



Ipotesi e metodi di studio

Gestalt psychedelic integration

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ABSTRACT in ENGLISH

In this paper, we explore the history and development of the integration of non-ordinary states of consciousness, leading up to the definitions and models currently in use. We then propose a new model of psychedelic integration, Gestalt Psychedelic Integration, based on Gestalt Psychotherapy as the theoretical reference approach.

Keywords

Psychedelics, Non-ordinary states of consciousness, Psychedelic integration, Gestalt Therapy, Phenomenology, Existentialism, Gestalt psychedelic integration.

ABSTRACT

In questo lavoro esploriamo la storia e lo sviluppo dell'integrazione degli stati non ordinari di coscienza, fino alle definizioni e ai modelli attualmente in uso. Proponiamo quindi un nuovo modello di integrazione psichedelica, Gestalt Psychedelic Integration, basata sulla Psicoterapia della Gestalt come approccio teorico di riferimento.

Parole Chiave

Psichedelici, Stati non ordinari di coscienza, Integrazione psichedelica, Gestalt Therapy, Fenomenologia, Esistenzialismo, Integrazione psichedelica gestaltica.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 2000s, we have been witnessing the Psychedelic Renaissance, a historical and scientific phase in which a renewed interest in psychedelic substances has been continuously growing. This interest is supported by the encouraging scientific results that are gradually describ-

ing the functioning and potential of these substances [1]. In parallel, we are also seeing increased “non-academic” interest [2] in different contexts: recreational, ceremonial, and self-medication.

Since the first scientific studies in the 1950s-60s, the importance of a phase of integration following the psychedelic experience became evident, so that the person

Citation: Ballotti, S., Roti, S., Giovagnini, S., & Defraia, M (2025). Gestalt psychedelic integration. *Phenomena Journal*, 7(2), 55–71. DOI: 10.32069/PJ.2021.2.232.

Editor in Chief: Raffaele Sperandeo, PhD, MD

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Received: February 5, 2025

Accepted: April 24, 2025

Published: June 11, 2025

could fully benefit from the experience and overcome some of the risks involved in experiencing it [3]. The concept of integration in psychedelics is important in research, neo-shamanic, and self-knowledge [4].

Although the word integration is routinely used in psychedelics, there are many definitions and they refer to different models; this paper adopts the definition from Bathje et al [5], who reviewed the primary models of psychedelic integration and provided a comprehensive definition encompassing diverse aspects:

"Integration is a process in which a person revisits and actively engages in making sense of, working through, translating, and processing the content of their psychedelic experience. Through intentional effort and supportive practices, this process allows one to gradually capture and incorporate the emergent lessons and insights into their lives, thus moving toward greater balance and wholeness, both internally (mind, body, and spirit) and externally (lifestyle, social relations, and the natural world)."

Integration practices vary depending on their context and typically include preparation, the session itself, and the post-experience work. Understanding integration as part of an ongoing process, rather than an isolated event, is essential. Instead of thinking of punctual interventions at distinct moments, it is necessary to keep in mind these three moments as necessary steps in the development of the setting. In fact, each of these has a very important influence with respect to the direction, course, and outcome of the process. Most of the time, when there are difficulties in the integration of an experience, it can be seen that there were also difficulties, negligence, or mistakes in the previous steps [4].

The use of sacred plants with psychotropic and psychedelic effects has a history that dates back thousands of years and persists today in shamanic cultures, where the Western notion of integration is viewed as unnecessary. This is due to the fact that in shamanic cultures, the social context greatly differs from that of the West: the cultural and social setting of the former is deeply infused with spirituality, understanding of non-ordinary states of consciousness, acceptance of the use of sacred plants, and a communal approach to sharing experiences. These elements create an integrative

framework for the experience. In Western cultures, this is not the case; it can be said that in the West, the integration of the psychedelic experience becomes foundational since the experience itself is deconstructive, disintegrative with respect to reality as the individual, fixedly, knows, mentalizes, and conceptualizes it. Integration allows for the reformation of disintegrated experiences into a form, with a broader and denser meaning, that is, less fixed.

HISTORY OF INTEGRATION

According to Passie [6], the first studies of psychoactive substances in modern Western culture date back to the late 19th century, conducted by Moreau de Tours, who aimed to induce hypnotic trance. These studies were followed by the first experiments with psychedelic substances in the early 20th century, particularly Lewin's studies [4] on mescaline, which focused solely on pharmacological effects rather than intrapsychic ones. A few years later, the focus shifted to the clinical use of these substances. Thanks to Hofmann's discovery in 1943 of LSD, a new and very fruitful era of research began with respect to the use of this substance in the pharmacological, psychiatric, and therapeutic context [4].

This marked the emergence of two distinct approaches to therapy with these substances: psycholytic and psychedelic. Psycholytic therapy was based on the repeated use of low and medium doses of psychedelic substances during the course and process of psychotherapy in order to facilitate the emergence of unconscious material to deepen and, thus, shorten the therapy. Psychedelic therapy, on the other hand, uses high or very high doses of psychedelic substances in a few sessions in order to bring about a peak experience, so as to reorganize the patient's psychic and personality structure by showing immediate effects through behavior change.

It is within the framework of psycholytic therapy that the first need for integration tools emerged. In fact, emphasis is placed on the need to develop other types of interventions by the therapist, in addition to verbal ones, during sessions. This includes the importance of specific training to work with psychedelics, the necessity for *ad hoc* places to hold sessions, and the requirement for patients to have support even

after the session to reframe and integrate their experience [7]. It is always within psychoanalytic therapy that it is demonstrated that the psychedelic experience alone does not produce lasting changes in the patient's life; rather, integration after the experience is necessary for the individual to fully benefit from it and to mitigate some of the associated risks [3, 8]. The initial integration methods originated here: narrating the psychedelic experience, group sharing, and creating drawings and clay sculptures [4].

