

The Social Function of Experiences of Altered Perception

CRAIG JACKSON CALHOUN

The object of this study is the experience of altered perception, an intrinsically individual event. The focal point from which it is viewed is society. Social scientists are not always the first to be explicit with definitions and frequently look down upon those who don't understand precisely what they mean. This problem, a characteristic of what Kuhn calls the "pre-paradigmatic" stage of a science (Kuhn 1970) forces scholars to spend a great deal of their time working out definitions. Perhaps since definitions not only affect our communication but shape the very substance of our thought the effort may be seen as worthwhile. As scientists we attempt to surmount any phenomenological notion of the subjective constitution of the world; we should continue our effort, not delude ourselves into thinking we have succeeded.¹ Such battles are never won, only pushed further.

It will be noted that the definitions I offer overlap each other in that all are a part of the same scheme and that scheme is being demonstrated at the same time. No rigorous attempt is made to define the terms outside their relationship to one another.

Social function is considered to be the way individual acts, entities, and experiences determine and are determined by the interpersonal context, both immediate and infinite, in which they take place. The immediate context refers to real, live actors in their responses, the infinite is the net-

¹ Of course, it is the subjective constitution of the world which this paper postulates, and to a large extent, it is that with which it deals. The author wishes to recognize a considerable otherwise uncited debt to several phenomenological philosophers. In particular, Husserl, a bit corrupted in my thinking by shared emphasis on Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, has influenced this paper. In fact, I am occasionally convinced that he must have said it all somewhere and I have only missed the passage. Consider, for example, this passage from *Ideas*:

work of interrelations and continuities which exists beyond individual lives and actions. Social function, for the purposes of this paper, refers to the tie between the individual unit and the larger system. Thus, kinship, seen as an analytic system, does not have social function but is social function. Particular kinship acts have social functions. Any particular individual's internalizations of kinship systems have social functions. Those concepts (externalizations) which help the scholar or native tie together the diversities of experience and observation are plasma holding the individual unit within them. The observer delimits the notion of unity, thus being able to treat a single structure at different times as a concept (fabric of smaller units) and as a percept (immediate whole, gestalt). We must be cautious in our classifications, and avoid assuming an intrinsic and exclusive unity at one level.

Something of the relationship between social and individual functions should be noted as well. The way in which something functions within the life of the individual is not, as such, a social fact.² It may be, however, depending on certain other conditions. For example a psychological function, such as an emotional release from strictures, may be seen as a social need.³ Thus whatever fills this individual need has a social function as well. Individual acts are always social in effect. Even the choice of an

... the nullifying of the world means, correlatively, just this, that in every stream of experience (the full stream, both ways endless, of the experiences of an Ego) certain ordered empirical connexions, and accordingly also systems of theorizing reason which take their bearing from these, would be excluded. But this does not involve the exclusion of other experiences and experiential systems. Thus no real thing, none that consciously presents and manifests itself through appearances, is necessary for the Being of consciousness (in the widest sense of the stream of experience) (Husserl 1931: 137).

The doctrine of intentionality, that to be conscious of something is an act of the Ego which constitutes the thing the Ego is conscious of, a starting point for much of Gestalt psychology, is also an implicit postulate of the argument of this paper. The world is essentially structured by the individual, and he may learn his structures from society, and they may be changed in various ways.

² Durkheim remains the most prominent discussant of social fact. He suggests in *The rules of sociological method* that the social is that which is not completely contained in the individual act. There is an important dichotomy in his work among things which meet this rather ambiguous criterion. There are those which are abstractions of particular events, i.e. language, and those which are particular in time and space, i.e. mob action. Thus one distinguishes collective organization and collective patterns of perception and categorization from collective behavior. We are concerned here principally with the former.

³ This is how Freud, for example, viewed the situation and attempted, in *Totem and taboo*, to account for rituals which allowed extremes of illicit (otherwise) behavior. An element of this seems quite plausibly the case, although certainly it is an insufficient account of ritual in its particular forms.

individual to opt out of society by committing suicide or defining himself as psychotic is social in as much as it is a choice having both a social rate and a particular interpersonal history (effect and determination). The choice need not involve immediate action with other people to be a social choice. What the individual does always has a social function since he is always a potential social actor. What he is, or what happens to him, has only a social function in so far as it is expressed in behavior, and/or the result of the behavior of other persons. While this may include nearly all possible situations, it will be noted to include only certain analytic aspects of them.

In a way, experience and perception are two sides of the same coin. Perception is an externalized image of an event or scene; experience is its internalizing relation. Perception is what our bodies tell us we have sensed; experience is the system into which we fit the perception. Perception is non-temporal, the act of an instant;⁴ experience is completely temporal, the changing of one moment into the next, dependent on the past, determining the future, but without a break, having the individual life as its continuity. Perception is a sensory act of definition, with a beginning — contact with a stimulus — and an end — termination of contact. For both perception and experience the individual is the crucial factor. It is the single organism that perceives and experiences.

