

Reviews

ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND PSI: A Historical Survey and Research Prospectus

by Edward F. Kelly and Ralph G. Locke

(New York: Parapsychology Foundation, 1981. Parapsychological Monographs No. 18. 91 pp. \$6.00 paper)

Reviewed by Charles T. Tart

Dr. Tart is a psychologist at the University of California at Davis. He has pioneered both in the study of altered states of consciousness in psychology and in the relation of altered states to psi phenomena. He has written several books, including States of Consciousness (Dutton, 1975) and PSI: Scientific Studies in the Psychic Realm (Dutton, 1977) and edited the classic, Altered States of Consciousness (2nd ed., Wiley, 1972).

I have always been intrigued by altered states of consciousness, parapsychological phenomena, and their relationships. After years of empirical investigations of various altered states, I constructed a comprehensive, systems approach to understanding altered states of consciousness, and later applied that theoretical approach to applied questions about using altered states of consciousness to enhance psi phenomena (Tart, 1974, 1978, 1979, 1980). Very little experimentation has been stimulated by my suggestion as yet, but I was highly encouraged on reading this monograph. Starting from a primarily empirical and historical approach, rather than a theoretical look at altered states in general, Kelly and Locke have reached many of the same conclusions as I have about the great relevance of altered states to psi. Their excellent monograph should be an important stimulus to profitable research.

Kelly and Locke start by asking the vital question, "Is progress being made in laboratory psi research?" They recognize the variations in answers that parapsychologists would give to this question, but conclude, rightfully I believe, that while there are some small signs of progress, the rate of advance is quite discouraging. What is badly needed, as many of us have increasingly recognized, are *strong* and *reliable* sources of laboratory psi. When only some experiments produce any psi functioning at all, and when the quantitative level of psi in such experiments is typically extremely low, we are dealing almost exclusively with noise rather than signal, and it is only natural that progress should be discouragingly slow.

Kelly and Locke are optimistic about the potential of altered states research to lead toward strong and reliable psi sources. They conclude that in their survey of psi from broad historical and cultural perspectives, ". . . we found substantial grounds for hypothesizing that uncommonly strong manifestations of psi tend to co-occur with a widely recurring family of discrete altered

states of consciousness. We therefore argued that psi researchers should become more directly involved in various kinds of research on altered states, which might in turn ultimately lead to production of stronger and stabler sources of psi effects for laboratory study." I wholeheartedly agree.

The authors concur with recent calls for more venturesomeness in psi research, and present their monograph as an hypothesis-generating venture, rather than a comprehensive review of all relevant literature. The depth and width of their background research is quite apparent, however, and this is a sophisticated study of altered states and psi. They focus particularly on the early association of hypnosis (especially very deep hypnosis) with psi, on trance mediumship, on historical associations between meditative and mystical states and psi, and on anthropological literature relevant to psi. Throughout their monograph they show an excellent grasp of the methodological problems that plague the extant literature and which will have to be appropriately dealt with in future research. This includes such chronic problems as the rather vague terminology in the field: some people, for example, use "meditation" as if it referred to a unitary state, instead of recognizing that there is a wide variety of practices and resultant states subsumed under that heading. They recognize the possibility of simulation of altered states in some contexts, the importance of individual differences, the depth fluctuations that occur within an altered state that need to be accounted for, and the widespread confusion in which a procedure which *might* induce an altered state of consciousness is equated with the production of the altered state. They emphasize that intensive, exploratory work with *individuals* is the most profitable direction for research into this area, rather than thinking we can do large-scale studies at this time.

Kelly and Locke emphasize that the more profound certain altered states of consciousness, the more likely they are to have strong psi manifestations associated with them. Strong altered states of consciousness are seldom, of course, induced in parapsychological laboratories. They bring out this point quite strongly in their excellent chapter dealing with shamanism, the deliberate induction of altered states of consciousness for socially useful purposes. For those who tend to think that shamanism is an exotic practice done in a few primitive tribes, the authors point out that 90 percent of the world's four thousand different cultures have at least one, if not several, systematized techniques for inducing and using altered states of consciousness. Shamans do not work on their own but in an explicit and implicit social context, which helps guide the way in which their altered states are constructed and reinforces their potentialities.

