

Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice

Bringing Order to Disarray: A Consensus Taxonomy of Altered (Non-Ordinary) States of Consciousness

--Manuscript Draft--

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| Manuscript Number: | CNS-2024-0436R2 |
| Full Title: | Bringing Order to Disarray: A Consensus Taxonomy of Altered (Non-Ordinary) States of Consciousness |
| Article Type: | Unmasked Article |
| Abstract: | This paper presents a taxonomy of altered states of consciousness (ASCs), primarily based on their central phenomenological features. Following taxonomic principles and a modified Delphi methodology, a multidisciplinary, international group identified eight distinct phenomenological/behavioral states (some with subcategories): proto and transitional, delirium, minimal to no awareness, experiential detachment, enhanced physicality, altered identity, imaginary/fantasy/visionary, and unity/mystical. We hope this taxonomy will be discussed and developed further, fostering conceptual clarity and stimulating research and integration across different specializations. A nuanced discussion of different states should reveal what is common and different across different triggers and antecedents of ASCs, and encourage their phenomenological, psychological, cultural, and neuroscientific understanding. This will pave the way to an integrated understanding of different modalities of experiencing. |
| Keywords: | altered states of consciousness; alternate states of consciousness; non-ordinary states of consciousness; taxonomy; phenomenology |
| Manuscript Classifications: | 10: Altered States of Consciousness; 170: Measurement of Conscious States; 280: Phenomenology of Conscious States; 360: Theories and Models of Consciousness; 370: Unusual/Anomalous Experiences |
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| Order of Authors Secondary Information: | |
| Opposed Reviewers: | |
| Response to Reviewers: | <p>Thank you for the suggestions, our responses to the comments by the Editor and Reviewer 3 are underlined follow:</p> <p>1)We have changed the Figure following all the suggestions mentioned and adding the new category. We also checked that printing it all in black retains the readability. We had to eliminate the final column so everything could fit, but the content of that column was already in the text.</p> <p>2)Re. the request to include the Frewen and Lanius 4-d, there are other models that we did not include and the relevance of that one for a general discussion of states of consciousness from a taxonomic rather than dimensional perspective is arguable. It will be more relevant in a future paper of dimensional categories. However, if deemed by the editor to be indispensable, we will add a reference to it.</p> <p>3)Recommend to start new paragraph at (bottom of page 12 of tracked doc): "Our classification (Figure 1) follows these guidelines. It"</p> <p>Done</p> <p>2) Discussion, RE: "We propose here a seven-categories taxonomy as an initial point to discuss and compare commonalities and differences across various contexts." - recommend to include a restatement of the list of the 7 categories here, example, following a colon to follow the word "contexts".</p> <p>Done</p> <p>3) New paragraph at: "Nonetheless, we recognize that the taxonomy we present is a "work in progress"..." (Discussion, pg 26 of the tracked document)</p> <p>Done.</p> <p>4) RE: "A more precise ASC phenomenology may inform a more precise future neurophenomenology." - consider adding, "and vice versa" or equivalent - the idea of neurophenomenology is that both forms of investigation inform and constrain the other, while the current statement seems to imply a greater significance for phenomenology.</p> <p>Done</p> <p>5) I would prefer a slight reordering of the discussion as I perceive many of the paragraphs are too short and would be better linked to have a clearer message. For the authors' consideration, a final paragraph could start with "We present this taxonomy with the goal of stimulating further research and theory, to expand our understanding of states that form an intrinsic part of who we are as humans." - as opposed to this being the final sentence of the manuscript. This paragraph would then present the full paragraph currently beginning: "We hope that our taxonomy will not only be used but challenged..." OR the full paragraph currently beginning: "Some of the questions that remain for the future include..." I believe the final statements would have more impact if their focus was on the future directions (this proposed re-ordering) than simply what has already been accomplished (the current last sentence).</p> <p>This is somewhat contradictory because the reviewer also asked us above to make two paragraphs shorter. Nonetheless, we have taken another look at the structure of the Discussion and changed it slightly. For instance, we brought down the paragraph of future development to just below the last sentence, which we want to leave as the last sentence.</p> |

April 17, 2025

Dear Robert:

As per our previous correspondence, I am attaching the ms with and without tracking, so you can easily check the category we added (and the revised Table). Other than that, I left some changes to the discussion tracked, since they address some of the comments by the Reviewer. We addressed all your and the reviewer's request except for adding a taxonomy, which I did not think was important for this ms although it will be mentioned in another ms we will prepare.

I thank you for your willingness to allow us to add that category, which we needed. Now I feel even better about the work. Of course, if you think we should change anything let me know.

Thanks,

Etzel

Bringing Order to Disarray:

A Consensus Taxonomy of Altered (Non-Ordinary) States of Consciousness

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Abstract

This paper presents a taxonomy of altered states of consciousness (ASCs), primarily based on their central phenomenological features. Following taxonomic principles and a modified Delphi methodology, a multidisciplinary, international group identified eight distinct phenomenological/behavioral states (some with subcategories): proto and transitional, delirium, minimal to no awareness, experiential detachment, enhanced physicality, altered identity, imaginary/fantasy/visionary, and unity/mystical. We hope this taxonomy will be discussed and developed further, fostering conceptual clarity and stimulating research and integration across different specializations. A nuanced discussion of different states should reveal what is common and different across different triggers and antecedents of ASCs, and encourage their phenomenological, psychological, cultural, and neuroscientific understanding. This will pave the way to an integrated understanding of different modalities of experiencing.

Keywords: Altered states of consciousness, alternate states of consciousness, non-ordinary states of consciousness, taxonomy, phenomenology

Introduction

Biology took a giant step when Carl Linnaeus introduced a binomial structure taxonomy to name, differentiate, and classify living organisms (Cain, n. d.). His general system is now supplemented by phylogenetic (evolutionary) analyses based on genetic relatedness (e.g., Mabee et al., 2020). Biological taxa have different properties than states of consciousness,

¹ We thank Michiel van Elk, Ph. D., for valuable suggestions. Address correspondence to: Etzel Cardeña, Ph. D., Thorsen Professor of Psychology, Lund University, etzel.cardena@psy.lu.se

yet a systematic taxonomy of such states has the potential to move the field toward greater understanding and integration. In the study of consciousness, a generally agreed-to classification of altered (alternate, or non-ordinary) states of consciousness (ASCs) has been absent, while vague definitions and lack of testable criteria have been common. Yet, we think that ASCs can be readily characterized by their central phenomenological features and that a taxonomy of ASCs will provide a map to organize and contrast those states among themselves and with the “ordinary” waking state. We offer in this paper a consensus taxonomy of ASCs, developed by a multidisciplinary (e.g., psychology, psychiatry, neurosciences, anthropology) team of experts.