At the same time, even within the field of psychedelic therapy, people are beginning to talk about integration, understanding it not only as something posterior to the experience, but as a dimension to which attention should be brought before, during, and after the session [4].

The practice of integration as we know it today was developed by Stanislav Grof [9], who in 1980 proposed his post-session program, in which he includes activities such as: rest, meditation, contact with nature, listening to music (particularly that used in the session), talking with the therapist to share the experience and analyze its puzzling aspects, watching the recording of the psychedelic session, writing an account of the experience, artistic expression of the experience (drawing, poetry, music...), and attention to dreams. Grof specifies that the process of integration can take days or weeks and that, although in most cases the activities listed above are sufficient, there may be situations in which the process does not complete spontaneously and therapeutic intervention is needed to reactivate it and facilitate closure of the experience (e.g., through breathing techniques such as rebirthing) [9]. However, attempting to conclude a psychedelic experience may reflect a reductionist view of the experience itself. This is why the process of integration is often seen as something that never fully closes, since it continues to foster openness and awareness. Self-work, moreover, is also an ongoing and evolutionary process, developing through organismic self-regulation in a spontaneous manner.

THE DIMENSIONS OF THE PSYCHEDELIC INTEGRATION PROCESS

Psychedelic experiences are often as complex in their content as in the form

in which they are experienced. To maximize their benefits and mitigate potential adverse effects, integration must adopt the most holistic and comprehensive approach possible; an integral approach requires consideration of the different dimensions of integration [4].

Cognitive dimension

The psychedelic experience, on a cognitive level, can be very rich, offering access to various levels of consciousness from which one receives an immense amount of information. A sense of overwhelm may arise from the intensity, quantity, and speed at which cognitive content emerges. For Westerners, unlike in shamanic contexts, it is crucial to understand the meaning of visions, decipher symbols and interpret the experience. For the experience to be properly processed, it is essential for the person to narrate it, maintaining narrative continuity with their life. Otherwise, difficulties may arise in the integration process. It is therefore important for the individual to find internal coherence between the lived experience and his or her own life, being able to give meaning to the experience, which may also vary over time, with new reflections. Working in the cognitive dimension of integration involves the ability to produce a coherent internal account of the experience [4]. The therapist must take into account and adapt to the individual's cosmovision: this involves following a map of the possible types of experiences, such as biographical, perinatal, transpersonal, or those related to COEX systems as described by Grof and Grof [10].

Emotional dimension

Emotionally, good integration occurs when there is an open aptitude for exploration of the emotions that have emerged, fostering adequate processing that allows the person to feel that he or she can exercise healthy control over them, without repressing or over-identifying with them. Intense emotions may arise during verbal integration sessions, just as they do during the psychedelic experience [4]. These manifestations are necessary to be able to finish processing the session's uncontained content, and should be understood

not as exaggerated or pathological, but as regulatory mechanisms aimed at resolving internal emotional conflicts [4].

Physical dimension

Any psychedelic substance or consciousness-expanding technique (e.g., holotropic breathing, rebirthing, vipassana meditation, Zen meditation, etc.) may produce significant physical manifestations: tensions may intensify, and addressing them can result in strong energy discharges (sexual energy or energy accumulated from painful, traumatic, stressful, terrifying, threatening experiences). These physical manifestations are an essential part of the process of self-awareness and healing. The body and somatic manifestations are excellent tools for integration, and there are several situations in which attention to them is particularly important both to maximize the benefits of the experience and to reduce adverse effects. In addition, Physical sensations provide an opportunity to retrieve feelings and content from the session and of making anchors to positive states experienced: the body becomes a resource for making cognitive and emotional content available again, thus being able to retrieve states that are perhaps not in the patient's usual domain. Conversely, the body may manifest unpleasant physical sensations or pains that are not always related to explicit emotional content; working with them may be the most direct way to access unresolved emotions and content of the experience. Attention to the physical dimension of integration also includes psychoeducation regarding the body's needs after a session: rest, hygiene, nutrition, and physical space [4].

Spiritual dimension

Mystical experiences are commonly discussed in the psychedelic context, characterized by feelings of unity, transcendence of space and time, positive states of mind, feelings of sacredness, ineffability, and noetic and paradoxical components. It is common for different levels to coexist within the same experience: biographical, transpersonal, and perinatal contents. That is why it is important to give the right space to the spiritual dimension, avoiding

both overestimating and underestimating it. The therapist must work while respecting the patient's cosmovision and keeping in mind possible adverse effects, such as spiritual bypass, clash of spiritual paradigms or false spirituality [4].

Behavioral dimension

One of the key aspects of the behavioral dimension of integration is translating the insights gained during the non-ordinary state of consciousness into a physical and actionable plane. The psychedelic experience can become transformative when what has been learned is transferred to the concrete, behavioral and action plane. Otherwise, it risks becoming sterile, without contributing to personal growth and transformation. Therefore, good integration must promote behavioral and ethical changes [4].

Social Dimension

In shamanic societies there is no concept of integration because the use of psychoactive plants and non-ordinary states of consciousness are already integrated into their cosmovision. In Western culture there is no established common language to talk about them with other people or even to understand them entirely; in parallel, there is a lack of methods for accessing experience of non-ordinary states of consciousness, of structures to integrate these practices into social functioning, and of physical and temporal spaces for people to relate around them in a normalized way.

Thus, a liminal zone between ordinary and non-ordinary experiences is needed in Western societies, both at the individual and intrapsychic levels and at the social and interpersonal levels (such as during the session with a psychotherapist or within a psychedelic integration circle).

In tribal cultures, then, society and environment play a substantial role in the individual's experience: it is essential that each person go through an initiatory experience with which to face challenges and confront his or her own psychological difficulties while the rest of the community witnesses and acknowledge what is happening. The group, then, becomes witness to that experience, making it undeniable

and indelible, and recognizing the change that has occurred with respect to that person's role. In Western society, there are not only no initiatory rites, but also no dedicated spaces for sharing experiences related to non-ordinary states of consciousness. Thus, the opposite of what occurs in tribal societies may happen: those who undergo a transformation through psychedelic experiences might not only lack societal support, but may no longer be recognized by their community, since others have neither shared nor witnessed the experience. Since perceived identity depends on what others attribute to that person, this lack of recognition may hinder the process of individuation [4].

