaine and molly have very unpleasant emotional and physical comedowns after their highs. Olivia says that party drugs deplete serotonin from the brain, and explains: “There’s a joke in the electronic music community, it’s called Suicide Monday. And after a weekend of being at a festival or going to events, if you’re rolling on Monday, you feel like you want to commit suicide because you have no serotonin. Whereas with psychedelics, like mushrooms, acid—I would include ketamine in that too—those drugs don’t make you feel like that.” While psychedelics highs can be, at their worst, frightening, the comedown after taking these drugs is, by comparison, very mild compared to the physical comedown of other drugs.

Robert discussed views of psychedelics and non-psychedelic drugs at length. He describes taking psychedelics as a completely different experience than with taking other kinds of drugs: particularly, how psychedelics are simultaneously low-risk and nonaddictive, but the nature of psychedelic highs is unpredictable. Interviewees greatly value the type of psychedelic they are using, who they use it with, where it comes from, and what environment they are in during their trip.

Robert: ...there's something different about psychedelics, and mushrooms in particular. Those are my go-to because I don't like chemicals. I don't trust a lot of things that you know you find it a concert, or that you get from some person who got from some person. If I don't know that it's natural and all that, I don't like it. You know your alcohol, your cocaine, heroin, even weed; you know all that stuff you have—if you're an addict, you're hardwired in a way that you crave those things. Psychedelics you really don't crave. It's not something you want to do too often because of the fact that it can be absolutely terrifying. [On taking a lot of mushrooms] ...It doesn't make you feel good physically...it can be fun, don't get

me wrong. It can definitely be fun. but it's not something that you're going to take and have a good time...People know they're gonna go out to the bar with their friends, [have a] few beers and have a good time. Psychedelics are not that.

...I've never known anybody who's taken psychedelics and was ashamed of it. But I do know that a lot of people who have taken harder drugs, you know, crack cocaine, heroin, things like that, and were ashamed of it to the point that they wouldn't tell anyone about it other than their friends...

Me: Why do you think that harder drugs like heroin, cocaine, and meth have a worse reputation than psychedelics?

Robert: Because I've never known anybody in my long, long life who sold everything they own, become homeless, lost their family, lost everything because they took acid or because they took mushrooms. I've never heard of that. I don't know of any documented case, and maybe it's out there. But I don't know, I mean maybe somebody with schizophrenia or something did some shit like that. But you hear that all the time with, you know, cocaine, heroin, that sort of thing.

Me: So you would say that chemical or physical dependency is very important here?

Robert: Absolutely. You're not gonna get physically dependent to psychedelics. You can get psychologically dependent to a degree. Well, yeah, I know there are because I used to study this stuff. But I mean if you if you're looking comparatively, if you're looking statistically at psychedelics specifically versus any of those other things one on one, and I'm hesitant to throw cannabis in that mix because I think cannabis is also medicine. The people you I personally don't use it often. But when you get to things specifically like opioids and cocaine, and now Adderall is up in there too, things like that, you start seeing a lot more dependence than you do with psychedelics.

Robert's personal experiences and knowledge of drug research impassion his opinions on the relative harmlessness of psychedelics in comparison with other drugs. He draws on multiple personal experiences—or lack thereof—to assert several points about what psychedelic drugs do and do not do. Robert's background in drug research has exposed him to much data and scenarios: from his experience and knowledge, he affirms that psychedelics, in comparison to many other drugs, are relatively harmless to the livelihood, and physical and mental health of users. Again, while psychedelic experiences can be “terrifying,” he asserts that there have been no extreme cases where a person's life

has been severely and negatively affected by psychedelic use on the scale that heroin, meth, or cocaine addiction has caused.

Since setting and health are highly influential to psychedelic highs, psychedelics almost require a specific environment to be taken in order to be enjoyable. Olivia had a major change in her lifestyle in her mid-20s, where she was not only moving away from party drugs, but also entering a new phase in her life, as in going to college. The friends that she used to do party drugs with, such as cocaine, were not supportive of her new lifestyle:

There was sort of a break in my mid-20s, between 24 and 25—this is where I was moving out of using party drugs and moved into psychedelics. This is also when I went back to school and was sort of getting my life together. It was very divisive in my friend group. And I'm not friends with those people...the friend group that I had, all we knew was partying together. We would go out and do a fuckin' 8-ball of cocaine between us every weekend. I stopped doing that because it started to make me feel like shit, and those friends, I think, started to resent me for that...

She goes on to mention that her old friend group are still using party drugs since this rift in their friendship. Olivia had found that party drugs were taking a toll on her physically and mentally (making her “feel like shit”), and found that taking these drugs was a large part of her relationships with this group of people. She eventually accepted that she cannot make amends with her old friends, as they now live very different lifestyles.

Psychedelics may be seen as almost the antithesis of harder drugs, as drugs such as acid and mushrooms do not stimulate the body the way Adderall, cocaine, and other stimulants do. The environments for these drugs differ, as well; as previously mentioned by Nick, club and party environments, where stimulants are usually taken, may be very uncomfortable to be on under the influence of psychedelics. Many interviewees find being at home, or being outside with few people as optimal environments for taking

psychedelics. These lifestyles (party culture and psychedelic culture) can be viewed as opposite.

There are several inconsistencies with interviewees statements and opinions on various drugs. The general thought between interviewees is that psychedelics, unlike other drugs discussed, are seen as non-habit forming, and do not cause extreme harm to the body. However, there is not enough research to support this claim wholly. There have been myriad studies on psychedelic drugs assisting in psychotherapy, mental health issues, and addiction to other substances (Kvam et al. 2018). In particular, ketamine, psilocybin, and ayahuasca have showed positive therapeutic results in treating alcohol and nicotine addictions, and in therapeutic measures for depression, schizophrenia, and PTSD. Celia Morgan et al (2017) discuss that while psychedelic treatment has promising effects, they still acknowledge there is potential for psychedelic drug abuse and dependence: “abuse potential of all of these compounds particularly when used therapeutically appears to be low: the serotonergic hallucinogens have not been associated with subsequent addiction whereas ketamine and dissociated anaesthetics have some potential for abuse, although this has not been observed when it has been used in therapeutic settings” (2017:74). While Karen, for example, claimed to be averse to “harder” drugs like heroin and meth, overusing MDMA also caused distress for her mentally and physically. While many interviewees do not think psychedelic drugs are addictive physically, they do have the potential to possibly be dependent on them psychologically, especially if the psychedelics are being used in lieu of other drugs or substances, or for psychological treatment. Furthermore, psychedelics can cause severe psychedelic distress to users. Some interviewees have stopped taking one type of

psychedelic drug, or psychedelic drugs altogether, after having a mentally disturbing trip. While this would not damage the body physically, these trips can be very distressing and disturbing to the individual.

Superiority and Authenticity

Haenfler (2014) defines the concept of authenticity as members of a subculture labeling behavior as good or bad, and to express what are perceived as the “real” tenants of a subculture (2014:83). Some interviewees mention how other people in psychedelic subculture can have a sense of superiority over others. This can entail being more “woke” or more “enlightened” than other people. These individuals can exclude other psychedelic users. Karen says that her city “is full of...I said it before woke people, but they're just like, almost exclusive, like, they want to be better than you and like, ‘oh, well, I had a bigger, better trip than you. And so, I'm a more important person in this conversation.’ It's like we're all here to do drugs, pretty much. So there shouldn't be an attitude of being better than anybody.” People who express superiority over others are seen as dishonest members of psychedelia. Later on, Karen mentioned genuineness between psychedelic users, particularly about those who talk over others, and exclude others: “Like what makes them likable and not likable how genuine they are in their interactions... like over you when trying to talk about psychedelic experience, it just seems like they don't want to share...There's like exclusionary people, and then there's people who are nice and friendly about it.” Karen asserts that there are exclusionary people within the subculture. Genuineness and humility are valued traits to have, as Karen expresses dislike for those who are dishonest or act superior.

Brad expressed an inability to become deeply involved in the subculture because of the nature of superiority and inauthenticity within it. “I felt it was always hard for me to get into the psychedelic culture because, to me, it was mainly spiritual stuff. Yoga, meditation, all this stuff, I always thought it was kind of silly. I saw it more as theatrics. I saw it more as a fandom. ‘Cause these people are acting very awakened to the world because they’re doing this substance that’s making them think a little bit out there, but they’re acting like they know the secrets to the universe. These people are just people who are...drunk, essentially. It doesn’t really give them any higher plane of existence...To say you’re more enlightened is a complete sham to me. I think if you say you’re more enlightened, then you’re trying to sell something or push an idea.” Brad expresses a skepticism towards certain psychedelic users who position themselves as being more knowledgeable than others.

Conversely, there is a different response to the question of values when the interviewee is involved with people who use psychedelics more for fun rather than for spiritual or personal purposes. Travis, who does psychedelic drugs casually, says people he knows use psychedelics as a casual or fun activity. He said he could not speak for the broader community of psychedelic users: “Everyone else I know that does it just does it casually, or as a fun activity. So, I don’t really think I can speak on the larger culture of people that consider doing psychedelics as a part of their culture.” Travis has a much more relaxed or casual view of psychedelics than other interviewees. It could be said he does not take them as “seriously,” as in, he does not necessarily use them as a psychological tool.

When further asked about values of psychedelia members, the issue of “reckless” use and “responsible” use of psychedelic drugs comes up. Users seem to be divided into two groups: those who seldom use psychedelics for spiritual, religious, or personal purposes; and people who use psychedelics for fun. Being a drug that can significantly influence the user’s mind and emotions, psychedelics are seen as a drug that should not be abused, and the substance should be “respected”—as in, some users believe psychedelic trips are significant personal occurrence. Olivia said that the more she used psychedelics, the more she used them with “intention”—she would no longer use psychedelics in a party environment, but shifted to using them for meditation and a “hard brain reset” when she is dealing with difficult situations or emotions.

