

Phenomenological analysis of set and setting's manipulation in shamanic psychedelic rituals and psychedelic-assisted-therapy

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Abstract: In this paper, I present a phenomenological examination of lived experiences within the context of psychedelic therapy, specifically focusing on the influence of “set” and “setting” in consciousness’ regular functioning. I scrutinize the limitations of psychological and sociological approaches in understanding how the manipulation of internal and external factors mediates therapeutic effects. Even when these approaches attempt to concentrate on the internal state of mind, they adopt a third-person perspective that fails to adequately explain the subjective experience. Consequently, I argue for the necessity of a phenomenological reflection employing Husserlian methodology to elucidate the intentional structure underlying modifications in the subjective experience that anticipate therapeutic outcomes. Utilizing epoché, I propose both a descriptive and a genetic analysis to capture the essential and universal properties that define those types of experiences. By comparing shamanic therapy in indigenous populations with the medicalized use of psychedelics in the West, I demonstrate how the efficacy of manipulating “set” and “setting” depends on an ongoing re-organization in consciousness’ intentional functioning concerning structures of embodiment, intercorporeality, intersubjectivity and culture.

Keywords: psychedelics, set and settings, Husserl, intersubjectivity, intercorporeality, culture, therapy

1. *Set and settings: levels of explanation*

The question of the role of extra-pharmacological variables in determining the content and effects of psychedelic experience, previously addressed by the pioneering studies of the last century under the title of *set and setting* (Leary, 1961; Leary *et al.*, 1964), has assumed fundamental importance in the last twenty years from both a historical-conceptual and applicative perspective (Hartogsohn 2016, 2022). The psychedelic renaissance in the West has

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taken the form of a progressive medicalization of the use of certain psychedelic substances in the treatment of a variety of psychiatric disorders (Johnson and Griffiths, 2017; Luoma *et al.*, 2020). To date, there is an increasing number of studies that attest to their efficacy, especially in the reduction and treatment of anxiety and depressive symptoms (Carhart-Harris *et al.*, 2018; Carhart-Harris *et al.*, 2021; Griffiths *et al.*, 2016), suicidal ideation (Ross *et al.*, 2021), social isolation (Zeifman *et al.*, 2023), and addictions (Zafar *et al.*, 2023). With the accumulation of therapeutic evidence, however, there has been an immediate need to develop a theoretical model that clarifies the mechanisms of action of various substances, thus guiding the formulation of experimental protocols that, on one hand, respect scientific constraints, and on the other alleviate the still vivid social and political tensions (Hartoghsen, 2022). The challenge stems from the fact that the outcome of psychedelic therapy does not seem reducible to pharmacological mechanisms, rather it involves a stratification of levels of explanation. It is necessary to consider not only the biochemical level but also the neural, psychological, and finally the socio-cultural level (Van Elk *et al.*, 2022; Roseman *et al.*, 2022). I assume that this stratification poses questions that go beyond experimental considerations and primarily concern foundational and epistemological issues. For instance, when it comes to the role of psycho-social aspects, it seems complex, if not impossible, to isolate causally manipulable variables on which to base a mechanistic model that is continuous with basic epistemological principles of hard sciences (Craver, 2015). Empirical studies show that the influence of both socio-cultural variables and geographical-environmental collocation can alter the contents and the dynamics of subjective experience suggesting the adoption of a contextual view on cognition (Ibanez and Garcia, 2018). The same can be said for the phenomenology of the subjective experience of a psychedelic trip, such as those induced by the ingestion of ayahuasca, whose perceptual and imaginative content change radically under the influence of extra-pharmacological factors related to environmental clues or cultural references (Shannon, 2002). These differences become even more evident if we compare the multiplicity of cultural manifestations in which the use of medicines and plants with psychoactive effects plays a crucial role both in individual and collective therapy (Winckelman, 2010, 2021; Brabec De Mori, 2021). Psychedelic practices have a secular history rooted in rituals and traditions in various and distant areas of the world. In most cases one can witness ritual organizations, typically united in the form of shamanism, which aim to awaken and enhance the human, existential, and social potential believed to be liberated by the substance (Winckelman, 2010, 2015). The substance, instead of representing the centre of the treatment, is rather considered the means that enables an existential journey in which individual healing is mediated

by collective practice and the efficacy of shared beliefs, mostly of a spiritual-transcendent nature (Winkelman, 2010). It is important to note how such ritual organizations cannot be simply understood as the performance of mechanical, material and contingent practices, but rather represent a symbolic vehicle that animates a cultural universe that gives meaning to individual and collective experiences (Dupuis, 2021a). This symbolic universe, in fact, is embodied and lived through the subjective experience that present unique contents and dynamics. Most of shamanic rituals using psychedelics subscribe the efficacy of the practice to the healing effect of a symbolic-cultural universe within which the individual or the group enter in a relation during the trip (Winkelman, 2021). From the perspective of those practises, set and setting's manipulation mediate the awakening of a symbolic-qualitative meaning that shape the phenomenology of subjective experience. This being said, the relation between the individual and this complex symbolic universe cannot be understood just by looking at material practises and depends on universal law of consciousness' functioning. The material apparatus surrounding the practice is subordinated to cognitive, symbolic, and cultural operations that transform the healing-process in an ongoing modification of the intentional relation between the individual and its own world (Petrement, 2023).