Temporal dimension

Integration encompasses preparation for the session (before), what happens during the session (during), and processing what emerged afterward (after). Two different time periods of integration can be traced in the after-experience: the immediately following and the long-term. The intervention in the immediate aftermath of the session primarily acts on the physical and emotional domains. At this stage, the integration of the content and insights that emerged during the experience has not yet occurred; instead, the focus is on stabilization. This is a necessary condition for integration to occur later on and to minimize any potential adverse effects of the experience. When there has been immediate integration, it can be said that a "point of closure" has been reached, which is the goal of this stage of integration, so that the person can focus on that in the long run. It is important to maintain a broad perspective with respect to the time dimension of integration since particularly meaningful experiences can continue to provide insight and interpretation over the course of time [4].

PSYCHEDELIC INTEGRATION MODELS

In recent years, as noted by Bathje et al [5], numerous studies on psychedelic integration have emerged, proposing various approaches.

Integration models can focus on cognitive aspects or take a more holistic approach. The theories underlying these models may be derived from the study of non-ordinary states of consciousness and psychedelic therapies, or they may be rooted in preexisting psychotherapeutic approaches. Each integration model may be based on specific worldviews and indigenous practices, transpersonal psychology, Jungian psychology, acceptance and commitment therapy, psychodynamic psychology, somatic psychology, relationship with nature, biopsychosocial and spiritual perspectives, and harm reduction. These differences make comparing the various models complex, as they focus on different aspects: the view of the causes of suffering and the very meaning attributed to the integration process change [5].

Below, we will give a brief review of the main models of psychedelic integration [5].

Holistic or biopsychosocial-spiritual models

These models [11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16] attempt to incorporate somatic, spiritual, nature-related, community-focused interventions based on indigenous knowledge and practices. Their primary focus is to value and seek balance among all dimensions of human experience, seeking to work on each during the integration process. These models go beyond internal experience and psychological/emotional process, and embrace relational, community, existential, spiritual, bodily and sensory aspects. The view of the human being in these models is that of a complex, multifaceted entity that suffers when the various dimensions of existence are disconnected or out of balance [17]. According to these models, it is precisely the desire to restore this balance that drives people toward psychedelic experiences.

Integration is seen not only as a resolution of specific difficulties, but as a process aimed at bringing balance and alignment to the whole of existence. Integration becomes a long and central path in the individual's life. According to these models, the need for integration arises less from the psychedelic experience itself and more from the condition of Western culture, which tends to overemphasize the mind, materialism, and behavior. [11; 12].

Psychotherapeutic models

These models [18, 19, 20, 21] tend to focus on one or two dimensions of holistic models, placing special emphasis on the cognitive dimension and psychological health. Integration is seen as a necessity directly arising from the psychedelic experience. Therefore, the focus is on processing, using and implementing changes based on what was learned during the experience. However, a limitation of these models is that they may not adequately prepare patient and therapist for experiences beyond the typical psychotherapeutic process [5].

Synthesized model

This model [5] attempts to synthesize previous models, proposing a balance between different practices and dimensions of integration, with an orientation toward holism. It takes into consideration various aspects of the person and the lived psychedelic experience, including:

- Mental/cognitive/emotional
- Bodily/somatic
- Spiritual/existential
- Natural world
- Relational/communal
- Lifestyle/action

The model also proposes a continuum on which to organize integration practices: the degree to which the practice is more conscious or unconscious, more internally or externally focused, more creative or receptive, more passive or active, more outside one's comfort zones or delicate self-care, more contemplative or expressive.

PSYCHEDELIC INTEGRATION IN THE GESTALT PSYCHOTHERAPY APPROACH

The models described above bring various focuses on integration and focus, at times, on specific dimensions. Attempting to merge all dimensions into a single model to propose an integrated approach may result in a fragmented experience of integration, where each aspect risks being addressed in a rigid, sequential protocol.

The psychedelic experience is not comparable with other similar experiences, and therefore, an empirical integration model, such as the cognitivist model based on observable facts and repeatability, is not suit-

able for this purpose. At the same time, a physicalist and interpretive model, such as the psychoanalytic model, requires a solid theoretical basis to give meaning to the experience, but this is a critical aspect in the context of the psychedelic experience: every phenomenon experienced is absolutely unique and unrepeatable, especially in the psychedelic experience, and this makes it impossible to interpret it through rigid and predetermined models.

Phenomenological-existential Gestalt (GT) psychotherapy is an approach that offers the psychotherapist considerable freedom of action, allowing the pathway to be tailored to the specific needs of the person. This approach does not involve precluded dimensions or the application of rigid protocols that could limit the intervention. Moreover, GT facilitates awareness of experiences without judging or interpreting them, while at the same time responding to existential issues. GT considers all the dimensions mentioned above holistically and is based on the person's lived experience, without reducing it to predefined patterns, but helping the individual to give his/her own meaning to that experience.

In this paper, we propose a new model, Gestalt Psychedelic Integration (GPI), as a GT-based approach to psychedelic integration.

Next, we will outline the philosophical assumptions and main features of GT as the foundation of the GPI model. Although GPI derives from GT and uses the same tools, it is important to emphasize that integration and psychotherapy are different contexts in terms of goals, setting, motivation and focus of knowledge. In psychotherapy, the goal is to develop awareness of the self; in psychedelic integration, on the other hand, one starts from experience and then returns to the self.

Brief outline of the philosophical assumptions of Gestalt Psychotherapy

GT finds its philosophical roots in phenomenology and existentialism, two approaches that offer a profound understanding of human experience.