Katie speaks at length about “respecting” psychedelics, while simultaneously mentioning she had done psychedelic drugs for fun at times. While she acknowledges the importance of psychedelic experiences, she maintains that she does not treat drugs with a sense of carelessness or “cavalierness:”

I think one difference I have with other people that do these drugs is that I feel like I have a need to respect the drug that I’m doing? And maybe that comes from my upbringing of, you know, learning to fear drugs a lot. But I try to make sure that I never go into a drug trip with a sense of cavalierness, like “ah, let’s just drop some acid,” like I want to always be aware of the importance of what I’m doing and why I’m doing it. And sometimes I’m doing it for fun—I have done acid at Six Flags, I’m not gonna say I only meditate on acid. I definitely try not to do it too often. And other friends that I have don’t share the same kind of ideas... They take it more often, they know how they are on acid, so they’re just like “yep, I’m gonna do this as often as I want as long as my tolerance, I’m good to go.” But they’re a mixed bag. I often participate on drug Subreddits on LSD, things like that...you do have people who take these every two weeks, once a month, and other people who are like “I only trip once a year, this is a very important thing.” it’s a mixed bag, there’s a little bit of both kinds of people.

Katie, while valuing the importance of respecting psychedelics, does not take psychedelic use as “seriously” as others might—as in, she is comfortable using psychedelics for both

introspective purposes and for fun. While she does not do psychedelics often, there is a balance in purpose of her use. Robert also emphasizes the importance of balance in relation to frequent use of the drugs. He recalls his personal experience of abusing psychedelics at first, but learning later how to use the drugs properly. He views psychedelic abuse as harmful to a person's mind. Where psychedelic experiences are seen as significant introspective experiences, psychedelic abuse dilutes or weakens the "purpose" of taking psychedelics:

And then also there's the other side of that where I was, people that abuse it, people that use it too much. Because I think there needs to be a balance personally, and if you can't control yourself, or you can't take a break from it and try to be normal about it, then what's the use of even doing it at all? There's no contrast, and you can't see what it's really doing, or really analyze how it's helping you. And in most of those instances, it doesn't help you and it makes you not realize what you're doing, and you'll end up doing things that you wouldn't want to do normally...

In conjunction with many users believing psychedelic drugs are a form of healthcare, or a spiritual or emotional tool, some users believe psychedelics should be taken

"responsibly." Those who abuse psychedelics are seen as irresponsible or immature.

Whether using psychedelics for fun or for serious purposes, like any drug, it is generally looked down upon if someone uses drugs too often, or for the sake of getting high.

"Respecting" psychedelic drugs is a common important value among interviewees. To respect the drug means to not abuse or overuse it, and to accept the unpredictable nature and healing potential of the drug. Since the psychedelic experience has the potential to be intense, unpleasant, or extremely life-changing for the individual, psychedelic users believe they should not attempt to "control" their psychedelic experiences or think they are above, or more powerful than, a psychedelic experience. Since one's setting and

headspace directly affects the psychedelic high, it is seen as irresponsible to take psychedelics without intention or without seriousness.

Karen and Brad both assert that all psychedelic members are “just people” who have common interests, and that holding a sense of superiority over others is counterintuitive and “silly”. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige (1979) discusses the prevalence of superiority, and negative attitudes towards inauthenticity: “the distinction between originals and hangers-on is always a significant one in subculture. Indeed, it is frequently verbalized (plastic punks or safety-pin people, burrhead rastas or rasta bandwagon, weekend hippies, etc. versus the ‘authentic’ people)” (1979:122). There is a clear notion of who in psychedelia exhibits acceptable behavior and unacceptable behavior: psychedelic drugs are seen as something to be respected, used seldomly, and used with intention of personal development (as in, not simply for fun or for the sake of getting high). However, though psychedelic drugs are agreed to be done for personal and spiritual development, the drug user using for this purpose should also be humble. Most interviewees have a strong dislike of psychedelic users who have a large sense of self-importance, intelligence, and superiority over others because of their drug use. Drug users at the end of the day, as Karen said, are all simply drug users—as in, psychedelic users are all on the same level of importance and value, and no one is better or more important than someone else. It can be deduced that, while no one explicitly stated it, humbleness is valued among psychedelia members, seeing as a sense of haughtiness and superiority are very looked down upon.

CONCLUSION

Many conclusions and inconsistencies can be drawn from these observations. Foremost, interviewees seem to be passionate and dedicated to their opinions and values; they believe psychedelia members should be kind, compassionate, and nonjudgmental people: interviewees espouse and support these ideas by trying to practice mindfulness and openness in their daily lives, participating in activism and volunteering, and supporting politicians who align with their personal values and goals (further discussed in the next chapter). In order to be compassionate and open, interviewees approach situations and people without judgement, and try to be kind to others.

Social relationships are very important to joining and being in psychedelia. Interviewees fall into psychedelia through two main processes: being introduced by someone else, or being introduced through media. Most interviewees were given psychedelics, or introduced to psychedelic culture, through friends, partners, or siblings. Despite being taught that drug use could be harmful, the social aspect of drug use (such as using drugs with an experienced drug user, or using drugs for the first time with someone else) lessened the fear associated with drug use. Some interviewees, such as the ones who do not use drugs, became interested in psychedelics and the subculture through interest in psychedelic media. Several interviewees, like Brad, Abby, and Katie, have had significant positive social circles and experiences when becoming involved in psychedelia; they were able to meet new people with similar interests and views within the subculture. Within the subculture, many interviewees note that psychedelia members have common values related to openness and kindness; additionally, there are people within the subculture who do not express these values. Negative or hateful people are

seen as the antithesis of psychedelia's values. Therefore, there is a divide between people who are seen as acceptable and unacceptable or invalid members of the subculture.

There is extensive discussion on the difference between psychedelic drugs and other drugs, particularly drugs that are considered "hard." The general consensus is interviewees favor psychedelics because they 1.) do not cause physical harm to the body, 2.) are not physically addictive, and 3.) are of volatile nature. For these points, interviewees compare psychedelics to other drugs: Olivia draws on personal experience how cocaine use made her feel "like shit;" psychedelics, in comparison, were a much more positive experience. Robert also uses a personal anecdote to explain how he had seen people addicted to meth or heroin ruin their own lives because of their addictions (selling their possessions and losing friends and family, for example), but had not seen a case with people who use psychedelics.

Finally, there are several opinions on behavior that is considered unacceptable in psychedelia. As mentioned previously, kindness, openness, and compassion are considered the main tenants of psychedelia; people who do not espouse these values are considered being the opposite of psychedelia's values. People who have a sense of superiority over others in the subculture, such as thinking they are better, smarter, or "more enlightened" than others, are very disliked. Inadvertently, humbleness and humility are traits that interviewees value. Additionally, those who disrespect or overuse psychedelic drugs are seen as irresponsible. The drugs, as many interviewees affirm, are substances that are meant to be treated with respect and used as a tool: this means they are not meant to be used without intention, or overused, as their effects can be unpredictable and unpleasant.

Many of the conclusions or assumptions interviewees make are limited by their own knowledge. For example, Robert had said he had never heard of someone's life being ruined by psychedelic use; Katie stated she could not imagine a psychedelic user maintaining a conservative ideology. Interviewees also assume that psychedelics cannot be addictive substances. These conclusions come from interviewees own assumptions and experiences, but they have not witnessed these situations themselves. While these situations may be uncommon, most interviewees assume they do not exist—or if they do, these people are exceptions to what is known about psychedelia and psychedelics. As many interviewees are firm on what qualities they associate with psychedelia, there are many aspects that are considered the opposite of what the subculture stands for. These people who are opposite have been, for the most part, hypothetical strawmen.

While this chapter briefly touched on interviewees political views, the next chapter will further discuss their political opinions, alignment, and actions. Based on their personal values as discussed, most interviewees perform activism, community service, or volunteering to show their compassion and kindness for others.

CHAPTER 5: POLITICAL VIEWS, SOCIAL BELIEFS, AND CRITICISMS OF PSYCHEDELIA MEMBERS

Introduction

Psychedelia is historically a left-leaning youth movement, as psychedelic use and political involvement went hand-in-hand in the late 1960s. The public's curiosity to try LSD for its supposed positive and enlightening effects coincided with several simultaneous political and social movements at the time; thus, psychedelia is often associated with movements such as the anti-war movement, sexual liberation, civil rights, opposition to authority (in terms of the generation gap), and other means of resisting the status quo (Baumeister and Placidi 1984). Since the original incarnation of the subculture is so heavily associated with left politics, and since psychedelia today can be considered a post-subculture (Hebdige 2013) without a strictly uniform political ideology, it is unclear how closely tied politics are to psychedelia today. Therefore, interviewees were asked their views and background in politics, their views of American society, and their involvement in activism.

Additionally, I investigated the current societal and political issues interviewees feel strongly about. Psychedelia in the 60s had a large overlap with leftism, mainly in regards to rejecting different levels of authority: from rejecting social conventions such as mainstream American values and mores, to rejecting larger societal and political authority such as military violence and the draft. While the New Left movement and the

hippie movement had several disagreements about values and execution of political action, the two movements at their core had similar goals: to end the war, fight against police violence, reject mainstream society's expectations and traditions—goals and morals that thought conservatives or rightists as a common enemy (Miller 2012). Both movements, as Miller phrased, “pitched their tents in distinct but adjacent campsites” (2012:xxii) that could not be wholly separated. The social and political problems of the 1960s have not disappeared: youth then and now are still affected by impending environmental collapse, police violence, changing social norms, racism, and war abroad. I discuss in what ways, if any, political and social attitudes in psychedelia have changed in the present day, and which social and political issues members feel strongly about.