Moving from those shamanic ritual practices to the medicalization of psychedelically-assisted-therapy (PAT), it is mandatory to ask how the latter value subjective experience in its relations with the natural and cultural world shaping the healing journey. Looking at manuals such as the Yale manual for psilocybin-assisted therapy (Guss *et al.*, 2020), the attempt to identify and isolate causal mechanisms at the psychological level makes one blind to the more culturally-mediated symbolic relations that shape the phenomenology of subjective experience. The effort is conveyed in isolating psychological categories describing aspects of the psychedelic experiences that can be predictive of good or bad outcomes. Those concern, for example, mystical experience (Griffith *et al.*, 2006), feeling of awe (Hendricks, 2018), Ego-dissolution (Nour *et al.*, 2016) and enhanced perception of (bad or good) emotions (Hartogsohn, 2018). Building on different sub-scale targeting those psychological categories, qualitative research uses a series of questionnaires, such MEQ (Barrett *et al.*, 2015), EDI or CEQ (Barrett *et al.* 2017)¹, to differentiate singular experiences and develop individualized protocols. However, there are a lot of different experimental-therapeutic protocols that, focusing on different psychological and temporal levels of abstraction, propose alternative description and relevant explanations (Belser *et al.*, 2017; Dworatzky *et al.*, 2022). In the case of shamanic rituals, on the contrary, the dominance of socio-cul-

¹ Mystical- experience- questionnaire (MEQ); Ego- dissolution-inventory (EDI); Challenging-experience-questionnaire (CEQ).

tural-religious apparatus flattens the epistemological questions to symbolic interpretation and environmental manipulations. The empirical fact showing the efficacy of both types of practices renders any attempt of hierarchization obsolete, speaking rather in favour of a synthesis. If lived experience holds therapeutic value in itself (Cacciatore, 2022), it becomes necessary to establish a general epistemological framework that defines the categories, methods of investigation, and interpretative tools needed to describe and explain these diverse experiential paths and their associated meanings. In other words: we need to integrate organic-mechanistic analyses with phenomenological ones (Colelli, 2023; Perrotta, in press). This understanding should concern an anthropological investigation that is not tied to historically-contingent manifestations, but rather looks for universal properties of human nature that renders all those different manifestations possible. This theoretical study must be carried out at the level of description of first-person experience and must concern the generality of consciousness with its constitutive structures and functions. I propose the use of an Husserlian-inspired methodology to study consciousness as a pure epistemological ground for any experiential manifestation. Having clarified how those universal structure shapes the phenomenology of subjective experiences in the case of psychedelic therapy, we will be able to address empirical question regarding the relative efficacy of different practices.

2. *Phenomenology and psychedelics*

There is great debate when discussing the role of phenomenology in replacing or integrating the psychological-cognitive approach studying mental phenomena (Pokropsky, 2019, 2021; Yoshimi, 2020, 2021; Gallagher and Zahavi, 2007; Gallagher, 2017). The proliferation of approaches that define themselves as inspired by phenomenology makes it complex to assess their explanatory potential in non-philosophical disciplines (Casper and Hauesis, 2023). While it is true that the phenomenological literature already presents a great variability of positions within it, it is difficult today to trace continuity even in approaches that define themselves as inspired by the same author (Yoshimi, 2022). While the urgency of clarification of the role of subjectivity becomes increasingly urgent (Zahavi, 2014), especially in the field of psychedelic experiences (Houot, 2021; Yaden and Griffith, 2020), we still don't have any unified approach. From a theoretical standpoint our research continues an already initiated attempt to phenomenologically clarify the co-constitutive relation between aspects of subjectivity, or pure consciousness, and elements of the world, now considered as a complex stratification

of layers of objective manifestation and meanings (Moran, 2012). Phenomenology states that the meaning of experience is not, so to speak, immediately given, but rather the result of a continuous activity of meaning-giving by a subjectivity that experiences its world-environment in an integral and non-reducible manner (Colelli and Di Bernardo, 2023). In this regard, Petrement assumes that the ingestion of psychedelic works by giving the subject the occasion to re-organize its relationship with the world, opening new possibilities for perception, action, and thought (Petrement, 2023). These insights align well with naturalistic neurocognitive explanation such as the REBUS (relaxed-belief-under-psychedelics) model that considers the effects of psychedelics on 5HT_{2A}r in altering global neural activity. REBUS, making use of a synthesis between the free energy principle, the entropic brain hypothesis and the predictive processing framework, assumes that psychedelics provide an opportunity for updating beliefs about the self and the world (Lethby and Gerrans, 2017; Carhart-Harris and Friston, 2019). Psychedelics trigger a de-activation of the DMN (default-mode-network) that is implied in those self-referential-functions necessary to reduce the prediction error by appealing to an acknowledged and accepted global belief system. When the top-down influence of DMN is de-activated, there is an increase in the prediction error that challenges the organisms to find new adaptive pathways given the sensory information. This naturalistic explanation, while building upon our accepted neuroscientific knowledge, does not say anything about the subjective and embodied lived experience that is implicated. Petrement, building a phenomenologically-inspired proposal, critiques brain-centered reductive explanation by proposing that therapeutic transformation implies primarily a change in the subjectively-experienced-world. He proposes that the psychedelic therapy does not simply modify subject's psychology but can rather show new therapeutical experiential path by updating the perceived affordances in the external world. Blevins, appealing to critical phenomenology, proposes abandoning Petrement's assumptions that are considered still too abstract. He focuses on a model of *operative subjectivity* to understand how social categories can determine the forms of individual experience by shaping consciousness structures and dynamics (Blevins, 2023). The author thus attributes a constitutive role to intersubjectivity understood as the "(the) existential condition of sharing the world with others that makes possible meaning, communication, and socialization, processes which rely on and are perpetually (re)enacted through social categories" (Blevins, 2023, p. 5). Working on its enactivist premises, Blevins makes the body an all-encompassing foundational element, attributing the efficacy of cultural categories to an embodiment of socially established values into dispositions that prepare action. In particular, the author speaks of a modification in the sensitivity, in