Phenomenology, developed by Husserl [22], focuses on a return to 'things themselves', i.e., the study of lived experience in a direct manner, without prejudice or preconceived theoretical interpretations.

Husserl proposes the concept of *epoché*: a suspension of judgment that allows experience to be observed as it manifests itself to consciousness. In this sense, consciousness is never passive, but always intentional: it is oriented towards an object or content of experience. Perception is not simply a recording of external reality, but an active process in which the individual participates in the construction of the meaning of what he perceives. The author thus wants to focus attention back on immediate experience, on what is perceived in the present moment, rather than on interpretations derived from pre-existing schemas.

Brentano [23] introduces the distinction between primary and secondary phenomena.

- Primary phenomena are those perceptions and sensations that occur immediately in our experience; they are direct and unmediated manifestations of consciousness. These phenomena are characterized by a lack of elaboration or interpretation and do not require active processing to be understood. For instance, seeing the red color of an apple or feeling the coldness of ice.
- Secondary phenomena are reworkings or reflections on the original experience. They emerge, therefore, through mental processing of primary phenomena and include reflections, memories, judgements, and interpretations, which are constructed from the raw sensory data. These phenomena are not immediately present to consciousness but are instead the result of cognitive processing. For instance, remembering the last time one ate an apple or judging the taste of that apple as pleasant.

Brentano's contribution is fundamental in establishing a distinction between the mere reception of sensory information and the way this information is processed and integrated into conscious experience; a distinction that is relevant because it helps to understand how we process and attribute meaning to our experiences.

Another central aspect of phenomenology and existentialism is the use of metaphors. The most complex or ineffable human experiences, such as deep emotions or non-ordinary states of consciousness, often require metaphorical language to express them. This enables the person to

convey aspects of their experience that cannot be accurately captured through rational language. Whereas rational language is objective and structured through definitions and equivalence (e.g., "this is that"), analogical language is subjective and metaphorical, better suited to conveying emotions and experiences (e.g., "this is like that").

According to Nietzsche, the concept is a desiccated metaphor, that is, a metaphor from which all sensory reference has been removed [24]. Metaphor transports (*metapherein*: to transport), on the contrary, the concept contains and concludes (*cum-captus*: conceived); therefore, these two forms of knowledge are complementary in that the former allows us to connect different moments of reality, while the latter places contents in our network of meanings. The analogical part is what is necessary to produce meaning, without interrupting it into a meaning, i.e., a crystallized, 'closed-box' definition.

The use of metaphors is a way to enrich our understanding of human experience, transcending the limits of direct descriptive language to explore more deeply the structures of consciousness and the essence of being. Metaphors not only enrich the personal narrative but also open new ways of perceiving and understanding reality, offering a lens through which the most intimate details of human life and its essence can be seen.

Existentialism, with philosophers such as Heidegger [25] and Sartre [26], introduces further fundamental concepts.

Heidegger develops the idea of *being-in-the-world*, emphasizing that the human being is intrinsically and inevitably in relationship with the world around him and that every action has existential consequences since this relationship is not merely one of physical co-presence, but is a fusion of being and world in a continuous exchange. Heidegger argues that we do not exist in a vacuum, but always in a living context, which affects every aspect of our being. Human existence, therefore, cannot be detached from its world; every action is chosen and contextualized by this inextricable connection.

Sartre emphasizes individual freedom and responsibility: human beings are not defined by essences or predetermined patterns but must continually construct their own meaning through choices and

actions. The author states that human beings are condemned to freedom in the sense that they have no choice but to make choices. The author rejects the idea that identity is predetermined, arguing that everyone is free to choose who they become, and that this freedom is accompanied by responsibility for those choices.

Both Heidegger and Sartre, then, challenge the traditional conception of a linear and rigid time. For Heidegger, time is phenomenologically rooted in the experience of the present moment, where the past is always interpreted by the present, and the future is a horizon towards which to move. Sartre, on the other hand, sees time as a field of possibilities that unfolds in the present; the future, therefore, is not a fatality but a set of opportunities and choices that are made now.

The existential philosophy of these authors emphasizes how existence is intertwined with the temporal and physical context in which human beings live and how freedom and responsibility actively shape that existence.

A brief outline of the fundamentals of Gestalt Psychotherapy

GT is a humanistic, phenomenological-existential and holistic psychotherapeutic approach that is based on the therapist/individual relationship as an authentic, non-directive encounter between two people; it has as its main objective the development of awareness, following the principles of self-determinism and individual responsibility (i.e. the individual's ability to be aware of his or her own choices and actions, taking responsibility for his or her own decisions and behavior). GT is applied here and now and relies on the principle of organismic self-regulation that occurs in contact with oneself, one's emotions, and needs. It pursues the person's well-being by building a more coherent and harmonious sense of self through the integration of parts and polarities. Below, we present the instances underlying this approach.

Here and now

Building on existentialism and phenomenology, GT expands the concept of the here and now by bringing attention to the

individual's awareness only possible in the present moment.

Everything of which the person can be aware, that is, what is real for the person, takes place in the present. The past is what was real at the time it happened, and the future will be real at the time it happens. Similarly, the individual can only directly experience what is happening within the range of his senses, i.e., it is only possible to experience something that is happening where the person is. Even if the individual imagines something, he is painting it to himself; therefore, the imagination is taking place where the person is [27].

Speaking of the present means, in contrast to other epistemologies, something that takes place in the immediate, here and now, everything that at this precise moment is within the reach of the individual's attention [27].

Remembering and foreseeing are actions that have to do with past and future but, inevitably, take place in the present: one remembers something that took place in the past but is recalled in the here and now; similarly, the prediction of something future is an image that is formed in the present and that will take place in the future. This does not imply living exclusively for the present, but living fully in the present, that is, taking into account one's past experiences to be able to respond more adequately to the present, and having one's goals in mind so as to be able to modify one's present behavior [27].

This worldview allows one to deal with past situations and future predictions based on one's own feelings at the time they are evoked, thus enabling one to address introjections, prejudices, interpretations, and other mechanisms that break contact with one's own feelings.