This chapter discusses the political and social beliefs of interviewees.

Interviewees discuss politicians they support, what social issues they feel strongly about, and if they are involved in any direct action, such as activism or community service. This chapter mainly seeks to answer: what political and social beliefs interviewees have; and through what processes does involvement in psychedelia influence people's involvement in political activism.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL BELIEFS

Political Alignment and Identification

Most interviewees identified as being left-leaning in some capacity. Travis described himself as being “very, very, very, very, very, very far left, like almost off the map.” Similarly, Mary stated “I don't know how to describe myself. I guess liberalism is the easiest way. Super left-leaning, maybe. Very left leaning. As left as you can go.” Many

interviewees, such as Dana, Katie, and Joseph, have mentioned being left-leaning their entire lives. In relation to psychedelics, Julie mentions how the drugs have not changed her views, but influenced them: “I’m not sure that psychedelics have changed my beliefs on any of the issues, because I’ve always had these beliefs. But I think using psychedelics catalyzes you into activism.” Almost all left-leaning interviewees (besides Patrick, who will be discussed next) have felt the same about politics their whole lives; in some cases, using psychedelics helped them become more passionate about the specific issues they feel strongly about.

Psychedelic experiences do not guarantee having a sudden change of views. Robert explains: “...there are people who just take drugs to take drugs, and I mean dropping acid isn’t going to just instantly change you. You have to be kind of onboard with the whole thing. People who...take stuff for the wrong reasons, you know ...It’s not like you’re gonna take some mushrooms and all of a sudden you go from...being a very damaged human, to being completely fixed. I mean it does happen I’m sure, but that’s not a guarantee.” While psychedelic use made Patrick curious about other political and social viewpoints, he sought out information (books and podcasts) to teach himself. Thus, psychedelic use may not *cause* these feelings, but may encourage or inspire them to think about their beliefs deeper than before.

Some interviewees do not explicitly identify with leftism. Brad identifies as independent, and has a dislike for both the right and the left, especially with the dishonesty, violence, and restriction of free speech that can come with each group. He explains:

Politically, I'd say I'm independent. Raised Republican, went very much democrat when I was getting into the raves. And then around 2019, I think, I actually got very much against the left because I saw that the ideas the media left were pushing were not too honest. To me, it started with the whole "punch a Nazi" movement thing. That's when I really started to question—because I'm a pacifist through and through. With a party that I was supportive of pushing "respond to words with violence," I thought that was despicable. And I saw that being accepted... "these words offend me so I must attack that person." And I think that's been really hurting the country in the last few years, especially—you know, look at the division with Trump and everything. If someone did something that people didn't like, their reaction to it, I think, would be an overreaction. It was more of going with what everyone else wants you to say.

...I would say the majority of youth see themselves as more liberal than as Republican, and the rebelling against the ideas of their parents' more conservative ideas. That brings out that extra "us versus them" mentality, which has been leading to violence, and is why I distance myself from the left. And I've distanced myself from the right, too, because they can be violent too. Any idea that supports violence is completely wrong for me.

Brad references the aforementioned values of hippies: nonviolence, liberalism, and rebellion against previous generations' conservatism. He was raised Republican, and once into the rave scene, went to the 'opposite' end of the political spectrum and identified as Democrat. He expressed dislike for the Right and the Left's acceptance of violence to execute their respective goals. Though it's unclear if they support political violence or not, most interviewees strongly support the idea of "love" and being kind to one another (this was further discussed in the previous chapter). Conversely, Olivia expresses a more radical, revolutionary ideology of leftism: "I'm so far left, I'm get-your-guns-back left. Very pro-revolution left, like 'arm the proletariat'. Super, super Marxist." There are a range of opinions among interviewees on what "effective" social change would require—some, in this case, requiring radical revolution beyond the simplicity of changing social norms. Though interviewees have varying political opinions, and that these opinions have formed at different points in their lives, the central agreement among them is that major political and social change is necessary. Rather, the way American

society and government is acting now does not exist in the public's best interest, and cannot continue the way it is.

Some interviewees discuss having major political shifts after taking psychedelic drugs. Patrick went through a long process of shifting his political ideology from being far-right to being a Marxist:

Patrick: So, I used to actually be far right-wing extremist, and through the process of psychedelics I became a Marxist, and I feel that what's like psychedelics do. They strip away all the cultural propaganda, and they open you up to the idea of everything you have been taught as well. And if you embrace it and research on your own that you end up finding yourself on the left. And that process for me was a 2-year process.

Me: That's a very major shift and ideology. How did you kind of navigate that? Did you, for example, did you make friends or lose friends? Were you kind of just questioning everything?

Patrick: I have definitely lost friends and have created tensions within family... a lot of it was just talking with my friends about society and the world we live in during the come-down period... where I'm not peaking anymore, but my mind is still malleable to new ideas. And we're just talking about things like this. My friend recommended a book to me, and I actually checked it out. And then I started listening to podcasts and things like that. And I definitely have made friends and lost friends there. There are friends that are conservative that we used to hang out all the time together, and I don't really get invited over anymore.

Patrick discusses going through a major ideological and social shift during this period:

his ideas changed, along with his social circle, as he adopted a far-left ideology. Patrick mentions a process that other interviewees believe about psychedelics: the drugs encourage the mind to "strip away all the cultural propaganda" that one has been taught about politics and society. Sam spoke about having a change of ideas about society, hierarchy, and structure of society since getting into psychedelic use:

Prior to psychedelics, I wasn't an anarchist. I'm not necessarily an anarchist now, but I was of the opinion that, for any society to work, there has to be a power structure, and there has to be someone in charge delegating tasks, and it needs to be hierarchical...and post-getting psychedelics, I had the realization that that's not

necessary, as opposed to earlier which was like ‘no, somebody has to be in charge telling people what to do.’ Post-that, it’s shifted more towards the anarcho-cooperative style of it, like I don’t think a hierarchy is needed to run a society.

While opinions on authority and power structures will be discussed later in this chapter, Sam touches upon changing opinions on hierarchy after psychedelic revelations. Sam does not identify as an anarchist, but aligns with the anti-authoritarian points of anarchism. He explicitly describes an ideology shift influenced by psychedelic use. Katie had said, “...Things like capitalism make no sense to me, especially when I’m on these drugs. I can’t—I just can’t imagine someone [dropping acid] and being like ‘yep, I deserve property more than another person. I earned this, I own this piece of land.’ I cannot imagine that happening. And I’ve heard so many stories of people doing acid and being like, ‘I love everyone, I love everyone on the Earth.’ I don’t know if I’ve ever heard a story of someone doing a psychedelic and being like “yep I hate everyone. They’re all different from me and I hate them.”” To Katie, and other users, the idea of a conservative or bigoted psychedelic user seems nonsensical, specifically because the drugs can encourage users to feel a sense of oneness, peace, or deep contemplation about society and themselves.

There have several studies that indicate LSD and psilocybin use positively affect the brain’s serotonin levels, and thus can inspire feelings of openness, connectedness with others, and treat feelings of depression and anxiety (Erritzoe et al. 2019; Watts et al. 2017; Yaden et al. 2017). Despite this, there have been case-studies confirming the existence of the mythologized psychedelic right-winger (Page & Devenot 2021) which concludes that psychedelic research 1.) has expectations and bias of how they “change” individuals, and 2.) do not guarantee an ideological shift from right-to-left, or further

towards leftism. In the words of an LSD user on the neo-Nazi forum Stormfront: “Well I can tell you this much: I have tried LSD several times and it certainly did not make me a liberal idiot” (2021:5). Despite the widening breadth of studies on the relationship between political ideology and psychedelics, it is impossible to conclude, and expect, that psychedelics overwhelmingly cause a strict list of feelings and opinions. While Patrick is an outlier among interviewees, all others had some previous levels of agreement or association with leftism, egalitarianism, or liberalism before taking psychedelics. In their own words and experiences, it can be assumed that psychedelics had encouraged them towards feelings about society that they already had before using the drugs. Psychedelics, as Adam attested, have helped interviewees become *more* openminded and considerate of others. While almost all interviewees had a foundation of congruent ideas and values before taking psychedelics, processing a major psychedelic experience can cause major self-reflection.

Political Figures

When asked which politician or social figure interviewees agreed with their policies or ideas, 7 out of 19 named former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders. When asked why, they noted points such as supporting the same policies over his career, believing in universal basic income, and valuing social justice issues. The runner-up figure that 2 interviewees mentioned was Andrew Yang, who also supports universal basic income. Other interviewees named local politicians, such as Georgia House of Representatives member Stacy Abrams. These three politicians are notably progressive and left-leaning who have, or who desire to, pass legislature that will work to provide more equal access

or resources to marginalized groups. Three interviewees did not or could not name a figure they felt they could agree with.

When asked why they supported their politician of choice, interviewees often agreed with and supported similar issues the politician addressed:

Joseph: Bernie Sanders would be the only one I guess that I could agree with. I agree with his policies. I appreciate that he's one of the only politicians that will say something about Palestine versus the rest of American politicians being too afraid to say anything about that. I know he's not really socialist but at least he...tries to push the agenda more left than any other career politician has tried to.