The Concept of ASC

At the beginning of psychology as a scientific discipline at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, there was vivid interest in states of consciousness, as exemplified by the various contributions of William James, such as his Lectures on “Exceptional Mental States” (e.g., Taylor, 1984). That interest faded with the ascent of behaviorism, which dominated psychology for decades, but it resurged in the 1960s, stimulated by the use of psychedelics and knowledge of Asian meditation practices (Tart, 1969). Research and theory on ASCs waned after some years, partly because of the criminalization of psychedelics and excessive claims about their potential benefits, but the wheel has turned again in recent years, driven by renewed research and interest on the practical applications of psychedelics and meditation techniques.

The concept of ASC we follow here refers to a general functioning or discernible state of mind different from the ordinary waking one, not to the basal concept of “consciousness” as the capacity of being (reflectively) aware of something (cf. Natsoulas, 1983). Albeit not as widely used as “altered,” *alternate*, in the sense of a state substituting another one, is arguably a more precise descriptor of *different* states of consciousness than the sense that the ordinary one is “altered” (Zinberg, 1977). There have been numerous definitions for ASCs, some critical

(e.g., Revonsuo et al., 2009), others more open and neutral (e.g., Mishara & Schwartz, 2011), yet they all contrast them to a normal or ordinary state of consciousness that is (typically) temporarily and reversibly altered. We adopt a Western notion of states of consciousness as something inherent to the person, but recognize that the metaphysics of other (sub)cultures interpret those changes differently. They might be considered instead as unveiling the *real* state of consciousness or as experiencing other ontological realities (cf. Locke & Kelly, 1985). Nonetheless, focusing on experiential features may make them identifiable even by those holding different metaphysical models (cf. Taves & Barley, 2023).

A full conceptual discussion of which criteria should be used to characterize an ASC is beyond the scope of this article, but for the purpose of this taxonomy we parted from the influential definition by Tart (1975, p. 5) of a discrete ASC as a “unique, dynamic pattern or configuration or psychological structures...different from some baseline state of consciousness.” This definition was clarified by Farthing (1992), who specified that ASCs are: (a) not just changes in the content of consciousness, (b) nor quantitative changes in only one psychological process (e.g., greater or less absorption), (c) may not be recognized by the person at the time, (d) are usually short-term and reversible, (e) differ from the individual’s ordinary waking state of consciousness, and (f) refer to changes in the configuration of psychological structures, rather than on only differences of behavior or physiology.

The notion of an ordinary, waking state of consciousness needs to be problematized, as there are important individual differences, for instance about the incidence of imagery, which may be central for some people but not for others (Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007). In addition, some phenomena such as synesthesia may be experienced by most people only during ASCs, although they are “ordinary” for strong synesthetes (Marks, 2014).

Our taxonomy was developed primarily for alterations among adult humans, but some preliminary statements are in order. Distinct behavioral (and perhaps experiential) states have

been reliably identified in organisms as primitive as nematodes and are essential to human development. Understanding infant behavior requires segmenting it into discrete behavioral states defined by differences in alertness, motor activity, physiology, facial expression, and, probably, experience. Such states are transient, repeatable, and unique configurations, moving from one to the next in roughly predictable sequences, as in transitions between sleep-awake states (Putnam, 2016). There is no way to know with certainty what infants experience, but Deikman (1977) offered this perspective: “Imagine the infant’s world: shifting fields of sensations within shifting levels of sleep and waking; swirling mists of warm sleep giving way to bright colors and simple patterns, mixed with gnawing feelings, persistent and demanding; then muscle tensing and crying sounds” (p. 230).

Previous Adult Taxonomies

Attempts to categorize ASCs are neither recent nor exclusive to modern science. Beginning over 2000 years ago, such classifications arose in different cultures. The Greek philosopher Plato mapped divinely-induced alterations of consciousness or *manias* according to their outcomes (e.g., creative or prophetic) in his *Phaedrus* dialogue (Ustinova, 2020). In India, maps of ordinary and meditative states of consciousness, and sequences in which they arose during meditation, were developed at least in three religious-contemplative traditions: Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism (Feuerstein, 1998).

During the era of scientific psychology, categorizations have been mostly based on induction and/or underlying psychological dimensions. A recent unpublished paper reviewed 23 “classification schemes” of ASCs into three main types (state, method, and neuro/physio based; Fort et al., 2004) that seem unclear and contradictory. For instance, Fischer’s cartography, based on physiological arousal, is not situated under the physiologically-based group. Our purpose here is not to offer an exhaustive list of previous classifications of ASCs, but to mention influential ones, how they can be grouped, and their uses and limitations.

The simplest categorization of ASCs uses the level or depth of a phenomenon (e.g., “light versus deep trance” in mediumship, Sidgwick, 1915). More sophisticated models have proposed interacting dimensions, although circumscribed to a few ASCs. They include mapping of severe brain injuries (e.g., coma and locked-in syndrome) according to levels of awareness/consciousness and motor function (Laureys, 2005). Hobson (2010) developed his Activation-Input-Modulation (AIM) model to differentiate waking, dreaming, and lucid dreaming, based on three dimensions of neural dynamics: **A**ctivation of areas in the brain, **I**nhibition of sensory and motor input, and **M**odulation of neurotransmitters such as dopamine. Also centered on brain dynamics, in this case of neuronal networks, Christoff et al. (2016) analyzed daydreaming according to the influence of neuronal networks on brain regions.

Other classifications have been proposed for many or all ASCs. Fischer (1971) offered an influential cartography of “ecstatic and meditative states” based on levels of physiological arousal, positing that, at the extreme, hypo- and hyperarousal produced a similar state. A more recent and sophisticated neurophysiological model avers that cognitive states can be arranged according to levels of cortical entropy and cognitive flexibility (Carhart-Harris et al., 2014) and does not propose that opposite extreme levels produce the same state.

Considering that ASCs are multidimensional global states, having different characteristics and functional roles (e.g., Bayne et al., 2016), some taxonomies have used multiple dimensions. Metzner (2005) arranged various ASCs according to three dimensions: arousal versus sedation, pleasure versus pain, and expansion versus contraction. A more complex model was offered by Berenbaum et al. (2000), who classified anomalous experiences according to three onset/course dimensions (level of awareness, individual volition, and individual control) and three phenomenological dimensions: subjective hedonic valence, psychical-metaphysical qualities (e.g., whether they were sensory focused), and potential involvement with some entity. Although including important elements such as level of awareness, this classification is

unwieldy and does not provide actual categories. A model by Josipovic (2021) incorporated an implicit–explicit gradient of nondual awareness and a map of states including global level and phenomenal content.