Figure/Ground

Starting from Husserlian phenomenology, in GT, perception is considered an intentional act guided by motivation and sustained by attention, thus perception is not a passive function of the human being; hence the individual is not overwhelmed by a kind of sensory 'bombardment', but can exercise, consciously or unconsciously, his or her choice where to direct perception, organizing the incoming sensory current into a target

called the 'figure' that emerges from the 'ground'.

The ground can also represent an individual's entire life and thus can be divided into three parts: past, unfinished situations (unfinished Gestalt), and present flow. This does not mean that the ground is a gateway to the past; it is more the depiction of the past in the present. The re-emergence or emergence of past situations, unfinished Gestalt or happenings in the present flow can form, hand in hand, the figures perceived by the person. The ground, therefore, represents the whole puzzle, while the figure is the piece of the puzzle the person is holding at that moment.

The figure corresponds to the present and connects us to the environment. The ground corresponds as much to what exists within us as to the eternal [28].

Characteristic of the figures is transience; characteristic of the ground is fertility. The management of a healthy alternation between figure and ground, avoiding the fixity of a figure and stimulating the exploration of the present ground, allows for the closure of unfinished Gestalts and the discovery of new points of view with respect to the experiences one is living.

Contact cycle

In GT, we understand the individual (organism) in relation to 'other than self' (environment); the interaction between individual and environment occurs at the boundary of the contact between them [29]. Contact with novelty, which occurs at this boundary, requires creative adaptation. This process enables individuals to grow and develop by responding effectively to unexpected changes or new circumstances within a contact cycle. Creative adaptation occurs when an individual is pushed towards the environment to satisfy their needs. These needs emerge from the background as internal tensions that require interaction with the external world to be resolved [30]. When these tensions emerge, there is an initial pre-contact phase that represents the first experience between the individual and the environment at the boundary of contact; it is characterized by sensations and is, therefore, by its nature, an automatic and passive response. In pre-contact, there are two moments: what is felt physically and what

is felt emotionally [29]; here we have Brentano's primary phenomenon. Pre-contact represents initial arousal and awareness of need. It is a moment of preparation, exploration, and recognition of the need [30].

Subsequently, the person begins to direct himself towards what will satisfy his need. In this phase, known as the contact phase, one experiences the external world directly through one's senses and actions. Contact with the environment is not just a passive reaction but involves an active choice on the part of the individual as to how to interact with the surrounding world and is therefore subjective [29]. In this phase, the person discriminates, selects, and adapts creatively to resolve internal tension [30]. This is Brentano's secondary phenomenon.

When the need is clearly defined, the individual moves closer and closer to the moment of resolution or satisfaction of the need and is fully engaged with the object or situation that satisfies it, in a peak of arousal. This is the phase of full contact, which is the culminating moment of interaction with the environment, in which there is a complete connection with the object of need and in which a high level of awareness and clarity is achieved. However, full contact is transient, and once the need is satisfied, arousal begins to diminish [30].

After full contact, the excitement gradually subsides, and the individual relaxes, integrating the experience into their structure. This post-contact phase is important because it allows the person to consolidate what has been learned or achieved during the contact cycle: it is a period of reflection and assimilation, in which one becomes aware of the changes that the experience has produced and re-establishes the organism's internal balance, thus preparing for the emergence of new needs [30].

Once the need is satisfied and the contact cycle concludes, the organism transitions into a withdrawal phase in which it detaches itself from its environment and returns to focus on itself. Retreat is a time of stillness, during which the organism can rest and regenerate after expending energy and excitement during contact. This phase allows the person to fully integrate the experience and regain internal balance. Once this balance has been re-established, the organism is ready to contact the environment again when a new need arises.

The contact cycle is never static or fixed but is a continuous process that reflects the dynamic interaction between person and environment. Each new need initiates a new cycle, and so the organism continues to grow and develop through the contact process [30].

In GT, the emphasis is placed on the importance of being aware of this process and developing the capacity for creative adaptation, so as to help the individual recognize his or her needs, make contact with the environment effectively, and resolve internal tensions through interaction with the outside world. The ultimate goal of GT is to re-establish a fluid and creative contact process, where the individual not only reacts to the environment, but actively adapts, finding new solutions and increasing possibilities for personal fulfillment [30].

Polarity and integration of parts

In GT, the concept of polarity highlights how many experiences and phenomena are interdependent on their opposites. For example, concepts such as 'day' and 'night' are only distinguishable because they are opposites. The human experience is inherently immersed in the presence of these polarities: the person is a dynamic unity, that is, a unity that is realized by continuously integrating the pushes of divergent forces. The GT has as its implicit aim the exploration of these conflicting dynamics, from the perspective of both awareness and organismic self-regulation, to strive towards the realization of a condition that goes beyond the conflict between polarities, i.e., internal fragmentation and division. To do this, it is necessary to give voice to both sides, not as if they were antagonistic, but considering them complementary: by understanding that the ego is simply a figure emerging from the background, one detaches oneself from the importance attributed to it. In other words, the activation of a condition of pure awareness is sufficient to experience both sides, without the need to resolve their differences and without wanting to eliminate one of them, thus overcoming the eternal dualism between the polarities. Thus, the conflict that arises from the false representation we have of ourselves can be overcome [24, 29].

Field theory

Field theory, as presented by Lewin [31], proposes starting from the psychological field, formed by the individual and the environment, to study the human psyche. The author argues that the individual is shaped by environmental forces and that the environment, in turn, is modified through the influence of the individual. This theory is connected to the Gestalt principle according to which the whole is more than the sum of its individual parts: Perls explains this with the example of the chess box in which individual pieces represent the isolationist view but in the 'field' of the chessboard they represent the 'holistic' conception, i.e., the processes of the parts that are determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole [32]. This conceptualization is in line with Heidegger's view that human existence is inextricably connected to the world, and every action and choice is contextualized by this connection.

