

HALLUCINOGENS – WHAT’S IN A NAME?

OR DEFENDING THE INDEFENSIBLE

Gary L. Bravo, M.D. (glbravo@aol.com) and
Charles S. Grob, M.D. (csgrob@aol.com)

Dr. Lenderts raises important and thought-provoking points in the ongoing dialogue over the proper nomenclature for these plants and chemicals which are the subject of scientific inquiry in the pharmacological, medical, psychological, anthropological and sociological literatures. We have no issue with his thesis that the term “hallucinogen” is in some ways reductionistic and misleading as to the myriad and profound effects these substances may potentially manifest in the brains, minds and souls of users. However, the issue as we see it is to identify a useful terminology which can be agreed upon by all who care to communicate about these protean substances and be recognized by those receiving these communications.

“Our argument is basically a practical one – the key is context.”

The term “hallucinogens,” whether rightly or wrongly, and much to the chagrin of many who would prefer terms such as “entheogens,” “psychedelics,” or “visionary plants and drugs,” has become the accepted nomenclature in the scientific and anthropological literature. For example, an Internet search of the biomedical literature using the words “entheogenic,” or even “psychedelic,” would probably not generate the desired results for the inquirer, whereas the term “hallucinogenic” most likely would.

In their classic text *Plants Of The Gods: Their Sacred, Healing and Hallucinogenic Powers*, Richard Evans Schultes and Albert Hofmann do not equivocate in their use of what they consider to be the appropriate term. Over the last hundred years various investigators have alternatively proposed a bewildering nomenclature, including, though not limited to, “deliriant,” “delusionegens,” “eidetics,” “entheogens,” “misperceptinogens,” “mysticomimetics,” “phanerothymes,” “phantasticants,” “psychedelics,” “psychodysleptics,” “psychogens,” “psychointegrators,” “psychosomimetics,” “psychotaraxics,” “psychotocants,” “psychotogens,” “psychotomimetics,” and “schizogens.” Each of these terms has its particular advantages, yet all fall short of encompassing the entire range of reactions these substances are known to induce.



Gary Bravo and Charles Grob on the Amazon, 1996

Acknowledging that no individual appellation is entirely acceptable, it may be instructive to explore the etymological root of the

“We would wish that by using another term for ‘hallucinogenic’ or ‘psychedelic’ or ‘entheogenic’ plants and chemicals, if we could all agree on one, that we will challenge or even change the preconceived notions and prejudices of others, but we’re not necessarily convinced that this would be the case.”

contested term “hallucinogen.” As clarified by Ralph Metzner, prolific writer, scholar and early explorer of altered states phenomenology, the Latin root of “hallucinogen” is *hallucinari*, or *elucinari*, which translates as “mind wandering” or “mind traveling.” By moving beyond the obvious association to hallucination, which itself is defined as a false perception or false idea, and examining “hallucinogen” from the perspective of the induction of mind voyaging, the term is no longer constrained within the fixed, pathological framework Dr. Lenderts suggests.

There are many words in the English language which no longer are referent to their original meaning. We would wish that by using another term for “hallucinogenic” or “psychedelic” or “entheogenic” plants and chemicals — if we could all agree on one — that we will challenge or even change the preconceived notions and prejudices of others, but we’re not necessarily convinced that this would be the case.

Our argument is basically a practical one — the key is context. Pioneer pharmacological

researcher Sasha Shulgin once told us, when asked about the debate between usage of the term “entheogen” versus “psychedelic,” that if you talk to most people “on the street” and refer to entheogens, they won’t know what you’re talking about, but if you refer to psychedelic drugs, they probably would.

Most likely there will be no resolution to the dilemma of what to call these substances, and they will continue to harbor differing labels depending on the set and setting of the speaker. The term “entheogen” may even become the accepted referent in the religious and spiritual literature. But in the meantime, can’t we all just get along? ■



*Tatewari, Shaman and Peyoteros
Huichol Yarn Painting
from Plants of the Gods*