In an influential paper on the psychobiology of ASCs, Vaitl and co-authors (2005) offered an inconsistent classification based on both experiences and induction, and used four basic dimensions: level of activation, awareness span, self-awareness, and sensory dynamics. Timmerman et al. (2023) advocated for a neurophenomenological framing of ASCs but proposed categories based on inductions (hypnosis, meditation, and psychedelics) rather than on the experiences themselves.

There have also been attempts to focus on proposed core aspects such as different types of self-experience. Based on Gallagher’s theory (2000), Berkovich-Ohana and Wittmann (2017) presented a typology centered on a narrative or minimal sense of self, along the dimensions of subjective time, awareness, and emotion (see also Berkovich-Ohana & Glicksohn, 2014). Yaden and Newberg (2022) proposed a taxonomy based on changes in self, time, space, and mind perception. Finally, Walsh (2007) offered a large number of dimensions to compare different states: control (ability to enter and/or control the experience), awareness of the environment, ability to communicate, concentration, mental energy/arousal, calm, affect, identity or self-sense, out-of-body experience, and content of the experience.

Also relevant has been the development of questionnaires designed to evaluate alterations of consciousness based on various dimensions, some with neutral descriptors (e.g., sense of time or self, in the Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory, or PCI, Pekala, 1991), others with complex descriptors such as “Oceanic Boundlessness” (Dittrich, 1998).

Previous categorizations of states of consciousness have had important limitations, such as mixing inducing triggers, cognitive processes, and experiences; relevance to only a few states; and lack of empirical evaluation. The most common form to characterize ASCs has been

according to the stimulus, induction, or trigger preceding them, but this strategy has various problems:

- It presumes effect homogeneity of an induction/trigger such as hypnosis or meditation even though neurophenomenological outcomes vary depending on specific instructions and techniques used (Cardeña, 2016).
- It ignores individual experiential and/or neural differences. For instance, the effects of hypnotic induction or psychoactive substance interact with cognitive traits (e.g., Cardeña et al., 2013; Moujaes et al., 2023).
- Characterizing states by their triggers obscures common predisposing traits, such as absorption and openness to experience, predicting responsiveness to different triggers (for psychedelics, see Aday et al., 2021; for hypnosis, see Cardeña & Terhune, 2014; Glisky et al., 1991).
- States produced by different inductions may be very similar, as in boundaryless states produced by hypnosis, drugs, or meditation (e.g., Ataria et al., 2015, for meditation; Cardeña, 2005, for hypnosis; Carhart-Harris et al., 2014, for psychedelics).
- Even for the same individual during the same context, such as a psychedelic or hypnotic experience, the experience may differ markedly across time (e.g., Cardeña, 2005; Sandilands & Ingram, 2024).

Another problem has been the use of vague and unclear terms such as “ego dissolution” or “trance” to classify different experiences (e.g., Lindström et al., 2025). Conversely, different terms may refer to the same experience (Britton et al., 2021; Cardeña & Krippner, 2010). Vague or contradictory definitions and the lack of well-defined, clear, and empirically testable criteria to evaluate ASCs have hindered a clear discourse and the integration of the subspecialties that address them. A taxonomy based on clearly defined subjective experiences (and behaviors as needed) and testable concepts can move the field forward toward such integration and offer

insights into potential neural mediators (as in the comparison of NDE and psychedelic experiences, see Martial et al., 2019).

The Current Taxonomy

We decided to develop a phenomenologically-based taxonomy, but we also briefly present information on related neurodynamics for further consideration. At a future point, a neurophenomenological taxonomy should be developed, combining the systematic use of first-person subjective experiences and third-person neurophysiological measures, to integrate both types of data (cf. Lutz & Thompson, 2003). Such an approach has been used to compare daydreaming with dreaming during sleep (Fox et al., 2013), evaluate changes in states triggered by hypnosis (e.g., Cardeña et al., 2013), and discuss the effects of hypnosis, meditation, and psychedelics (Timmermann et al., 2023). However, the neurophenomenological approach to ASCs is still in its infancy (e.g., Moujaes et al., 2023), does not use agreed-to methodology, and only rarely distinguishes specific states within a longer event (cf. Jamieson et al., 2024). Thus, we believe that our approach, based on phenomenology (and behavioral observations when no first-person reports are feasible) is a cardinal step for further developments.

A taxonomy that covers a wide range of (if not all) ASCs has much to offer:

- a common language for those working in subspecialties;
- arranging disparate observations from different bodies of literature (e.g., meditation, hypnosis, psychedelics) into a coherent system;
- facilitating hypothesis-testing across subspecialties to assess underlying phenomenological and neural processes;
- revealing what is common and different across different triggers/antecedents of ASCs;
- revealing linear and non-linear changes during a sequence of states; and
- clarifying the characteristics of transitions between states.

This taxonomy is the consensus of a multidisciplinary group of experts on alterations of consciousness. We followed a modified (in that participants were not anonymous) Delphi technique (Waggoner et al., 2016). The first author contacted recognized experts in various relevant areas (e.g., coma, sleep states, meditation, religious experiences) and from different disciplines (e.g., psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, neuroscience) and asked them if they were interested in developing a taxonomy of ASCs and, if so, whether anybody else's expertise might be needed. After initial online meetings with those interested to discuss how to develop a taxonomy, the first author submitted a draft asking for discussion and modifications from all other coauthors, and later produced a revised draft. This process was repeated using group calls and emails until agreement on the basic categories, definitions, and literature reviewed was achieved after reviewing six previous drafts.

During this process, we discussed alternatives to the categorical taxonomy we present. The main alternative was to develop descriptions of ASC based on dimensions such as experiences of minimal self, agency, and so on. This is not a mutually exclusive strategy to the categorical one presented in this paper, but we concluded that adding it to this paper would detract from developing a clear categorical taxonomy.