Lewin argues that all behavior is the result of forces acting within a dynamic field, just as in GT human experience is seen as occurring at the 'contact boundary' between the individual and the environment: these are not two separate entities, but a dynamic process in which contact is a determining factor for growth and awareness. It follows that no individual is self-sufficient because the individual can only exist within an environmental field, of which he or she is inevitably constantly a part. Thus, the individual's behavior is a function of the total field, which includes both him and the environment, and it is precisely the nature of the relationship between them that determines the behavior of the human being [33]. This theory guides the therapist towards a broader view of situations, always considering the environment as a determining element in people's behavior and feelings as they influence each other.

In conclusion, GT applies the principles of phenomenology and existentialism to create a therapeutic approach that values immediate experience, awareness of the present moment, and personal responsibility. These philosophical assumptions form the basis of a therapy model that not only aims to resolve internal conflicts but also to facilitate greater understanding and awareness of the human being in the world.

GESTALT PSYCHEDELIC INTEGRATION

Psychedelic experiences often lead the person to confront an existential reality that transcends the normal limits of his or her everyday life, revealing a sense of greater freedom and openness. This newfound freedom also brings a profound responsibility: how to integrate these discoveries into one's life? Thus, psychedelic integration takes on an existential dimension, as it guides the individual in the process of becoming aware of his or her choices and the responsibility that comes with it. Psychedelic experiences can often disrupt a person's existential project, challenging his or her beliefs and opening up new possibilities for existence. When approached with awareness, this process provides an opportunity to reorganize one's existential path more authentically and to make decisions that are in line with one's deepest values. In this sense, integration helps the person to transform the psychedelic experience into an opportunity for existential growth, favoring a realignment between what they experience and what they choose to be.

GT, with its roots in phenomenology and existentialism, offers a unique framework to address this challenge. Phenomenology reveals the importance of direct experience and the active role of consciousness in constructing reality. This approach is crucial for understanding psychedelic experiences, which often defy conventional descriptions and require an exploration of personal and subjective meaning. Likewise, existentialism emphasizes personal freedom and responsibility, inviting individuals to explore and integrate profound psychedelic revelations into their daily lives.

In the context of Gestalt Psychedelic Integration (GPI), these philosophical principles not only help navigate and make sense of experiences of non-ordinary states of consciousness but also provide a solid theoretical foundation to support individuals in their integration process. Through the use of metaphors and respectful attention to the subjectivity of experience, the therapist can facilitate a pathway of integration that respects the depth and complexity of the psychedelic experience. In this sense, the work in GPI is very similar to the way in which in GT one works with dreams [24; 28].

What is needed is an approach to psychedelic integration that not only con-

siders the clinical and therapeutic importance of psychedelic substances but also values and respects the profound personal transformations that can emerge from these experiences. In order to be able to move on this theoretical-practical basis, the therapist's training must also be adequate; in fact, the therapist must not only have achieved an impartial, psycho-spiritual and ethical-ontological openness in the ideas and concepts concerning integrative work, but must also have the ability to understand, use and promote abstract communication by experiencing with the patient the metaphors it entails. The therapist must be familiar with the territory they are navigating and should have experienced non-ordinary states of consciousness, for example through holotropic breathing.

With GPI, we propose a model that fully embraces the complexity of the human being, in a process that is as transformative as it is respectful of individual freedom.

Picking up on the dimensions discussed above, in the Gestalt model of psychedelic integration the physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral dimensions are closely linked since they represent consecutive phases of the contact cycle which, as we have seen, starts from the awareness of emotions, thoughts, choices and behavior and can only take place in the here and now. In a psychedelic experience, what is perceived cannot be reduced to a mere objective fact. This is because perception is an active process in which the individual projects aspects of their self and emotional world onto the experience, rendering it unique and unrepeatable. Intentionality thus becomes a key element in understanding how a person ascribes meaning to his or her psychedelic experiences and how, through integration, he or she can rework these experiences to fit them into a more coherent and meaningful narrative. The contact cycle thus initially allows the above-mentioned dimensions to be separated "in series", with a natural succession of questions (e.g., how does it make you feel?, what do you think?, what would you like?, what can you do?), so as to make the psychedelic experience less confusing and help the person to increase his or her level of awareness of the experience itself. Unpacking these dimensions implies that the action is reasoned with respect to taking care of what is felt; this ensures that the ac-

tion is not 'empty' and that the need does not remain unfulfilled, thus avoiding that the Gestalt remains open (e.g., if I feel itchy and decide to eat a sandwich, the itch will remain unfulfilled!). This increase in awareness is what, naturally, favors the subsequent 'recompacting' of the experience, which is necessary and fundamental for its assimilation, i.e., to be able to carry some of its elements into daily life, thus avoiding it remaining an isolated experience. Developing integration work with this modality allows one to remain strongly anchored in the here and now and protects the individual and the therapist from the risk of interpreting the experience. In GPI, therefore, keeping in mind the distinction between primary and secondary phenomena is particularly useful since many of the experiences lived during a non-ordinary state of consciousness emerge as primary phenomena (visions, sensations and intuitions that manifest themselves in a pure way, unfiltered by rationalization). Subsequently, through the integration process, these experiences are transformed into secondary phenomena, i.e., when the person reworks them and gives them meaning in the context of his or her own life. This distinction, therefore, helps to focus attention on direct experiences (primary phenomena) before proceeding to the analysis or integration of a deeper, more personal meaning (secondary phenomena). This allows for an approach more rooted in immediate experience, avoiding interpretative superstructures that could distort or complicate the integrative process.

