

LSD and Level of Personality.

Click to print page.

[↩ Main](#)

Laurence Nixon
Religion Department
Dawson College

In an article published in Vol. 3, No., 3 of The Dąbrowski Newsletter, Michael Piechowski mentioned various causes of ecstasy (or mystical experience)--i.e., "One of them is devotional fervor, another is stimulation with drumming or rattling, another is through...(intense breathing with loud music), yet another is provided by psychotropic drugs." He then went on to say that ecstasy would not automatically result from these stimuli, but would depend on the presence of psychic overexcitability and personality level.

I would like to cite some empirical data to support the position that the greater the presence of psychic overexcitability and the higher the level of personality, the more significant will be the experience resulting from psychotropic drugs. But before doing this I would like to make three preliminary points. The first is that reports of mystical experience resulting from the ingestion of psychotropic drugs and reports of mystical experience resulting from meditation are indistinguishable from one another. The second point is that taking psychotropic drugs does not automatically result in a mystical experience--in fact such an experience is rather rare. In a study conducted by Masters and Houston (1966) only six of 206 subjects had a full-blown mystical experience.

This leads us to ask in what way are those who have a mystical experience under the influence of a psychotropic drug different from those who take the drug but have no mystical experience. Masters and Houston tell us that, "...all of these [six] subjects were over forty years of age, were of superior intelligence, and were well-adjusted and creative personalities" (1966:307). Masters and Houston then go on to conclude, "It would appear, therefore, that where there is an intellectual and other predisposition,...the necessary maturity...to undergo such an experience, then we have the conditions favorable to the psychedelic-mystical state" (1966:307). So it would seem that the impressions of these two researchers was that the potential for mystical experience, following the ingestion of a psychotropic drug, was related to the level of personality development, as stated by Michael Piechowski.

The third preliminary point is that drug-induced experiences are not simply mystical or non-mystical, but can be classified along a spectrum of meaningfulness. Masters and Houston (1966), for instance articulate a model of four levels of drug experience: (1) sensory, consisting of alterations in body image, spatial and

temporal distortions, and perceptual changes; (2) recollective-analytic, in which significant past experiences are relived, often with the accompanying emotion; (3) symbolic, in which persons experience drug-induced images as archetypal or mythic, and in which there is a certain degree of self-understanding and self-transformation; and (4) integral, in which total self-understanding and total self-transformation occurs result of a mystical illumination.

Now with these considerations in mind I would like to summarize the results reported by Barr and Langs (1972). These researchers administered LSD to 30 unemployed actors. The subjects were interviewed and asked to complete a battery of personality tests-some prior to, and others during, their drug experience. They were also asked to write an autobiography. On the basis of their LSD experiences the subjects were placed in one of six groups and a personality profile was then constructed for each group. There were also 20 additional subjects, each of whom was given a placebo. Although Barr and Langs did not analyze their findings from the perspective of developmental psychology (and clearly did not have this perspective in mind when they designed their procedure), it will become clear to those familiar with the theory of positive disintegration that the level of personality and the degree of psychic overexcitability should be considered as factors in accounting for the variation in LSD experiences.

I will limit my citations of the findings of Barr and Langs to their descriptions of the personality characteristics and LSD experiences of two of the six groups. The first group is called Group VI by Barr and Langs. I have chosen it because it seems to me that the personality profile corresponds to Dąbrowski's first level of personality. The personality summary of this group is as follows:

QUOTE: The seven men in this group are strikingly independent, assertive and hard-headed...They are active, cope well with the problems of life, and act on their own initiative, pushing their goals with persistence, even against opposition. They see themselves as practical and realistic, and in fact show good common sense and judgement. They prefer action, including physical activity and adventure, to feeling or speculation. Their thinking tends to be rather literal and they are notably not intellectual, intuitive, introspective, or ruminative. They are given to acting out their conflicts, rather than experiencing them consciously.

. . . Both fantasy and sensuality seem shut out from these men's experience...The lack of primary-process material in their pretest Rorschachs was also quite striking. The constriction of their inner life can also be seen in their earliest memories, which were quite detached and lacking in warmth. Themes of dependence and orality were lacking...The recollections were strongly embedded in reality and also showed concern with ego boundaries. They stressed themes of identity, independence, and freedom from controls. Insofar as they were active in these memories, they behaved aggressively toward others, often losing control.

. . . Their need for independence and self-assertion is tinged with mistrust and a fear of being controlled. They tend to be defensive, manipulative, and ungenerous; they feel unloved, and hostility colors their relationships. Positions of authority and status are important to them...They are clearly heterosexual and have few conscious conflicts or feelings of inadequacy in regard to sexuality. (Barr and Langs, 1972:135)

In a newsletter of this kind, space does not permit a detailed analysis of this passage in terms of correspondences with Dąbrowski's description of the various dimensions of primary integration, but I would be happy to provide these, either privately or else in a subsequent issue. Barr and Langs provide the following summary of the LSD experiences of this group of subjects:

QUOTE: Their reactions to LSD was minimal; of all subjects they gave the fewest indications of an altered state...