the orientations of a living body that can thus assume different *physiological* postures towards a natural and cultural environment. He then recognizes the need for a phenomenological investigation of context manipulation in psychedelic experience but end up crushing the intended investigation of the consciousness' structures and functions onto a generalized reference to living corporeality. As we will see, complex experiences cannot be phenomenologically reduced to embodied senso-motorial activity. Complex experiences depend on the mutual correlations between affective, cognitive and symbolic elements that define mental states by virtue of their unique eidetic qualities (Pokropski, 2021). Moreover, the epistemological issue is not resolved in any way. In fact, it ends up reproducing the same confusion between different levels of explanation from which we started. Phenomenological analyses, which are proposed as a methodological therapy to resolve conceptual confusion, would ultimately fall back into the same mire from which it sought to differentiate itself.

3. *The importance of epoché*

While I postpone to future research an attentive analysis of the anti-naturalistic assumptions of Husserl's phenomenology (Zahavi, 2013; Moran, 2008), I focus on the possibility of applying the epoché as an epistemological starting point to base a series of phenomenological analyses regarding consciousness' structures and functions involved in contextual manipulation that differentiate alternative that implement psychedelics for therapeutical purposes.

Following Zahavi, I suggest that an integration of phenomenological analysis with empirical sciences must preliminarily clarify its claims and its fields of application (Zahavi, 2021b). In this regard, the aim of this research concerns primarily theoretical reflections. The applicative commitment, I argue, can only follow a preliminary theoretical-conceptual clarification without which every subsequent research would lack its foundation (Husserl, 1936). It is in the realm of philosophical reflection, in fact, that the relationship between consciousness, subjectivity, and the world is discussed, as well as the importance of the relationship between nature and culture, the role of categories such as intersubjectivity or embodiment in determining the meaning of subjective experience, and so on (Zahavi, 2017; Perrotta and Melon, in press). This is, I argue, the basis for an epistemologically-clarified science of consciousness.

The principle of phenomenology is the return to the things themselves, to the pure observation of the unfolding of experience without any pre-assumption regarding the meaning of the world as it is intended in the practical-natural attitude (Husserl, 1913). Through a preliminary bracketing of our theoretical hypotheses about the world, the phenomenologist investigates

the unfolding of the lived experiences reduced to their essential properties, seeking to grasp those universal laws that constitute structural invariants with their related functions (Zahavi, 2019; Perrotta and Melon, in press). In the phenomenological perspective, indeed, the meaning of the phenomenal world is a product of subjectivity, the result of a constitutive and layered correlation between different acts of consciousness and the matter of the world. Thanks to the epoché, we recognize that every act of consciousness is “about something”, it always has an object. Husserl refers to this universal property of consciousness as *intentionality* (Zahavi, 2017). Intentionality is not an external relation between an empirical subject and its pre-given world, but rather what constitutes the meaning of the world as we experience it. Given those pre-assumptions, our proposal is inspired to Husserl's later idea of developing a pure psychology as an intermediate stage towards a more mature form of phenomenological psychology (Husserl 1913, 1936). Pure psychology studies mental phenomena from the pure perspective of the epoché: those are consciousness functions that constitute a specific *regional aspect* of subjective experience: that aspect related to the life of a *psyche*. Those functions concern perception, feeling, imagination, remembering, belief, judgment, reflection, desire, and so on. Phenomenology recognizes the existence of other intentional functions that are still constitutive of human experience while not being reducible to mental-cognitive operations. Those are related to the life of the *Leib*² and concern our visceral, affective and sensorimotor engagement with the world. Both those levels of activity and description refer to a series of structure concerning temporality, embodiment, intersubjectivity, culture, self-consciousness. As we will see later, the content, the dynamics and the meaning of the subjective experience depends on the internal relation between the net of active functions and their related structures. Those premises pose the basics for a layered investigation of consciousness' functioning. The distinction between aspects of experience connected to corporeality and those connected to the psyche should be acknowledged and presented (Husserl, 1913). This may explain why the understanding of the role of material, historical and cultural elements cannot be reduced to the general category of embodiment of cultural values. Cognitive and psychological functions are necessary to constitute and understand cultural habits and value. Of course, even bodily activity is involved, but in a form that is often mediated and fulfilled by cognitive interpretation. The proposed goal of our research is to develop an analysis of those structural basis with the dynamical connections

² For any phenomenological analyses it is important to underline that the body through which we experience the world does not directly coincide with the body that is object of physiological processes. The former is defined as *Leib* or living body, the latter as *Körper* or lived body. Transparency is the property of “seeing the world through our living bodies”. (Fuchs, 2018).

between the various layers of activity that define each type of experience. This intentional functioning defines the phenomenology of the lived experience as well as the properties and meanings of the objects that manifest through them. In the following paragraph, I propose to base the study of the subjective meaning of complex experiences involved in different psychedelic practices on a systematic correlation between consciousness' structures and functions.