The pre-contact phase, as specified, is characterized by the appearance of physical and emotional sensations. In the non-ordinary state of consciousness, the body, as the seat of sensations and emotions, is often in the foreground: bodily manifestations are spontaneous and favor the emergence of experiences, memories, discomforts, comfort, etc. The holistic vision that GT has of the human being leads, in GPI, to pay strong attention to the physical manifestations that can manifest during the experience in a non-ordinary state of consciousness, working for instance on tensions in order to intensify them and reach intense energetic discharges (e.g., of energies accumulated through exposure to painful, traumatic, stressful situations...). The very expression of these somatic manifestations is a pro-

cess of self-awareness and healing. Sometimes this type of manifestation may begin during the experience, but without reaching a complete energy discharge. The use of Gestalt Body Work within the integration process is an excellent tool to help the person work on these energies, whether they are unpleasant or pleasant, arriving at an energetic discharge and being able to become aware of the emotional and cognitive material connected to the body [34].

In GPI the emotional experience is of fundamental importance and is explored by supporting the subject in the process of discovery and awareness with the aim of welcoming what is there, for example emotions that remain even after the psychedelic experience has ended, or the main emotion that accompanied the experience, or even a sudden emotion that emerged, or even all of these together. The individual is supported not only in feeling and recognizing their emotions, but also in accepting the intensity they may experience, helping them to express these emotions rather than block them. In this way, the subject can become aware of the pervasiveness of the emotions they try to block. Often, the person is more 'drawn' to the cognitive aspects and attempts to disconnect them from the emotional ones, seeking the meaning of the psychedelic experience, rather than the meaning of it. If emotional and cognitive dimensions are dissociated, the person is compartmentalized because he or she is compartmentalizing the experience instead of striving for integration of the parts.

Psychedelic experiences often elude rational and objective descriptions, requiring language that can capture the ineffability of experience. Metaphorical evocation makes it possible to convey the meaning of a complex experience without reducing it to mere rational concepts. Metaphor is valuable in trying to understand the human psyche because it is an element that, with few words and few explanations, conveys many concepts, knowledge, and information. It is very simple but conveys more than it says, there is more implicit information than explicit information (and this is precisely what happens in the psychedelic experience as well: something that lasts for a second and can evoke a multiplicity of things, to the point that trying to describe or explain it later requires many words—if it's even possible at all).

Metaphors launch a stimulus that quickly plunges one into a story and an experience. That is why they are excellent for explaining complex concepts. The use of metaphors, therefore, helps the individual to explore and describe their experiences in a deeper way, offering the therapist more direct access to their subjectivity.

The cognitive aspects, however, also play a crucial role in enabling individuals to think and decide how to direct their actions to address the needs that have arisen. This is also significant because one of the ways human beings come to understand the world (and, consequently, themselves) is through mentalization. In GPI, the cognitive dimension is engaged as soon as the person is asked to recount their psychedelic experience. It is not important to be detailed or to include all the information that emerged during the experience. On the contrary, choosing how and what to share, making it available to someone else, and organizing it into a coherent narrative are, in themselves, integrative actions. These processes facilitate the reworking and deeper engagement with the material of the experience. As often occurs during a Gestalt Therapy session, the psychedelic experience can also lead to a rupture in one's self-perception and life narrative. This happens because both are inherently deconstructive and disintegrative experiences, challenging the fixed reality that the individual knows, mentalizes, and conceptualizes. In Gestalt Psychedelic Integration (GPI), the therapist seeks to support the individual in the process of restructuring reality in a broader and more fluid sense—that is, in a less rigid way—enabling them to become aware of their fixations and to explore alternative visions and ways of “being in the world.” This restructuring process, which involves opening to new possibilities, is connected to the transition from the cognitive to the behavioral dimension—the full contact cycle. For the psychedelic experience to be truly beneficial, it is essential that it does not remain an isolated bubble separate from the rest of life. Instead, the insights gained during the experience must be integrated into daily life, allowing for changes in the person's behavior. In this way, the psychedelic experience can become genuinely transformative and promote personal growth.

The contact cycle, therefore, integrates the four dimensions previously discussed

(physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral) into a continuous process where integration represents organismic fluidity. It serves as a tool for awareness, aligning these dimensions to enable movement in the direction of one's conscious intention. In Gestalt Psychedelic Integration (GPI), these four dimensions are always brought into focus within the temporal framework of the here and now, allowing the person to flow in an integrated way. Shifting to a different temporal dimension (past or future) would result in the absence of emotions and behaviors, leaving only thought (“thinking about”), which hinders integration and highlights mechanisms of contact interruption. Remaining in the past, for example, would reduce the experience to mere description, distorting the emotional aspect, as descriptions are inherently fragmented. Actions, like feeling, are possible only in the present moment. Neither can occur in the past nor the future, as the experiential richness and immediacy of the present are prerequisites for true integration and embodied transformation.

As said, contact is the awareness, choice and assimilation of novelty; when the person is faced with a novelty that is neither assimilable nor refusable, traumatic suffering appears [30]. This reading gives us a perspective on what happens in the so-called bad trip, i.e., on those negative and often distressing experiences that can occur while taking psychedelic substances. The situation makes it impossible for the individual to reject the non-assimilable experience he or she is having and, since figure formation occurs through processes of identification but also alienation, if it is not possible to leave and alienate oneself from the experience in progress, the novelty risks to become overwhelming. This means that the person does not have the resources either to stay, modifying the environment to make it assimilable, or to leave [35].

This environmental support, however, as described above, is naturally present in shamanic cultures; on the contrary, in the West, not only is the field not socially supportive, but often hostile, given the illegality of psychedelic substances and the consequent negative social perception of them.

Since individual behavior is shaped by the field they inhabit (needs, goals, perceptions, other people, objects, events),

GPI places substantial emphasis on the social dimension: integration after the psychedelic session becomes a social act, as it helps recreate a container for the experience through sharing and the creation of a shared community space. (e.g. psychedelic integration circles), it also involves simply connecting with another person, such as a psychotherapist, to share the experience. Pre-experience integration is, in turn, of great importance from the perspective of harm reduction and benefit maximization: it already creates, at least partially, a frame of reference for the person about to have the psychedelic experience. The very act of approaching a psychotherapist, or participating in an integration circle, is an act of intentional socialization that brings the individual's attention from the self to the liminal zone of contact with the other than self.