As for developing a data-driven rather than an expert consensus taxonomy, despite its potential such development was not feasible at this point. Among them, currently there are no databases encompassing a broad spectrum of states; instead, individual efforts focus on specific subsets of states, such as drug-induced experiences or dream reports. This heterogeneity poses challenges when comparing reports across databases, as participants may describe their experiences in varying ways, highlighting different aspects of their experiences. Furthermore, some of the largest collections of first-person reports (e.g., Erowid for psychedelic experiences) were not originally intended for scientific analysis but for users to share their experiences with the community (Friedman & Ballentine, 2024). Our taxonomy

can organize and set the basis for data-driven efforts in the future, and for analyses of the extant data. As a consensus paper, our effort did not require an ethics review and complied with all standards for such work.

Our strategy followed four taxonomic principles that were also used in a classification of meditation methods: Theoretical Foundation, Orthogonality, Semantic Lucidity, and Utility (Nash & Newberg, 2023; see also Ereshefsky, 2000). The premise underpinning our taxonomy was that it must be grounded on ongoing or retrospective reports of subjective experience. In some cases (e.g., unresponsiveness), experiences of ongoing mental occurrences might have been obtained retrospectively or inferred by observers from behavior and physiology. The principle of orthogonality means that we have sought to provide categories in which a member of one category is not also a member of another category, although, in the case of states of consciousness, we are dealing with “fuzzy sets” rather than absolutely discrete, mutually exclusive sets (cf. Kosko, 1998; see also Rosch et al., 1976). Furthermore, one state may transform into another, as in simple images turning into complex ones or non-lucid dreams becoming lucid and vice versa, unlike what typically happens with biological taxa.

We concluded that other forms of categorization such as using exemplars or basing the classification on theory would not be very useful at this point. With respect to exemplars, we were more interested in describing states that are phenomenologically similar across conditions or inducers, rather than presenting examples that may be prototypical in common parlance (e.g., “trance state”) that have little scientific value. As for theoretically based classifications, they can be useful within more circumscribed domains (e.g., the AIM models, Hobson, 2010) but a taxonomy that first organizes various observations phenomenologically in distinct sets is a needed first step.

To achieve semantic lucidity, we present categories using general descriptive terms and with examples of first-person reports whenever feasible. We have sought to present states arranged

by their main characteristic, avoiding overlaps and particular jargon (as in some contemplative traditions). As for utility, during the development of this paper we discussed similarities across triggers that had not been contemplated before and have developed research plans to evaluate them in the future so we can present a more integrated perspective on ASCs.

Our taxonomy uses a nomenclature with the first term defining the cardinal characteristic of the state followed at times by a subcategory (e.g., mystical or unity states, with or without sensory content). Contexts/triggers/conditions in which the state has been clearly described are also mentioned, to orient the interested reader, but we abstained from categorizing states by their triggers for the reasons mentioned above. Finally, neural features related to specific states are briefly mentioned when available, as a supplement rather than as the focus of this taxonomy.

Our classification (Figure 1) follows these guidelines. It:

- discusses states experienced by adult humans, although at least some (e.g., dreaming, drug-induced states) are present at all ages and in other species;
- focuses on the main characteristic of the experience (e.g., identity alteration) rather than on peripheral but related alterations, such as changes in the sense of time;
- seeks to achieve a basic or species level of categorization, which is the most cognitively efficient one (cf. Rosch et al., 1976);
- addresses substantial (“qualitative”) and recognizable state changes from the ordinary state, rather than subtle variations from it;
- adopts the term phenomenology in a “thin,” general sense of referring to subjective experience rather than in a narrow, “thick” sense of following a specific methodology or philosophy (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2020; for reviews of research methods of subjective experience see Cardeña & Pekala, 2014; Kitson et al., 2020);

- centers on discrete states rather than on complex experiences that may include sequentially a number of them;
- avoids labels that seem evaluative (e.g., spiritual) to focus on the experience as lived, regardless of different cultural interpretations or positive or negative outcomes;
- indicates that most of the categories (except for delirium and some unresponsive states) describe states that may have clinical *and* non-clinical presentations, so no assumption of pathology or increasing or decreasing levels of development is assumed.

Categories

1. Proto and Transitional States

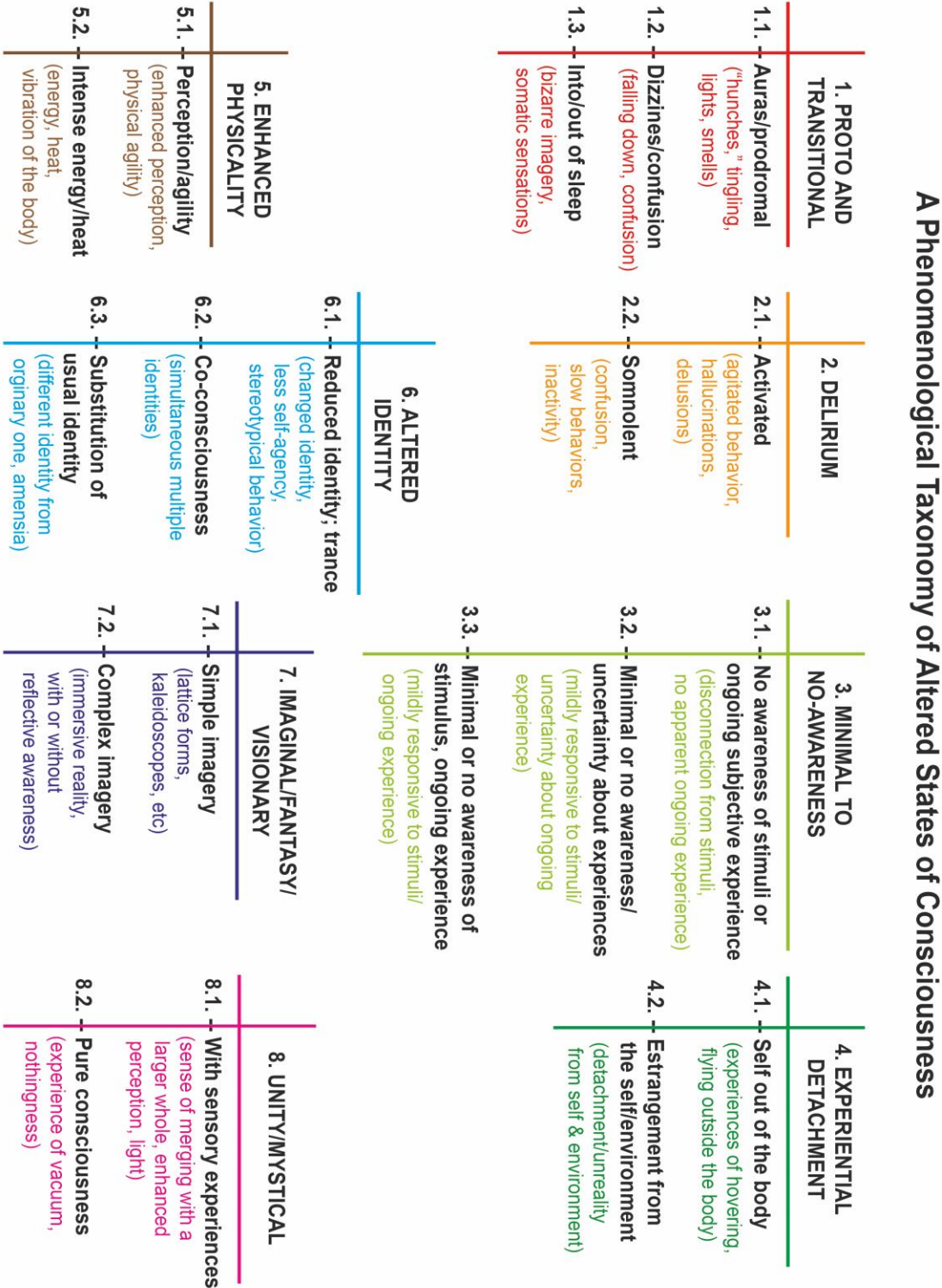
In both childhood and adulthood, unstable proto or transitional states lasting seconds to minutes occur between stable states (for simulation of brain state transitions see Deco et al., 2019). Case studies of individuals with dissociative identity disorders (DID) have found changes in diverse brain regions when switching from one identity state to another (Lebois et al., 2023), but studies with groups are needed to obtain a clearer picture. Other transitional states include:

