

The CREATIVE PROCESS

And the PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE

COMPARISONS BETWEEN the psychedelic experience and the findings of creativity research were discussed by Frank Barron, Ph. D., in a lecture presented May 9, 1964 as part of a symposium entitled "LSD: Basic Problems and Potentialities" held at San Jose State College.

Dr. Barron is Research Psychologist at the University of California Institute of Personality Assessment and Research (Berkeley) and author of Creativity and Psychological Health.

Describing the work done by himself and his colleagues on creativity, Dr. Barron said: "We began with the approach that creativity is probably a general process throughout all nature and that psychic creativity is a special instance of it. We looked for persons who manifested creativity to a high degree—but not with the idea that they alone possessed this attribute. On the contrary, it seems evident that the creative process is inherent in everyone. We participate in it simply by thinking. And any time we think a thought which is new for us—or have a feeling which is new for us—the process that's happening within us is probably the same as whatever occurs when highly creative people produce strikingly novel or powerful new ideas.

"So we decided to ask people in different fields to tell us who were the individuals in that field who were highly original, or highly creative, who had produced work which other people had recognized as having these qualities. We gathered—from a variety of fields, such as mathematics, the physical sciences, architecture, and creative writing—a large group of individuals who were outstanding in this regard, and we compared them with individuals from the same fields who did not possess those attributes in the same degree—the idea being that if we could find differences between these two groups, we might get an inkling of what the underlying process was like.

"Our first finding, which was surprising to many of us, was that creativity—as thus defined—had not very much relationship with conventional IQ—intelligence as measured by intelligence tests.

"The thing that was important was something that might be called a cosmological commitment. It was a powerful motive to create meaning and to leave a testament of the meaning which that individual found in the world, and in himself in relation to the world. This motive emerged in many ways, but we came across it over and over again when we compared highly creative individuals with those of equal intellectual ability as measured by the IQ tests, but of less actual creative ability. The intense motivation having to do with this making of meaning—or finding meaning and communicating it in one form or another—was the most important difference between our criterion and control groups.

"The second difference—which was so marked that we began doubting our statistics—was the emphasis on intuition which was present in the creative subjects.

"We used one test, based on the Jungian typology, which classified individuals in terms of extroversion-introversion, thinking-feeling, sensing-intuiting, and so on.

"If this test is given to subjects drawn from the general population, only about 20% will be classified as intuitive. We found, however, that 90% of our creative subjects were intuitive.

"There was also some tendency for them to be introverted rather than extroverted. This wasn't marked, but it was still very definite. So our finding was that intuition, linked with some degree of introversion, was related to creativity.

"We also found marked differences in the preference of creative individuals for rather complex phenomenal displays—all the way from art products to problems that prove challenging. This seemed to be linked to an effort to make the most complex possible synthesis in the finding of meaning and the communicating of it. In other words, our creative subjects were not challenged by what was very simple; instead, they sought to find a way to take something quite complex and, in it, find a simple order. This is something like the definition of elegance in mathematical explanation. Mathematicians say an explanation is most elegant when, with a minimum of postulates, it can embrace a maximum of implications. And the same applies to a scientific theory. And the same, I think, probably applies to a work of art. So that frequently the final product or explanation is amazingly simple but is based on an extremely complex substrate of empirical or individual observations.

"Another finding came from one of the tests we administered which was a commonly used psychiatric diagnostic instrument. Fairly much across all samples, the creative individuals were more troubled psychologically as measured by that test. In one sample, the creative subjects were placed close to the top 5% of the general population in schizoid tendencies. Of course, it wasn't true schizophrenia; it was something that was involved in whatever that scale was measuring.

"Now, this particular scale that measures schizophrenia is very highly negatively correlated with another scale which measures strength of the ego. This negative correlation appears when the test is given to subjects drawn from the general population.

"But among our creative subjects we found persons with quite high ego strength who also had elevations on the scale that indicated psychological problems. In other words, they admitted to much more inner turmoil or psychological imbalance than the general population, while at the same time having greater strength of ego functioning.

"Another marked difference was the exceptional independence of judgment displayed by our creative subjects when they were placed in a situation where they were under pressure to conform to a false consensus. We set up an experiment so that the subject thought that other people held a certain opinion — an opinion which in fact was in error. Under these circumstances the creative subjects maintained their independence and expressed the correct opinion, rejecting the consensus.