Patrick: I don't really feel represented by 99% of mainstream politics, and the only person that I'm partial towards is Bernie Sanders. Because I believe we need more...equitable distribution of wealth in society. I believe that he's actually a socialist and he can't really come out and say that outright. I feel like he hasn't changed politically on his beliefs over the span of his career versus...a lot of politicians that are against gay marriage. And then, as soon as the height of public opinion was there, I feel like he has been fighting for working-class people and fighting for racial justice, and things like that since he was a young person.

John: I loved Bernie Sanders. I was all about Bernie Sanders...I don't trust Democrats or Republicans. I just think they're all sketchy. I think they're all bought, paid for. I think there's somebody else calling the shots and it's not them. But when Bernie came on, he was somebody I really believed in, you know? He had a very similar belief system as I do. You know, we got to do something about Big Pharma. We need healthcare for all. I mean, the guy got arrested in like the Sixties at an MLK convention or something, I can't remember exactly. But he'd been arrested for standing up for people of color.

Travis, while voting for Sanders, also tended to vote for Democratic politicians, despite not liking Hilary Clinton or Joe Biden as much as he favored Sanders:

Travis: I'm gonna tell you a little anecdote. I turned 18 on August sixth. The next day was the Democratic primary, and I got to vote for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary the day after my eighteenth birthday. I've been chasing that high ever since. I voted for him in the primary both times. And then I did end up voting for Hillary Clinton. I like closed my eyes and plugged my nose, and just kind of did it. Same thing with Joe Biden.

Me: What policies of Sanders do you agree with? Why vote for him?

Travis: Just because he actually cared about people and he cared about the environment, and he didn't have policies that were actively killing people.

These interviewees express great distrust or dislike for most politicians, and the two-party system in general. The characteristics these interviewees like about Sanders, besides his specific policies, are his consistency of support for issues over time; supporting issues that other politicians ignore; and supporting left politics (that may be considered socialist in America's political climate). Support for Sanders and this section's politicians are supported based on their consistency and commitment to their campaign. As will be discussed later in this chapter, several interviewees feel distrust towards the government and government officials because they do not have the interests of the public as priority. Part of Sanders appeal, as mentioned, is his interest in issues of the majority of Americans, such as wealth distribution for the lower classes, free healthcare, and accessible education—or, as Travis said, “didn’t have policies that were actively killing people.”

Others supported politicians had similar, progressive policies. Nick mentions an unsureness in supporting politicians, but was able to “settle” on presidential candidate Andrew Yang:

Nick: I would say for sure there are definitely a lot of politicians who have policies I agree with, but I haven’t really found anyone who I go, “ok everything this guy says is what I think.” The closest thing I can think of was Andrew Yang...at first I was very aversive to his policies, like the idea of universal basic income. To me it’s a very alarming policy to the extent in which if it’s not implemented correctly, it could cause a lot of power to be funneled towards the government...but the more I listen to him speak, the more it makes sense...And even someone super conservative like Ben Shapiro, even he has to admit that he doesn’t like the idea of universal basic income, but it’s eventually gonna be necessary.

Julie supported the policies of Georgian politician Stacy Abrams, which are similar to the campaign points of Sanders:

Julie: ...I do have a lot of faith in Stacy Abrams and I feel like I tend to agree with the majority, if not all, of her platform. And I can't necessarily think of another politician off the top of my head. That I would say, I agree with as much as her.

Me: What are the kind of topics that she supports?

Julie: She supports healthcare for all, like universal healthcare. I think she also supports really trying to come up with some different ways for checks and balances within our legal system for police and in our justice system for incarcerations. She also is a believer in fair education, that everybody should have equal access to the same levels of education and education funding. She also is an advocate for Planned Parenthood, and everything that Planned Parenthood surrounds: access to abortion, access to transgender healthcare, access to free birth control. So those things are some of the main pinpoints for me with her.

Several interviewees valued issues that could be under the umbrella of “basic human rights” such as universal basic income, universal healthcare, and necessities such as food and housing for all. These topics are similar to the agendas of the politicians’ interviewees support.

A few interviewees did not name a politician they supported. For those who did not agree or align with any politicians or social figures, only Mary gave a concise answer as to why:

I don’t think I really agree with anyone, because even people who I really like, like Ilhan Omar or AOC, sometimes they do silly things...This sounds very jaded and very silly of me, like [in a dramatic voice] “I don’t *trust* politicians at *all!*” That’s not true. I just think all politicians at some level sometimes forget what’s going on. I also live in [large US city] where even our most liberal politicians sometimes don’t seem to have any interests in mind other than their own. I think that also contributed to how jaded I am and how much I don’t trust the American political system at all. I just think it sucks.

Mary expresses the sentiment of being untrustworthy and pessimistic towards American politics and politicians. An untrustworthiness of politicians is a reoccurring theme in interviewees’ discussion of politics. Mary, and others, feel that even the “best” politicians are concerned with their own interests and not what may be best for the American public.

Similarly, politicians may make decisions that go against their campaign promises, or “do silly things” that are unpopular or disliked by the public. While Dana supported Bernie, she still hesitated to give overwhelming support for a politician, saying, “I try my best to like, follow politicians as much as I can. But I’ve tried not to latch onto any specifically because I feel like at the end of the day, it’s really hard to really put everything you believe into one person, ‘cause a lot of the times it ends up being disappointing. It’s hard to find specific politicians that I like fully. But, this is probably like the common answer, I feel like the one of the only one that is consistent with what I believe in is Bernie Sanders. But then again, I am always hesitant to go fully in on people...I’m always weirded out by people who idolize politicians in general, so I try to distance myself.” Dana expresses distrust and wariness towards people who idolize politicians or “put everything you believe in one person,” as having too much faith in a politician can end with disappointment. This ties into a broader sense of distrust in political figures and the political system, and therefore a pessimism and jadedness in regards to politics as a whole.

FORMS OF ACTIVISM

Most interviewees claimed they participated or used to participate in various forms of activism and volunteer work. These ranged from attending protests (the most common type being Black Lives Matter or against police brutality), to donating to causes or people in need, to volunteering with companies or programs such as Planned Parenthood, drug legalization groups, or political candidate campaigns. The involvement and commitment with activism ranged from person to person: for example, Karen used to attend protests against police brutality, but no longer does since the COVID-19 pandemic; Mary and

Katie's jobs are directly involved in helping and giving opportunities to marginalized groups (Asian-Americans in the arts and neurodivergent children, respectively); Travis has much activism experience in volunteering for many causes such as felon voting rights, climate change, and immigrant rights; Jacob used to attend protests and donates to people when he can, and through his band, notes "the truest way that I can really change anything or make my voice heard literally is through music."

Some interviewee's choice of activism or involvement is influenced by their own identities and experiences. For example, James, a transgender man, notes how his work for the World AIDS Museum is an important resource for LGBT history: "I volunteered with the World AIDS Museum in Ft. Lauderdale where I did a lot of...secretarial-type work. Being a person in the LGBT community, I thought that was personally important, because that's an important part of our history." Katie, who is neurodivergent, is passionate about issues relating to ADHD and autism awareness and treatment. Joseph, being Palestinian in America, has made being politically conscious unavoidable: "I've kind of had the same political beliefs since I was 13. I feel like they've definitely got more informed and deeper into them, but I guess I never had the option to not be political." As previously discussed, several interviewees had specific political affiliation before being involved in psychedelia. The most common ways to get involved in activism is to support problems interviewees had already experienced.

Robert, a musician, described playing benefit shows for a variety of causes, mostly environmental relief funds. Robert uses his talent as a musician to accumulate donations for people or causes in need. He is especially adamant for not supporting right-leaning campaigns, and favors more direct action for people in immediate need:

Robert: ...I did benefits for Bernie, that was activism. I didn't make any money doing that. I've done lots of concerts for lots of different causes. I can't even think of what they all were. But yeah, I'm very open to that. Pretty much anytime somebody asked me to play for a cause, I'll do it. That's usually how I how I give back, because that's my talent. That's what I do. I don't have a job where I do a lot of pro-bono work at the time, but I would.

Me: Would you have agreed, or agree, to doing a benefit concert for, I don't know, like Turning Point U.S.A. Or Trump 2024? Or is it more like left-leaning—

Robert: Oh, no, I'm not gonna play anything for Trump. No, fuck that no, that ain't gonna happen, no. It's like if somebody—if somebody has cancer and the family is trying to raise money, I'm all on it. I'll play that you know, I'll draw as many people as I can and things along those lines, even if it's like...I did something for some flooding. Not the recent flooding in Kentucky, but some flooding before that I did. I played, for, you know, flooding, stuff like that, hurricane relief. Those sort of things like humanitarian kind of things. No, I'm not doing Trump.

In the previous chapter, several interviewees were determined to be openminded to ideas they may disagree with. However, Robert is adamantly against supporting campaigns for Trump and other topics that are the “opposite” of his ideology.

While there were varying degrees of involvement in activism, most participants engaged in different forms of activism for varying contemporary issues, such as Black Lives Matter and the overturned Roe v. Wade. The most common forms of activism interviewees participated in were protests (such as marches) and donating funds.

Online and Personal Activism

Personal or everyday activism refers to activism that is performed within one's personal circle or everyday life on a small scale, such as having political conversations with family members or spreading information on social issues. This overlaps with online activism, which is mostly comprised of spreading important information such as articles, petitions, and opinions on social media. Dana mentions her form of activism being personal based,

rather than working for institutions or groups. In her case, she educates friends and family, both in-person and online, on issues she feels are important.