1.1 “Auras”/prodromal phenomena that may precede organic and functional neurological seizures. They cover hunches (“a funny sensation”), negative emotions such as fear, somatic sensations such as tingling, impaired vision, and feeling dreamlike, distant or confused (Cardeña et al., 2020), while maintaining overall memory and perception (Lüders et al., 2014). Auras may also precede migraines and include visual disturbances (e.g., bright lights and blurred vision) and somatic phenomena (e.g., anesthetics and paresthesias; Viana et al., 2017).

1.2 Transitory states of dizziness, confusion, or lack of equilibrium, found in descriptions of going into or out of ritual trance or spirit possession (reviewed in Cardeña et al., 2023). Emic (from the culture) examples include *saoulé* (inebriation) or spirit touch in

Vodou (Schaffler et al., 2016), and *irradiación* in Afro-Brazilian religions (Frigerio, 1989).

Figure 1



1.3 Transitory stages going into or coming out of sleep (i.e., hypnagogic and hypnopompic stages). Common phenomena include sounds, somatosensory sensations such as falling down, short, bizarre, and geometric imagery (e.g., “the blood turned into what looked like... cocktail sauce that’s served with shrimps, and then... little shrimps started appearing,” Foulkes & Vogel, 1965, p. 239). There is also sleep paralysis, which is a mixture of reflective consciousness (typical of wakefulness) combined with muscle paralysis and occasional hallucinations (typical of REM sleep). Here is an example: “I was sleeping... and couldn’t move... There was a terrifying figure looming over me” (Solomonova, 2018, p. 435).

Neurochemically, shifts between wake and sleep are related to changes in the discharge of cholinergic and aminergic groups of nuclei in the brain stem and pontine region (Hobson, 1994).

2. Delirium

Delirium is characterized by cognitive (e.g., inability to communicate or focus attention) and behavioral (e.g., agitated movements) disorganization. It may occur in the context of neurological and/or psychiatric disorders, and post-operative reactions. They present in two main forms that may alternate (Ross et al., 1991):

2.1 Activated, characterized by agitated behavior, hallucinations, delusions, and illusions (e.g., in tonic-clonic seizures, Viarnés, 2007)

2.2 Somnolent, involving confusion and unresponsive or slow-to-react behaviors (e.g., catatonic schizophrenia involving lack of responsiveness, withdrawal, and automatic/repetitive behaviors and verbalizations; Ungvari et al., 2009).

3. States with Minimal or No-Awareness of/Disconnected from the Environment

These states involve very limited or no conscious awareness of perceptual stimuli, sometimes accompanied by lack of responsiveness to stimuli. Unresponsiveness does not necessarily mean unawareness or unconsciousness, though, as the person may not respond because of inability to speak (aphasia), amnesia, paralysis, lack of motivation, or absorption in non-perceptual experiences (Gloor, 1986; Sanders et al., 2012). It is important to mention that in ordinary and ASCs there can be non-conscious registration and even learning of stimuli (cf. Kihlstrom, 2022). We identified the following subtypes:

3.1. No awareness of/disconnected from environmental stimuli, without ongoing subjective experience, including coma states (apparent unawareness and unresponsiveness with eyes closed, as in some brain-dead and coma presentations), as well as unresponsive wakefulness with eyes open.

Decreased arousal/subjective experience is related to lower frequency brain wave oscillations (Annen et al., 2023; Rusalova, 2006). Unresponsive brain seizures show decreased default mode network activity (Danielson et al., 2011) and unresponsiveness in general is related to decreased connectivity across brain regions (Demertzi et al., 2019) and overall brain states stability (Perl et al., 2021, 2023).

3.2 Minimal or no awareness of stimuli/uncertainty about ongoing subjective experiences.

Some coma patients seem to have minimal awareness (Noirhomme & Laureys, 2011) and present similar brain activity to those with minimal awareness (Thibaut et al., 2021), as happens in some seizure presentations (Detyniecki & Blumenfeld, 2014). This category also includes “minimally conscious states” during neurological conditions, in which patients may show purposeful behaviors, can follow simple commands and respond gesturally, and may produce intelligible verbalizations but it is uncertain whether they have spontaneous, ongoing subjective experience (Noirhomme & Laureys, 2011).

3.3 Minimal or no awareness of external stimuli/ongoing subjective experiences. Most lightly anesthetized individuals and those reporting immediately from REM or non-REM sleep do not seem to have much if any conscious awareness of external stimuli or behavioral responsiveness but retrospectively report dreams or dream-like experiences (Scheinin et al., 2021; Siclari et al., 2017; Valli et al., 2023).

With respect to sleep, we can distinguish between two main types:

3.3.a Dreaming sleep, non-lucid. This is the most common type of dreaming experience, involving an immersive, hallucinated reality experienced as real, involving a more or less coherent narrative, and varying in richness and detail. Although there is a first-person perspective and almost always a dream self that experiences the dream event, that self may be a reduced version of the narrative, reflective self of waking life. There are various types of dreams, some closely reflecting waking experiences, others predominantly fantastic and/or symbolic (Hunt, 1989).