Historically, GT places a strong emphasis on interpersonal relationships, privileging the group setting and 'using' each member to contribute to each process, carrying out, in fact, more than a group therapy, where each participant becomes a subject and has space to express the 'effect on him/her' of the experience he/she is having in the here and now of the group. In this sense, GT is a social approach of choice in psychedelic integration circles because each individual therapeutic work becomes communal and participatory for each group member.

The field is also imbued with what each person brings with them (needs, perceptions, etc.), including their own cosmovision: that is, the vision they have with respect to the psychedelic experience (psychonautical, introspective, therapeutic, spiritual vision, etc.) and with respect to approaching the world (spiritual, scientific, materialistic vision, etc.).

In the context of psychedelic experiences, people often speak of "mystical experiences" and a sense of sacredness—experiences typically associated with transcendence. The spiritual dimension may be relevant in the psychedelic experience and integration requires going through the individual's cosmovision. An open, non-judgmental attitude towards a worldview that may not resemble that of the therapist is therefore necessary.

In GPI, spirituality is seen as something that happens and not as something that is. Spirituality takes place in the present

moment, which is itself a spiritual experience. We can only connect with it if we are not stuck in rational thinking or emotionally entangled in what just happened. That's what makes both being present and accessing spirituality so hard [28]. Spiritual experience cannot be possessed, defined, considered true or false, disproved; it is not repeatable and only belongs to those who experience it in the instant it occurs [36]. It follows that spirituality has to do with feeling, that it is subjective and ever-changing. This implies that staying within the sense of experience given by feeling, rather than on meaning, reduces the danger of running into a false spirituality or ego inflation based on the avoidance of one's inner world or difficult situations in life.

Unlike spiritual or shamanic approaches, which offer a predetermined cosmovision, or clinical approaches, which often overlook spiritual aspects, Gestalt Psychedelic Integration (GPI) treats spirituality as an open-ended process rather than a fixed concept. The therapist's role is to support this process, facilitating a co-construction of spirituality that is meaningful and authentic to the individual.

A non-judgmental approach ensures respect for the person's existing spiritual framework, if one is present, while also embracing and validating experiences that do not involve spiritual elements. This approach promotes acceptance and inclusiveness, allowing each individual to explore their journey in alignment with their own unique perspective and needs. The laws of perception of Gestalt psychology tell us how human beings are led to read the world based on their prior knowledge and experiences. Keeping this in mind is of particular relevance in GPI, especially when dealing with spirituality as a dimension that may not be considered in the Western world. The individual who detects spiritual elements in the psychedelic experience, without ever having dealt with this dimension before, runs the risk of running into certain blocks: 1) relying on the interpretation and/or cosmovision of others; 2) avoiding and/or denying the experience had; 3) relying on beliefs and superstitions, emptying the experience of meaning; 4) judging the experience itself by interpreting it. The GPI is, therefore, necessary to support the person in being in touch with his own feeling, following the meaning that

the experience has for him, thus avoiding leaning on the search for his own or other people's meaning.

The suspension of judgment also serves as protection against the clash of spiritual paradigms that may arise from the imposition of the psychotherapist's cosmovision over that of the individual. Conversely, if the clash of spiritual paradigms results from a shift in the person's own previous cosmovision, GPI supports overcoming the conflict by facilitating individual change and the ongoing process of creative adaptation.

GPI is an approach of choice in preventing and treating the possible occurrence of spiritual by-pass as it moves with the contact cycle as its map and leads to the integration of parts and polarities. The contact cycle helps to align the various planes of the person's experience (sensations, emotions, thoughts, actions) and, therefore, rebalances any attentional disharmonies between the various dimensions, restoring contact with this plane of reality. Since the spiritual bypass is a dissociation, that is, a consideration of only one polarity while scotomizing the other, then the integration between the parts and polarities becomes necessary to maintain or restore contact with this plane of reality. This helps the person to find a synthesis between emotions and thoughts or between two contrasting thoughts, thus overcoming fixity with respect to the spiritual dimension alone and treating it no longer as a substitute for everyday reality but as an integrative part of one's life and the psychedelic experience he or she has had.

GPI becomes a process of co-construction of meaning, where the therapist does not impose his or her own vision, but helps the person to explore and define his or her own personal meaning. This respect for subjectivity is crucial, as experiences in non-ordinary states of consciousness often challenge traditional conceptions of reality. Through the relationship, in the co-construction of meaning, the individual can reorganize his or her existence in a more authentic way, integrating the new insights into a life lived with greater awareness and responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examines the crucial role of integration in non-ordinary states of consciousness and proposes a model of

psychedelic integration based on phenomenological-existential Gestalt psychotherapy. The GPI approach aims to promote a holistic process of integration that naturally embraces all dimensions of human experience.

The philosophical principles and psychotherapeutic approach underpinning GPI are necessary to move through the landscape of psychedelic experiences, to give them a meaning that is in line with the person's felt and are, therefore, a solid theoretical foundation to support individuals in their integration process. These theoretical-practical foundations, then, allow for continuity between the language that the experience inherently has and that used during integration, to create a continuum between the experience and the person's narrative.

GPI does not only work with the insights and transformations that emerge during the psychedelic experience but also facilitates a process of profound self-discovery and personal change that can positively influence long-term personal and community growth and well-being. This model is, therefore, naturally relationship-oriented and succeeds in expressing its full potential in both individual and group settings, being also supportive of the creation of a different social vision of non-ordinary states of consciousness.

The proposed model respects the subjectivity of individual experience, fostering the exploration of the depth and complexity of both the psychedelic experience and the human condition. It facilitates a process that is simultaneously transformative and protective of individual freedom. Gestalt Psychedelic Integration (GPI) is a model that not only acknowledges the clinical and therapeutic potential of psychedelic substances but also values and respects the profound personal transformations that can arise from these experiences.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

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