4. *Psychedelic ritual: a phenomenological analysis*

I propose an application of the principles and method just explained to the study of the complex network of individual and social phenomena implicated in the manipulation of set and setting in shamanic rituals using psychedelics. In this regard, I integrate the phenomenological analyses with the biopsychosocial model elaborated by Winkelman as a corollary of decades of study of shamanic practices from the Palaeolithic to modern era (Winkelman 2010, 2015). After observing the importance in rituals of alteration of consciousness for reassessing the equilibrium of the individual and the community, the author attempts to reconstruct the prehistory of the functions that mediate the efficacy of such practices, proposing a synthetic view that integrates studies of evolutionary theory, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology (Winkelman, 2021). He assumes that evolution has endowed humans with a series of functional adaptations useful to specific niche and cognitive construction that we can divide into two macro-categories: (i) on the one hand, there are metabolic adaptations related to the ability to synthesize and absorb chemically active elements contained in plants and fruits; (ii) on the other, there are cognitive-behavioural functions and habits that have been selected because useful to the performance of rituals which strengthened group organization while enhancing individual survival rates. The first case involves mechanisms and causality studied by biochemical sciences and remains outside of the scope of our research for now. The second coincides with the development of what the author calls (i) *personal intelligences* and (ii) *collective intelligences*, both expressed in terms of motor reciprocity and symbolic-linguistic communication (Winkelman, 2021). Instead of describing such forms of intelligence as functional-psychological properties correlated with the evolution of cognitive modules in the brain, I adopt a phenomenological perspective to treat them as active ingredients of an intentionally layered consciousness' functioning. This will help us describing not just the distal causes that can be causally linked to evolutionary mechanisms, but the effective component of universally functioning human

consciousness. Each of those functions are correlated with the various layers of consciousness' structures concerning embodiment, intercorporeality, intersubjectivity and culture. This will uncover universal aspects of experience, thus confirming both the intrinsic intersubjective nature of human experience as well as the constitutive intertwining that involves bodily and psychic elements.

5. *Living body, intentionality and intercorporeality*

If we analyse the acts of a living body within the context of a purified consciousness, a fundamental duality immediately emerges: the body is both the diaphanous medium through which I experience things in the world and a physical system with material properties accessible from a third-person perspective. Husserl proposes to understand the first aspect of corporeality as a living body (*Leib*) and the second as an object body (*Körper*) (Fuchs, 2018). The object body is the body immediately accessible to others, an object among objects, possessing the property of extension like any material object. The living body, on the contrary, is involved in a series of functions that give meaning to the objects of the world, including the self, possessing such a body. We can think of this process as a bottom-up process of self-constitution. The living body is thus already the beholder of a peculiar form of intentionality. It is, so to speak, the first way of constituting the sense of the world. If investigated through the lens of the phenomenological method, the constitutive activity of the living body already involves an original form of intersubjectivity that, following Fuchs, we can define intercorporeality (Fuchs, 2017a). I mean that even in the intentional functioning of a living body endowed with drives, impulses and sensorimotor capacities is implicit a relationship with other bodies conceived as the bodies of other living-human-beings. This reference to primary intersubjectivity as an original form of orientation in the world does not concern an external relationship between bodies, but rather refers to the fact that every human activity implies in principle a co-action, whether this remains veiled or becomes opaque (Fuchs, 2018). This defines the universal consciousness structure of intercorporeality³. The living body is therefore initially moved and animated by a series of drives and tensions that tend to be satisfied in sensorimotor relations with other bodies or with objects in the world (Colelli, Di Bernardo, 2023). The structure of intercorporeality already gives these pulsional and tensional

³ We can see how the structure of intercorporeality is already entrenched with the structure of embodiment. We live our world through our living bodies while we engage with others as living bodies themselves.