. . . It is well to keep in mind, however, that these subjects were affected by the drug. Minimal though their reaction was, it was significantly greater than that of the placebo subjects...

. . . Their altered state was, however, limited to certain kinds of effects. They reported feeling and acting silly, difficulties in concentration, impaired judgement, and a variety of somatic effects...as often as did other drug subjects. They were also observably anxious and preoccupied with their bodily symptoms...although significantly less than the other drug subjects.

. . . Their questionnaire responses indicated that their moderate degree of anxiety was focused on the concern that they might lose control of their bodies or their emotions...They reported none of the more bizarre features of the altered state seen under LSD, however, such as changes of meaning, perceptual distortions, changes in self or body image, and loss of contact with reality. (Barr and Langs, 1972:135-136)

This reaction to a psychotropic drug does not even qualify for the first level of drug experience in the four-stage model of Masters and Houston, much less for one of the higher levels. Such an experience is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the mystical.

The personality characteristics of those subjects that Barr and Langs labelled Group I are, of all the groups, the most developed in terms of personality level (somewhere between advanced unilevel disintegration and the beginning of spontaneous multilevel disintegration). Of this group Barr and Langs state,

QUOTE: the subjects in Group I are very open in expressing their emotions and in revealing their thoughts. they have high self-esteem; they are rather narcissistic and exhibitionistic; and they tend to be cheerful rather than depressed. They do not defend themselves against feelings but rather accept their own impulses

and express them openly. They are emotionally impulsive and spontaneous, and have a genuine interest in other people.

. . . They are also intellectual, sensitive, introspective, interested in knowledge and understanding, and have strong creative strivings. Their thinking is clear and not inhibited; they use words in a colorful manner, give the impression of having vivid imagery. They are not orderly, very punctual or well-organized in their use of time, and dislike having to wait. They report a high capacity for involvement in their work, and are notably independent of parental figures.

. . . [There is] a strong reliance on isolation as a defense. Their pretest Rorschachs appear schizoid in that they have many primary-process manifestations in both form and content, but they successfully control such material through humor and intellectual contexts, or by identifying the percept as a fictional or fantasy character. These subjects are also particularly likely to reflect on their own responses, either introspectively or critically. Thus their Rorschachs may be described as adaptively regressive, showing a readiness to use primitive modes of thought creatively. (Barr and Langs, 1972:89)

Again space does not permit a detailed analysis of this passage from a Dąbrowskian perspective. But one can say that their interest in other people and their sensitivity are suggestive of emotional overexcitability and that their vivid imagery, fantasy and their high capacity for involvement in their work are indicative of the presence of imaginal overexcitability. Their capacity for adaptive regression (referred to by Dąbrowski as positive regression), their ability to reflect upon their Rorschach responses introspectively or critically; their creative strivings; and their use of the higher level defense mechanisms of humor, intellectualization and isolation suggest personalities at the upper range of unilevel disintegration or the beginning of spontaneous multilevel disintegration. In any case the subjects belonging to this group are clearly more advanced in terms of their personality development than are those belonging to Group VI. And their LSD experiences are correspondingly further along the spectrum toward mystical experiences than are the experiences of the subjects in Group VI, as the following description by Barr and Langs will reveal:

QUOTE: The altered state experienced by these subjects under LSD was characterized by many subjective changes which were primarily expansive in nature; their overt behavior, however, was much less affected. Subjectively they were elated, lost their sense of time, and reported various disturbances in thinking, body image changes, and some visual distortions. More striking were the frequent reports of the emergence of new meanings in experiences and of improved functioning...

. . . The content of their ideation under LSD emphasized the feeling of having acquired new insights into themselves and the world: "I feel more mature;" "I understand more about myself;" "I realize that a childhood experience had more bearing on my life than I realized;" "Overall glittering generalities, life, beauty and life, and there is nothing else;" "I felt omnipotent at times, as if I understood truths I'd never be

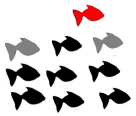
able to communicate to anybody;" "I keep seeing people in terms of their essence;"... Barr and Langs, 1972:90)

While the drug experiences of the subjects in Group I are not at the level of mystical experiences as such clearly they do share some characteristics of mystical experiences and are closer to mystical experience than the experiences of the subjects in Group VI. Hence I would take the results of the Barr and Lang study to be evidence in support of the hypothesis put forward by Michael Piechowski-i.e., that the greater the presence of psychic overexcitability and the more advanced the level of personality, the greater the capacity for ecstasy or mystical experience.

References

Barr, Harriet Linton & Langs, Robert J. (1972). LSD: Personality and experience. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Masters, R.E.L. & Houston, Jean (1966). The varieties of psychedelic experience. New York: Dell.



[↑ Top](#)

[↩ Main](#)