"In one of our experiments, the subjects — a group of creative writers — were asked to judge which of two circles was the larger. The circles were of identical area. Under control conditions, where there is no attempt by the experimenter to influence opinion, people split 50-50 on it, as might be expected. When the experimenter introduces a false consensus, about 75% of ordinary subjects will agree with the false consensus. When we tried to establish this false consensus among the creative writers — that the circle on the left was the larger — 82% of them said the circle on the right was larger!

"There were two other attributes which were more subtle and for which we have no supporting experimental evidence of the kind stated above. We had the impression that our creative subjects had more adventurousness and, perhaps, more courage to commit themselves at some point which was important in their lives. At some point they made a decision, often at some cost to themselves, but which, in existential terms, was the authentic thing for them to do.

"We also had the impression that creative individuals were able to entertain many opposites in psychic life simultaneously — opposites which, for most people, entailed the sacrifice of one to the other. I have in mind such common antitheses as discipline and freedom. We found creative people to be highly disciplined, yet quite free, so that the freedom was not the sort based upon simply a wholesale rejection of pedantic authority, for example, without a corresponding ability to do just as well as the pedantic authority at its own game.

"Other dichotomies, too, such as masculine and feminine, were able to be combined by the creative subjects. For example, creative men sometimes exhibit a sublimated femininity which is combined with a strong tendency towards a sort of seminal cognitive activity. When these are integrated in one personality, the individual could almost be described as 'procreative' — self-fecundating, self-begetting."

Turning to the phenomena observed in the psychedelic experience, Dr. Barron said: "I think there's an increase in complexity and openness, simply as a result of the perception of a wider range of stimuli in quite common sensory modalities. Here I'm thinking of such things as increased vividness of color, enhanced perception of detail, greater acuteness in listening to music. A number of 'perceptual constancies' are upset or altered.

"Upsetting such adaptive perceptual habits is not always a good thing, of course; at times it may produce undesirable psychological imbalance, and for this reason the psychedelic drugs must be used

with caution. It is advisable always to have a skilled psychotherapist present and a physician on call.

"As you know, the human being is a walking bundle of adaptations and repressions, most of them necessary and effective. The only way we can exist is not to think about a lot of things. For example, we repress perceptions of the functioning of our own body most of the time. This kind of thing is an adaptive perceptual constancy which serves to maintain an integral self-image.

"In the course of the psychedelic experience, a number of these constancies are temporarily abrogated. And these constancies are the stuff of which the ego is made, so that in a technical sense the psychedelic experience is at first ego-energating.

"The interesting thing about this is that the ego then re-integrates, and it may do so in a more complex fashion by virtue of having had these ordinarily repressed or excluded experiences. So one might expect an increase in complexity in an individual who has had such an experience.

"In the course of trying to express what this perception involves—in trying to sum it up—one becomes aware that there's a great deal more to one's own nature than one had previously thought. The phrase I came up with to describe the relationship of the ego—the individual self—to the total human potentiality which is inherent in our nature was this: 'In that vast room, we build the tiny hut of self.'

"I was seeking to express the fact that the self is a construction—and it's a construction within a much greater area of potentiality. And sometimes it's unnecessarily tiny.

"The second thing I would like to discuss is the increase in intuition that occurs in the psychedelic experience—sometimes a frightening increase. This hasn't been mentioned by many psychotherapists so far, but I think probably they've all had the experience that if they aren't acting straightforwardly with a patient who has taken a psychedelic drug, he'll pick that up immediately.

"There's a tremendous increase in that sort of intuition as well as in intuition in being able to look at something as it is now and see in it those immanent forces which will make it something different in the future—and also in perceiving what that future might be. There's a sort of cutting through conventional postures—including one's own.

"A final point—which refers to motivation in terms of cosmological commitment: I think that as a result of the psychedelic experience there's a heightened sense of the drama of life, including its brevity, and a realization both of the importance of one's individual life and of the fact that a sacred task has been given to the individual in the development of the self.

"As a result of this, there's a dropping away of many superficial motivations. This can be very distressing to people close to the individual if they themselves have not also had the psychedelic experience. We all count on other people to have at least some superficial motivations. If they don't, we must relate to them in a new way.

"Following this dropping away of the superficial, there may be a period when things are just too trifling to bother about—a kind of loftiness develops—but in the best cases, what eventually happens is a sort of return to the ordinary—but seeing it in its place without being prepossessed by it."