forms of intentionality a collective character, mainly due to a tacit affective connection mediated by the expressiveness of the body (Fuchs, 2017a). It is important to note that these relations do not assume a genetic form: that is to say, it is not about conceiving a progressive series of stages in which primary intersubjectivity then gives way to a secondary intersubjectivity that substitute it (Fuchs, 2017b). The affective character embodied in visceral and bodily reactions, in fact, guides the unfolding of our experiences even when they concern the instantiation of cultural or social symbolic values. Returning to the idea that extra-pharmacological factors influence psychedelic experience we can assume that the living body already has the *a priori* ability to intentionally (re)act before and regardless of the intervention of the psyche and the related cognitive representations. In this sense, I conceive the living body as a true intentional agent capable of establishing meaningful relationships with the world and, finally, of transforming them under the impulse of cultural values and meanings. I will now see how this layered activity can determine the content and the dynamics of subjective experience. Winkelman poses that a common characteristic for psychedelic rituals across time and space concerns the manipulation of bodily variables through the practice of fasting, sexual and sleep abstinence, and, particularly relevant, the listening of music and the staging of ritual dances or pseudo-tragedies with deliberately accentuated features *during* the performance (Winkelman, 2021). All these factors imply a reference to the body, on both aspects of the living body and the object body. As for the latter, it is rather immediate to conceive a series of causal-external relationships that modify homeostatic balances, shifting the space-state of physiological body towards an altered condition. The development of biological, physiological and neuroscientific research makes the statistical measurements concerning the biochemical mechanisms more precise (Heal *et al.*, 2023; Van Elk, Yaden, 2022). At the same time, however, it is important to note that the study of physiological variables can also benefit from phenomenological investigations. It is in the realm of experience that, for example, we become aware that listening to musical frequencies does not only exert effects on the auditory system but also involves affectivity, memory, social meanings, and so on (Smith, 2019). In this sense, phenomenology can guide empirical research by providing clearer and more precise descriptions of the phenomena one intends to study. Regarding the intentionally-active living body, on the other hand, it is essential to investigate how such manipulations interfere with the basic functioning of consciousness and therefore with the constitution of meaning of the subjective world. Physiological manipulations, while modifying variables of the *Körper*, also interfere with the intentionality of the *Leib*. In this regard, it is important to introduce another concept dear to phenomenology, that of *Hyle*. The *Hyle* refers to the material

of experience, to that substrate that form the sensorial basis for any further operation of consciousness (Zahavi, 1997; Moran, 2005). As should now be clear, thanks to the *epoché* we know that every objective manifestation refers to a constitutive process that implies a reference to an active consciousness. In this sense even the Hyle is organized under the impulse of this basic intentionality centered on the living body. Those features of experience depend on a series of passive syntheses that, as the term suggest, imply a particular form of activity. This concern law of organization and association that Husserl referred to under the name of *phenomenological unconscious* (Geniusas, 2020; Colelli Di Bernardo, 2023). Those are bot pre-egoic, meaning that they do not depend on the activity of the ego, and *temporally-extended*, meaning that they define constitutive relations between past and present content of experience. The habitual functioning of this basic activity, and especially its spatio-temporal regularities, depends primarily on the balance of a living body that alternate needs and tensions with fulfilments and satisfactions in a virtuous circle that is typically regulated by the principles of habit. The manipulation of these balances also causes a modification in the functioning of bodily intentionality, ultimately leading to a change in the basic structures of sensitivity. This can result in altered subjective perception of space and time. (Fuchs, 2013). When those basic structures get altered, even the conveyed tensions change their needs: the body takes on a peculiar posture towards the world, changing phenomenal content and dynamics. This modification of the phenomenal field depends on the distortion of the habitual consciousness' functioning and represents one aspect of the alteration that can be induced by psychedelics.

I can now pass to analyse the structure of intercorporeality as encompassing a first form of symbolic communication and understanding (Fuchs, 2018). The meaning of musical practices, ritual dances, or pseudo-tragedies cannot be entirely understood while staying at a basic level of physiological and sensorimotor interaction. The universal structure of intercorporeality is what makes possible for collective practices to acquire an intersubjective and proto-symbolic meaning. The subjective meaning of the experience of dancing, music, and performing ritual tragedies during the ritual is not just a way of altering consciousness through its material basis but is part of a cultural and collective en-actment (Meindl and Zahavi, 2023). The intentionality involved in these practices, although still centred on the living body, implies an internal and eidetic reference to others experienced as a collection of living bodies. The presence of other changes the meaning of experience in a way that cannot be understood from a strictly causal connection. Phenomenologically we assume that such lived experiences involve the structure of intercorporeality, so that consciousness' functioning tacitly implies an extended sensitivity to possible co-actors. It is not, therefore, a question of observing the other

and acting accordingly, but of internally possessing the capacity to act together (Fuchs, 2018). This will modify the affective and motivational engagement with the practice while posing the basis for the cognitive one. Winkelmann speaks of a *mimetic capacity* of human intelligence, that is, a capacity to *communicate* meanings through the movements of a body (that acquires expressive habits) and the correlate ability to understand meaning from the body of others (Winkelmann, 2021). Movement, and especially dance, perform a first form of symbolic communication not mediated by conceptual and linguistic representations. In the case of shamanic practice, the case of ritual tragedies in which exaggerated movements communicate precise meanings without the need for conceptual mediation is paradigmatic (Fuchs, 2017; Krueger, 2018). But if we remain confined to this level of explanation, as the author do, we cannot say how this type of communication can be possible. He refers those abilities to the existence of innate intelligences that have emerged during evolution. In this way, the distal causes are confused with the proximal ones, and nothing is said about the actual consciousness' functioning that determine the content of those subjective experience. This requires a careful phenomenological analysis of the dynamics of consciousness' functioning concerning the structure of intercorporeality. Mimesis can be defined as one of the capacities through which an embodied consciousness gives meaning to an experience concerning inter-corporeal relations. This involvement implies the establishment of a circularity in which the living body becomes both the subject of intentional experiences and the object of modification (Fuchs, 2018). While the objects of the world take on broader meanings under the influence of this basic form on proto-cultural mediation, it is the same embodied intentional habits that get modified, and with them the entire substrate that involves the acting subjectivity. When a subject "x" participates in a ritual dance, the rhythmic involvement becomes part of a complex net of functions concerning bodily, affective and proto-cognitive intentionality that alter the process of constitution that build a lived world. This happens because, as should now be clear, every objective manifestation refers to an active pole of operations, each of which implies some reference to the acting subjectivity. Husserl defines this internal correlation between the forms of acting subjectivity and the meanings of the objects of the world as noesis and noemata (Moran, 2012b). In the case in question, the noesis do not yet concern an active intervention of cognitive and representational intentionality but already delineate, by virtue of the expected fulfilments of a bodily one, a specific experiential path. This speaks in favour of a layered consciousness' functioning that involves even an intentionality centred in the body as part of this complex process of sense-making.