Although reports of dreaming-type experiences have been mostly associated with REM sleep, they may occur in other sleep stages as well (Picard-Deland et al., 2023). Compared with non-dreaming sleep, dreaming sleep is characterized by lower amplitude and higher frequency oscillations (Siclari et al., 2017). Compared with daydreaming, REM dreaming involves greater activation of the medial prefrontal cortex (PFC), medial temporal lobe structures, and posterior cingulate, with deactivation of various PFC executive regions (Fox et al., 2013).

3.3.b Dreaming sleep, lucid. This type of dreaming includes awareness that the person is dreaming, with access to episodic memory, a sense of will, and occasional control of the dream experience. LaBerge (2014) describes the phenomenon and provides examples such as: “I dreamed that I was standing on the pavement outside my home... on glancing casually at stones [I noticed that] they had seemingly all changed position...

Then the solution flashed upon me... I was dreaming” (p. 149). Occasionally in an experimental setting, awareness of external stimuli can be present, allowing a two-way communication between the lucid dreamer and experimenter (Konkoly et al., 2021). Greater reflective self-awareness in dreams relates to higher activation of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and precuneus (Dresler et al., 2012), which are involved in self-reflective thinking.

During the very rare phenomenon of witnessing, or conscious dreamless sleep, experiencers mention transitioning from lucid dreaming into non-imaginal experiences such as “a space of nowhere” that later might include visuals or other phenomena more akin to dreaming (Alcaraz-Sanchez, 2021).

4. Experiential detachment states

This classification covers experiences of partial or complete detachment from aspects of the self (e.g., the body, sensations, emotions) and/or the environment, with the individual’s sense of identity typically remaining the same.

4.1 Sensations of detaching, floating, being outside of the body, and flying sometimes precede imaginal states (see below). They have been described in various contexts including intense exertion (Morgan, 1993), spontaneous reports of highly hypnotizable person in a hypnotic context, or “deep hypnosis” henceforth (e.g., “floating,” “flying,” “mind leaving the body,” Cardeña, 2005, p. 47), psychedelic reports (“separation of the self from the body,” Preller & Vollenweider, 2018), situations of danger (Cardeña & Spiegel, 1993), near-death (e.g., “I was out of my body at once and on the ceiling of the operating room looking down, watching them work on a body... the person I was viewing was me!,” Greyson, 2021, p.68) and shamanic experiences (the “magical” or “soul flight” is a trademark of shamanism, Eliade, 1995).

Ketamine and other dissociative substances can give rise to these experiences (e.g., “It was like floating out of your body” (Breeksema et al., 2023, p. 1551). Experiences of body detachment have been related to slow brainwave activity, particularly at the temporoparietal junction (Blanke & Arzy, 2005).

4.2 Experiences of disconnection/estrangement from body sensations, emotions, thoughts, etc., but without the self being located outside of the body. Reduced sensorial experience can be induced by hypnosis in responsive individuals (e.g., Spiegel et al., 1985) and may also occur as transient reactions to traumatic events (“I felt totally estranged from all things and people... I felt dazed and detached,” Cardeña & Gleaves, 2007, p. 473). They are present in depersonalization (e.g., “It’s like glass over my eyes, a visual fog”; Simeon & Abugel, 2006, p. 9), and may occur during epileptic seizures and functional neurological disorder (Cardeña et al., 2020).

A review of biomarkers of pathological dissociation (Roydeva & Reinders, 2021) found alterations in prefrontal and frontal regions, anterior cingulate, posterior association areas, and basal ganglia. A study that could identify precisely when the experiential detachment occurred corroborated some of those findings (Jamieson et al., 2024).

5. Enhanced Physicality States

States of qualitatively distinct enhanced physicality or hyper-embodiedness involving sensations or physical abilities have been discussed for a long time (James, 1907, Murphy, 1992). They may lead to transcendent experiences but occur on their own. There seem to be at least two types:

5.1 Enhanced perception and agility experiences, such as sensory intensity during the amplification and orgasm stages of the sexual response (Maliszewski et al., 2011); increase in acuity during peak sports as in a golf hole suddenly looking “as big as a wash tub” (Murphy, 1992, p. 65); and in agility during acting training “climbing with

an assurance and speed I had not experienced before” (Cardena, 2019, p. 215).

Enhanced sensations and abilities have also been reported in bipolar disorder (Parker et al., 2017).

5.2. Sensations of intense energy/heat. Often related to the Hindu practice of kundalini, they have been reported in other contexts. Examples include: “I felt as though every cell in my body was ‘on fire’ or ‘charged’ in a way unknown before” (Woollacott et al., 2020; see also Cooper et al., 2021) from a “kundalini “experience, and “[in] the body... there's pure crackling, surging, grinding, burning energy” (Wade, p. 115) from a sexual context. Christianity contains descriptions of burning sensations or *incendium amoris* such as “in the coldest days of winter it was necessary... to open the windows... to moderate the great heat [of saint Philip Neri]” (Thurston, 1952, p. 210). The San of the Kalahari describe *N/um* as a boiling energy that makes them tremble and is hot during their dancing ritual (Katz, 1982).

The experience of meditation generated *Tumo* heat has been found to parallel measured increases in temperature in various parts of the body (Benson et al., 1982). Whether enhanced physicality shares similar brain dynamics with the more common “flow” experience (e.g., Dietrich, 2004; Harris et al., 2021) remains to be investigated.

6. Altered Identity States

These states are marked by qualitative alterations in identity, sometimes accompanied by amnesia. Rather than an absolute distinction, the level of identity substitution and amnesia may vary from instance to instance even among those who claim absolute identity substitutions and amnesia.

6.1 Alteration in the usual sense of identity, or what is often referred to as “trance” in anthropology (cf. Rouget, 1985). It involves enacting ritual behaviors with alteration

or loss (but not substitution) of the usual sense of identity with a decreased or absent narrative self, narrow or selective awareness of the environment, and decreased sense of self-agency (Cardena et al., 2023). An excerpt of an anthropologist's experience during an Afro-Caribbean religious ceremony is a good illustration: "I cannot clearly discern when... the surrounding scene started to vanish... the sensation of a force invading me... I was not dancing: I was danced" (Halloy & Servais, 2014, pp. 490-491).

