

Ritual, transcendence & psychedelics

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New research published in *Frontiers in Psychology* has demonstrated that engaging in dancing, listening to musical beats, being sleep deprived and taking (psychedelic) drugs during raves bonds people together, in a way that still shows effects up to five years after the event. A particular interesting aspect of these findings was that engaging in the 4Ds (**d**ancing, **d**rums, **s**leep **d**eprivation, and **d**rugs) only led to personal transformation and associated social bonding when the rave context induced awe. Awe is a complex emotion that involves self-transcendence, which happens when a focus on the self or boundaries of the self diminish to such an extent that one starts to feel connected to something bigger than oneself, whether the group of ravers one is dancing with, nature, the universe, or God. It was measured by feelings of connectedness, self-diminishment, perceived vastness, altered time perception, physical sensations, and a need to make sense of the experience. Experiencing these states as a result of the 4Ds led to personal transformation and social bonding.

Analyses demonstrated that the awe-inspiring ritual context of the rave that led to personal transformation and bonding was driven in particular by the amount of dancing and drugs the ravers had done. Importantly, they help alter our states of consciousness to an extent that we can transcend our normal boundaries of self and feel to become part of something bigger, like a group, but this transcendence also allows us to step away from the everyday and the mundane, into the surreal and sacred. Such experiences challenge pre-existing meaning systems and inspire people to new perspectives and ways of thinking. Thus, awe is not only an emotion associated with wonder, but also a meaning-making emotion that allows us to accommodate the perception of something (perceptually or psychologically) vaster than oneself. As such, it is an essential part of both for social bonding (feeling connected with a group larger than oneself) and personal transformation (incorporating new perspectives and insights).

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But what if one engages in the 4Ds without experiencing any awe or self-transcendence? For those individuals who didn't get to have an awe-inspiring experience, engaging in the 4Ds was associated with a lack of personal growth, or anomie. The researchers suggest that when ravers dance to loud repetitive beats all night and take great quantities of drugs but never reach an altered state of consciousness, they might simply become exhausted, instead. These are intense, energy-consuming activities which are sure to drain if no elevation takes place. Why exactly some people experience awe as a result of these activities while others don't, is currently unclear. One factor that the researchers uncovered is that people with a greater openness to experience were more likely to experience awe as a result of engaging in the 4Ds. Openness to experience is one of the personality traits of the so-called 'Big Five' personality model which dominates personality research and which includes five core personality categories (the other personality traits being extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism). People who score higher on

openness are more open-ended and curious and tend to be more willing to seek out novelty, try new experiences, and embrace or think up new ideas. The current research was not able to determine whether being more open led to greater experiences of awe, or whether the use of psychedelic drugs led to increased openness, something which previously been found in other research. Nonetheless, the more open someone was during the rave activities, the greater awe they experienced, which in turn led to personal transformation and social bonding.

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A reduced focus on the self, or 'ego dissolution', is a common feature of psychedelic drugs experiences. Research by one of the researchers of the rave study, Dr. van Mulukom, and her collaborators showed that people who had used so-called classic serotonergic psychedelic drugs (e.g., psilocybin or magic mushrooms, LSD, ayahuasca, etc.) and had an awe-inspiring experience (in particular, feeling connected during the psychedelic trip) demonstrated higher levels of empathy and feelings of connectedness to nature and humanity up to five years after the psychedelic trip. Importantly, this was associated with lower levels of maladaptive or exploitative-entitled narcissism, as well. As with openness to experience, the researchers were not able to disentangle whether awe-inspiring psychedelic experiences led to lower levels of narcissism, or whether individuals with lower levels of narcissism are more likely to take psychedelic drugs and/or have awe-inspiring psychedelic trips. Other research conducted at six multi-day mass gatherings in the United States and United Kingdom showed similar results: recent psychedelic drug use was associated with increased positive mood, greater feelings of connectedness to others, and an experience of personal transformation.

Such activities have been part of shamanistic and religious rituals for large parts of human history and were possibly part of the very first rituals. Ritual context might be crucial here: As we saw in the rave research, merely engaging in strenuous activities does not always lead to awe-inspiring experiences.

Thus, engaging in certain activities such as dancing and taking (psychedelic) drugs may contribute in particular to awe-inspiring experiences (whereby a focus on the self is decreased), which in turn can lead to feelings of connectedness and social bonding, possibly especially in individuals scoring high on openness to experience and low on maladaptive narcissism. Such activities have been part of shamanistic and religious rituals for large parts of human history and were possibly part of the very first rituals. Ritual context might be crucial here: As we saw in the rave research, merely engaging in strenuous activities does not always lead to awe-inspiring experiences. Anthropologists and sociologists like Émile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, and Victor Turner have argued for years that specific ritual contexts are required to allow for the emotional stimulation necessary to transcend normal boundaries and states of mind. When such a state has been achieved (also called the "betwixt-and-between" moment in religious rituals), ritual participants feel that they are physically and symbolically outside of the normal social order, which is when new perspectives can occur. At the same time however, the transcendental state that the ritual has induced produces a sense of collectivity. These two processes together mean that participants come away from the ritual with a renewed sense of identity and purpose.

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The connection between religious rituals and social bonding has also been demonstrated by Dr van Mulukom and colleagues. Through a series of fieldwork and laboratory studies, they have showed that attending rituals together increases social bonding. Importantly, the increases in social bonding after rituals were predicted by increases in positive affect and feelings of connectedness to something bigger (e.g., to God or the Holy Spirit) during religious rituals. Positive affect, that is intrinsically rewarding or pleasant emotions (of which awe is considered one), allows one to broaden one's scope of attention, which in turn helps facilitate bonding with others. Interestingly, this effect was also present in secular rituals, such as attending Sunday Assembly services and engaging in a multi-week secular yoga practice.

In this sense, then, raves and festivals may be relatively recent but seemingly enduring subcultural versions of these collective rituals, crucially involving music and dance in a way that can exalt the mind. Attending arts performances such as drama, but perhaps also experiencing paintings, sculpture, and so on, may be another ritual context which is not necessarily religious but which could induce awe and consequent personal transformation and social bonding, which warrants further research. Nonetheless, the research so far suggests that secular rituals are able to induce similar effects to religious rituals, using similar mechanisms as age-old religious rituals. This is great news given a worldwide increase in non-religious individuals with secular worldviews and secular rituals, who will be able to find self-transcendence outside of the church.