



WELCOMING THE ABNORMAL HYPNOTIC STATE

By Lincoln Stoller

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Accepting psychedelic states may seem like an “out there” topic, but it’s on the verge of happening. We’re not going to understand its relevance unless we talk about it.

State

At the risk of belaboring the obvious, a state is a frame of mind from which you experience the world. You don’t experience a state, you experience from it. Just as it’s unusual to be aware that you’re dreaming in a dream, it’s unusual to be aware of your state when you’re in a state.

Consider prejudice. If you are prejudiced you don’t see your prejudice as separate from you, your prejudicial view seems rationally justified. Most people jump from feeling they’re rational to logical to correct, but there is little connection between these. From a state-bound frame of mind—in this case, being prejudiced—what you take to be the truth underlies your thoughts and perceptions.

Your beliefs are the rational component of your state and your feelings are the irrational part. Thoughts, feelings, and awareness define your state. To reconsider your beliefs requires extracting yourself from them. To see parts of our thinking process as separate is a kind of dissociation.

When people argue without questioning their state, they’re defending, justifying, or asserting themselves. Prejudice is a good example because prejudice is common. And while people do argue and think their arguments have substance, if no change of state is possible, then their arguments have little meaning. They are just asserting the world as they see it.

This characterizes most of our social discussions. It explains why few discussions lead to anything new. Discussions of incommensurable points of view swing like a pendulum from one side to the other.

Personal Change

We’re interested in learning, meaning, and change and this includes social change. Personal change is social change because people are not separate individuals. Without an alteration in our states of mind, there is no social change, only the rearrangement of what already exists. To understand how we learn and find new meanings, we have to understand altered states.

The more I understand hypnosis, the more I see it as just an exploration of learning. Hypnosis is the experience of perception, memory, and understanding at levels of the body and mind different from our normal being. We traverse a variety of states of mind during the normal course of events, and we’ll accept a certain abnormal state as long there is a context for it.

We avoid states of inner conflict or conflict with our environment. We avoid both embodying them and we find it unpleasant to consider them. When you consider something you are embodying it and vice versa. You can choose to keep the experience private and you can temporarily minimize the

experience, but when an idea finds resonance there is little damping force in the mind to keep it contained forever. Thoughts are persistent things.

Social Acceptance

We are considering the social acceptance of altered states. Altered states have always been accepted in limited contexts: drinking, dancing, singing, and story-telling. We accept being drawn into a heightened state, as in spectator sports or dining out, or a sedated state, as in ceremony, driving to work, or meditation. No one thinks to call these state-departures abnormal because they’re collective, controlled, bonding, and accepted.

We have an ambivalent relationship to other hypnotic states which, while common, are rarely explored and not considered socially appropriate. These include dreaming, drunkenness, anger, and hysteria. Sexual arousal is rarely taken seriously as a state of mind and there is little discussion of it as a separate state of being.

Sex, dreams, panic, and inebriation are a few of the abnormal states we all experience but do not integrate into daily life. They have unusual chemical and neurological signatures. We righteously label them as abnormal and segregate ourselves from them or ignore them. Almost unbelievably, we claim that we control these states. We deny they control us, or are reflections of deeper states that do.

What society accepts as normal is so rudimentary as to imply that society has no brain at all. Our normal social awareness tends toward no action, no change, no learning, no long-term memory, and almost no experience. The social mind is fungal or, at best, plant-like.

The journalist Johann Hari created a stir when he dramatically reframed drug use—and by extension drug addiction—as a superior state of mental calm and relief, thereby removing it from the stigma of criminal activity or mental dysfunction. The idea was not his, but, as is so often the case, by making a spectacle of himself, a bolt of publicity brought the subject to life.

Hari’s point, to which most addicts would subscribe, is that people use hard drugs because it improves their state. Society still does not know what to do with this claim. It implies that for addicts being addicted is better than being normal. The socially acceptable response is that these addicted people are mentally ill and need treatment.

Abnormal and Hypnotic

I’ve described some abnormal states. We have different relationships with each of them. Our freedom to explore these states is circumscribed by what’s socially acceptable. For many of our states of mind we have one presentation we use privately, and a different one that we use publicly. It is common for a person to appear and think differently in public even when operating from one state of mind.

Hypnosis refers to the part-by-part exploration of states.

We're performing light self-hypnosis when we contemplate or meditate, and deeper self-hypnosis when we lose ourselves in reverie. Therapeutic hypnosis is a facilitated exploration for the purpose of learning, whereas our waking life—a series of normal hypnotic states—aims toward continuity and satisfaction.

Accept hypnotherapy as the unpacking of states of mind. We don't have to pay attention to how it's done or when it should be done. Hypnosis is just the process of taking off the garments of our personality and patting ourselves down. We may find something interesting, and we may do something about it, but, for the most part, we put the same clothes back on again.

Focus on the result of experiencing an abnormal state. What happens, or what could happen when we start experiencing things in unusual ways? You might be tempted to say that we discover things, but that presumes too much. It presumes that you would understand the novelty to a sufficient degree to make sense of it.

How can you discover a new concept in a realm constructed entirely of concepts that you already know? This isn't like sailing across the ocean to discover a new continent. Everything you see you construct, so how do you see anything new?