- 6.2 In co-consciousness, as described in the literature on mediumship and channeling, the person is conscious of more than one co-occurring identity. Long transcriptions of sessions in which a medium interacted with an intermediary or "control" reputedly communicating also simultaneously with deceased individuals are found in Gauld (1982); here is a quotation from a "channeler": "They often tell me that they are sending me information in the form of frequency" (Barzilay, 2012, p. 63). In the clinical condition known as dissociative identity disorder (DID, previously known as "multiple personality"), the person may experience different selves communicating with the ordinary, presenting identity (Ross, 1989, pp. 126-127).
- 6.3 Substitution of the usual by another identity occurs in ritual spirit possession, some mediumship/channeling experiences, and DID, in which one or more different identities (and body images) take over the person's usual identity. An example of the former comes from Uganda: "The daughter of a father who was killed started to talk with his voice 'bring my cigarettes'" (Van Duijl et al., 2005, p. 231). The asymmetrical memory and contrasting features across different identity states in DID are exemplified by what a patient told one of the authors (FP), "I'm tired of coming to work in the morning and finding out that I quit in a huff the day before." Periods of apparent unawareness or "blackout" are reported as well: "I looked at the clock

and it was 9:00 AM. Then I looked again and it was 2:30” (Loewenstein, 1991, p. 573).

Studies using different brain imaging techniques have found varying brain activity in the identity states of patients with DID, depending on the task evaluated. (Lebois et al., 2023) and have reported greater differences among identities of people with DID than among people simulating DIDs (Reinders et al., 2012).

7. Imaginal/fantasy/visionary states

In this category, imaginal experiences (mostly visual but potentially involving other senses) are central. The referent of the image may be something akin to what is found in perceptual experiences, diverge from it, or be a combination of both. We identified these types:

7.1 Simple imagery, which occurs by itself or before more complex imaginal experiences. It consists of geometric/kaleidoscopic visual images (e.g., lattice forms, kaleidoscopes), or other simple visual images and sounds. It has been reported in the literature on the transition between being awake and asleep (Waters et al., 2016), drug intoxication (Siegel, 1977), and “deep hypnosis” (e.g., “geometric shapes, like a grid thing,” “Cardena, 2005, p. 48). This or more complex imagery may include cross-modal imagery and synesthesias (e.g., in psychedelic experiences, Preller & Vollenweider, 2018; and in “deep hypnosis,” “Lines of different colors, making music,” Cardena, 2005, p. 48).

7.2 Complex imagery is described in various contexts including pathological disorders and non-pathological conditions such as shamanism, psychedelic experiences, religious experiences, “near-death experiences” (NDE), and “visionary experiences.”

Pathological hallucinations are often auditory but can be multisensory, as in this example: “I see all the dead, I see my relatives. They fly on a white cloud to me, where I am, and communicate with me. They are not visible to all” (Altman et al., 2023). A nonclinical

example, bearing some resemblance to the previous one, comes from a Sioux shaman, who recounted his experience thus: “I saw a man coming toward me, he seemed to have no feet, he just floated toward me out of a mist. He held two *wagmuha*, two rattles” (Halifax, 1980, p. 85). A vision transformed the life of a drug addict about to jump from a bridge: “In front of me I saw the outline of a face. Was I hallucinating again?... And I heard a voice, so soft and fatherly loving, as I had never heard before” (Geels, 2011, p. 267). Here is an excerpt from a near-death experience: “I found myself in a lush meadow of wildflowers. There, welcoming me with open arms, were my mama and papa.” (Greyson, 2021, p. 15). Finally, a quotation from a case study involving sensory deprivation: “there was this spaceship that was carrying me around the universe...I saw several corridors that lead me to several doors” (Glicksohn & Ben-Soussan, 2020).

Intense, vivid visual hallucinations are a hallmark of serotonergic psychedelic-induced experiences (Preller & Vollenweider, 2018). In psychedelic-induced states, visual experiences are associated with increased cerebral blood flow (Carhart-Harris et al., 2016) and decrease in alpha power over posterior parieto-occipital brain areas, signaling an increase in the excitability of visual pathways (Vollenweider & Preller, 2020). Higher gamma and beta, as well as greater brain omega complexity (less synchronization) related to imagery during hypnosis (Cardena et al., 2013), and occipital gamma was associated with imagery in a case study with an artist meditator (Luft et al., 2019).

8 Unity/mystical states

This category encompasses experiences (not only an intellectual conviction) of being united/merging with something larger than the self, be it a transcendent realm and/or the whole of reality, accompanied by reduced or absent self-importance (hypo-egoism) (Yaden et al., 2017). These states occur in various contexts. Marshall (2019) lists 13 potential

triggers including hallucinogen intoxication, hypnosis, meditation, and closeness to death (“I... might be shot... So what?... Then I was floating on my back on a river of peace... Then there was no river and no I,” Koestler, 1954, p. 350, on what he experienced when he thought he would be shot the following day).

Unity experiences are characterized by among others, an awareness of oneness and unity, boundarylessness, an apprehension of ultimate reality, and a transcendence of time and space (e.g., Nave et al., 2021; Preller & Vollenweider, 2016). They are often accompanied by awe, wonder, and euphoria (for psychedelics, see Preller & Vollenweider, 2016; for “deep hypnosis,” Cardeña, 2010, p. 99: “All the feelings that are good just surround me”).

These states can be divided into those occurring with sensory experiences, or extrovertive, and those without sensory experiences, or introvertive (Stace, 1960). Although very positive emotions are typically present, a minority of individuals find them dysphoric (Wulff, 2014). Following are examples of both types:

8.1 With sensory experiences, such as enhanced perception of stimuli, imaginal synesthetic (i.e., cross-modal) percepts, and a very bright light, as in this example from “deep hypnosis” “merging with pure light or energy” and “being one with everything” (Cardeña, 2005, p. 48). A meditator described it thus: “I became absorbed into the background, meaning the whole world without any separate entity” (Ataria et al., 2015, p. 141). And an example from a near-death experience: “As soon as the Light became present, I felt as if I was merging. The Light became my wholeness” (Greyson, 2021, p. 157).

8.2 A sense of pure consciousness without sensory experience has manifested in various contexts (cf. Metzinger, 2024). A high hypnotizable stated: “for a while I was just total nothing” (Cardeña, 2005, p. 48), and a meditator in a “deep” state: “there was no sense of my physical body, no thought” (Gifford-May & Thompson, 1994, p. 125).