Husserl assumes that there are universal laws of consciousness' functioning that explain the dynamical unfolding over time of the noesis: these laws

concern firstly the temporal organization and associative syntheses but also imply a series of references to drives, instincts, and obviously to habits (Husserl, 1938). The modification of the noesis determines the modification in the sense of the noemata, and therefore, in general, to the lived experience. Passive syntheses first give unity to the various sensory fields, but then contribute to linking increasingly complex meanings with the development of other types of noetic activity. This is what defines complex experiences as layers of intentional activities. In the case of collective activities performed during the rituals, for example, the bodily functions connected to perceptual integration and motoric coordination motivate other types of noetic functions related to affective engagement or to proto-cognitive interpretation. The habitual performance of those practices can embody a series of belief or proto-belief that define a form of attachment that is experientially relevant. This attachment is firstly a bodily-one that can then become increasingly abstract and symbolic (Fuchs, 2018). The integration between those different layers can alter even the perceptual content of the experience under the influence of environmental clues as well as in the case of abstract form of embodied reasoning. The first case would explain why even visual hallucination induced by the ingestion of ayahuasca are so sensitive to the environmental context (Shannon, 2002). The second would explain why the perceptual content of the psychedelic trip are similar or coincident with object derived from the cultural, symbolic or religious background of the subject (Dupuis, 2022). By way of this circularity of processes, the living body acquires new embodied and intentional habits while sharpening its sensitivity. This gives that dynamism and creativity to individual experience that is useful for existential modification and therapeutic outcomes. The awareness of these transformative potentialities of collective practices that exploit bodily inter-action was already present in very ancient indigenous population (Winkelman, 2007), and it is no coincidence that it is at the centre of most psychedelic rituals even today (Brabec De Mori, 2022). Up to this point I have focused on the role of the living body, but it is evident that the more complex aspects of human experience involve the faculties and capacities of a psyche with cognitive and representational abilities. These considerations, developed in the last paragraphs, concern the way in which the appearance of complex cognitive functions modifies the intentional relation between the acting subjectivity and its own environment, adding a series of functions concerning social reality, language, and culture.

6. *Secondary Intersubjectivity and Culture*

Having clarified the significant role that the living body and its active form of intentionality plays in constituting layers of experience, it is now crucial to note how, in the case of human beings, it is the regional ontology related to the activity of a psyche that makes our experience so unique. By this, I do not mean to mechanically separate the two layers but rather to highlight those functions that cannot be reduced to structure of temporality, embodiment or intercorporeality. As we have seen, the psyche and the body maintain an intentional and constitutive relation, and it is essential to conceive of an active and continuous motivational relationship between the two. Our lives as human beings unfold in the paradoxical duality of these two aspects, which nevertheless remain intertwined in a unity that is not easily separable. In the case of psychedelic therapy, there is a tendency in the literature to define the psychological or internal state of the subject as “set” (Hartogsohn, 2022). The medical approach to (Psychedelic-assisted-psychotherapy) PAP aims to manipulate those relevant variables by organizing a series of preliminary psychotherapy sessions in which the subject is instructed about the experience that awaits them. They are informed about the risks and difficulties of therapy, as well as the uncertainties and expected effects (Phelps *et al.*, 2017; Val Elk, Yaden, 2022). The main goal is to provide the patient with tools and cognitive habits useful for both coping with negative emotions, such as anxiety and fear often associated with hallucination, loosening of control on the body or ego-dissolution, as well as prepare them to the most common experiential effect of the substance that may be therapeutically relevant. The aim of those preparatory practises is to manipulate the internal state of the subject approaching the psychedelic administration to achieve those psychological stages that are in most cases predictive of positive outcomes. Those psychological categories concern being open, reporting a perception of safety, being ready to surrender to the experience, and so on. Empirical trials, such as the ones adopting the ACE (accept, control, embody) for treating major depression with psilocybin-assisted-therapy, are showing promising clinical results (Watts and Luoma, 2020). As I have already showed before, those empirical causal relations, while having some predictive values, lack a rigorous epistemological foundation as well as not having any direct reference to the structural and dynamical aspect of subjective lived experience. In the second paragraph, I briefly mentioned how some authors have emphasized the relevance of social categories in determining modifications in existing structures of consciousness such as intersubjectivity (Petrement, 2023). However, neither in these cases are the relations between consciousness’ structures and functioning specified. It is this complex intentional engagement that constitute