I haven't really had many opportunities to [do activism]—in terms of like how I grew up and stuff, I was like fairly sheltered. My parents never really let me do any outwardly political-related volunteering sort of things. I'm seeing more opportunities now that I'm in college and on my own. But yeah, thus far I haven't really done anything too outwardly, it's mainly just been on a personal level, like trying my best to educate people around me and posting online and whatnot. I'm having lots of discussions with family, I feel is mainly where my quote unquote “most successful activism” has been. ‘Cause I feel I have definitely pushed my parents a little bit more to the left in ways that I don't think I would have been able to if I never really had talks with them, I suppose. But yeah, in terms of my effects on other people in terms of activism, I'm not too sure how much I've done. But I like to think I've at least influenced people in a little bit [laughs] in some sort of way. But yeah, it's mainly been just on a personal level rather than like organizations or volunteer work. I hope to do that in the future, if I can.

She has felt conversations about political and social topics has been successful, especially with her family members. While not participating in “outwardly” activism (such as volunteering or protesting), Dana values the power of personal activism, especially since she grew up in an environment where she was barred from participating in other forms of activism.

Personal everyday activism is often an overlooked form of political action; ideas of what “meaningful” activism is are usually seen as intensive or involved forms of political resistance or charity, such as participating in marches, donating to underprivileged persons, boycotting, or otherwise sacrificing time, energy, and labor towards an issue. A “lifestyle movement” refers to the idea that one's everyday actions are political, and can be the primary means to significant social and political change (Haenfler 2014:52). Online activism, which entails speaking about and educating others on political issues in a social media setting, is a relatively new form of activism. It is

more convenient and less risky or laborious to participate in online activism than organizing a protest or attending a sit-in.

Two interviewees said they did not do any type of activism or service. Nick did not agree he did any kind of activism or charity; the various actions he mentions he believes do not have adequate merit or importance because of the motive behind doing them (such as working with autistic children for money) or its convenience (giving money to a homeless person or attending in a nearby protest):

The answer is basically no, very little. I was working with autistic children, but there was a paycheck involved, there wasn't very much. The reason I was drawn to do that was because I thought it was right—I thought basically there was moral benefit there. It helps suit my values and get me towards my goals. So I was doing that. But that would be just about the closest thing to charity. Occasionally I'll talk to a homeless person, give them a little money, that sort of thing...I've been a part of one protest or march, and I didn't mean to be. I went because I was interested in seeing the interactions relatively close to home.

While Nick explains work he has done in the past had “moral benefit” and “suit[ed] my values and g[o]t me towards my goals,” the moral reward of this work, in his view, seemed to be nullified by the monetary reward. The march he attended was not in interest of supporting or being against the cause, but to observe the interactions of people there.

While assisting children, homeless people, and attending a protest could all be seen as valid and helpful forms of activism, there is almost a reluctance to establish these as valid forms of activism because of their ulterior motives. Similarly, Christian explained that while he does not engage in activism, he feels guilty or shameful for this. When asked about it, he felt a moral obligation to help others:

Christian: No, not much activism, which I'm kind of shameful to say. Well, I have donated a little bit. That's one thing I've done, mutual aid.

Me: Why do you feel shameful?

Christian: I just feel like I'm not doing enough to help people out, you know, like all this talk about how people could *be* helped out more. And I say people should do this and that. But *I* don't do that, you know? I don't do a whole lot that I could be doing. That feels...somewhat lazy because of it, you know?

These two examples address an outlying statistic in the overall data, even though Nick and Christian are not entirely opposed to the idea of participating in activism. Both interviewees seem to have standards on acceptable and unacceptable forms of activism, and ideas of how much activism a person should do. "Valid" forms of activism are usually seen as actions one goes out of their way to do, are done persistently, and takes more time and effort to perform. Both interviewees have donated money in the past to people in need, but as Christian implied, this is seen as a low-effort, low-risk form of activism—hence his statement of feeling like he's "not doing enough to help people out."

VIEWS OF AMERICA'S ISSUES AND FUTURE

In describing their political and personal beliefs, there is a general sense of anxiety, dislike, or pessimism towards American society and its future. Many interviewees commonly note homelessness, the environment, police brutality, and drug legalization as major problems in America. While many interviewees are concerned about the same problems, they also overlap in the issues they think America should focus on to better itself. These topics range from structural and societal improvements, to everyday action.

Karen: I guess the first two things that come to mind is to fix or work on fixing addiction problems, and the prison incarceration situation, because I think that's a big circle. It just gets worse and worse and worse. And if you give prisoners the right to vote, then treat them as human...I know some people, they can be such good people, but they're in a horrible situation. And I think it's because America makes it that way. Like, once you get out of prison, you are way easier to get sent back. And then homelessness. That's just terrible. In [city] it's so bad here, and I feel sad every single time I see them. We're a pretty rich country, and there's people dying on the streets. It's very sad. What else? Re-look at the War on Drugs. I don't think that all drugs are great, but I think there are small steps being

taken for it. So that's exciting. Here in [city], they do ketamine, you can do ketamine therapy. I think some places are actually doing MDMA therapy, too. So this [is a] little step. I think that's a good walk in the right direction. Of course, healthcare being looked at differently.

Abby: Well right now, kind of timely, but body politics like, you know, right to abortion, access, and just body autonomy in general. I know in the Supreme Court, like Alito, for reference, likes to back up the claim that there [were] no constitutional standings for abortion...like this is totally...all about control. It's not about protecting the unborn or anything like that, it's all about controlling people. And women, or like, women and nonbinary people and transgender [people]. And you know they're gonna keep coming for other parts of society if they can, if they overrule Roe. So that's definitely something that I'm very concerned about. And probably overarching, the environment as well.

Sarah: Definitely address some of the systemic issues that are in place as far as race relations go, and the way structures are set up. That would be my first thing to tackle, because things start from there. Also, education, as far as different perspectives. I think a lot of times, people look at American society as a really diverse place, but I think me being American-born and living here my whole life, I see it's not the case, and there's a lot of people who aren't accepted and treated right in society even though that's what we stand for. This might be super random, but I also believe there should be a separation of church and state. I feel like a lot of times public officials and public leaders will use God as a way to justify their behavior. You know, religion should be personal to you, and that's a good thing about this country, that we're all allowed to practice our own religion. But sometimes it feels like not all religions are accepted here, and that has us at a standstill in terms of being progressive, towards the future.

Travis: Oh, people always ask me [what issues are important], and I say all of them, all of them. I can't choose, because when you work in activism, all of the issues, they're all connected. You know, climate is connected to racism is connected to food. Security is connected to incarceration is connected to reproductive justice. They're all entwined.

There is a general acknowledgement of many systemic issues in American society that are connected to, or influence, each other. Mainly, these issues include: the legalization and destigmatizing of drugs; caring for the environment; universal basic income; universal healthcare; and providing resources for lower income or impoverished people, such as food, water, and accessible housing. Several interviewees note power imbalances against laypeople and, for example, the government, the police, church, and other influential institutions. It is this distribution of power that is the root of several of the

problems that these interviewees discuss: religion, police authority, stigma and fearmongering (in the War on Drugs), and restrictions on abortion are tactics to control certain groups of people.

Capitalism, Authority, and Culture

Interviewees, if not directly stating it, tend to criticize or reject capitalism through the issues they support and the views they hold of what an ideal society should be. Most of the ideas they support—such as universal healthcare, free education, and universal basic income—are socialist ideas.

Christian: I would formerly describe myself as anarcho-socialist, but nowadays I just say I'm anti-capitalist.

Me: Why are you anti-capitalist? Why do you disagree with it?

Christian: I disagree that it has all these fake promises, like it's gonna help people out with the trickle-down economics, shit like that. All it really leads to is people being homeless on the street, people not getting enough to eat, people without enough money to live. It makes this environment where you have to make money to survive; I think we should have more compassion to our fellow humans, you know? But it's all just stacked in the favor of the rich. I don't like that.

Christian is concerned with the “fake promises” of capitalism that inevitably leads to the suffering of lower classes. Capitalism can be seen as the antithesis of what psychedelics offer: while some psychedelic users feel profound senses of compassion and a desire to help each other, capitalist society encourages individualism. Adam and Katie explain how psychedelics and politics can be seen as both connected and the “opposite” of each other:

I think politics and governments [is] kind of the answer to psychedelics. In the end, it's like politics wouldn't be a thing if there wasn't this other weird thing like psychedelics...it's like a balancing kind of thing. Like it's nature's answer...I do vote, you know, I think that's a way to change things. I think that's the biggest

way to change things other than love...that's like the opposite of politics, that's really what it is. The opposite of psychedelics are the opposite of politics.

Katie: I would say [psychedelic users have common values]. Everyone that we do these psychedelics with is kind of a socialist. I was also socialist before I started doing these drugs. You tend to stay in your political circle regardless... capitalism make[s] no sense to me, especially when I'm on [psychedelics].

Both interviewees describe the outcomes of psychedelics, or the process of psychedelic highs, as deconstructing or challenging the tenets of capitalism. Several interviewees have criticized American society and culture as being individualistic, materialistic, and hard-working for low reward—and therefore, psychedelic experiences embody the opposite of American culture: such as individualism, consumerism, and a constant strive for success. James reflects these criticisms, particularly about society's emphasis on materialism as means of success:

...if you don't follow a specific path, you will be disorganized. Maybe you'll end up with nothing. If you jump around too much in your career or your education, that's considered disorganized and not beneficial. I think it's a little bit vain, in some sense. I think American society values are not really necessities, you don't *need* a luxury car to live. You don't need a mansion to live and be happy and content. But in some way that's something we should all strive for, it's the American Dream, because no matter what background you come from you should work your way up to the cream of the crop. And that any area in between or below that is lacking in some way, is lacking. It's less than what you could have, you could always have more. I suppose it's also a bit self-centered, in the way that you should be self-sufficient, you should have earned everything by yourself and with nobody's help, you cannot attribute your success to anything but your own hard work. Independence in a way that is not so healthy. Not asking for help when you need it. Maybe not even helping when others need it, because that's giving away some of your resources and your time.