Research on the neural correlates of unity states is far from unequivocal (cf. Cardaña & Lindström, 2021). Nonetheless, some patterns can be discerned. Changes in the activity within the default mode network (DMN; related to self-related processes) and its connectivity with the task-positive network (TPN) have been related to “ego disintegration or dissolution” (Carhart-Harris et al., 2016), along with decreases in oscillation power in some brain areas (Dor-Ziderman et al., 2013), and greater neural complexity (Cardaña et al., 2013). Episodes of contentless “non duality” of meditators have been related to increases in low frequencies (Berman & Stevens, 2015), and increases in very fast (gamma) synchronization (Berkovich-Ohana, 2017).

Discussion

The study of altered states of consciousness has suffered from lack of conceptual clarity and not having a commonly accepted classification. We propose here an eight-categories taxonomy as an initial point to discuss and compare commonalities and differences across various contexts: proto and transitional, delirium, minimal to no awareness, experiential detachment, enhanced physicality, altered identity, imaginary/fantasy/visionary, and unity/mystical. A common reaction among the authors during the development of this taxonomy was that our understanding of each one’s special area of interest grew in depth and clarity as we struggled with how to best categorize these complex phenomena.

The taxonomy we present is a “work in progress” and expect that our categories and subcategories will be defined more precisely as we evaluate them more thoroughly, and that other transitional states will be described. Also, testing our level of description cross-culturally will inform us whether this or another level of classification is ideal (cf. Taves & Barley, 2023). We are cognizant that taxonomies are heuristics whose value depends on the questions asked by theoreticians and researchers, so authors with different goals than ours will use other

classifications more suited to their purposes, while ideally contrasting them with the classification we provide here.

In our enterprise we have sought to arrive at “pure” types of phenomena such as disembodiedness, without considering the context in which they happen, such as in an episode of depersonalization or the beginning of a near-death experience. The comparison of these different contexts has clinical implications as they may identify which features (if any) are related to pathology. It is also of great clinical importance that for many categories examples can be provided from pathological and non-pathological contexts, underlining the importance of not assuming that unusual states (and more complex experiences) are necessarily indicative of a disorder (see also Cardaña et al., 2014).

Looking at our categories in the context of the whole experiences in which they occur (e.g., a long meditation or psychedelic session) may allow us to investigate whether some ASCs usually precede others, such as sensations of floating preceding more visual experiences, as seems to occur in shamanic, “deep hypnosis,” and near-death experiences. Evaluating states sequences will allow us to better theorize about them, rather than just taking complex, multi-categories events such as “psychedelic experiences” and mixing all of various recognizable states into a hybrid one.

We hope that our taxonomy will not only be used but challenged so that it can be further developed and improved. For instance, we are pursuing the empirical testing of this classification based on linguistic analysis of extant data, and we will develop a dimensional classification that will supplement, rather than substitute, the current taxonomy.

It is also important to obtain more precise information on the states using a variety of methods, including mixed (e.g., Lindström et al., 2025), purely phenomenological methods (e.g., Petitmengin et al., 2019), and large-scale linguistic analyses (e.g., Martial et al., 2019), rather than relying on vague constructs and measures. Furthermore, a neurophenomenology of

ASCs matching specific experiences to brain dynamics has barely begun, with attempts to characterize neural correlates of clearly specified states being rare. A more precise ASC phenomenology may inform a more precise future neurophenomenology and vice versa.

Some of the questions that remain for the future include: (a) whether any central phenomenological features of ASCs are missing in this taxonomy, (b) testing the orthogonality of the categories, (c) evaluating quantitatively whether the phenomenology of the categories is coherent and specific, for instance by using natural language analysis, (d) presenting a map of the development of specific states across complex events such as psychedelic intoxication, (e) testing the cross-cultural value of the taxonomy by addressing how translatable our concepts are across different traditions, (f) comparing the categories along dimensions such as aspects of the self and controllability of the experience and (g) creating an even more comprehensive taxonomy that also includes variations within the “ordinary state.” We offer this taxonomy with the goal of stimulating further research and theory, to expand our understanding of states that form an intrinsic part of who we are as humans.

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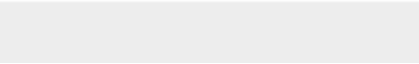

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Author Contributions: E.C. initiated and coordinated this project, and reviewed the literature, wrote, discussed, reviewed drafts, and gave final approval to the paper. A. B.-O., K.V., P. B., O. C., A. G.-M., B. G., V. K. K., S. L., T. M. L., A. N., K. H. P., F. W.P., E. T., R.W. and D. Y. reviewed the literature, wrote, discussed, reviewed drafts, and gave final approval to the paper.

All authors declare having no competing interests.



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A Phenomenological Taxonomy of Altered States of Consciousness

| 1. PROTO AND TRANSITIONAL | 2. DELIRIUM | 3. MINIMAL TO NO-AWARENESS | 4. EXPERIENTIAL DETACHMENT |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1.1. Auras/prodromal (“hunches,” tingling, lights, smells) | 2.1. Activated (agitated behavior, hallucinations, delusions) | 3.1. No awareness of stimuli or ongoing subjective experience (disconnection from stimuli, no apparent ongoing experience) | 4.1. Self out of the body (experiences of hovering, flying outside the body) |
| 1.2. Dizzines/confusion (falling down, confusion) | 2.2. Somnolent (confusion, slow behaviors, inactivity) | 3.2. Minimal or no awareness/uncertainty about experiences (mildly responsive to stimuli/uncertainty about experience) | 4.2. Estrangement from the self/environment (detachment/unreality from self & environment) |
| 1.3. Into/out of sleep (bizarre imagery, somatic sensations) | | 3.3. Minimal or no awareness of stimulus, ongoing experience (mildly responsive to stimuli/ongoing experience) | |
| 5. ENHANCED PHYSICALITY | 6. ALTERED IDENTITY | 7. IMAGINAL/FANTASY/ VISIONARY | 8. UNITY/MYSTICAL |
| 5.1. Perception/agility (enhanced perception, physical agility) | 6.1. Changed identity; “trance” (changed identity, less self-agency, stereotypical behavior) | 7.1. Simple imagery (lights, geometric forms) | 8.1. With sensory experiences (sense of merging with a larger whole, enhanced perception, light) |
| 5.2. Intense energy/heat (energy, heat, vibration of the body) | 6.2. Co-consciousness (simultaneous multiple identities) | 7.2. Complex imagery (immersive reality, with or without reflective awareness) | 8.2. Pure consciousness (experience of vacuum, nothingness) |
| | 6.3. Substitution of usual identity (different identity from ordinary one, amnesia) | | |