For perception, we need not distinguish between humans and other animals. Human experience, however, includes consciousness. As inclusive of consciousness, it includes the process of CONCEPTION of ideas. Experience is not limited to consciousness, of course. It is the whole of the connection between the individual and his life; it is mediated by its own history, and by perception.

Just as perception, at its level, may perceive different external realities, so experience, at a higher level, may experience different internal processes — recollection and expectation as well as perception. These three vary, of course, about a temporal focus. Further differentiation may be noted by considering the mode of thought as well as the temporal representation. We may recollect, for example, in original perceptions, in conceptions, or in abstract theoretical structures. On some level perceptions remain intact; they may also fade, fuse, and change with time. Each recol-

⁴ Put well by Durkheim: "Sensual representations are in a perpetual flux; they come after each other like the waves of a river, and even during the time that they last, they do not remain the same thing. Each of them is an integral part of the precise instant when it takes place. We are never sure of again finding a perception such as we experienced it the first time; for if the thing perceived has not changed, it is we who are no longer the same" (Durkheim 1915: 481).

lection is a distinct psychic act which involves a new perception, conception, etc. whether or not it is identical with the old.

When we speak of experiences of altered perception, then, we speak of experiences in the "now" in which perception follows different patterns from other, more statistically modal, "nows" [everyday life]⁵ and in which this differentiation is not random, but specifically altered. Such experiences are always intense and climactic, as a move from everyday structures must be. Whether or not the cause is also climactic does not matter in predicting that the event will be overwhelming. It is the dramatic effect which dissembling everyday structures has which gives the experience of altered perception its cruciality. Where everyday operations for dealing with data are suspended, what happens to the data becomes extraordinarily important. In the absence of the usual categorizations for perceptions, the mind must deal with them in terms of a range of alternate structures which are not necessarily available to more casual adoption. Whether these are supplied by society, or created *ad hoc* by the individual, or systematized by other orders, they exercise a telling influence on the individual and through him on society.

We can show four rather simple categories of experiences of altered perception: (1) Individual experience. This refers to such individual deviations as a "nervous breakdown." The criteria are that the experience not be shared and that the individual be alone while he experiences it. (2) Individual experience within a group having different individual experiences. In this instance, while the experience itself is not shared, there is interaction with other people who, though they may not be seeing the same things, are also seeing things as different from their usual manifestations. An example would be a group of individuals "tripping" together in a non-structured situation on different psychotropic drugs. (3) Shared experience with a group not present. Here the individual's perception is altered in the same way as other persons' are or have been. For example, all individuals undergoing strict Freudian psychoanalysis experience certain similar alterations of experience such as the transference neurosis. Another example would be the use of popular books in counter-culture drug experiences. Works such as *The psychedelic experience*, a manual based on the *Tibetan book of the dead* and created by Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert (Baba Ramdass), and Ralph Metzger, determine to a large

⁵ The phrase "everyday life" is used instead of the more formal "normative" because of the implication normative carries for approved, socially sanctioned behavior. Behavior during ritualized experiences of altered perception may very well be normative in this sense; it is proper under the circumstances. It is not, however, usual in everyday life.

extent the nature of experiences of altered perception for a very large, noninteracting population. (4) Experience shared within a present group. Here the persons have qualitatively similar alterations of perception and are present and experiencing them together. The *communitas* experiences described by Victor Turner (1969, in particular) often seem to fall into this category, including religious experiences within such a group as the members of a pilgrimage, the experiences of some participants in rites of passage, and the experiences of members of encounter groups or other therapeutic collectives.⁶

The classification criterion shared-individual is very rough, and is included to point up what the author thinks are crucial differences between experiences where the particulars of alteration are shared, and those where only the fact of alteration is held in common. Where particulars are shared the experience itself is much more likely to produce commonalities in future behavior and/or experience.

It is our intention to examine the social function of experiences of altered perception more closely than by simply setting up categories. Each and every part of such an experience, each constituent unit, is likely to have very specific referents as well as very particular effects. In addition, of course, the larger units, at each level of the componential structure up to the whole of the experience, have causes for and effects of their particular structures. The structures and particulars experienced in this high intensity are likely to be traceable in their determination of later organizations of data and behavior corresponding to their specificity. For example, rolling a "joint" of marijuana in paper bearing the picture of an American flag is a clear signatory act of disrespect, but one which reaffirms the symbolic importance of the flag although placing it in a different context from most American ideology. It is the context which determines the import of the symbolic gesture. A more diffuse gesture such as drawing a pentangle requires all the more complex integration into a structure to place it in an important position socially, and to identify the import.

An experience of altered perception may support or attack either particular points or an entire structure. Indeed, such experiences may constitute some of the strongest supports or most devastating attacks possible on a social order. Two variables are involved in determining the effect

⁶ *Communitas* is a rather unclear term in Turner. It can usually be taken to mean an intense experience of oneness, human-ness, commonality amongst fellows. The unity of all is a general feature. There are exceptions to this description in Turner's examples, however. In addition, the question remains as to whether *communitas*/liminality are necessarily temporary (as I would suggest) or whether they may be perpetual, as in Turner's example of the early Franciscans. We may hope that a clearer definition of this most useful concept will be worked out soon.

of experiences of altered perception in a social situation. Experiences may be more or less ritualized, and more or less provided for in the social order. The interplay of these two variables provides the mechanism for these experiences' contribution to the maintenance or change of the social order.