Additionally, Patrick supports the idea that American capitalist society is competitive and individualistic: "In our culture, we are very hyper-individualistic, and it's kind of like dog-eat-dog...I feel like [psychedelic users are] all disillusioned by politics and by the American dream..." In *Economic Philosophic Manuscripts* (1847), Karl Marx describes capitalism as alienating and estranging people from nature, life activity, and himself

(1847:31). Labor, and capitalism, are inherently isolating and competitive; as consequence, it separates people from their own pleasures and humanity.

When asked how they feel about authority, interviewees were generally disapproving of it restricting people to an extent. They worried for the limitation of free speech and of too much control over daily life. Mainly, interviewees believe politicians and police have too much authority, and those in power abuse their authority to relieve themselves of responsibility for their actions.

Travis: ...I feel like authority could be a good thing...having a structured government to actually look after its people. Then authority could be a good thing. But as it stands now, the people that have authority constantly abuse it, and don't actually look out for the good of the people that they are allegedly representing.

Jacob: I never liked [authority]. I bit my principal when I was in first grade. It's just always rubbed me the wrong way...never been too much of an authority figure, you know. I do teach. I teach guitar. I teach music. And in a way, I am an authority figure, but I'm always conscious of that, and I just try to be their friend, you know? Yeah, I think on a mass scale, authority and people trying to control things is doing the opposite of what they're trying to do like. I'm thinking of the police in in general how if there weren't any police, there wouldn't be as much crime...if the good cops are doing good in the world, you know they're out to get the bad guys, and really like, if there were no cops there would be no bad guys. It's like the whole duality to it all.

Julie discusses authority, power, and accountability, and recognizes many people in power use their authority to absolve themselves of accountability for their actions. While she implies that it is beneficial to have a government—or at least it is impossible for a nation to be without one—she is adamant that America's government and politicians are corrupt and abuse their power:’;

Julie: You know, we wanna have these ideas that we live in this free nation that democracy is everything, and blah, blah, blah. But you know, our government abuses their power too, and I just don't know that there is a perfect balance for all of that, because if you abolish the government, then it's just freaking chaos too. We're just so deep in the whole self-governing. I'm not sure there is even a

possibility without complete destruction. So I feel like it's a necessity, but then it's also a burden, and I think that that's unfortunately just the way life has to be. I'm not sure that there's any way out of government anymore, you know, not sure that there's a way to not have it. But it would be nice if there was some better accountability within it.

Me: Actually, what do you mean by accountability?

Julie: Oh, I think politicians can really do whatever they want. Even though we vote and we say what we wanna say, I'm not sure how much of a difference it really makes... We're always faced with the decision of picking the lesser of two evils, presidential and otherwise, and I don't feel like there's a perfect way to know that what they say is true at all. There's always a loophole you know, so there is no accountability. So they can promise you one thing and they don't have to deliver, and even if it's completely crazy illegal, they suffer no consequences, as we've seen with Trump... they can do the most outlandish things... So they're not held accountable for their broken promises or for their actions no matter what because there's too much red tape.

Additionally, a common issue that arose was the polarization and radicalization of political parties. James feels American politics are greatly divided: "I feel like more recently, liberals and conservatives, or maybe even Republicans and Democrats, have become so far on either spectrum of their beliefs. And there's a clear lack of agreement and communication... I feel like there is a lack of discourse regarding these things. ["Like polarization?"] Yes, it's very polarized right now." This polarization and corruption plays directly into feelings discussed in the next section, which delves into the feelings of interviewees towards these issues and America's future.

Societal Pessimism

Global and national circumstances have revealed a pattern of pessimism for the future from interviewees. They site main reasons for this feeling as: impending environmental disaster/climate change, growing power and control of the police/government, greed-motivated politics, and distrust of those in power. This leaves

interviewees generally feeling helpless in their situations, even if they do engage in forms of activism.

In reference to activism and volunteering Moe does, he seemed to express a sense of negativity surrounding the state of grassroots organizations, which reflected a pessimism towards larger problems in America. Moe reflects on a larger feeling of helplessness or inaction in reference to local or national action and politics. When I asked about this further, we said:

Me: I feel like throughout the interview...you've kind of mentioned about being disillusioned with the state of things, different movements and things, and I wanted to ask why?

Moe: [referencing a local leftist organization groups, a local IWW group in particular] it seems you show up to the meetings and talk about stuff that keeps the group going or attempt a lot of projects, but it doesn't really *go* anywhere...My experience with organizations that are aiming towards on-the-ground "we're going to do this community service stuff ourselves and set up our own institutions" are really flailing at it. [They] get sabotaged by their own [political] parties...These parties also seem more concerned with fundraising more than securing *Roe v. Wade*, or like environmental protections. Even when they're promising it—even if the more left elements got in [to office] they wouldn't do it. It seems like we're running out of time before environmental collapse happens. So, you know, [sighs] it's just a lot.

...We're all biased towards—at least I am—our own experiences. I guess a part of it is I feel a sense of helplessness in my own life. There seems to be a lot of the Right gaining power in a reactionary era... Also, the environmental thing, it seems like we have a limited amount of time to keep on this, and we're not tending towards progress fast enough.

The concept of helplessness towards political and social problems is a common feeling among interviewees, which alludes to why their involvement in activism usually pertains to grassroots organizations or direct assistance to individuals. Several interviewees comment on the possibility of impending environmental collapse, or otherwise irreversible damage to the planet. They also repeatedly discuss corruption within the political parties, and that there is a slim chance of radical change being enacted. It is for

these reasons interviewees feel overwhelmed and unable to fix these large-scale issues.

Robert expresses perhaps the most nihilistic opinion towards the state of humanity and the world today:

Robert:...I think that we're so divided as a country. I'm gonna get dark here so just be warned. I think that we're so divided that it's never going to get better. I don't think anything's ever going to happen about climate change because so many people don't think it's real. But we're seeing the evidence of it all the time. How many people in the country that still believe Trump is like some kind of savior? Honestly, he has a good shot at getting reelected, I mean, I would not be surprised, because Biden's not really any good. I just don't see things ever getting better, and that's a worldwide problem. That's not just America, but I think this country in particular so divided, you know, and everybody wants to hate on everybody else for something, whether it be the millennials or the gen-z or trans folks or homosexuals, or what everybody's is mad about something, and I'm at the point where I'm just ready for it all to end. Like, I've lived a good life, I'm ready for the fucking world to end. I don't think there's a future anymore...we're just kind of circling the drain. I think we had a shot. We blew it, and now it's time to give the earth back to something else.

Robert expresses deep pessimism towards the state of politics, so much that he is pessimistic towards the future and towards the progression of humanity itself. The division of America and its politics is only a singular source of his nihilism: there are larger, worldwide problems he mentions, such as global warming, division and corruption in other countries, and general hostile attitudes and oppression of peoples, that lead him to believe these complex issues are “never going to get better.”

Interviewees also harbor distrust for politicians, political parties, and institutions as a whole. Adam similarly expresses distrust or corruption between the Left and the Right: “I think like government stuff is...right-wing left-wing. I think it's all wings on the same bird, you know?” Despite the different goals of Republicans and Democrats, Adam believes corruption still deeply affects both parties. Similarly, Patrick discusses greed in

politics more directly. He believes that the greed of the upper classes is preventing the lower classes from having adequate resources to survive and thrive with.

Patrick: I feel like we have a police state. Obviously, I feel that being poor is criminalized in America, and police exist to maintain the current system. I feel like everything is just all about money, it's about money and greed. I feel like politicians don't care about people, it's all about just money...they only care about us because we work and pay taxes, and then they take that money and they spend it on war. We pay all these taxes but we don't really receive adequate social services like universal healthcare. And I feel like so many of the problems in our society could be solved if we get past greed and money. I would like to see tax dollars spent on public housing that every single person should be guaranteed food, clean drinking water, medicine, and at the bare minimum a studio apartment. I mean, I look at the cost to end homelessness in America, and the costs to provide universal healthcare, and then I look at the military budget which is—they're proposing it to be 700 billion dollars. And psychedelics help to see through all the cracks and things in society. It just feels like one giant pyramid scheme.

Laws are basically threats made by the ruling class, and I feel that a lot of authority is illegitimate. There are so many things which are perfectly legal, but should be criminalized in my opinion, and things that are criminalized, it should be legal. And so it all seems like one massive joke to me, and it's all about power, and power structures, and who has power within society.

Similar to Robert, Patrick has listed several large structural problems and power imbalances—such as military funding and lack of social services—that do not benefit the lower classes. Pessimism had tied in directly to all discussed topics of American politics; a lack of trust in government, impending environmental problems, and widening wage gaps contribute to a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness among participants. Interviewees have listed several issues and variables that contribute to a sense of powerless: underfunded social programs, increasing power of the police, and untrustworthiness in politics and political figures. These points—the “fakeness” of society and politics—contribute to how psychedelics help “see through the cracks” of the fakeness of social, economic, and political structures.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have showed that although many psychedelic users have left-leaning beliefs, their beliefs predate their drug use. Rather than *causing* open-mindedness and desire to help others, people take psychedelics to exhibit their open-minded attitudes. I have also shown that psychedelic users are more likely to engage in lifestyle politics than institutional politics—a behavior that reflects their cynicism toward and rejection of mainstream institutions and emphasis on personal authenticity.