This social context of altered states is something I have long thought about as presenting a great problem for our work in parapsychology laboratories. In our quite legitimate desire to carry out scientifically valid experiments and to be accepted as genuine scientists, the

social situation of our laboratories mimics that of orthodox science in general, often the physical sciences in particular. Rationality of the experimenter, objectivity by means of instrumentation—these sorts of things tend to dominate. This is a far cry from a group of tribal people singing and dancing around a campfire to help a shaman enter an altered state of consciousness, sometimes with the use of psycho-active drugs. I have sometimes had a vision of a specially selected small group of participants forming a subculture in the “laboratory,” taking the “laboratory” out to the field so we can indeed dance around campfires, play drums, and the like, and yet the immediate kind of rejection this would provoke from the scientific community (a subculture with strong prejudices of its own) makes me quite hesitant to embark on such a venture! These are some of the kinds of methodological problems we’re going to have to deal with: Do we want to have the surface appearance of high technology science, which may not be very psi conducive and perhaps continue our pattern of weak and unreliable results, or do we want to take a chance on looking unscientific but getting major effects?

Although it was not available at the time Kelly and Locke wrote their monograph, I particularly recommend Michael Harner’s new book, *The Way of the Shaman* (Harner, 1980) for those who are interested in actually developing a working knowledge of practical shamanism.

The monograph is well written and enjoyable reading. The exceptions to easy reading are the appendices detailing methodological factors that probably affect altered state production and resultant psi. This is fairly dense and technical material, but well worth reading. For any parapsychologist who is interested in getting strong and reliable manifestations of psi in his or her laboratory, this book is must reading. And, as Kelly and Locke have pointed out, besides the possibility of increasing the strength and reliability of psi in our laboratories, the systematic research into altered states per se that is required can help integrate parapsychology into more orthodox psychology.

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BEYOND DEATH: The Gates of Consciousness

by Stanislav and Christina Grof

(New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980. 96 pp. \$8.95 paper)

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Mr. Greene is a free-lance writer interested in parapsychology, religion, and metaphysics. He has published several articles on these subjects, including one on the life review in Theta (1980, 8[2]).

Interest in the mind/body borderlands between life and death has increased dramatically in the last decade. A whole new body of literature ranging beyond the traditional focus of parapsychological survival research has arisen to satisfy and nurture this growing curiosity.

Beyond Death, by Stanislav and Christina Grof, has to be considered one of the finest of additions to this new genre of literature. Issued as part of a series on “Art and Imagination,” this slender 8” x 11” paperback contains 17 large color plates among its 158 illustrations. The first third of the book consists of a long essay centered around the theme of death. The process of dying and the meaning of death are examined from a variety of perspectives. The “modern scientific” assumption that death signals the absolute annihilation of human consciousness is contrasted with recent findings from several areas of consciousness research and also with afterlife beliefs from ancient Egyptian, medieval Christian, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions as well as many other religions, cultures, and ages.

In this essay the authors delineate the phenomenology of near-death experiences as established by Heim, Osiris, Noyes, and Moody. They then illustrate both conceptually and visually how these altered states of consciousness seem to be represented in the “posthumous journey,” “judgment of the dead,” and “heaven/hell” doctrines of many religious traditions. The *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, its Tibetan cousin, and the lesser known Christian equivalent, the medieval “Ars Moriendi” literature, are viewed as authentic maps of certain aspects of the “human unconscious.”

The Grofs seem to stress one particular connotation of the term “human unconscious” in their book. They apparently wish to refer primarily to certain proposed levels of mind inherent to humankind that are connected to “alternate realms” or “realities” — the existences of which usually remain unrecognized by the “waking level” ego during the lifetime of the physical body. The intent of these eschatological texts, suggest the Grofs, is to illuminate for the ego mind of dying persons something of these “other worlds” which they —the dying—are about to enter consciously for the first time. The death struggle and rebirth process characteristic of shamanistic rituals and other religious rites of passage (and also experienced during hallucinogenic and schizophrenic altered states of consciousness) are looked upon as providing additional in-