the phenomenal content as well as the dynamics of lived experience with its layered meaning. Having laid the groundwork for the application of phenomenological analyses in the previous paragraphs, I can now pass to how the appearance of a psyche alters the nature of the universal functioning through which consciousness confers meaning to the world. The appearance of the faculty of intellect with its linguistic capacity make a series of representational and propositional content available. So, it is easier to organize information about the self and the world more precisely. The appearance of functions such as belief, judgment or cognitive evaluation coincides with the ability to attribute new layers of meaning to the objects that make up the natural and cultural world, including the self. Additionally, the exercise of intellectual functions coincides with the appearance of a new aspect of experiencing, strongly centred on one's interiority and partially coinciding with what we could define as a virtual space of the mind. This is the place of intimate reasoning, imagining, remembering, personally engaging with emotions and so on. This virtual space of the mind is also important for the construction and consolidation of our interiority as a part of the identity building process (Marraffa, Di Francesco, Paternoster, 2016). For the purposes of our research, however, it is essential to value a second crucial aspect, which is related to structures of intersubjectivity and culture. Even if intercorporeality provides us a basic intersubjectivity, it is only with the appearance of secondary intersubjectivity (Fuchs, 2018; Gallagher and Zahavi, 2007) that the other is perceived as a full subjectivity, involved in the world as an active and intentional "I"⁴. To the extent that the degree of *my* involvement in the world transcends the simplest interaction centred on the body and implies the ability to form representations and use them as a reference for my actions, the *Other* also becomes an active subject of representations and therefore a real and possible co-actor. The silent presence of the other as a co-actor and judge of my actions is embodied in the foundations of human existence at the point that makes Husserl saying that intersubjectivity precedes a full-blown subjectivity (Husserl, 1931). Some authors have proposed to understand this co-action as collective or shared intentionality (Tomasello, 2022; Damasio, 2017, 2021). For our phenomenological discussions, however, it is more accurate to consider it simply as a structural condition of possibility of the acts of a psyche. With secondary intersubjectivity, a complex culture emerges, understood as a collection of common representations endowed with affective relevance that can move us to action (Perrotta, 2022). As humans, culture plays a fundamental role for our lived experience: it gives meaning to our lives

⁴ Even if we have introduced the concept of a bodily intentionality, we can think of others as being intentionally engaged with the world just as a byproduct of a representational ability that is closely tied to intellectual and cognitive abilities.

while modifying the way in which we interpret phenomena of the world and of ourselves. This modification is not the result of a force exerting external causation on us, but rather a universal structure of human existence that opens new alternative scenarios for consciousness functioning and construction of meaning. This means that even aspects of the self in its relations with others and with the world can be altered, predicting strong existential modification ranging from affective, to bodily, to narrative ones. If we go back to our intended analyses of psychedelic's set manipulation, it is the case that in many shamanic rituals using psychedelics (Winkelman, 2007), as well as in different cultural habits such as tarantism (Daboo, 2010), the cultural meaning surrounding and structuring the practice is supposed to predict the outcome of the therapy. This cultural meaning is not simply a material apparatus, but rather a series of common representation embedded in the cognitive niche that can become the objects of individual consciousness' functions such as belief, judgments, desire, imagination and so on (Perrotta, Meloni in press). Even material practices, then, can acquire complex experiential meaning thanks to this layered consciousness activity. Those differences are subjectively lived through as constitutive of the experiential field while remaining inaccessible from third person perspective analysis. The cognitive engagement that relates to structures of culture is also affectively relevant. Specifically, it is what makes cultural representation reference values for our actions as well as potential therapeutic agents for our existential journey. This speaks in favour of a non-reductionist view on existential healing that concern complex intentional interaction between consciousness structures and functioning. For some shamanic ritual to "*heal the ill*", as in the case of various reported practices of Peruvian Amazon, it does not even mean to let him ingest the psychedelic substance (Dupuis, 2021b). The Shaman, by ingesting Ayahuasca, should get access to the spiritual world becoming the guide for the ills through their transformative healing-process. Therefore, he is not directly dependent on the effects of the substance, but on the existential transformation that is culturally sustained and that depends on the just-mentioned alteration of normal consciousness functioning. The same can be said for tarantism. Those basic functions, as I've already mentioned, can concern different aspect of our intentionally layered and complex lived experience. What can we say of the Western-medicalized patient? We could assume that cultural elements do not play a direct role and that it is rather external and symbolically insignificant triggers that can alter the scaffolding of the experience. This could also be the case of our actual beliefs or emotional status that we defined as "set".

However, this would be phenomenologically superficial while missing a solid foundation. How do those beliefs exert their effect, and why do they exist in this

form? Which relation do they have with other aspect of experience? Are they cultural belief, and if so, what does it make them that way and not another? Are those belief just abstract representation of our mind or they depend on other contextual factors? If so, which relation can a belief have with material things?