Aligning with the fluidity of post-subcultural theory (Haenfler 2014:12), psychedelia today is incoherent and noncommittal to a single political ideology or set of beliefs. While most interviewees align themselves with leftism, and share similar points of concern, there are no “requirements” in beliefs to be involved in psychedelia. The interviewees discussed mostly share concerns, and participate in activism or other acts of service, that are uniquely important to their own lived-experiences, and the circumstances of contemporary society. For example, a number of interviewees are involved in activism or volunteering that directly involves a marginalized group they are a part of themselves.

Some interviewees have discussed how their major psychedelic experiences have influenced their beliefs on social issues: their increased feelings of compassion and openness have sometimes spurred into direct action such as engaging in everyday activism. Despite being 60 years apart, American society in the 1960s and 2010s share similar problems—the threat of war, nihilism, and various social, political, and environmental issues. Psychedelics have helped interviewees, as Patrick said, “see through the cracks” of how society functions. Usually this has resulted in interviewees questioning how society runs, why it is this way, and who these structures benefit. These

psychedelic experiences, as Patrick, Katie, Sam, and others have discussed, have shifted (either slightly or radically) their views on what is wrong with society, and what could make society better.

There are structural problems that are too large, overwhelming, and corrupted for the average person to attempt to combat. Therefore, interviewees tend to be left with a feeling of powerlessness to change their circumstances, or the circumstances of larger problems in the country. However, their involvement in activism proves that interviewees are not entirely hopeless. They are passionately committed to causes they feel strongly about, usually working on smaller levels such as donating to individuals, working for political campaigns, or distributing resources, opportunities, and information to disadvantaged groups. While psychedelia may not have overwhelmingly *caused* interviewees to become politically involved, there is evidence to suggest that psychedelics can offer individuals incentive or inspiration to further pursue their activism and critique cultural and political structures of society.

DISCUSSION

Despite a long history of psychedelics effects and relationships with users, there is little qualitative information about the state of psychedelia as a drug-based subculture in the present. Interviewees gave deep accounts of their introduction to psychedelia and/or psychedelic drugs, their opinions on these drugs, other people in the subculture, their political beliefs, and their involvement in activism. Most importantly, this study sees how psychedelia connects these points together: how activism, perceptions of different drugs, self-expression and interests, and political beliefs may align with their involvement in psychedelia. Each question this study proposed is discussed:

My first goal was to discover how participation in psychedelic subculture shapes people's interpretation and response to psychedelic experiences. Interviewees usually expressed that they would be much different—for the worse, in some ways—if they had never had their major psychedelic experiences. Taking psychedelics and being in psychedelic subculture had offered them numerous advantages, such as being able to form stronger bonds with others/meet new people, be closely involved with the subculture, discover new interests, and to be able to process their own difficult feelings.

Interviewees had a variety of psychedelic experiences they would deem as very significant: these experiences ranged from being life-changing and intense to casual or boring. Nevertheless, most interviewees described their most significant psychedelic trip as having lasting emotional affects: after their intense experiences, interviewees often

reported feeling relieved of stress, or desire to change their behavior towards themselves or others. Psychedelics do not directly cause these major changes: rather, users must go through a process of understanding, processing, and assigning meaning to their psychedelic trip. Given the importance of social interaction within use of the drug—psychedelics are almost always taken in the presence of one or more people—interviewees were able to discuss their experiences with their friends and fellow drug users. The internet groups also provide users a space to share their psychedelic experiences and discuss drugs and trips with other psychedelic users.

My second goal was to see what common values and beliefs psychedelia members have. Previous research asserts that psychedelic use can spur positive emotions, feelings of connectedness, and more concern for social problems. Several interviewees assert the concepts of “openness” and “kindness” are important to psychedelia: interviewees discuss at length that they try to practice being openminded and kind to others in their daily lives. They believe that other people in psychedelia also believe these values are important. Despite interviewees claim that psychedelia members are open and accepting, they express several implied and explicit rules of acceptable behavior within the subculture. For example, interviewees hold strong opinions on who is and is not a responsible or ideal psychedelic drug user. Some interviewees such as Brad were critical of the fashion and culture of festivals and raves, such as thinking psychedelic festival fashion (like harem pants) were silly. Finally, there is varying interest and commitment to psychedelic aesthetics. Aesthetics (such as self-expression through clothing, or being a fan of psychedelic music) is not directly related to psychedelic drug use. Mary, who is very interested in psychedelic fashion and art, had mentioned that her friends, who have

no interest in psychedelic media, are more passionate about psychedelic drug use than she is. Dana, Abby, and Moe, who do not use drugs, have great passion for the music, fashion, art, and aesthetics. Most interviewees align themselves with Left politicians except for 5 interviewees who were unaligned with a politician, and one who identified as Independent. Most interviewees, those who supported a politician or not, expressed distrust in the two-party system, politicians, Americas political system in general. This caused some interviewees to begrudgingly “settle” on supporting a politician who they thought was imperfect, but closest aligned to their own values. Besides the labels of Left and Right, all interviewees expressed support for progressive laws, such as drug decriminalization, Universal Basic Income, and otherwise assisting disadvantaged groups.

My third goal was to discover contemporary psychedelia members’ philosophy in relation to activism, authority, and society. These views are a larger critique on America’s political system and individualistic culture. Several interviewees are aware of, and explicitly discuss, American society by using words and phrases such as “individualistic,” “dog-eat-dog,” and “self-centered.” While hippie culture in the past was partly based on an idealistic idea that love can conquer all problems (and a few interviewees do have a loving philosophy), interviewees are notably distrusting of political leaders, afraid of environmental and societal collapse, and pessimistic towards the future. In response to these feelings of pessimism, interviewees engage in activism to improve the conditions of their communities and the people within them. While an overwhelming amount engage in small-scale activism, they still feel a sense of powerlessness to change American society on a large scale. This can further be asserted

with the political figures' interviewees supported. 11 interviewees supported Bernie Sanders; 2 supported Andrew Yang; 1 supported a local politician; and 5 were indifferent or could not align themselves with a politician.

Few interviewees have claimed psychedelic use had been a direct cause of their political involvement or opinions to be strengthened or changed. However, a majority of interviewees held their political opinions before psychedelic use. Personal experiences as well, such as gender or racial identity, the environment they were raised in, or other circumstances, contributed to the development of political and social opinions. For example, Dylan identifies as independent after disagreeing with behavior of people from both the Left and the Right. Mary, who is Asian, maintains a volunteer position to assist Asians work in the animation industry. Several interviewees were passionate about drug-related activism and causes, such as the decriminalization or legalization of certain drugs. While Patrick is an outlier among interviewees, all others had some previous levels of agreement or association with leftism, egalitarianism, or liberalism before taking psychedelics. In their own words and experiences, it can be assumed that psychedelics had encouraged them towards feelings about society that they already had before using the drugs. But it can be concluded that correlation does not equal causation: psychedelic use, despite much evidence supporting claims that psychedelics can encourage antiauthoritarian views (Lyons & Carhart-Harris 2018), higher empathy, and feelings of openness, typically only causes these feelings if the user had already supported these views before drug use (except in the case of one outlier, Patrick).

As an overarching analysis, I wanted to analyze how psychedelic subculture exists in the present. Based on post-subculture theory, it can be deduced that psychedelia and

hippiedom have been turned into a loose, boundaryless subculture. Drawn from Haenfler's (2014) definitions of post-subcultural theory, the following data conclusions support this:

First: since psychedelia is originally a historical movement and subculture, the current iterations of psychedelia are slightly detached from the original movement. Though America now, like in the 1960s, still struggles with war; racial, class, and gender stratification; and environmental destruction, interviewees have not cited any of these reasons for being the cause of their entrance into the subculture. Interviewees have usually entered psychedelia through psychedelic media, taking psychedelic drugs, or being coerced into it by friends or other social figures. While interviewees may care greatly for the issues listed above, they do not identify with a distinct youth movement like the hippies were. Interviewees engage in vintage fashions, art styles, and music of the era, and are able to pick-and-choose which aspects they wish to adopt or engage in. PST states there are weak boundaries between mainstream and underground cultures (Haenfler 2014:13). There has been a recent rise in 60s and 70s fashion and aesthetics coming back into the mainstream, and several revival bands making psychedelic music. This also coincides with the importance of consumption to psychedelic subculture: as Moe mentioned, stores are profiting off the revival of psychedelic aesthetic by selling clothes, accessories, and memorabilia for high prices.

Second: involvement in psychedelia overall is a choice, and not something that has directly stirred from external circumstances (such as the Vietnam War and the generational conflict of the 1960s). Most interviewees were introduced to psychedelia through rave or festival culture, music, or psychedelic fandom. Psychedelia has changed

more into a loose subculture where, besides drug taking, members can meet online or in musical settings, socialize, and create art. While interviewees have expressed dissatisfaction and pessimism towards their personal and societal circumstances, they are able to find refuge, friendship, and importance in the subculture.

Third: interviewees use psychedelics recreationally. “Recreationally” in this sense is used to mean that users are not compelled by addiction to the drug to use psychedelics, but rather have will to use it as much or as little as they please without physical or mental distress. Using psychedelics is not a necessity to be a part of the subculture, as people like Dana, Abby, and Moe abstain from psychedelic drugs and are heavily involved with the cultural aspects and expression of hippiedom. Sarah and Christian used to use psychedelics but do not plan on continuing to take them in the future.