How could you understand an entirely new concept? What's the difference between utter chaos and a learning experience? Novelty must present some familiarity if we're even to remember it.

Imagine you had a psychedelic, hypnotic, or dream experience of speaking with a bird. The bird had better communicate using concepts that you know or you won't understand. If the bird simply chirps, you won't recognize any meaning and you won't remember what you heard.

What is abnormal about the imagination of paradise? Paradise would be built of all pleasurable things. The only thing abnormal about it might be its unending nature. Compare this with the imagination of hell. Pictures of hell portray all things unpleasurable, but hell also includes imaginal things that cannot be portrayed such as nameless fears. If paradise is all things consonant, then hell is all things dissonant.

“Creativity is born from anguish.”

— often attributed to Albert Einstein.

As much as we like the consonant and dislike the dissonant, little change comes from consonance and most change comes from dissonance. Distress is much more creative in terms of the options you're open to.

Consider phototaxis. If you like light, you work to get more of it. That may strengthen your roots and spread your branches but it doesn't change your structure. On the other hand, if you're starving, then everything might change. Nothing is beyond rejection when you're in distress.

Medicines and Medicinas

In the West, medicines are chemicals that address a physical imbalance. It's a vague definition because imbalance is a vague thing and “addressing something” can mean anything. We generally take medicine to be something that promotes healing or attacks something that causes ill health.

Psychedelics and entheogens don't fit these categories; they are not medicines. There is some argument that they're supplying neurochemicals that facilitate change, or they act like hormones to trigger downstream changes. But evidence is starting to accumulate that these chemicals are not sufficient in themselves and that their therapeutic effect requires some kind of integrating experience.

Since the states that psychedelics create are not normal, they've been called disruptors or toxins. You might call them catalysts if you recognize them as playing an intermediary role, but they're not catalysts in the chemical sense. Might we call them mental catalysts?

A language is being developed by neuropsychologists to refer to observed changes in brain structure that cause changes in state. There is no logical reason to believe that structures are states, but people want to believe this. It's objective, mechanical, and Western.

To people who don't know science—which includes most psychologists and all politicians—this sounds like science and science is our new religion. It satisfies the criteria of being “evidence-based,” which is so popular these days. These ideas, which are not yet even theories, justify authority, treatment protocols, and financial investments. No one seems to be questioning this modern form of phrenology.

Traditional societies don't think of health as a neurological state, so they don't view psychedelic substances as simply facilitating a mechanical state. In traditional societies, plants are spiritual beings, and ingesting them is a way to commune with the spirits. Indigenous societies follow a holistic model that preceded our “enlightenment.” Some traditional societies that use psychedelics refer to them as “medicinas” which is the Spanish for medicine but, for them, medicina does not mean medicine.

Catalyzing positive change is not the same as restoring the status quo. Altered states are disruptive in the way that creativity is disruptive. You can obstruct positive change by reframing psychedelics as healing in the Western sense. In order for psychedelics to heal in the Western sense—which is not to say that they can only be used this way but they might be—Western therapeutic notions will have to change.

It is almost certain that Western medicine will not change enough to embrace all of what psychedelics have to offer. Western medicine will only change enough to incorporate psychedelics in it. They will be conceived as prescribable medicines and controlled by doctors.

The ecstatic and hellacious pathways to positive change lie outside the Western model. We engage in these pathways, both personally and socially, but we do it unawares. We create these states of mind and believe them to be real. Illness, anxiety, and depression have strong mental-state components. The popular pastimes of getting drunk and waging war are mindless explorations of ecstatic and hellacious states.

Psychedelics and Hypnosis

There is much talk about using psychedelics therapeutically. This is changing our notions of medicine, therapy, therapists, and health. To some extent, we have broached these areas in hypnotherapy. Many hypnotherapists, if they've been at it for long, have experience with past life regression, parts therapy, spirit possession, and channeling. These are positive states and hypnotherapy has done more to incorporate them than positive psychology.

Hypnotherapists are in a better position to exploit and enhance the positive potential of “las medicinas” and related substances than are Western psychologists. We already accept and work with altered states. We recognize the subconscious and understand its role as separate from the ID, the unconscious, and the collective unconscious. Altered states are our territory. We talk to ghosts.

There are many things pertinent to the use of psychedelics that are missing from hypnotherapeutic training. Few hypnotherapists embrace alternate realities or understand the religious, dietary, and cultural perspectives of the cultures that use these substances. Hypnotherapists do not have psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy training and are not eligible to receive it. Nevertheless, we know things about working with altered states that other practitioners do not know.

Opportunity and Legality

At the moment, psychedelics remain mostly illegal. There

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has been some progress in legalizing them on religious grounds, but this has done little for most people and has not changed public opinion. Hypnotherapy has not embraced chemically induced altered states as part of hypnotherapy, and this is a pity. People have been using sedatives and opioids for millennia to achieve altered state insights and all hypnotherapists in the West have done is ride the anti-addiction bandwagon.

Cannabis is now widely legal, and some strains have psychedelic strength. Mushrooms may become legal without a prescription and, if they do, people will need help processing their experiences. They already do and who is helping them? We could be and we should be, but we're not.

This is a wake-up call to the field of hypnotherapy. Hypnotherapy is not the ugly duckling of psychotherapy. As the field of psychotherapy strains to wrap its head around altered states, hypnotherapy is already there.