As it tends toward ritualization, the experience builds in its participants an internal perception of the ritualizing order. Durkheim, considering this to be the central feature of the religious cult, comments:

The cult is not simply a system of signs by which the faith is outwardly translated; it is a collection of the means by which this is created and recreated periodically. Whether it consists in material acts or mental operations, it is always this which is efficacious ...

We have seen that this reality, which mythologies have represented under so many different forms, but which is the universal and eternal objective cause of these sensations *sui generis* out of which religious experience is made, is society (Durkheim 1915: 464, 465).

Society, the external ritualizing order, is seen as creating the religious cult. Yet, equally, society is a development out of religion for Durkheim:

In summing up, then, it may be said that nearly all the great social institutions have been born in religion. Now in order that these principal aspects of the collective life may have commenced by being only varied aspects of the religious life, it is obviously necessary that the religious life be the eminent form and, as it were, the concentrated expression of the whole collective life. If religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion (Durkheim 1915: 466).

In as much, then, as experiences of altered perception may be analogous to what Durkheim treats as religious experiences (an amount limited, for one thing, by the amount to which they are ritualized) they constitute symbolic representations of the social order. Where not analogous, that is, where the experiences are not ritualized reflections of the social order, they act as attacks upon it. Where highly ritualized by the social order they support it. In either event, the experience of altered perception is highly determinant of behavior toward the ritualizing and any other orders.

Ritualized experiences of altered perception need not represent society as it is usually viewed in order to be supports (they would hardly qualify as ALTERED were that a requirement). As Victor Turner, among others, has shown, reversal of the social order in a ritual situation can often be correctly interpreted as affirmation of that order.

Cognitively, nothing underlines regularity so well as absurdity or paradox. Emotionally, nothing satisfies as much as extravagant or temporarily permitted illicit behavior. Rituals of status reversal accommodate both aspects. By

making the low high, and the high low, they reaffirm the hierarchical principle. By making the low mimic (often to the point of caricature) the behavior of the high, and by restraining the initiatives of the proud, they underline the reasonableness of everyday culturally predictable behavior between the various estates of society (Turner 1969: 176).

The ritualizing order, however, need not be the dominant order of the society in which the experience takes place. If it is not, then the experience is likely to act as an agent of social change, construct an internal model of a new order and be an occasion for transition. For example, religious conversion experiences, or psychedelic experiences ordered around many valuational systems are often highly ritualized, yet they are not creating the image of, say, modern American society, or of its ideology. They are converting a portion of the populace more or less away from that system, and thus changing the society. Certainly society is not the only possible order and persons in societies have different perceptions, but without dealing with the whole complex question of what constitutes society, we may suggest that in such experiences central values are at issue and all experiences not involving a social order are challenges to it as it requires an element of centrality. The orders in question need not be social at all. In psychoanalysis, the individual patient through the experiences of altered perception is changed in his internal order primarily, rather than in his view of the order of society (though quite likely that as well).

If experiences of altered perception are provided for by the social order they are not necessarily reaffirmations of the status quo. They may be used to deal with change, to construct a transition which saves the identity of the group and/or the society. Barbara Myerhoff has reported that members of a Huichol Indian pilgrimage identify themselves as "the ancestors, the first Huichol." They then perform a number of rituals in which the deer and the maize (representative of successive hunting and agrarian phases of Huichol culture) are parts of a triad with the mediating figure peyote and are represented as being "one thing." Thus changing social order and life style are kept from changing the identification "Huichol." The modern participants are still one with their ancestors, the Huichol are still one people (Myerhoff 1973).⁷

When experiences of altered perception are provided for in the social order, then there is less likelihood (obviously) that the occurrence of such

⁷ A bit of an apology is due both Myerhoff and the Huichol for this extremely oversimplified account of a major and complex ritual. Interested readers are referred to her excellent forthcoming discussion entitled *The peyote hunt*. I owe a debt to both Professor Myerhoff and to Riv-Ellen Prell-Foldes, as many of the ideas expressed here were developed in their early stages in joint discussions and the products of those must be considered communal property.

experiences will be a threat. To be a threat, the experience must then be contradictory to the social order in its specifics. In other situations, where experiences of altered perception are forbidden, or considered not to exist for healthy individuals (say, much of America where they would be regarded as evidence of insanity) any such experience is an attack on the social order. If there were any universal drive for certain kinds of experiences (as Turner seems to regard implicitly to be the case for *communitas*) or if release in this form is a human need, then societies which do not allow for experiences of altered perception have a precarious existence. The non-ritualized experience of altered perception tends to be always destructive, leading as it does towards (or from) chaos rather than order. It is, however, less likely to occur where society has a perceivable (internalizeable) order, and where this order allows for cathartic emotional experience, particularly where that experience is so ritualized as to be a support for that order.

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