Fourth: interviewees have varying involvement with psychedelic media. Moe dresses in vintage psychedelic-inspired fashion; Mary, Dana, and Abby make psychedelic-inspired artwork; several interviewees are fans of old and new psychedelic music. While psychedelic drugs may be an important facet of the subculture, drug use is not a requirement, and non-drug sects of the subculture can exist and engage with it.

Finally, political affiliation is not strictly tied to the subculture. While most interviewees are left-leaning, and assume other psychedelia members are left-leaning, not all members have to be affiliated with activism or a specific political philosophy. Some interviewees mainly take psychedelics in rave, festival, and party environments, which are mainly events to use drugs, socialize, and listen to music in a fun environment.

There are several patterns found between interviewees experiences and feelings. For the majority of interviewees, they:

First, have one or more mental illnesses. Most interviewees have depression and anxiety, while others have schizophrenia, OSDD, ADHD, or PTSD. They have reported that psychedelic use has usually helped alleviate their symptoms, or helped them process their emotions and diagnoses differently. Psychedelic use for self-medication can be interpreted as a method of self-alleviating strain. Interviewees without diagnoses discussed using psychedelics as a way to relieve temporary anxiety, depression, or otherwise process difficult situations they may be dealing with.

Second, they share feelings of “openness” (a willingness to listen to new ideas, try new experiences, and otherwise engage in things they may not initially agree with), compassion and patience towards others, and a desire for the betterment of humanity (protesting against violence and inequality, donating to the homeless, caring for the environment).

Third and finally, they engage in everyday activism, such as donating to people in need, being conscious of their environmental footprint and waste, spreading information online, voting, volunteering, supporting political campaigns, boycotting companies they do not support the values of, discussing politics and social issues with friends and family, and so on.

While variations exist, the typical psychedelia member still closely resembles the typical hippie from the 1960s: a white, middle-class youth who uses psychedelics for

self-development, recreation and in response to strain, and engages in progressive low-level activism to help disadvantaged groups.

Limitations

A main limitation was the diversity of my interviewee pool; while there were some age and race outliers, a majority of interviewees were fully white (15/19), in their 20s (17/19), and male (12/19). A more diverse sample size would be able to fully discuss views of politics and subculture across people who engage with a historically young, white, middle class subculture. While this paper analyzes the current iteration of psychedelic subculture, interviewing older generations of hippies would help gauge the differences between the present and past iterations of psychedelia. Additionally, most interviewees were culled from the websites Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. I had not tried to cull interviews from sites such as Reddit, or other drug-related forms such as Bluelight.org, which could have diversified the data pool.

All interviews except for one were done over the video-audio meet software Zoom. Interviewees were culled from many parts of America. While I believe Zoom offered interviewees convenience and a level of anonymity, I believe in-person interviews would have resulted in different relationships with interviewees. In-person interviews can offer more personal engagement and build a relationship between the interviewee and interviewer, especially when talking about sensitive subject matter like drug use, family life, and politics. Additionally, Zoom calls had a tendency to occasionally cut out, glitch, or otherwise disrupt the flow of the interview and recordings. Finally, time was a constraint on the research. Interviewees were completed over the course of about 5 months; more interviews could have been done had there been more

time to work on this project, thus giving the data a wider breadth of experiences and diversity.

CONCLUSION

Through these interviews and review of subcultural literature, I have offered both a thorough description of present-day psychedelia and analyzed key aspects of the subculture. Though many interviewees possess similar values and political beliefs and undergo some common experiences, psychedelia has changed from a subculture borne from several time-specific political and social events, to a broad group without strict membership prerequisites. Indeed, interviewees hold varied interests, political opinions and opinions of what psychedelia should and should not be.

Another important aspect not previously studied is analyzing psychedelia as a drug subculture that coexists with a “revival” of the original 1960s subculture. Psychedelic drug use is either used for fun or for personal development/spiritual purposes; interviewees have varying opinions on what constitutes as “correct” psychedelic use. Interviewees believe psychedelics, since they can produce intense and uncontrollable highs, should be taken seldomly and in specific circumstances. As for interviewees who do not use psychedelic drugs, psychedelia as an aesthetic, music genre, and style is immensely important to how they express themselves.

Though it is known that subcultures in recent decades have shifted from organized groups to fluid, fragmented scenes or lifestyles, psychedelia gives a prime example of how both the internet and corporate commodification can influence a group. It is unclear if the revival in interest and commodification of psychedelic aesthetic brings new people

into the culture (as interviewees who do not use the drugs have been introduced to psychedelia from a young age), but there are persistent settings—raves, parties, and internet groups—that provide people of all ages, backgrounds, and places to bond over these common interests and activities. Psychedelia today, it could be argued, continues to be rehashed and recycled, yet, as PST mentions, in a fashion that members are able to pick and choose what aspects of the subculture they want to participate in. Not every interviewee enjoys rave culture, just as every interviewee does not like classic psychedelic music, nor even using psychedelic drugs.

There are several minor findings that could be further researched, such as: variation in psychedelic trips and experiences; how important users think headspace and environment are to drugtaking; socialization into different drug cultures; further analysis and discussion of people involved in anachronistic subcultures and present youth's interest in the subcultures of previous generations; and stigma regarding psychedelics and other kinds of drugs. Additionally, the revival and commodification of the psychedelic aesthetic is a burgeoning trend in youth fashion. While many fashions are revived throughout the decades, psychedelic music, fashion, and the hippie movement itself had roots in countercultural rejection of mainstream norms. The appropriation and commodification of this—such as selling related clothes and objects at high prices, or brands capitalizing on vintage interests—could be distinctly different from revivals of fashion trends, such as 90s grunge or the bright colors of the 80s—which, in of themselves, were temporary moments of fashion history of these decades. There is an axis yet to be explored of the correlation between the power of fashion and aesthetics in combat with the current political atmosphere.

Lastly, research should continue on current popularity and culture between drug users, namely psychedelic users. Psychedelic users believe psychedelics to be distinctly separate from some other types of “hard” drugs (depending on physical and mental addictiveness). While psychedelic users in the 1960s (and some interviewees) have used drugs like amphetamine and cocaine alongside LSD, interviewees still distinctly separate psychoactive drugs like LSD and marijuana from drugs with a worse reputation such as heroin and meth. This opens the door to more analysis for comparison between different scheduled drugs, their users, and changing societal attitudes in the coming years. Marijuana use is becoming legalized in various states at various levels, and psychedelics are gaining popularity in psychiatric use for mentally ill patients. The fight for the legalization and decriminalization of drugs continues to be a pressing topic with increasing victories. Changing attitudes towards psychedelics, as society seemingly progresses more towards acceptance, is an important topic to delve into.

TABLE OF INTERVIEWEES

Name	Age	Race	Occupation	Supported Politician	Drug of Most Significant Experience
Katie	23	Chinese/ Indonesian/ Argentinian	Childcare	Bernie Sanders	LSD
Karen	25	White	Truck driver	Bernie Sanders	DMT
Brad	28	White	Alarm technician	Andrew Yang	LSD
Sarah	25	White	Student (now graduated)	Bernie Sanders	Mushrooms
Julie	38	White	N/A	Stacy Abrams	Ecstasy
Joseph	25	Palestinian	Retail	Bernie Sanders	Mushrooms
Mary	24	White/Chinese	Animation	Did not say	Mushrooms
Nick	25	White	Student	Andrew Yang	LSD
Patrick	29	White	N/A	Bernie Sanders	LSD
Adam	24	White	Guitar teacher	Did not say	LSD
Travis	20s	White	N/A	Bernie Sanders	Mushrooms
Olivia	29	White	Student, bartender	Bernie Sanders	Mushrooms
Sam	25	White	N/A	Bernie Sanders	Mushrooms/ LSD
Robert	46	White	Research coordinator/case manager	Bernie Sanders	Mushrooms
Christian	24	White	Stagehand	Did not say	LSD
James	22	White	Research coordinator, student	Bernie Sanders	Mushrooms
Dana	23	Arab	Animation	Bernie Sanders	N/A
Abby	21	White	Art student	Did not say	N/A
Moe	23	White	Janitor	Did not say	N/A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Before psychedelics

1. Tell me what you were taught about drugs when you were younger.
2. Tell me about your first experience with psychedelic drugs.
 - a. Follow-up: What do you remember the most from this experience?
 - b. Tell me about your most significant experience with psychedelics.
3. Do you think taking psychedelic substances makes the user realize things they wouldn't have if they were sober?
4. How have your experiences affected your perspective on the world? Your own well-being and happiness?
 - a. Follow up: Do you think you would be different now if you had never taken psychedelics? In what ways?

Subculture

5. Tell me about other psychedelic users you know. What kind of people are they?
 1. Follow-up: Can you tell me what a 'hippie' is? Do you identify as this label in any way?
6. Are you interested in any psychedelic music or media?
 1. Follow-up: Are any of these books, music, activities very important to you now?
 2. Follow up: Tell me about the overall lifestyle besides the substances?
7. Do you believe there are "common values" psychedelic users/enthusiasts believe in?
 1. Follow up: What values and beliefs do you or people in that group express?
 2. Follow-up: Tell me about some people you see eye-to-eye with. What about people you disagree with?

Beliefs

10. Have you gotten involved with any political issues or changed your perspective on them? Why?

1. Follow up: Do you participate in any activism, community service, or volunteer work?

11. Follow up: Is there a politician whose policies or ideas you really agree with? What do you like about them?

12. What are the most important values that you believe and try to practice?

13. What are problems in America that you feel most strongly about?

14. How do you feel about authority?

15. Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview that I did not address?

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