In our everyday life we do not bring attention to the consciousness structures and dynamics, and we need to perform a bracketing of the natural attitude, namely the epoché, to capture it (Bitbol and Petitmengin, 2017). This attentional shift will inform us that even the psychedelic experience of the Westerner patient undergoing a session of PAP is influenced by the *culturalization* of the practice. For a Westerner, both the hospital and the presence of physicians are not just material element: they are also imbued with symbolic representation that associate them with medicine while motivating beliefs concerning safety, calm and reassurance. Those can also have a strong effect on embodied aspect of our experience such as our affective status. This, in turn, can modify the intentional posture of the lived body and alter even some aspects of the perceptive components of lived experience⁵.

The role of the therapists in the PAP, as well as the preparation of the context, can then be considered as important as that of the shaman in the rituals. In both cases, the figure in question is recognized to exert a strong epistemic authority capable of transmitting beliefs that can in turn set in motion that cognitive and affective apparatus that sustain the existential transformation (Braben De Mori, 2021). He embodies cultural values that are symbolic and abstract while being materially linked to a bodily figure, to material objects or to habitual practices. Different functions are directed towards those layers of objectivity while building complex experiential paths. The doctor, as well as the Shaman, is the beholder of an authority that can be trusted. This epistemic authority is a by-product of an intersubjectively-mediated consciousness functioning: it moves our will and our affective reactions by modifying our intentional approach towards the world.

While the psychedelic substance may *alter* the normal functioning of the brain mechanism by acting on the 5HT_{2A} receptors and causing a cascade of reactions (Vargas *et al.*, 2023), the quality of the affective and cognitive lived experience requires a phenomenological foundation. This basic functioning of consciousness is universal. It provides us a general tool for understanding how singular experiences *can* develop by relating the generality of functions to the specificity of a context-dependent lived experience. The functions that define our volitional and affective engagement with the world are strongly related to structures of intersubjectivity and culture. Being our culturally-de-

⁵ As we have already outlined, in the case of psychedelic trip it is important to note that the administration of the substance, especially if with high doses, induce important physiological alterations that can induce hallucinations or the loosening of bodily control whether the context.

fixed values and belief so diverse, we can understand how indigenous-practice and medical-treatment can induce similar existential transformations by following alternative paths and different strategies. At the same time, we can understand *how* and *why* values can move our affective and cognitive lives, relating the specificity of our singular life and contingent experiences to the universality of consciousness' structures and functioning. This is how phenomenological analyses can integrate with empirical ones. The *content* of the psychedelic trip induced by the same substance can be so divergent given the existential differences between subjects and cultures. Set and setting's induced alteration can then be considered as a part of a general re-organization of consciousness functioning concerning both bodily and cognitive intentionality. When this re-organization brings balance, integration and interconnection in the life of the subject it will have positive outcomes for his well-being. Phenomenologically, it will show *directly* by modifying the dynamics of our complex and layered lived-experience, concerning an interaction between bodily, emotional, relational, spiritual and mental aspects of our perceived being-in-the-world. This re-organization depends not only on what happens during the trip; it is part of an ongoing process that implies what happens before, as an effect of psychological preparation, (Modlin *et al.*, 2022), as well as what happens *after* the trip, during the integration phase (Bathje *et al.*, 2022)⁶.

7. Conclusions

In this paper I have outlined a Husserlian-inspired theoretical approach to develop a universal understanding of which consciousness' structure are involved in set and setting's manipulation in a cluster of practices using psychedelics for therapy. Every structure defines and sustain different consciousness' functions that determine the content and the dynamics of different lived experiences. The way in which those functions get related one to another determine how the subject constitute, engage and react to his ever-changing *Umwelt* both in the short-term and in the long term. I have shown how the entirety of the affective, cognitive and social acts that engage with the material content of the psychedelic practice, being it PAP or a shamanic ritual, exert a fundamental effect on the way in which the intentional habit of the subject gets re-organized short and long-term. If there is something about the lived

⁶ Different studies, in fact, have showed how the efficacy of PAP for existential *healing* strongly depends on the commitment during the integration phase. The integration phase may supply the Westerner practitioner of that cultural and symbolic reference that indigenous cultures have embedded in their practices and embodied in their daily habits.

experience that is therapeutic in itself (Cacciatore, 2022), it concerns both the (i) structural aspects of a layered and temporally extended engagement with the world and (ii) the dynamics of a net of consciousness' functions that constitute world's object and meaning. I have considered experiences that concern psychedelic use both in the Western model and in different shamanic rituals as complex one that concern multiple experiential layers of activity. In the case of PAP or shamanic ritual, basic perceptual and sensorimotor functions related to the living-body get entrenched with culturally-mediated cognitive and affective functions.

I have showed that the content and the dynamics of the ongoing lived-experience of the psychedelic trip cannot be truly analysed neither understood if we confine the research to the effect of the substance on the biological substrate nor on the psychological mechanisms. The phenomenological foundations outlined in this paper pose alternative categories and theoretical trajectories to develop qualitative methods that look for contingent and personal realization of those universal principles of experience (Perrotta and Meloni, in press). At this point we will then be able to use empirical data from different levels of explanation⁷ and compare them with universal phenomenological categories. This will enrich an ongoing process of mutual enlightenment (Gallagher, 1997) towards a more humanistically-inspired comprehension of human nature and personal well-being.

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⁷ Those concern biochemical and neurocognitive research but even cultural anthropology or evolutionary theory.

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